On Power & Political Capital:
How Political Capital Shapes our Nation and is Co-constructed by Elites

by Reed Elman Waxham

B.A. in Political Communication, May 2018, The George Washington University

A Thesis submitted to

The Faculty of
The Columbian College of Arts and Sciences
of The George Washington University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

May 19, 2019

Thesis directed by

David Karpf
Associate Professor of Media and Public Affair

Acknowledgements

This capstone was submitted in the Spring of 2019, under the direct supervision of Dr. David Karpf and with additional guidance from Dr. Michelle Kimball and Dr. Ethan Porter. I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to my advisory committee, as well as the entire faculty at the School of Media and Public Affairs (SMPA) at the George Washington University. Their direction has proven invaluable over the course of my education and this thesis would not have been possible without their guidance. For that, and for so much more, I will be forever grateful to the faculty and staff of SMPA. I would also like to acknowledge my interview subjects, who took time to share with me about their work and perspective. And, of course, Brooke, my center.

Keywords: political capital, power, legislative effectiveness, Congress, media effects

Abstract

On Power & Political Capital:
How Political Capital Shapes our Nation and is Co-constructed by Elites

What is political capital anyway? Academia has talked around the topic and has yet to settle on a shared definition. This study contends it is the imaginary but potent currency of politics—not one minted in a bank; but a co-constructed metric of power. That co-construction is guided by political sophisticates—an elite that encompasses staffers, politicians, journalists, and outside groups—who rely on each other to decipher and construct the relative value of this currency. Its value is not tied exclusively to public opinion or electoral success, but instead, its value is set by its perceived value among elites. The present study reveals the complex nature of political capital, describes the process of its co-construction and informs a new understanding of the concept. This exploratory research distinguishes political capital from political power, offers a model of political capital, and suggests that political capital may not be as easy to define as previously thought.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ..... **ii**
Abstract ..... **iii**
Table of Contents ..... **iv**
List of Figures ..... **v**
INTRODUCTION 1
REVIEW OF LITERATURE 4
Theories of Political Power 5
Theories of Political Capital 10
Legislative Effectiveness as a Metric of Political Capital 18
Media Acumen as a Metric of Political Capital 22
Why Senior Congressional Staff? 31
Lay Theories of Congressional Staffers 34
METHODOLOGY 37
A Qualitative Approach to Political Capital 38
Research Questions 40
Method 41
ANALYSIS & FINDINGS 45
Overview 46
Political Capital: What and Where? 46
Influencing the Media: The Role of the Press & Staff in Political Capital 53
Different Publics: The Role of Outside Groups, Activists, and Voters in Political Capital 56
Ideology, Position & Bravery: The Role of Elected Leaders in Political Capital 59
An Arena Contingent Political Capital 63
"A Bullshit Metaphor" 66
CONCLUSION 67
REFERENCES 69
APPENDIX A 76
APPENDIX B 77
APPENDIX C 78

List of Figures

FIGURE 1 — Sources of Political Capital 50
FIGURE 2 — Arena Contingent Model of Political Capital 65

INTRODUCTION

What do MSNBC host Alex Wagner and President George W. Bush have in common? A bad feel for political capital. At the first news conference following his re-election in 2004, President George W. Bush offered a pretty confident assessment of his political position, saying "I earned capital in this campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it."[1] Among politicians, he is not alone in that assumption that electoral victory means some advantage in politics. And politicians are not alone is assuming what may, or may not, grant political capital. Following the Sandy Hook shooting, MSNBC host Alex Wagner remarked that "one would hope that there will be some political capital to reform the way in which we handle gun and gun violence in this country."[2] In her remark, she assumed a catastrophic event like the Sandy Hook shooting may offer a similar advantage in politics to proponents of gun reform.

Bush and Wagner would both prove—at least somewhat—wrong. Just two years after winning re-election in 2004, Bush's Republican party lost control of both houses of Congress without major legislative achievement. His first term saw an average job approval of 62 percent, but in his second term, it plummeted to 37 percent and reached an all-time low of 25 percent by 2008.[3] And while the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting saw some state-level gun reform measures, both the Manchin-Toomey Amendment for stricter background checks and an assault weapons ban were defeated the following year in Congress.[4] Wager, a prominent political journalist, and Bush, a pedigreed president,

[1] Marc Sandalow, "Bush Claims Mandate, Sets 2nd-term Goals / 'I Earned Capital in This Campaign, Political Capital, and Now I Intend to Spend It'," (SF Gate, November 5, 2004).
[2] Mackenzie Weinger and Dylan Byers. "MSNBC Launches the Gun Control Conversation," (*Politico*, December 14, 2012).
[3] Gallup, *Presidential Approval Ratings -- George W. Bush*, (Washington, DC: Gallup).
[4] "*113th Congress, Roll Call Votes by the U.S. Congress,* (Congress.gov).

seem well positioned to make assessments about the nature of political capital; however, they did not seem to have a complete grasp on the political capital market. In that, they are not alone. The professional political, academic, and journalistic world do not seem to have—beyond cursory descriptions or off-hand observations—a perfect grasp of it either.

It is hard to blame them for that. Political capital is one of the least, if not the least, understood metric of political power. Broadly, power may be understood as the capacity to influence the behavior of others or events in a way they would not have acted if not for the exertion of that influence. At its core, political capital is just that: a way to influence. Banfield offers a specific definition of that political power, arguing that control is the ability to cause another to give or withhold an action and power as the ability to establish control over another.[5] But that definition leaves a lot to understand about where political power comes from.

And political capital, particularly as a way to understand political power, has largely been an afterthought in academia and used so often as to become a buzzword in news media. In a sense, it has become a catch-all term for political power. The present study will seek to change that. By analyzing hours of interviews with Capitol Hill staff members, the present thesis will argue that political capital is distinct from political power, does not have a shared definition among Capitol Hill staffers, and is co-constructed among political elites. These political sophisticates—an elite that includes staffers, politicians, journalists, and outside groups—rely on each other to decipher and construct the relative value of this currency. This qualitative analysis reveals that the

[5] Edward Christle Banfield, *Political Influence*, (New York, 1961).

value of political capital is set by its perceived value among those elites, describing the nature of political capital and defining the process of its co-construction.

The present study employs a grounded theory approach, detailed in the methodology section of this thesis. As such, the review of literature that follows positions the research within the larger political science sphere. The theories presented in this review are possibilities not definitively linked to the findings in this study. With that in mind, the review of literature will explore the concept of political power with a particular focus on how it relates to political capital. In doing so, this analysis will argue that political capital is separate and distinct from political power more broadly. It will also review literature related to media effects and legislative success, potential metrics related to the measurement of political capital. Doing so will allow a more informed analaysis of the data collected in this study, making the research cognizant of academic concepts that may be at play in the processes the informants may describe. The review of literature will also make an argument about the selection of the informants—senior Congressional staff—and why those staffer's lay theories about political processes are critical to an academic understanding of political capital.

In an institution as complex as Congress, governing a nation as diverse in policy problems as in people, the work of government would be virtually impossible if not for the expert staff. They bring order to the chaos of Congress and action to their member's goals. The portfolio of a Congressperson is simply too large to handle alone; members are ideological leaders, staff to their constituents, politicians, and policymakers to the nation.[6] With their members distracted, staffers are left to captain the ship and preserve

[6] Susan Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process,* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 46.

institutional memory. The staff interviewed in this study all had worked with more than one member, indicative of the role they can plan in preserving knowledge even after electoral losses. As a collective memory of legislative knowledge, the staff steady what may otherwise be a bumpy shift from session to session or when the gavel is handed from one party to another. In doing so, they provide important context and strategy to members based on past events. This study offers an analysis of four staffers' theories and perceptions of political capital on Capitol Hill. During their interviews, they discussed the role that political capital plays in legislation, in politics, and described where they believe it comes from. The forthcoming analysis offers a window into these staffers' world, an understanding of how they think about their jobs, and a roadmap for future research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To date, there is not a widely accepted definition of political capital in academia. This study will contend that political capital can broadly be described as a type of political power or a model of political leadership. Early descriptions of power hint at the concept, notably Hobbes seminal description in *Leviathan* of social and political power, in which he observes that "the power of a man, to take it universally, is his present means to obtain some future apparent good."[7] That concept—that power can be stored and spent later—is a central tenet of political capital, a concept that was first explored by Banfield in his 1961 book, *Political Influence*. Banfield offered an early explanation of local political leadership that sounded more at home on the New York Stock Exchange than on Capitol Hill. He proposed that "the political head… gets his stock of influence by

[7] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan.: Or the Matter, Form an Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil*. (Routledge, 1651).

'buying' a bit here and a bit there from the many small 'owners' who are endowed with it by the constitution-makers."[8] He continued the metaphor further, proposing that "on any particular occasion, the Mayor might indulge himself in the luxury of 'consuming' rather than 'investing' influence, i.e., of using it for present purposes without regard to its replenishment. But if he consumed it for very long, he would be out of business."[9] In this nascent description, Banfield hit on the central tenets of the term: namely that, like real capital, it can be bought and sold or gained through work. With this extended metaphor of mayoral political leadership, Banfield describes what we would now call the theory of political capital.

Theories of Political Power

On its face, political capital seems indistinct from political power; this assumption is wrong. To understand the distinction between these two political science concepts, this study must first begin with a more informed understanding of power. Power, of course, is a useful way to talk about politics in our daily lives. But in academia, the concept can often seem muddled by competing definitions and vague concepts. As Uphoff has put it, when power is used to "analyze politics systematically it quickly becomes entangled in a snarl of concepts, its precise nature growing less clear in the underbrush of related term."[10] Political capital is certainly one of those "related terms," but indubitably it is not alone in that murky "underbrush." Uphoff has pointed out, for example, that "power is often treated as synonymous with 'authority'" and "authority is commonly referred to as

[8] Banfield, *Political Influence*, 241.
[9] Ibid., 242.
[10] Norman Uphoff, "Distinguishing Power, Authority & Legitimacy: Taking Max Weber at His Word by Using Resources-Exchange Analysis," (Polity, 1989), 295.

'legitimate' power."[11] What these overlapping and competing definitions and concepts make clear is that power is central to an informed understanding of politics. To grasp how power has been employed in political science, it is critical to examine existing definitions and applications.

One of the most cited definitions of power comes from Max Weber's germinal *Economy and Society*, in which he proposes that "power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests."[12] For Weber, the designation of power is an assertion about probability—it is the concept that power is not a single definable metric, but rather a relationship between two actors. Weber's definition does not exist alone. Parsons has argued that political power is a phenomenon of "coercion" and "consensus" because it "integrates a plurality of factors and outputs of political effectiveness" and it is not identified with just one of those "factors."[13] Similarly vague to other descriptions, Parsons' analysis is critical because it recognizes that metrics (like political effectiveness) can help to gauge the relative power of political actors and that power is the culmination of numerous factors. Other academics have been more specific about the nature of power than Weber and Parsons.

Robert Dahl, in his seminal *The Concept of Power,* proposed a now widely accepted description of power. He proposed that "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do."[14] This simple but effective

[11] Uphoff, "Distinguishing Power," 296.
[12] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, (Univ. of California Press, 1956), 152.
[13] Talcott Parsons, "On the Concept of Political Power," (American Philosophical Society, 1963), 258.
[14] Robert Dahl, "The Concept of Power," (Behavioral Science, 1957), 202-203.

description offers academia a starting point to understand what aspects of a relationship are impacted by power. As to where the power in that relationship comes from, Dahl proposes that the "base of an actor's power consists of all the resources—opportunities, acts, objects, etc.—that he can exploit in order to affect the behavior of another."[15] Under this definition, political capital may merely be a resource of power, a potential model that this study will be conscious of in its analysis.

Another way academics have approached political power is through study of a political actor's reputation for power. Wolfinger has studied whether "reputations for power is an adequate index of the distribution of power" and if it is "useful to describe a political system by presenting rankings of the leading participants according to their power."[16] His analysis found that a politician's reputation for power alone is not a "valid representation of the distribution of political power."[17] He concluded that ranking power based on reputation "would not be useful without additional research" into the power dynamics of the community being studied.[18] A better understanding of political capital may shed light on the role that reputation for power plays in politics and will thus be a critical question this study will analyze.

Soft power—typically understood through the lens of international relations—may also offer a critical lens through which political power can be cognized. Soft power is a persuasive approach to power relations; it is the idea that you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar. Gallarotti has proposed that soft power "represents a

[15] Dahl, "The Concept of Power," 203.
[16] Raymond Wolfinger, "Reputation and Reality in the Study of 'Community Power,'" (American Sociological Review, 1960), 637.
[17] Wolfinger, "Reputation and Reality," 642.
[18] Ibid.

form of meta-power."[19] Meta-power, in that case, describes "situations in which power relations themselves are embedded within some greater constellation of social relations that influence those power relations and thereby influence final outcomes that derive from the interactions among actors."[20] This concept recognizes that power itself is not the ultimate organizing concept in social relations—there are many factors beyond power at play as well. While this is typically articulated as a view of global politics, the relationship between meta-power and agenda control may prove critical to an informed understanding of political capital. Gallarotti has argued that "meta-power is often equated with agenda control" and that "agenda control could be consistent with some elements of soft power" dynamics.[21] The ability to control an agenda may be a critical factor in political capital and power more broadly. Nye has also proposed this theory, arguing that soft power may be a control over the "political agenda" in world politics.[22] The logic would follow that the same may be true in domestic politics as well. Nye proposed that:

> "Soft power uses a different type of currency (not force, not money) to engender cooperation—an attraction to shared values and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values. Much as Adam Smith observed that people are led by an invisible hand when making decisions in a free market, our decisions in the marketplace for ideas are often shaped by soft power—an intangible attraction that persuades us to go along with others' purposes without any explicit threat or exchange taking place."[23]

---

[19] Giulio Gallarotti, "Soft Power: What It Is, Why It's Important, and the Conditions for Its Effective Use," (Journal of Political Power, 2011), 28.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Gallarotti, "Soft Power," 29.
[22] Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics*, (Public Affairs, 2004), 9.
[23] Ibid., 7.

The idea that a political actor may "engender cooperation" out of shared values could be the prism through which political capital may be analyzed and Nye's market metaphor seems to fit well with the concept of political power as capital. As such, this study will be mindful of the ways in which soft power may be used to influence political outcomes. But these various definitions and descriptions of power remain vague. To what extent can a political actor even control the power they may, or may not, wield?

Parsons has contended that there is a "relatively 'free floating' element in [a] power system which is analogous to a credit-system."[24] He has argued that "power, as a symbolic medium, is like money in that it is itself 'worthless,' but is accepted in the expectation that it can later be 'cashed in,' this time in the activation of binding obligations."[25] The link to political capital here is apparent, though suggests that Parsons sees no distinction between power and political capital. However, he further proposed that:

> "A power-system in which this credit like element is prominent is in a state analogous to the 'insolvency' of a monetary system which includes an important element of actual credit, namely its commitments cannot be fulfilled all at once, even if those to whom they have been made have formally valid rights to such fulfillment. Only a strict zero-sum power system could fulfill this condition of 'liquidity.'"[26]

[24] Parsons, "On the Concept of Political Power," 255.
[25] Ibid., 256.
[26] Parsons, "On the Concept of Political Power," 256.

The power system in Congress is not zero-sum. One need not lose for another to gain in Congress, so power on Capitol Hill is not liquid under Parson's definition. The true nature of power, then, must be more complex than a credit system.

The extant literature on political power is broad, failing to settle on a single definition of political power. As such, the door remains open for alternate understandings of power. Does power, in any literal form, exist? Uphoff has argued no. In a critical analysis of Weber's *Economy and Society*, Uphoff contended that power cannot be possessed, proposing that:

> "Power does not exist literally, though the word refers to concrete and important phenomena. Once can never possess power except as a figure of speech. One can only have power means, i.e., resources that are used with more or less skill, more or less determination, and more or less luck."[27]

In this view, reputation, credit, soft power, and other concepts of power may all be viewed as "means" of power. The present study will argue that political capital is one of those "means," separate and distinct from the organizing concept of power, and is a resource that a tactful political can deploy within a power dynamic. Political capital epitomizes that idea, the idea that that power exists only through its means. Where capital is means to commerce, political capital is a means to power. This relationship is not lost on the political capital literature.

Theories of Political Capital

This paper contends that political capital is distinct from political power; instead, it views political capital as a "means" of political power rather than a synonym for it.

[27] Uphoff, "Distinguishing Power, Authority & Legitimacy," 320.

This distinction is possible because while power is "both an ends and means in politics,"[28] political capital is just a means. Put another way, political capital is not a goal, but power can be a goal. Instead, political capital is a means to achieve a political purpose, which could be to pass legislation, raise money for reelection, or merely to gain power. In this view, political capital is a kind of power base, as are wealth, social status, statutory authority, and knowledge (among a litany of other things). The same is true of the various models of power. For instance, where a reputational approach to power "assumes and reports a static distribution of power,"[29] political capital may be a means to improve a reputation for power. And where soft power may involve "getting others to want the outcomes that you want,"[30] political capital may be a means to influence the values a political actor may use to evaluate a decision. In these examples, the distinction between means (political capital) and ends (political power) is evident. Having recognized the distinction between political capital and power, this study now turns to understanding the nature of political capital.

Bourdieu was one of the first to classify political capital, mentioning it in the essay *The Forms of Capital*[31] and then expanding on the concept in his seminal *Language & Symbolic Power*.[32] Bourdieu wrote that "political capital is a form of symbolic capital, *credit* founded on *credence* or belief and *recognition* or, more precisely, on the innumerable operations of credit by which agents confer on a person (or on an object) the very powers that they recognize in him (or it)."[33] In Bourdieu's view, political capital is

[28] Uphoff, "Distinguishing Power," 296.
[29] Wolfinger, "Reputation and Reality," 644.
[30] Nye, *Soft Power,* 5.
[31] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," (Greenwood, 1986).
[32] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991).
[33] Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 192.

like a bank vault for political power, where the means to achieve your ends may be stored. An adept politician, under Bourdieu's definition, can accumulate means to power in the same way a banker may accumulate wealth. It is a view that has been widely accepted in the literature and among politicians. Bourdieu did not propose the concept of political capital in a bubble. He defined capital, in a broad sense, as the "accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor." In *The Forms of Capital* Bourdieu articulated three distinct forms of this capital: economic, social, and cultural.[34] Political capital, this paper contends, is a form of social capital.

In Bourdieu's view social capital is "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition."[35] More simply, it is the capital one has from their social positioning. In contemporary America, the collective social capital is said to be declining.[36] However, Putnam has noted one exception to this general decline: political advocacy. Putnam, remarking about the link between social capital and politics, observed that:

> "The national administrators of [AARP and Sierra Club] are among the most feared lobbyists in Washington, in large part because of their massive mailing lists of presumably loyal members. These new mass-membership organizations are plainly of great political importance."[37]

[34] Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital."
[35] Ibid.
[36] Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," (Culture and Politics, 2000).
[37] Ibid., 71.

Putnam, in his observation, has attributed social capital to political advocacy organizations. This paper argues that the capital at play in Putnam's example is political capital. In this way, political capital may be understood as a "variation" of social capital applied to the political arena.[38] Additionally, this further bolsters the argument that political capital is distinct from political power.

Despite all this, political science has no agreed upon definition of political capital.[39] And while there is no shortage of the term in academia, most scholarship has assumed the meaning is understood without offering a definition.[40] Casey has proposed that "political capital can be conceived as exchange between political resources—elements of seven capital types—in various political markets…" and that "implementing [a] measurement of political capital is possible."[41] She argues the sum of seven capital types—human capital, institutional capital, social capital, symbolic capital, economic capital, cultural capital, and moral capital—is the total political capital an actor possesses.[42] However, Casey acknowledges that her proposal "is far from being a complete theory" as it relies solely on a review of relevant literature and does not bring original data to the analysis or her proposed definition.[43]

More recent scholarship has contended that "political capital is the form that power takes in formal politics."[44] French has proposed that political capital cannot be

[38] Kimberly Casey, "Defining Political Capital: A Reconsideration of Bourdieu's Interconvertibility Theory," 3.
[39] Ibid., 1.
[40] Ibid., 2.
[41] Ibid., 15.
[42] Casey expresses this formula as: *Political Capital = ICsc+HCsc+SCsc+ECsc+CCsc+SyCsc+MCsc*, where *sc* is the scoring criteria for each constituent part of political capital.
[43] Casey, "Defining Political Capital," 16.
[44] Richard French, "Political Capital," (*Representation*, 2011), 216.

measured and is best understood through comparison.[45] He offers a reasoned but vague definition:

> "The prospect of the absence of political power flows from the represented to the constituency, closing the gap or completing the circle of representation. The representative gap is filled by reciprocal acts of judgment on the parts of the political figure and constituents. The product of these reciprocal acts of judgment is political capital."[46]

In French's view, political capital is "intangible, volatile, and inherently unstable" as the consequence of the "reciprocal judgments" of political actors.[47] Put more simply, French sees political capital as a nebulous phenomenon that is governed by a cycle of arbitration among voters and politicians; he views it as a "neutral concept."[48] However, French identified one critical role of political capital: solving political problems. He argued that "much more of politics is about building a following—political capital—than about finding solutions to public policy problems, but if and when such solutions are on offer, their execution will inevitably require political capital."[49] French's contention supports this study's argument that political capital is distinct from political power by offering further evidence that political capital is a means to some end. Other models of political capital have attempted to find distinction in the means.

In his analysis, economist Edward Lopez proposed two distinct forms of political capital: representative capital and reputational capital.[50] He defines representative

[45] French, "Political Capital," 218.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid., 226
[49] Ibid.
[50] Edward Lopez, "The Legislator as Political Entrepreneur: Investment in Political Capital," (*The Review of Austrian Economics*, 2002).

political capital as the "vector of parliamentary rights and legislator attributes that [determine] productivity in influencing a policy" and reputational political capital as the "vector of legislator attributes that determines his standing with voters and other unorganized interests."[51] In his view, representative political capital could account for a legislator's committee assignments, seniority on a committee, and general "law-making acumen."[52] This is contrasted with reputational political capital, which may include party affiliation, voting record, name recognition or any other characteristics that voters may use to evaluate a legislator's potential "future performance."[53] Lopez is also quick to note that while these forms of political capital are distinct, they are nonetheless interdependent. For instance, a legislator that accumulates great representative capital may lose reputational capital as they become more entrenched in the power structure and simultaneously more distant from their constituents. In this model, sometimes reputational and representative capital are "mutually exclusive and in other cases mutually reinforcing."[54] This paradox seems to indicate that political capital is not as simple as many understand it. In this, Lopez is supported by Dahl's model of power. Dahl, discussing the workings of power, proposed that a "second necessary condition [of power] is… obvious and nonetheless important in research: there is no 'action at a distance.' Unless there is some 'connection' between A and a, then no power relation can be said to exist."[55] In this contention, Dahl proposed a limitation of power that restricts

[51] Lopez, "The Legislator as Political Entrepreneur," 213-14.
[52] Ibid., 213.
[53] Ibid., 214.
[54] Lopez, "The Legislator as Political Entrepreneur," 216.
[55] Dahl, "The Concept of Power," 204.

impact to related areas. These areas—or arenas—will become important to this study. It suggests that your stock of influence in one area may grow while decreasing in another.

We have no doubt seen several real world, if only anecdotal, examples of this paradox in recent years. In June 2014, in what could only be described as a major upset, Eric Cantor—the Republican Majority Leader—lost a Republican primary to an insurgent Dave Brat. Cantor undoubtedly, as the second highest ranking Republican in the House at the time, had a tremendous amount of what Lopez would call representative political capital. As Leader, he had a disproportionate amount of influence over legislation, committee assignments, and the actual functioning of government. But while he had accumulated a stock of representative political capital, it would seem his reputational political capital suffered, as evidenced by the Republican leaders' upset loss in a Republican party primary. And in almost perfect parallel, in June 2018, House Democratic Caucus Chair Joe Crowley was defeated in a Democratic primary by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a first-time candidate. Crowley, as Chair of the House Democratic Caucus, was the fourth highest ranking Democrat in the House. His position conferred similar representative political capital to what Cantor had in 2014, but he had similarly lost his reputational political capital. While anecdotal, these cases illustrate the seemingly fickle nature of political capital. That problem is perhaps why the concept has largely been an afterthought in academia, but that has not stopped political observers from offering their own lay theories.

A Reagan and Bush administration official, Schneider described his understanding of political capital in *The Atlantic*. He observed that "the rule about

political capital is when you've got it, spend it, because you can't hold on to it."[56] Schneider made his remark in response to President George Bush's 2004 declaration that he was planning to spend the political capital he "earned" during the election.[57] It would turn out, as previously detailed, Bush was a bit off in assessing his own political position. However, Schneider's observation is worth examining. His observation, worth exploring because of his political expertise, seems to suggest two key things about political capital. First, it indicates that political capital is volatile. If, as he suggests, one cannot expect to maintain political capital they have acquired, it is different from traditional conceptions of capital. Even given the volatility of monetary capital markets, investors can generally rest assured that the overall trajectory of their capital is toward growth. Schneider's suggestion that this is not the case with political capital, in and of itself, challenges the capital analogy and warrants further examination. Second, and more importantly, Schneider's observation suggests—to extend the monetary analogy—that political capital is liquid. His argument—that political capital can be spent at will—indicates that it is readily convertible into political achievement in the same way that liquid monetary capital is a readily convertible asset. The convertibility of political capital is something this study will play close attention to. This is opposed to illiquid capital, which is held for the long term and is not readily convertible. However, viewing Schneider's argument—in its lay approach—misses the full picture of the political capital market. To address these gaps in the literature, it is important to understand the different metrics we can evaluate political capital with. This study proposes two primary metrics—legislative effectiveness and media strategy—based on a the review of previous literature.

[56] William Schneider, Jr, "What is Political Capital?" (*The Atlantic*, 2005).
[57] Sandalow, *Bush Claims Mandate.*

Legislative Effectiveness as a Metric of Political Capital

With legislative achievement as the metric of capital value it would seem that political capital earned from electoral victory is less clearly converted into political achievement. While a politician may win a remarkable victory that leads them to the halls of Congress for the first time, what capital do they have when they get there? They may have a large media following or characteristics that make them adept at the legislative process, but they likely lack the political capital needed to turn that electoral success into legislative success. In this way, their political capital may be somewhat illiquid. It exists in much the same way real estate does as an asset class. There is, of course, a value in illiquid capital. But the process to convert that value into legislative achievement is longer and more complicated. This is contrasted with the relative liquidity of political capital sourced from position. Politicians whose capital comes from rank, position, or ability to influence legislation have an outsize ability to convert that capital into legislative achievement. In fact, there is a logical link between this type of political capital and the ability of a legislator to influence outcomes. No one would dispute the Speaker of the House or the Senate majority leader—both politicians with tremendous amounts of political capital *ex officio*—have a greater ability to influence legislation than a newly elected member. While this is not a revolutionary acknowledgment, it leaves us wondering: what makes a member of Congress productive?

The Center for Effective Lawmaking, a joint initiative of the University of Virginia and Vanderbilt University led by Craig Volden and Alan Wiseman, rated Members of the 114th Congress based on "the bills they sponsor, how far the bills

progress through the lawmaking process, and how important the bills are."[58] They found the most effective senators were Orin Hatch, who had served in the Senate for 40 years at the time and who was the senate pro tempore, and Ron Wyden, who had served in Congress for 36 years at the time and is the dean[59] of the Oregon Congressional delegation. The Center's study of the 115th Congress found Congressman Don Young, the dean of the house, was the most effective member of Congress.[60] In fact, across their studies, they have found that "egalitarianism and individualism undergird lawmaking activities in the Senate."[61] Moreover, they have found that the "Legislative Effectiveness Scores of committee and subcommittee chairs are positively correlated over time and rise along with their expertise," providing support for the hypothesis that *ex officio*[62] political capital is associated with legislative achievement.[63]

They have also argued that "it takes a certain set of political skills (and the right political circumstances) to formulate a viable solution to a major public policy problem, to construct a coalition in support of that solution, and to shepherd the related legislation through committee, across the floor, and into law."[64] The present research would contend that political capital is one of the "political circumstances" that contributes to legislative effectiveness. Although legislative effectiveness has long interested political science as a

[58] Center for Effective Lawmaking. "Center for Effective Lawmaking Announces Highest-scoring Members of Congress," (2017).
[59] In Congress, "dean" refers to the longest serving member of a body. i.e. dean of a state's delegation or dean of the entire body.
[60] Center for Effective Lawmaking, "Highlights from the New 115th Congress Legislative Effectiveness Scores," (2019).
[61] Craig Volden and Alan Wiseman, "Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Senate," (*Journal of Politics,* 2018), 731-35.
[62] Literally "from the office," this study uses *ex officio* to refer to political capital granted by a position held.
[63] Craig Volden and Alan Wiseman, "Legislative Effectiveness and Problem Solving in the U.S. House of Representatives," (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2017).
[64] Volden and Wiseman, "Legislative Effectiveness in Congress," 1.

topic, there is little recent research about effectiveness beyond studies about electoral or interest group settings or those completed by the Center for Effective Lawmaking.[65] The research in the field that does exist is largely empirical and lacks widespread acceptance.[66] State politics have generated some literature about legislator effectiveness[67] and a few have attempted to do the same at the national level.[68] Because of this dearth of research and because their model is comprehensive, the metric of political effectiveness proposed by Volden and Wiseman seems the most reasonable to apply in this study. The factors they primarily consider when evaluating a given legislator's effectiveness are: "innate ability, the acquisition and cultivation of a critical skill set, and the sophisticated utilization of key legislative institutions."[69] These amorphous pillars are inherently hard to define and even more difficult to measure. Some legislators simply bring more innate ability—and with it, political capital—to politics than others. They, seemingly without trying, are able to not only articulate political problems, but know how to create solutions to those problems that are "politically viable."[70] These politicians, for lack of a better term, possess a "gut feeling" about what arguments will be persuasive to whom and can sense when something is doomed to die in committee. As Volden and Wiseman put it, "these are abilities that some members of Congress have at high levels and that others, even if they dedicate all of their time and effort to cultivating such abilities, simply

[65] Volden and Wiseman, "Legislative Effectiveness in Congress," 2.
[66] Ibid., 6.
[67] See Katherine Meyer, "Legislative Influence: Toward Theory Development through Causal Analysis," (*Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 1980) and Miquel and Padró Miquel and James Snyder, "Legislative Effectiveness and Legislative Careers," (*Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 2006).
[68] See William D. Anderson, Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, and Valeria Sinclair-Chapman, "The Keys to Legislative Success in the U.S. House of Representatives," (Legislative Studies Quarterly, 2003) and Gregory Wawro, *Legislative Entrepreneurship in the U.S. House of Representatives*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).
[69] Volden and Wiseman, "Legislative Effectiveness in Congress," 7.
[70] Ibid.

cannot achieve."[71] The lawmakers with that innate ability will also have a better understanding of the forces of political capital. They will know how to read its market, how to build it for themselves, and when and how to deploy it. Those adept legislators will have a larger stock of political capital out of the gate because their increased legislative effectiveness which, in turn, could be associated with higher levels of political capital.

But policymaking is not done in a bubble and even the most effective senator needs fifty of their colleagues to pass a bill out of the Senate. Chairing a committee, being active in a caucus, or being in the majority all offer institutional (e.g. *ex officio*) advantages. Without the capacity to influence the debate, even the most intrinsically effective legislator has little hope of legislative achievement. That dilemma is why legislative achievement cannot, and is not, the only metric of political capital. And while Mayhew has observed legislative effectiveness is a necessary precondition of political advancement, arguing that "like power contenders in the Roman Republic who headed for Gaul or Spain to win battles, would-be presidents try to score points by showing they can actually do something – pass laws,"[72] it is not the only path to advancement (and thus a greater stock of political capital). The capacity to influence the debate is oftentimes far more important than legislative effectiveness, which is why media acumen— especially the ability of a legislator to set an agenda and frame the debate—may be critical to their stock of political capital.

[71] Volden and Wiseman, "Legislative Effectiveness in Congress," 7.
[72] David R. Mayhew, *Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, and Investigations*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 110.

Media Acumen as a Metric of Political Capital

If we understand political capital as—at least in part—a media phenomenon, understanding the media effects literature is critical. In particular, the cascading activation model is essential in understanding how political actors can influence political capital. Cascading activation is the process by which political actors inform elites of a frame, who then inform the media, which then trickles down through the news frames to the public.[73] Entman's application of media framing—which involves promoting certain aspects of an event or issue to promote a particular reaction—it is best understood through the frame of news media. Harcup and O'Neill give us a more comprehensive understanding of what political actors may use to ascribe news value, and thus an understanding of what makes Entman's cascading activation model successful. They found that news stories must typically meet one of their criteria to be selected for coverage.[74] Their model proposes the most successful frames are those that deploy a power elite, celebrity, entertainment, surprise, bad/good news, magnitude, relevance, follow-up, or newspaper agenda frame.[75] By following these principles, political actors can employ mechanisms like framing, the CNN effect or agenda-setting to facilitate and amplify their message. The CNN effect, for instance, may allow a political actor even to exercise their political capital across borders, allowing "instant communication between states and leaders" domestically or in other nations and force their target elites to "adopt policies that they would not make otherwise."[76] While the CNN effect is conventionally

[73] Robert M. Entman, "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame After 9/11," (*Political Communication*, 2003).
[74] Tony Harcup and Deirdre O'Neill, "What Is News? Galtung and Ruge Revisited," (*Journalism Studies,* 2001).
[75] Ibid., 279.
[76] Eytan Gilboa, "The CNN Effect: The Search for a Communication Theory of International Relations," (*Political Communication,* 2005), 326.

understood as a way the media can impact the public consciousness and force political leaders into decisions, skilled political actors can use Harcup and O'Neill's guidance to influence media and deploy that CNN effect to achieve their own goals. They can be particularly successful at this by utilizing framing, the cascading activation model, and agenda-setting.

Entman's seminal study of framing describes it as the process by which media "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation."[77] Explained differently, framing is the concept that audiences employ their beliefs to comprehend their world and that media contributes to those beliefs.[78] Deployed properly, as in Entman's cascading activation model, these frames can then impact media coverage, offering a way political actors may influence the media. But framing is not alone in the role it plays influencing news media. And while Weaver has noted, "framing incorporates a wider range of factors than… agenda setting, which [is a] cognitive concept,"[79] other scholarship has contended that framing and agenda-setting share media bias as an "organizing concept."[80] Notwithstanding the various "similarities and connections" between framing and agenda setting, they are distinctive cannot be conflated.[81] But since, according to McCombs, framing theory also "links" to the agenda-setting process, it is

[77]Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," (*Journal of Communication*, 1993), 52.
[78] Stanley J. Baran and Dennis K. Davis, *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future*, (Cengage Learning, 2015), 297.
[79] David H. Weaver, "Thoughts on Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming," (*Journal of Communication*, 2007), 143.
[80] Robert M. Entman, "Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power," (*Journal of Communication*, 2007), 163-73.
[81] Weaver, *Thoughts on Agenda Setting*, 146.

also worth careful examination to get a complete picture of how political actors may utilize various media phenomena.[82]

As this study expects that political capital is often reliant on the ability of legislators to influence the media, understanding media effects at-large is critical to understanding political capital. Systematic academic approaches to media effects have successively supplanted early theories leading to models like those pioneered in *The People's Choice*.[83] Later research, especially Noelle-Neumann's, found evidence of a potent mass media environment,;[84] and subsequent research by Gerbner and Gross developed the theory of cultivation.[85] The confluence of these advents in media scholarship brought another paradigm shift in the political communication literature in the 1970s. Markedly for the concept of political capital, the media research of the late 20th century brought about the agenda-setting model of media effects.

Agenda-setting is best understood as a function of mass media that—by selecting and promoting particular issues—cause the public to perceive those issues as the most salient.[86] From its earliest iterations, the agenda-setting scholarship has had a primary focus on the political ramifications of the process. It inherently follows that politicians who are able to influence media coverage, by proxy, work in conjunction with the media to set the agenda. McCombs and Shaw's pioneering study that developed and defined the agenda-setting process demonstrated for the first time this process at work.[87] Their

[82] McCombs, *A Look at Agenda-setting*, 546.
[83] Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*, (New York, Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1948).
[84]Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, "Return to the Concept of Powerful Mass Media," (*Studies in Broadcasting,* 1973).
[85] George Gerbner and Larry Gross, "System of Cultural Indicators," (*Public Opinion Quarterly,* 1974).
[86] McCombs and Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," 176.
[87] Ibid.

research argued that the media "exerted a considerable impact on voters' judgments of what they considered the major issues of the campaign."[88] For instance, even when the political candidates they studied placed emphasis on different campaign topics, their research suggested that the "judgements of the voters seem to reflect the composite of the mass media coverage," offering evidence that "voters pay some attention to all the political news regardless of whether it is from, or about, and particular favored candidate."[89] However, in the time since McCombs and Shaw's 1972 study, these assumptions have changed, and the media landscape they studied has changed even more dramatically. Narrowcasting and a hyper-partisan media landscape have made disparate what over 40 years ago could be defined as the agenda set by the media and have given individual politicians total control of self-produced media coverage (on social media in particular).

Since the nascent years of agenda-setting theory, the U.S. political and media landscape has changed considerably, especially when considering how media may interact with political capital. Some politicians have framed the press as the enemy of the people and the number of media outlets continues to proliferate with no obvious end in sight.[90] One of the primary effects of these changes has been an increasingly partisan media. For instance, Ladd has found that more Democrats consume news from CNN, NPR, PBS Newshour, and MSNBC and Republicans consume news from Fox News.[91] This may be an important consideration for the present study, as Democrat and

[88] McCombs and Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," 180.
[89] Ibid., 181.
[90] Jonathan Ladd, "The Era of Media Distrust and Its Consequences for Perceptions of Political Reality," (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014).
[91] Ladd, "The Era of Media Distrust," 31.

Republican staffers may have differing views on how (and which) media impact political capital. Moreover, since the 1970s, "levels of trust in the media among the public have significantly declined," particularly among Republicans.[92] This trust may be another critical factor when trying to decipher how Republicans view the news media's role in political capital.

Thanks to the rise of new media technologies, narrowcasting has also become a crucial media phenomena. Primarily the product of cable television and the Internet, narrowcasting is "the targeting of specific niche audiences" that is contrasted to broadcasting, which inherently had a general audience.[93] Some scholars have argued that the trend toward narrowcasting may have a democratizing impact on the media and thus limiting the power the broadcast media once held,[94] but Hindman has argued that is likely not true.[95] He has argued that the Internet is not a narrowcasting tool that "levels the playing field"[96] and that the theory that the Internet has a democratizing effect on politics is flawed.[97] He found that ostensibly narrowcast Internet media mirror, to a large degree, the agenda of broadcast media. Hindman's findings suggest that the narrowcast media agenda is set by the mass media, offering evidence that inter-media agenda-setting is at work. This finding is critical if, as the present study does, we want to understand how political actors may capitalize on the diffuse media landscape. Political actors, for example, may spend political capital to make an issue more salient or gain political

[92] Ladd, "The Era of Media Distrust," 40.
[93] Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, "Narrowcasting in the New World Information Order," (*Television & New Media*, 2004), 70.
[94] Ibid., 71.
[95] Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
[96] Ibid., 38.
[97] Ibid., 3.

capital by linking themselves to an already salient issue. As such, this study will explore the connection between issue saliency and political capital.

Issue saliency is the most common way academics understand agenda-setting. Previous scholarship has operationalized issue saliency in numerous ways. Most analyses of issue saliency have centered on attention, which is "the number of news stories devoted to a particular topic" and prominence, which is the importance of the news about an issue measured through "page placement, size of headline, amount of time or space, appearance in the lead."[98] If we understand salience as a form of attention, it can be primarily comprehended as the consequence of individual and societal factors that influence our attentiveness.[99] To the extent political actors can influence issue saliency, or to associate themselves with existing issues, the more significant influence they have over their media-based political capital.

This is made clear in existing scholarship. According to Behr & Iyengar, as conditions of public interest get worse and a president concentrates their attention on a particular issue, "public concern for these issues increases" and "real-world conditions and events provide an independent impetus to the perceived importance of issues."[100] This perhaps could be described as political agenda setting, the process by which a political leader may influence the public agenda through issue saliency. This particular phenomenon of saliency is the most relevant for the present study, demonstrating how political actors may utilize saliency to build or deploy political capital. Behr & Iyengar

[98] McCombs, *A Look at Agenda-setting*, 550.
[99] Salma Ghanem and Dixie Evatt, "A Salience Scale to Enhance Interpretation of Public Opinion," (*World Association for Public Opinion Research*, 2001).
[100] Roy L. Behr and Shanto Iyengar, "Television News, Real-World Cues, and Changes in the Public Agenda," (*Public Opinion Quarterly,* 1985), 53.

are cognizant of the link between media and political actor influence on issue saliency, noting that "analyses of media agenda-setting that ignore real-world conditions will arrive at severely inflated estimates of media influence."[101] This recognition is exceptionally critical to the present study and may play a role in how Capitol Hill communications staffers think about political capital's relationship to media. Additionally, it is critical to consider how those staffer's may deploy these media effects.

More often, politicians and their staffers are turning to the Internet and social media to conduct politics. At the same time, we are seeing Internet-related media fragmentation. Mancini has contended that "with the Internet, the number of possible sources of information increases and, therefore, the number of consumers is distributed across a larger number of media outlets."[102] These trends have significant consequences for the concept of political capital, in particular how political actors take advantage of these phenomena. As news becomes more disintegrated and the public more cynical about the media they ingest, we may expect to see more diverse and weaker agendas and frames, and thus weaker views of politicians. However, most scholarship on inter-media agenda-setting indicates that these changes in media will have minimal impact on the agenda-setting function of the press. In fact, it may be that Internet media are just a reflection of the wider political discourse. Inter-media agenda-setting scholarship has assessed the function of media opinion leaders, which are outlets that "all other media seem to look to for guidance."[103] These opinion leaders of the press, typically marquee

[101] Behr and Iyengar, "Television News," 53.
[102] Paolo Mancini, "Media Fragmentation, Party System, and Democracy," (*The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2012), 45.
[103] Raymond A. Harder, Julie Sevenans, and Peter Van Aelst, "Intermedia Agenda Setting in the Social Media Age: How Traditional Players Dominate the News Agenda in Election Times," (*The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2017), 2.

newspapers, have been shown to set the agenda of other news outlets.[104] Understood differently, that means "highly regarded media such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* in the United States are assumed to influence the content of other media."[105] These inter-media agenda-setting effects may help us understand how political actors may utilize media opinion leaders to set an agenda or frame a debate. As such, the study will be mindful of the media the informants consume.

Other scholarship has also sought to describe the effects of social media on the political agenda.[106] In studying the inter-media agenda-setting impact of Twitter, Conway *et al.* posited that "traditional media and Twitter feeds of politicians, campaigns, and parties are involved in a source cycle."[107] Their study offered evidence that the "contemporaneous relationships and minimal time lags" that exists on Twitter "suggest that agenda setting is expedient in the online arena."[108] In fact, they still found that the media opinion leaders have not lost their ability to set the agenda on social media, as "candidates are still going to look to the media for legitimacy, just as social media users are going to look to the media for information on unobtrusive issues."[109] This offers evidence that while social media may be a tool in the arsenal of political actors, it is not independent of the traditional media. When seeking to understand political capital, we

[104] Rens Vliegenthart and Stefaan Walgrave, "The Contingency of Intermedia Agenda Setting: A Longitudinal Study in Belgium," (*Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2008).
[105] Sevenans Harder and Van Aelst, *Intermedia Agenda Setting in the Social Media Age*, 3.
[106] Lance W. Bennett and Shanto Iyengar, "A New Era of Minimal Effects? The Changing Foundations of Political Communication," (*Journal of Communication*, 2008).
[107] Bethany A. Conway, Kate Kenski, and Di Wang, "The Rise of Twitter in the Political Campaign: Searching for Intermedia Agenda-Setting Effects in the Presidential Primary," (*Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2015), 374.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Conway, Kenski, and Wang, "The Rise of Twitter," 375.

anticipate social media has a role, but that it is not decisive. As such, informants will also be asked about the role that social media plays in this process.

Recent developments like these have offered support for a new model of agenda-setting which has been dubbed the network agenda-setting (NAS) model. The NAS model denotes the "impact of the networked media agenda of objects or attributes on the networked public agenda of object or attribute salience."[110] This model is distinct from other forms of agenda-setting and is perhaps the most important for strategic political actors. This third level of agenda-setting, which is continuing to play a larger role in the extant literature, asserts that "issues can be either implicitly or explicitly linked in news coverage or the public's mind."[111] The NAS model implies that media network agendas are associated with public network agendas and that media network agendas are able to predict public network agendas. Applied to political actors, issue saliency may also be linked to a particular politician in much the same way Representative Ocasio-Cortez has been linked to the Green New Deal[112] and President Trump has been linked to the border wall proposal.[113] The extant literature largely ignores questions about news media's role in political capital. Is media acumen even the right measure, or should it be legislative effectiveness? These questions—questions about the true nature of what constitutes political capital—are where this study begins. To answer these questions, this study will look to the lay theories of senior Congressional staff about political capital.

[110] McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver, *New Directions in Agenda-Setting Theory and Research*, 782.
[111] Vargo, Guo, McCombs, and Shaw, *Network Issue Agendas on Twitter*, 300.
[112] Robinson Meyer, "A Centuries-Old Idea Could Revolutionize Climate Policy," (2019).
[113] Richard Parker, "Why the Wall Will Never Rise," (2019).

Why Senior Congressional Staff?

The informants in this study—senior Congressional staffers—possess well-developed instincts for legislative action. They choreograph the "dance of legislation" by developing and implementing their member's legislative goals.[114] Senior Congressional staff, according to a 2017 Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) report, include communications directors/press secretaries, legislative directors, state/district directors, deputy chiefs of staff and chiefs of staff.[115] That CMF study, conducted between August and October 2016, surveyed those senior staffers in House and Senate personal offices. While their study sought to understand the "challenges Congress faces in performing its role in democracy," it offers a wealth of information for the present study.[116] CMF contacted 1,900 House and Senate staffers to participate in an online survey. Invitations were only sent to chief/deputy of staff, legislative director, communications director/press secretary, and district/state director. They received 206 responses of which only 184 met the terms of participation. According to their report, 79 percent of these senior staffers had worked in Congress for more than four years, with 43 percent having worked in Congress for more than ten years.[117] Senior staffers are also older than the wide-eyed young staffers often associated with Congress, with 84 percent being over the age of 31 and 42 percent being over the age of 41.[118] In contrast, the average age of all

[114] Eric Redman, *The Dance of Legislation*, (University of Washington Press, 2001).
[115] Kathy Goldschmidt, *State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate,* (Congressional Management Foundation, 2017), 30.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Goldschmidt, *State of the Congress*, 31.
[118] Ibid.

Congressional staff is only 31.[119] This indicates that senior staffers possess vast institutional knowledge compared with Congressional staffers in general.

The role of staff is increasingly important, especially as the time members of Congress have available to commit to legislative activity has decreased. Only six percent of staffers are "very satisfied" that Congresspeople have "adequate time and resources to understand, consider and deliberate policy and legislation."[120] That finding has been corroborated by previous CMF research on Members of Congress. In a 2011 survey of 25 representatives, half disagreed with the statement "I have the time and resources I need to accomplish my goals in Congress," and a third felt they did not spend enough time on legislative work.[121] That means members are increasingly reliant on their staff, particular their senior staff, to handle the functioning of their office. More critically, that reliance on staffers comes after decades of staff cuts on Capitol Hill.

Since the 1980s policy and nonpartisan support organization staff on Capitol Hill have suffered dramatic cuts.[122] In particular, legislative branch departments like the General Accountability Office and Congressional Research Service seen dramatic staff reductions, putting more of the work on already strained staff in personal offices. The cherry on top: staffing on subcommittees and in member's personal offices has also declined. Since 1985, the number of staff in the average House of Representative's personal office has dropped by 20 percent.[123] Even starker, staff in support offices including the clerk, sergeant at arms, and chief administrative officer has been but by 83

[119] Daniel Schuman, *Keeping Congress Competent: Staff Pay, Turnover, and What It Means for Democracy*, (Sunlight Foundation, 2010).
[120] Goldschmidt, *State of the Congress,* 9.
[121] Nicole Cooper, *Life in Congress: The Member Perspective,* (Congressional Management Foundation, 2011), 21.
[122] Goldschmidt, *State of the Congress*, 24.
[123] Ibid.

percent since 1985. [124] The decline is less significant on the Senate side, where since 1985 personal office staff has been cut by four percent and support offices by 13 percent.[125] These declines exacerbate strain on staff and make the remaining staff even more central to the function of Capitol Hill.

Another critical trend in Congressional staff is the shift of staff from Capitol Hill to district or state offices. A 2010 Sunlight Foundation analysis of Brookings' *Vital Statistics on Congress* data found that "fewer staff perform policy-related work now than in years past."[126] Each Member can decide to hire and place positions where they see fit. In recent years, members have been placing more staff in state and district offices rather than on Capitol Hill. Because policy and legislative work are typically carried out in DC offices and constituent services in district offices, we can expect this trend has had an impact on the functioning of Congress. The Sunlight Foundation found that nearly 75 percent of staff in 1976 was based on Capitol Hill; by 2005 that number was 50 percent.[127] When considering this trend through the lens of reputational versus representative capital, we may expect to find that Congress has placed greater importance on reputational capital (referring to capital among constituents) at the expense of representative capital (referring to capital among colleagues). As such, interviewing informants in both district and Capitol Hill offices will be critical.

[124] Goldschmidt, *State of the Congress*, 24.
[125] Molly Reynolds and Jackson Gode, *Vital Statistics on Congress: Data on the U.S. Congress*, (Brookings Institution, 2019).
[126] Schuman, *Keeping Congress Competent*, 5.
[127] Ibid.

Lay Theories of Congressional Staffers

The present study has a particular focus on lay theories, or those theories which people employ in their everyday lives, because those who govern our democracy employ them on a daily basis. Herbst has argued that "the central reason we should care about lay theories of public opinion—those ideas citizens have about the meaning, measure, and value of public opinion—is that these theories give us some insight into how people think about democracy."[128] And because people reason about politics in this way, the same is true of political capital. Academia though, in general, is skeptical of these lay theories. Even when dealing with a well-informed public or political professionals, academics may question their reasoning process and judgment making. And there are certainly many academics, notably Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, who have been critical of lay theory employed in academic study.[129] But despite the detractors, some researchers have ventured to study this type of folk psychology. That research has yielded a body of literature "very much concerned with argument, with the contested nature of social and political events and policies."[130]

Since early studies like Robert Dahl's *Who Governs?*[131] and Barber and Tarlock's *The Lawmakers*,[132] political science has a long history of interest in the views of politically sophisticated individuals. In fact, even Tocqueville's seminal *Democracy in America* is based on interviews with well-placed political actors.[133] Political

[128] Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion,* 152.
[129] Richard E. Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985).
[130] Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion,* 26.
[131] Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961).
[132] Dan A. Tarlock and James David Barber, "The Lawmakers: Recruitment and Adaptation to Legislative Life," (*Stanford Law Review*, 1966), 539.
[133] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (1835).

professionals, as Herbst refers to them, are an elite that encompasses political staffers, journalists, activists, and other high-level political actors. Before proceeding, it is also important to understand why this study—in its title and though the text—refers to these senior Congressional staffers as "elites." It goes without saying that elite is a loaded term that academics often shy away from. Even Herbst decided to employ the term "sophisticates" rather than "elites" throughout her study.[134] However, the present research has chosen to use the word elites because it was the term most frequently employed by study participants to describe their group in relation to the political process. Moreover, elites was chosen over sophisticates because it is more precise. One can have sophisticated knowledge of a subject without being well-positioned to impact that subject; an elite, in contrast, is both sophisticated and positioned to impact the subject. Further study may have revealed this term would not hold to a wider population, but as a result of the exploratory nature of this study, this research will stick with the term taken from the data collected: elites.

These elites will, by virtue of their sophistication, have more informed lay theories to describe their environment. The present study has chosen to focus on Congressional staffers. These staffers are a critical component of what scholars call the "enterprise" model of legislative action.[135] But why staffers and not their bosses? The enterprise model recognizes that legislators do not work alone but are a part of a larger infrastructure of Congress in which staffers are a vital part. The enterprise model, perhaps

[134] Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion*.
[135] David Whiteman, *Communication in Congress: Members, Staff, and the Search for Information*, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 3.

more importantly, acknowledges that "legislative bodies have a culture" that impacts how they operate.[136] Herbst proposes similar reasons, writing:

> "Why not study legislators instead of staffers, though if we are interested in elaborate and complex lay theories of the policy-making process? There are several reasons. First, staffers are a vital component of what legislative scholars call the 'enterprise' perspective or model of legislative action: Members of a legislative body do not work alone but depend on an entire infrastructure of expertise and personnel as they debate and make policy."[137]

Staffers are not only a vital part of the political process, but they are also uniquely positioned to focus on issues related to the legislative process divorced from the issue of campaigning. This is not to say, of course, that they are not interested in the outcomes of campaigns.

Staffers are attuned to elections and their jobs are invested in the outcomes, but they do not constantly concern themselves with political parties and elections. Instead, they are focused on the legislative and political goals of their member. They are concerned with the outcome of votes, co-sponsors of a bill, committee positions, public opinion, and media coverage—all things likely to play a role in the political capital of a member of Congress. By studying staffers, we can get an idea of how individuals inside the legislature think about the concept of political capital—the ways they deploy it, the ways they build it, and how they consider it. In effect, these staffers offer us a behind the scenes look at the Congressional process.

---

[136] Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion,* 35.
[137] Ibid. Referencing Whiteman's *Communication in Congress*.

Communications staffers are their own ball game, distinct from legislative and other staffers. They are the individuals who mediate their member's interactions with the press and public, shaping how we view their members. Press and communications staff are also typically the only staffers with the authorization to speak with the press, on or off the record.[138] Their job is to frame the debate and influence issue saliency, putting a "spin" on issues for strategic reasons. This distinction will become critical in this study's analysis, as it will examine the role staff and press play in the formation of political capital, and thus communications staffers will be vital informants.

METHODOLOGY

In this section, we examine the questions this study is concerned with and describe the qualitative method this study will use to answer those questions. When looking to create a research method for this study, Susan Herbst's *Reading Public Opinion* was the most salient model.[139] Her seminal study of public opinion examined its co-construction through a qualitative analysis of interviews of journalists, legislative staffers, and activists. Though her study examined a different political concept—public opinion rather than political capital—and used a different locus—Illinois state politics rather than Congress—as a model, the parallels between her 1998 study and the present research abound. Large portions of the methodological basis, interview protocols, and analysis of this study are inspired by Herbst and adapted for the present research questions.

[138] Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion,* 36.
[139] Ibid., 152. Especially as it relates to the qualitative interview model offered by Herbst and to the process of co-construction in political science.

A Qualitative Approach to Political Capital

The present study recognizes that a "culturally informed political psychology takes talk seriously: What people say motivates their actions is valuable. We cannot always tell what they do or why they do it without asking them directly and intently."[140] Learning from the people who operate in the world in which academics wish to understand is critical to an informed understanding. That "culturally informed" political science can then study how individuals conceive of their world while still linking their study to the larger academic discourse. As such, this method of inquiry—what Herbst calls "folk psychology"—is, by necessity, interdisciplinary in theory and method.[141] That is why this study, in this review literature and its method and analysis, has drawn on a broad theoretical foundation ranging to include media studies, political science, psychology, and field study. This study is also mindful that when individuals, particularly sophisticates, are asked to give a definition—as they were in this study—they do not just give an answer, they make an argument.[142] This study will be cautious of that, understanding that study participants will "make an argument very much tied to their place in the social matrix and the sorts of institutional discourses that interest them."[143] Deanna Kuhn, in *The Skills of Argument*, notes that "if psychologists studied thinking involving content from people's everyday lives, so the rationale was, what people know about this content would likely become confused with their ability to reason about it."[144] While phenomenon governing people's lives may not be easy for them to self-describe in

[140] Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion*, 24.
[141] Ibid., 25.
[142] Deanna Kuhn, *The Skills of Argument*, (Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[143] Kuhn, *The Skills of Argument*, 27.
[144] Ibid., 7.

a definitive way, there is still value in the "creative reasoning people engage in" about their lives.[145]

It is also important to recognize that our informants are paid professionals. As such, it can be assumed that these staffers have a tremendous personal and occupational interest in the evaluation of political capital. But, as is the case in Herbst's study, "regardless of whether they are paid or not, however, the citizens in this group are different from most Americans, since they maintain an extraordinarily high interest in public affairs."[146] They are sophisticated political actors with well-developed theories of political capital and the policy-making process. By virtue of their position, they are a unique subset of citizens. As Herbst put it in *Reading Public Opinion*, "the legislative enclave studied here is very much—to borrow words from Robert Entman—a 'democracy without citizens': citizens are certainly the ultimate object of policy, but they are not conceptualized as anything but peripheral to the policy-making process."[147] Because of the nature of this group, a qualitative approach is best deployed with a moderately systematized interview. This loose structure allows the informants to take the conversation where they believe it should go, functioning as a way to combat bias that may be introduced through questioning.[148] This study will look to Herbst—because of the parallels between our studies—as a model in this regard. Herbst describes her approach to interviews, saying:

> "The interviews in the present study were semi structured. In other words, there was an interview protocol, but it was critical to use extensive probing, each of the

[145] Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion*, 27.
[146] Ibid., 31.
[147] Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion*, 87. Referencing Robert Entman's *Democracy Without Citizens*.
[148] Grant McCracken, *The Long Interview*, (Sage Publications, 1990).

> interviews has its own unique characteristics. Since the informants were very knowledgeable about politics, and usually very opinionated, they often guessed the next question or took the conversation off on an interesting tangent. This sort of openness and 'negotiation' with the interview protocol is entirely intentional, and it is what makes the method different from conventional survey research or experimentation, where opportunities for respondent commentary are usually quite restricted. I got the sense, in fact, that these informants were relieved that I was not conducting a survey composed of closed-ended questions: Several expressed increased interest in and excitement about the study when they realized that they could explain their arguments and opinions at length."[149]

To a T, Herbst's interview model parallels to this study. A loose questioning style, in Herbst's view, allows for a conversation rather than an inquisition, leading to richer interview content. With an understanding of the qualitative model we will employ in this study, it is appropriate to now turn to the methodology of the present study.

Research Questions

This study is interested in the sources of political capital, the essential nature of that capital, and the theories that govern it. To guide this inquiry, this research has two essential research questions:

RQ 1: What is political capital?

RQ 2: Where does political capital come from?

[149] Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion*, 44.

Method

In following Herbst's model, the present study will employ a qualitative study based on interviews with Capitol Hill staff about their perceptions of political capital. A qualitative study method was chosen because of the exploratory nature of the research. The goal of the present research was not hard and fast rules, but a better understanding of the concept from the people who actually interact with it. With this goal in mind, a grounded theory, qualitative approach was the best fit for the present research. Capitol Hill staffers were selected for analysis because, as public officials working at the highest levels of politics, they are uniquely qualified to offer an informed perspective on the construction of political capital. Herbst selected a similar group for a parallel reason, noting that:

> "I chose to study non academic sophisticates... for several reasons. First, and most importantly, those who work in politics are likely to have richer and more elaborate lay theories about the relationships among media, public opinion, and policy. The second reason I chose to study engaged political actors is obvious: They have some power to change their environments. The people I spoke with absorb a tremendous amount of information about public affairs, but they also affect public opinion, the nature of media content, and the character of public policy."[150]

Following Herbst's model, the present study utilizes "non academic sophisticates." Those elites who work at the highest levels of politics, like the Congressional staffers that participated in the study, are prone to have more developed "lay theories" about the

[150] Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion*, 32.

workings of Capitol Hill, the nature of political capital, and how political capital is utilized on Capitol Hill. And, like Herbst, the second motivation this study utilized political elites is because they have the agency, capacity, and power to influence the phenomena this study is concerned with understanding. And while the same could be said of the Congresspeople they work for, the convenience of interviewing staffers prevailed. The staffers interviewed for this research were all at the "director" level or higher in their respective offices, putting them in a position to grasp and explain the highest levels of politics, how those politics interact with political capital, and the external forces that impact that capital. The U.S. Congress—both the House of Representatives and the Senate—was selected as the locus of the research because it is the most prominent and important legislative body in the country, if not the world. The processes that govern these legislative bodies are critical in understanding the nation and politics at-large. Furthermore, members of both the Democratic and Republican parties were selected because they have a virtual duopoly on U.S. politics and thus have the most impact on the theories this study is concerned with.

The outreach to potential informants began by emailing two people (initial respondents) whom the author knew personally and who worked on Capitol Hill.[151] These two people, a Democrat and a Republican, offered the first snowball referrals. All referrals, who were then contacted by email,[152] were limited to the same party to preserve a Democratic and Republican sample and the snowball sample proceeded from there. The two initial respondents only offered respondent referrals and were not interviewed or otherwise included in the study because of the concern the author's relationship with

[151] See Appendix A
[152] See Appendix B

them may impact the results of the study. Snowball purposive recruitment was employed because this study required a specific demographic that is hard to find. While this recruitment method can prove challenging to generalize with, the specific and technical nature of the positions and the relatively small social network of targets warranted this method. Nonetheless, the resulting data will have transferability to future research. There is one clear divide on the Hill that is a potential roadblock: the partisan divide, which is why one sample started with a Republican staffer and one started with a Democratic staffer with referrals limited to the same party. For the purposes of this study, staffers working for independents or other parties were not included because they are few and far between.

All interview subjects were informed about the purpose of the research and then the interviewer proceeded with the Protocol for Congressional Staff template.[153] The research was exempted from institutional review board oversight.[154] The interview protocol served only as a template and the predetermined questions were followed up by probes and lines of questioning based on the respondent's answers. Two of the interviews were recorded and then transcribed; the other two were not recorded at the request of the informants. Unfortunately, both of the Republicans taking part in the study declined an audio recording. Perhaps it was because they were informed of the author's political disposition or because of some other underlying factor.[155] Despite this limitation, copious notes were taken throughout the interviews and adapted the general pacing of questions

[153] See Appendix C
[154] The study (IRB# NCR191041) was determined to be research that is exempt from IRB review under DHHS regulatory category 2 of 45 CFR 46.104 by the George Washington University Office of Human Research.
[155] The author is a registered Democrat actively working in Democratic electoral politics.

to allow for clarification and note taking. In order to preserve participant confidentiality, something required by these staffers for a candid interview, all respondents have been kept confidential. In this study, they will be identified by randomly assigned numbers, position, party, or the scope of their work. Following the transcription and the translation of note-taking shorthand, the interviews were coded by hand.

The coding and analysis process was based on grounded theory. Initially developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, this methodology is a qualitative, systematic approach that builds theories through methodical data analysis.[156] Following this approach, throughout the study—during interviews, analysis, and theory development—the author was engaged in inductive analysis. The goal of this model of theory development is to layer theory, building and forming observations throughout the process. In doing so, the author developed some theories that were later discarded and some theories that only came about during my final analysis. The interview probes also changed as these theories developed, allowing the author to investigate lay theories that were explored in previous interviews. Critically, grounded theory requires persistent and rigorous interpretation of data, a process that demands care not to inflate a minor statement by an informant or ignore a subtle but important theme. Keeping with this model, the analysis was concerned with the subject's place in the larger Congressional ecosystem and cognizant of relationships within their lay theories. All of this is not to say the informants were not asked about hypotheses, ideas, or theoretical possibilities the author was developing, because they were. In doing so, evidence was found to support some hypotheses and pushed others to the wayside. During the interviews (which were all

[156] Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, (New York: Aldine Publishing, 1967).

conducted over the phone), all the informants were asked for specific examples of the phenomena they described. These examples can be a particularly helpful window in understanding how processes are linked and how the lay theories described are put into action.

ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

This qualitative analysis features responses from four interviews with experts currently working in the U.S. House of Representatives or U.S. Senate. The interviewees were all legislative, district, or communications staffers working in director level positions. Two staffers were members of the Republican party and two were members of the Democratic party. What follows is a synthesis and analysis of these interviews, offering a new take on the concept of political capital by going beyond the ideas presented in the previous literature review. However, because of the small sample size and job type representation, this study should not be used to make broad conclusions about the nature of political capital and is merely exploratory research. Instead, this study offers a roadmap to transfer to future scholarship on the subject; in particular, this study proposes a broader study that would encompass more groups. A more developed recommendation for future research is presented in the conclusion to this study. A prefatory consideration about the interviews: the informants rarely spoke in a grammatically correct way. The resulting transcripts and interview notes are sometimes difficult to read. In the interest of representing the informant's views as faithfully as possible, where necessary their statements have been edited for clarity. These edits did not substantively change the content, meaning, or views of the informants, but in some places ellipses or bracketed explanatory notes are employed for intelligibility.

Overview

In analyzing this rich interview data, the most challenging task was organizational. This study follows Herbst's model, who herself learned from Robert Lane's model, in "choosing to stay as close to the data as possible."[157] The strategy was not counting words or phrases; it was more textual. Interviews were coded by hand, not in order to quantify the data, but to help me see patterns and divergences. Following in the spirit of Herbst, and Glaser and Strauss before her, a grounded theory approach was employed.[158] This approach, an inductive rather than deductive style, helped me to develop grounded theory about the informants lay models of political capital. The resulting analysis offers insightful findings. To begin, this analysis explores definitions of political capital, seeking to understand how senior Congressional staffers think about political capital in all its forms. Following this definitional starting point, the analysis will explore types of political capital and the role that different actors play in its co-construction.

Political Capital: What and Where?

The clearest thread through the interviews with Capitol Hill staffers was that they view political capital as a way to influence outcomes. It was frequently described by the informants in the context of legislation, delivering for constituents, advancing political positions, and the day-to-day functioning of Congress. The informants were quick to describe their work in terms of power. One Democratic staffer said:

[157] Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion*, 47.
[158] Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

> "Political work involves a lot of give and take, a lot of leverage. Sometimes with your political and professional allies and sometimes with your political and professional adversaries… Political capital is the leverage you have in that back and forth."[159]

That sentiment has clear echoes of a power dynamic at work. Congress is a back and forth between political parties, between the House and Senate, and between members. Political capital, then, is central to the work of Congress. Political capital's function, according to the informants, is to impact the actions of Congress and our political discourse. It is, as one staffer put it, "the power you have... built up, that in a given circumstance, [you] are able to wield."[160] That is not to say, however, that all politicians use political capital in this way (or even use it).

Two of the staffers talked about "hiding" behind political capital. They indicated that while political capital can be used to achieve a goal, it can also be used to protect a politician. A Democratic staffer observed that "[political capital is] something that [politicians] hide behind. [They will say] 'we don't have enough political capital to get this through…'"[161] In that context, it is the means to avoid debate, preserving the capital for a later fight or nothing at all. The same staffer, when asked to explain, offered more context:

> "I just think that some [politicians] hide behind [political capital] instead of making tough choices. And your politicians are there to make really tough choices, [choices] that aren't easy by any means and aren't black and white... [or]

[159] Informant 105, Interview by the author.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Informant 104, Interview by the author.

> easy to determine. And there are winners and there are losers and they get involved with compromise and things of that nature. And so [the less] we can hide behind a phrase, whether it's [political capital] or any anything else, the more we can truly get things going."[162]

In some cases, politicians may never spend their political capital. Whether that is because they are not interested in legislating or merely because they are safe in their position is less clear and warrants more study. One possible explanation offered by the same staffer was age. He added "[the idea that politicians may build up political capital and never spend it]... may be true and I think that is true with a lot of the old-timers…"[163] Complacency in age, or in time served in Congress, may then be a possible explanation for a risk-adverse, complacent lawmaker. Despite these outliers, it was clear from the interviews that the vast majority of members take the value of political capital seriously.

A Republican communications director was rather blunt about the impact of political capital, saying "everything is related to political capital—nothing happens without it."[164] Her sentiment was echoed across all the interviews, underscoring the importance of the concept if not the term. A Senate Democratic communication director also linked the term to a member's relative power, arguing that "as [your] political capital builds… [you] can gain more sway."[165] In his view, influence comes with political capital: it is a way to impact outcomes. But that does not describe it perfectly. The same informant offered what, through all the interviews, seemed to be the best metaphorical definition of political power. He proposed that:

---

[162] Informant 104, Interview by the author.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Informant 107, Interview by the author.
[165] Informant 105, Interview by the author.

> "[Political capital] can take different forms, it can be built up in different ways and then expended in different ways. To borrow from physics, it is the sort of potential energy versus kinetic energy."[166]

Potential energy, in physics, is the stored energy an object has because of its position. Think, for example, of a ball being held over the edge of a tall building. In that state, suspended above the ground, the ball possesses potential energy. In contrast, kinetic energy is the energy of movement, of the ball after it is dropped speeding toward the ground. In this metaphor, potential energy is political capital and kinetic energy is political action. Political capital, then, is the stored energy of politics waiting to be spent. And political action—think legislation or elections—is the kinetic energy. But the metaphor does not stop there. When that ball hits the ground, it will bounce into the air—building new potential energy as it rises—and falling again with new kinetic energy. New political capital then, according to this metaphor, can be acquired by expending that capital. Now, this physics metaphor has its limitations. The ball will never have as much potential energy after the first drop has it had to begin with, but political capital may build indefinitely. This metaphor is particularly useful in thinking about the dynamics of political capital, but it leaves the question: how did the ball get up there in the first place?

The informants in this study offered several explanations of where political capital (P.C.) comes from. The composite of those explanations, in order of most to least mentions, is shown in *Figure 1*.

[166] Informant 105, Interview by the author.

Figure 1 — Sources of Political Capital

Source	Definition
Media/News	Politicians may exploit media, issue saliency, and framing
Public Opinion/Voters	Voters as units of P.C., public opinion supporting P.C.
Position	Leadership (Speaker, Leader, etc.) positions
Ideology/Partisanship	Ideological or partisan leadership can confer P.C.
Outside Groups	Outside groups can share P.C. with politicians
Other Politicians	Politicians may share their P.C. with others
Issue Expertise	Issue leader's credibility may convey P.C.
Experience/Time	Knowledge of process/more time in office
Past Success	Electoral, legislative, or other victory may convey P.C.
Memberships	Committee/Caucus membership, power in voting bloc
Bravery	Bold stances, standing up for beliefs
Legislation/Policy	Legislative victory may increase P.C.
Activists	Activists have P.C. and can share it with politicians
Movements	Movements have P.C. and can share it with politicians
Trust	Public/media trust in politicians may give them P.C.
Advertisements	Can support P.C. by impacting voters
Money	Money in campaign accounts, ability to fundraise

Figure 1 demonstrates the complex web of interconnected sources of political capital. These sources were sometimes offered explicitly by the informants or were inferred from their explanations. For instance, a Republican legislative staffer offered a pretty direct

statement about the role of experience, outside groups, and other politicians in forming political capital. He said that "you likely have more political capital if you have been around a lot longer, if you have done things for other members or [outside] groups. You get it, really, from other people. It is rare that you build it yourself."[167] In addition to pointing out three sources of political capital, this staffer noted it is rare to conjure political capital of one's own volition, some external action or factor must be the impetus. In fact, over the course of the interviews, it became clear political capital was generated through co-construction between many political actors; many staffers offered compelling examples of that process.

A Senate Democratic communications director offered one of the most persuasive explanations of political capital at work in an extended example about the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. Despite its length, its inclusion was warranted:

> "During the campaign... President Trump put out [a] list of potential nominees that he would [appoint to the Supreme Court]... [It] was a way of showing...the Republican electorate… that he was going to go the way that they wanted. That list was completely… put together… by groups like the Federalist Society, which wields an incredible amount of political capital within the Republican judicial circles… So… you've got... this conservative group that's wielding political capital to get names on this list. The president takes that political capital, latching onto that list, to boost his own political capital amongst that community and the electorate... But then he nominates Brett Kavanaugh, who is off the list... Lots of money gets poured into it. That's political capital. They start putting out ads on

[167] Informant 111, Interview by the author.

> TV… exercising their political capital… On the Democratic [side]… you have lots of outside groups between civil rights organizations, women's reproductive health organizations, and civil libertarian groups, *et cetera* who oppose Brett Kavanaugh based on his records. [They] all have lots of political capital built up with Democrats... through supporting their elections… or through supporting their legislative efforts… And then Christine Blasey Ford… happens… and then comes in these critical questions of the political capital of the #MeToo movement... And then you know it comes down to the political capital that was exerted on… Senator Susan Collins… In the #MeToo-era, there's a huge amount of political capital built up around those issues by the women of America. So that then became a huge, huge wave of political capital against [Kavanaugh]… There [are] different groups who have leverage for different reasons. And at… each turn of that whole process the pressure points for… the [groups] that had [the] political capital to expend were sort of different in different ways. And all of them had an effect on that process."[168]

There is a lot to break down in this example. The staffer describes political capital not in terms of a single member or organization; instead, it is about how various groups and individual's political capital interacted over the course of the nomination fight. Political capital, according to this staffer's example, comes from outside groups, money, advertisements, voters, and movements. In his example, these various sources impact the political capital held by Senator Susan Collins, Justice Brett Kavanaugh, President Donald Trump, and the Senate Democratic caucus. In the end, Kavanaugh's side won,

[168] Informant 105, Interview by the author.

but through this staffer's example, we gain a better understanding of the role that political capital played in that nomination and confirmation. Other staffers offered similar explanations, with a particular focus on the role that media, staff, activists, outside groups, and other politicians play. The following sections will examine the lay theories these informants offered about the role of these groups.

Influencing the Media: The Role of the Press & Staff in Political Capital

This study has grouped media and staff together for a critical reason: it the job of Capitol Hill communications staff to influence the press. They are responsible for interfacing with the press and coaching their members on how to do the same. They are, for lack of a better term, the gatekeepers of Capitol Hill. Non-communications staff also play a critical role in media relations, even if they are not directly responsible for media strategy. Legislative staffers, for instance, provide the substance that communications staffers re-package and district staffers work with local media and community members. Media, too, have their own role independent of staff in impacting political capital. This section will detail how the staff and press work together to influence the debate and construct political capital.

The news media alone are a powerful player in the construction of political capital. As one staffer put it, "members can get political capital from the press or through the media because that is the best way to have your voice heard." Media can, through their agenda-setting function, impact the salience of issues and what politicians are linked to those issues. One example is Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. A Republican legislative staffer remarked about the media's seeming obsession with her, saying "all of the political capital [Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] has is from the press. All

of it. She has no political capital built on the Hill yet, none! It's just a media thing, they love her."[169] He said the same is true, to a lesser extent, of Representative Will Hurd and Representative Eric Swalwell. They, by this staffer's account, have the vast majority of their political capital because of media coverage. That could have two possible explanations: either the media is attracted to the candidates in their own right (because of media performance, interesting background, political stance, *et cetera*) or because they and their staff are expert at influencing the media.

Politicians and their staff who are skilled at influencing the media by impacting the agenda, deploying a cascading model of activation or some other tactic can manipulate media coverage to their benefit. A Democratic communications staffer, who has employed these strategies in the past, offered this explanation:

> "One of the things that the media loves to do is… try to effectively gauge or handicap political capital. I think especially political media understand that political professionals are always trying to... [figure] out… who has got the upper hand… And so… there's a question of whether if *Politico* writes that Mitch McConnell has the upper hand in.. some negotiations, does that make it true? Does that amplify it...? There are people who read that [and think]... 'Oh well I can't mess with Mitch. You know he's so good.' I think the role of the media in that is certainly interesting. I don't know whether they handout political capital or sort... try to accurately measure it… It's probably a mix, right? [The staff] want to get those stories planted because they know that it will be self-fulfilling, that it will help snowball."[170]

[169] Informant 111, interview by the author.
[170] Informant 105, interview by the author.

The idea of media-driven political capital as "self-fulfilling" is an intriguing one. It suggests that adept staffers deploy media strategies in an effort to increase their member's political capital. They even strive to create myths about their member's skill or power to increase the value of their perceived political capital. Other staffers agreed about the link, with another Democratic staffer arguing that "really [the only ones] who pay attention to [political capital], to tell you the truth, seems to be the media… but staffers [shape it]…" This staff strategy, according to the informants in this study, is devoured by the press who are interested in stories about how power impacts Congress.

What is ambiguous about press-driven political capital is the impact it has on the political process. It is one thing for the media to talk about you, but how does that translate into actionable political capital? One Republican member offered her analysis, arguing that:

> "What is less clear with political capital from the media is what it actually translates to in Congress, in policymaking. Take [Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez], the media is just eating her up, but does that matter? I don't think we know yet. I would guess that it won't, not out the gate. What it may matter for down the road is fundraising. If her [fundraising] list can generate a lot…[of money], then sharing that list [with other member's] may generate some good will toward her."[171]

Her example is interesting for two reasons. First, she and the other Republican informant were the only study participants who used Representative Ocasio-Cortez as an example (neither Democrat mentioned her). More analysis would be needed to understand why,

[171] Informant 107, interview by the author.

but conservative media coverage of Ocasio-Cortez likely had a role. Second, and more critical to this study, this informant offers us a good reason to care about press-driven political capital: money. The fundraising capacity of a candidate can give them a route to ally themselves with important members and strengthen their influence among their peers. The same staffer added that "if a politician drives [viewers] then [the press] is going to assign more coverage to that politician, which then probably gives that politician more political capital."[172] This indicates there is another way the press can impact political capital: by linking a politician to issues through media. According to this informant, the more time a politician spends in public view talking about an issue, the more the public will associate that member with that issue. That sentiment was reflected by other informants as well.

Different Publics: The Role of Outside Groups, Activists, and Voters in Political Capital

As one informant put it, "political capital is often measured in terms of how the chips are going to fall. Who is going to stand by you when a particular decision point comes?"[173] Oftentimes those standing by you are outside groups, lobbyists, or activists. These "outside" political actors are independent of Congress and the media but operate in the same political universe and oftentimes they have ideological or issue priorities that their political capital is linked to. These outside groups are "putting pressure… in different directions… and are trying to exert political capital" for their ends.[174] The informants in this study all mentioned the role that outside groups, labor unions,

[172] Informant 107, interview by the author.
[173] Informant 105, interview by the author.
[174] Ibid.

corporations or activists had in constructing political capital. One Democratic staffer described their role in legislative activity this way:

> "If you think about a big vote… like on an energy bill in Congress, you've got Democrats and Republicans who have… countervailing forces arrayed against them. They are thinking about their voters, they are thinking about the groups—which could be environmental activists, it could be energy companies, [or it could be] lobbyists… who are going to… either support or oppose their vote. And if they feel that they've got the support of those groups… that makes it easier for them."[175]

In his example, outside group support can bring political cover. Those organizations can effectively share their political capital on a given issue, working with politicians to achieve a policy goal. But outside groups do not always work to support a politician, often they use their influence to diminish a politician's political capital. A Democratic district director offered an example related to trade:

> "Take the TPP... [In that case] it was the political capital that [outside groups] thought they had over [my Member]. And so, that's the time where [outside groups]... came together and… they tried to expand and exert what [political capital] they did have, the opposing forces, and failed. But they exhausted a lot of [the political capital] we had in our bank… Political activists thought they had more political capital… and they were [using] it to… [try] to prevent or block a vote or convince others that [my Member's] stance was wrong. And so, it took a lot [of our political capital]."[176]

[175] Informant 105, interview by the author.
[176] Informant 104, interview by the author.

This case shows that outside groups not only have the capacity to build political capital, but also to take it away. By going on the offense—attempting to weaken public support for a member or policy—they may force a politician to exert their own political capital to fight back, weakening their public or financial support.

In this way, the role that outside groups play in political capital is inexorably linked to fundraising and public opinion. Another staffer supported this hypothesis, saying "I think the public opinion space is… one of the battlefields for political capital, for policy… and for political or electoral advantage."[177] Public opinion, though, can mean different things to different political actors; Herbst's *Reading Public Opinion* confirms as much. It does not always mean, for instance, a resounding margin of support in a poll. One informant described the role of public opinion on political capital formation this way:

> "The public can be on your side… That doesn't mean you need overwhelming public opinion *per se*. You know Trump believes he has [political capital] right now with his 32 percent base [of supporters]. So, it just varies... Public opinion plays a lot in the support of a particular Representative… And so, it depends how strong your public is… how strong your base is, or how loud they are."[178]

How active that public is, how critical that public is to a member's electorate, and how much media attention that public can garner are all important factors in determining the role that public opinion plays in the process. Oftentimes the informants in this study talked about public opinion in terms of activists or outside groups. The public opinion they seemed to care about most was organized public opinion; public opinion that had a

[177] Informant 105, interview by the author.
[178] Informant 104, interview by the author.

face and political strategy behind it. One Democratic informant made a compelling argument about how public opinion, from a single voter to an organized political group, fits into the larger political capital paradigm:

> "Voters themselves exert their own political capital. That could be as… an individual voter...that one unit of political capital that you can always use every Election Day. [But if] you want to organize at a grassroots level in your community then you are going to sort of pool the political capital of a group of voters… If you are going to join forces [with] a nationwide movement then that's obviously [more]... political capital."[179]

In this staffer's model, political capital is scalable. The larger the "public" the more political capital it can wield. Politicians, however, are not entirely dependent on outside factors for political capital.

Ideology, Position & Bravery: The Role of Elected Leaders in Political Capital

Outsiders—from the press to voters—are not the only factors that can impact a politician's political capital. The informants in this study offered examples of how elected officials agency to control their environments may impact their political fortunes. In this category, they described how ideological/partisan factors, leadership positions, support from peers, voting blocs, and political bravery can influence the construction of political capital. A Republican communications staffer linked ideology to political capital and voters, saying "political capital can come from ideology. However, if you are talking about [political capital] as it [relates] to ideology then you have to remember that

[179] Informant 105, interview by the author.

[ideology] and district almost always overlap."[180] In her view, ideological leadership can only build political capital if a politician's constituents share that ideology. Ideological leadership can also, according to her account, lead to more media coverage and fundraising prowess. However, she cautioned that "if you have political capital because of your [ideology] or your views, then you have it because of your voters."[181] Politicians cannot, in her opinion, gain political capital by being an ideological leader that does not fit with the ideology of their district. In this way, outside factors are still a prerequisite for ideological political capital.

Leadership positions can also play a role in political capital. According to a Republican legislative staffer, "right now, it seems like… obviously [Leader] McCarthy and [Speaker] Pelosi have [political capital] because of their position."[182] This staffer, in saying their leadership "obviously" confers political capital, is making the argument that stature within the Congressional leadership structure comes with increased power. Naturally, this assumption would extend to other leadership positions in Congress. Partisan chamber leadership, committee chairs, ranking members, and caucus leaders all—under his model—would also have some inherent political capital by virtue of their positions. There is, of course, a prerequisite at play in this factor as well. Congressional leaders are never freshmen members. Leadership positions exclusively come with experience and time severed. The longer a member serves and the more senior they become, the more options they will have to take on leadership roles. In addition to experience, leadership also often comes with peer relationships. Lawmakers with richer

[180] Informant 107, interview by the author.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Informant 111, interview by the author.

relationships among their colleagues are better at whipping votes, moving legislation, and building political capital. This points to another way to build political capital: support from peers.

Support from fellow members may come in the form of co-sponsorships, voting blocs, or even friendships. A Democratic communications staffer offered one concrete example of how peer support interacts with political capital:

> "A common thing in a Congressional office is… [to] put together a Dear Colleague Letter… and the Dear Colleague is going to have 50 signatures on it. That's more political capital than a letter with five signatures on it. And in our letter, we say these are all the national groups and all the… state-level groups that support this legislation... The more of those that you list, that's a list of political capital. So [that is] a concrete way of displaying and saber rattling your political capital—convincing other people to hop on board. [If you think] it's already a powerful coalition… you are in good standing if you add your name. So… certainly political capital belongs to and is wielded by [outside groups and politicians]."[183]

Dear Colleague Letters, which are an official correspondence between members of Congress, are a fantastic example of political capital. These letters, according to this staffer, are frequently employed as a list of political capital that encourage other members to support a bill because of those already supporting that bill. The sender and the signatories of Dear Colleague Letters are then identified as supporters of that issue. More signatories are added as more supporters—either legislators or outside groups—join the

[183] Informant 105, interview by the author.

letter, conferring more political capital to the letter's goal. The signatories then represent a literal list of political capital about a given issue. These letters, most frequently, garner support from members who belong to the same political group as the original author. That alludes to another form of political capital: voting blocs.

On Capitol Hill, members organize themselves by party, caucus, and committee. These groups are various types of voting blocs formed along partisan divisions, ideological positions, or issue areas and present another way to gain political capital. A Republican legislative staffer described the way caucuses, a type of voting bloc, influence political capital, arguing that "you can get [political capital] through a caucus where you commit to helping other members. Again, it's from others. In that case, in the case of a caucus, it's from… a voting coalition based on [shared] ideology."[184] Because the caucus commits you to help other members, membership builds political capital by association. Members of the caucus share their political capital, especially on issues related to the caucus's purpose. The same is true of committees and parties.

The informants in this study also presented a more abstract means of building political capital: bravery. A commonality in the responses of all the respondents was the idea that taking a stand, making a bold statement, and generally taking a brave position could aid a member in building political capital. A Democratic district director was pretty direct about that fact, proposing that "anybody can have [political capital], anybody who is an elected official that's not afraid to stand up and do what's right or stand up and do what they believe."[185] They were not alone in that belief. Across the board, the staffers

[184] Informant 111, interview by the author.
[185] Informant 104, interview by the author.

who took part in this study felt that political bravery could pay off dividends. The same Democrat further elaborated:

> "A lot of people probably assume that [political capital] comes off of a resounding electoral win. However,… that's not always true. I think maybe you can get it from… the trust of the voters and representing them well… That's how you get it: by standing up on [voters] behalf… [If you are a Democrat], for example, standing up to Trump and things of that nature probably change the nature of the game."[186]

His theory about political bravery certainly makes logical sense. And other staffers hinted at why that may be the case. Another Democrat, in remarking that political capital is "more of an art than a science," argued that if you think you have the political capital in a given circumstance you have to "go for it." [187] He reasoned that even if you do not have the political capital to begin with, taking a brave stance will resonate with voters because "… you are offering the kind of leadership that they are looking for."[188] It is, however, important to note that the informants who proposed political bravery as a means to gain political capital were vague on details. There was no single way, as they saw it, that this tactic works. Instead, it is based largely on political instincts. Despite this limitation, the role of bravery in political capital formation warrants further study.

An Arena Contingent Political Capital

Extant literature has identified two types of political capital: reputational capital and representative capital. This study further explored these two types of capital and

[186] Informant 104, interview by the author.
[187] Informant 105, interview by the author.
[188] Ibid.

looked for additional types. First, this study found additional evidence to support the reputational and representative capital paradigm originally proposed by Lopez. For instance, a Republican legislative director remarked that "more often than not political capital is [spent] getting things for your district,"[189] supporting the reputational model of capital. Another Republican staffer remarked that "someone like [House Republican Conference Chair] Cheney has none [political capital] right now… [because] she decided to vote against the anti-Semitism turned anti-hate resolution" and it was clear that "[Leader] McCarthy was mad…" at her for that decision. This type of action may be seen to impact Cheney's representative capital, as it may affect how she is treated by her fellow party leaders and ability to impact future legislation. More examples like these were evident throughout the interviews, supporting Lopez's model of political capital.

This study also found evidence for additional models of political capital. In particular, the informants in this study alluded to a type of arena contingent political capital. In different ways, each informant hinted (and sometimes outright described) that political capital is not a universal currency. According to the informants, political capital accumulated in one arena cannot readily be spent on an issue in another arena. A Democratic communications staffer summarized this arena contingent model political capital, saying:

> "[Political capital] varies… scenario by scenario. Somebody may have political capital in one avenue and not [in another]… A given official or politician or caucus or party may have the political capital amongst… [group 1] to achieve 'A'

[189] Informant 107, interview by the author.

but not among… group [1] to achieve 'B…' "Political capital is not an absolute entity… it's relative."[190]

This arena contingent model has broad implications for the future study of political capital. It also is clearly in line with Dahl's contention that "there is no 'action at a distance'" in political power.[191] Dahl proposed that power is limited in impact to related arenas and this study has now found evidence to suggest the same is true of political capital. However, more study would be needed to confirm this arena contingent model.

Figure 2 — Arena Contingent Model of Political Capital*

$$PC_A = Reputational\ PC_A + Representative\ PC_A$$

$$PC_A \neq Reputational\ PC_B + Representative\ PC_B$$

*Where PC is political capital and A and B are separate arenas

The new arena-contingent model proposed by this study and depicted in *Figure 2* employs Lopez's model as a starting point. Applied to an example, a member with strong reputational and representative capital on gun violence prevention (arena A) cannot use that capital to exert power in the debate of an environmental bill (arena B). Similarly, a member with strong political capital garnered from the press (arena A) cannot automatically spend that political capital to help pass an environmental bill (arena B). Political capital, according to this model, is exchangeable but not universal. You can share your political capital with others, but only within a single arena. Arenas, in this model, are policy topics or sources of political capital. While the limited scope of the

[190] Informant 105, interview by the author.
[191] Dahl, "The Concept of Power," 204.

present study offers some support for this arena contingent model of political capital, more study is needed to evaluate the theory.

"A Bullshit Metaphor"

This study's literature review demonstrated that political capital is often thought of as a single, definable thing—the present research indicates that is not the case. Political elites have very different ideas about what constitutes political capital. One Democrat offered an exceptionally blunt assessment of this disjointed understanding, arguing:

> "I think that [political capital] is a bullshit phrase, a bullshit metaphor… I don't see it as having any weight. Maybe it's a fallback created by the media, but politicians see it differently, I see it differently. There [are] always a number of other factors that go into it and not just the blanket term political capital."[192]

This sentiment, in less direct ways, was shared by several of the informants in this study. More study would be needed to make generalizable conclusions based on this, but it would seem to indicate that political capital is not easy to pin down. The respondents, including the staffer who called it a "bullshit metaphor" all felt that it still had importance as an organizing concept, however, what exactly it organizes was somewhat less clear to them (and the present study).

This is not to say there is no value in understanding political capital; in fact, this research made it clear that a better understanding is critical. The diversity of lay theories the informants offered makes this abundantly clear. They feel, despite disagreeing on a definition, that political capital is central to the work of politics. The informants identified, at virtually every aspect of the legislative process, how political capital may

[192] Informant 104, interview by the author.

play a role. But in that diversity is disunity. What good is an organizing concept like political capital without a shared understanding between its operators? A more comprehensive study is required to answer that question, but the present study makes it clear that further research is warranted.

CONCLUSION

Political science has the luxury of perspective. When academics study political actors and develop theories about how politics happens they take time to reflect and consider alternative hypotheses. Political actors do not have that luxury. Deadlines are pressing and events can change their priorities. The end result? Politics are often reactionary, not proactive. Because of the fast-paced, reactionary environment, political actors must rely on their own models and expertise to inform their day to day activities. They must, as Herbst observed and this study supported, "fall back on the frameworks, tendencies, and rules of thumb in their repertoires."[193] Political capital is one of those frameworks, though academia has seemingly brushed it aside to its detriment.

This study has revealed that political capital is an important concept—distinct from the broader political power literature—governing many aspects of the functioning of Congress and U.S. politics at-large. It is, according to one informant in this study, the "currency where you can exchange capital for getting something you need."[194] The informants also revealed the process of its co-construction—a process by which politicians, staffers, journalists, and outside groups depend on each other to interpret and construct the relative value of this currency. They do so by taking into account many

[193] Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion*, 46.
[194] Informant 111, interview by the author.

factors but set the ultimate value relative to the perceived value among these elite political actors.[195] In essence, the value of political capital is what these political actors believe it to be. Additionally, the informants in this study offered evidence of an arena contingent political capital, a model of politics in which capital accumulated in one arena cannot readily be spent on an issue in another arena. Perhaps most importantly, the present study contends that political capital is not a single, easily defined thing. Rather, this research revealed that political elites have divergent conceptions about what signifies or builds political capital.

More study is needed to confirm these findings as the present research is only exploratory. Despite this limitation, the findings of this study should be taken seriously and are transferable to future research. The informants, through expansive interviews, offered a detailed account of the workings of political capital, power, and the legislative process. Future scholarship should include a larger sample population and focus on the factors contributing to political capital, the process of its co-construction, and a critical analysis of the phenomena described in this study. In particular, this research indicates the literature would benefit from a qualitative interview-based study of Capitol Hill staffers, political journalists, members of Congress, and outside group leaders. A wider study should also include triangulation through diverse methodology, particular a quantitative survey of the same groups. The resulting analysis would benefit not only the political science literature but American politics more broadly. At a time when our divisions seem more stark and legislative action more difficult to obtain, a more informed understanding of the processes that govern Congress would be beneficial to society.

[195] See *Figure 1* for a list of factors contributing to political capital.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

Waxham, Reed Elman. 2019. Informant 104. Personal Interview.

Waxham, Reed Elman. 2019. Informant 105. Personal Interview.

Waxham, Reed Elman. 2019. Informant 107. Personal Interview.

Waxham, Reed Elman. 2019. Informant 111. Personal Interview.

Secondary Sources

"113th Congress." *Roll Call Votes by the U.S. Congress*. Congress.gov.

Anderson, William D., Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, and Valeria Sinclair-Chapman. "The Keys to Legislative Success in the U.S. House of Representatives." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2003): 357-86. doi:10.3162/036298003x200926.

Banfield, Edward Christle. *Political Influence*. New York, NY: London, 1961.

Baran, Stanley J., and Dennis K. Davis. *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future*. 7th ed. Cengage Learning, 2015.

Behr, Roy L., and Shanto Iyengar. "Television News, Real-World Cues, and Changes in the Public Agenda." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (1985): 38. doi:10.1086/268900.

Bennett, W. Lance, and Shanto Iyengar. "A New Era of Minimal Effects? The Changing Foundations of Political Communication." *Journal of Communication* 58, no. 4 (2008): 707-31. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.00410.x.

Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. Richardson, 241-58. Greenwood, 1986.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Edited by John B. Thompson. Translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

Center for Effective Lawmaking. "Center for Effective Lawmaking Announces Highest-scoring Members of Congress." News release, September 26, 2017.

Conway, Bethany A., Kate Kenski, and Di Wang. "The Rise of Twitter in the Political Campaign: Searching for Intermedia Agenda-Setting Effects in the Presidential Primary." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20, no. 4 (2015): 363-80. doi:10.1111/jcc4.12124.

Cooper, Nicole. *Life in Congress: The Member Perspective.* Report. 2011.

Dahl, Robert A. *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961.

De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. 1835.

Entman, Robert M. *Democracy without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Entman, Robert M. "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm." *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51-58. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x.

Entman, Robert M. "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame After 9/11." *Political Communication* 20, no. 4 (2003): 415-32. doi:10.1080/10584600390244176.

Entman, Robert M. "Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power." *Journal of Communication* 57, no. 1 (2007): 163-73. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00336.x.

Gallup. *Presidential Approval Ratings -- George W. Bush*. Report. Washington, DC: Gallup.

Gerbner, George, and Larry Gross. "System of Cultural Indicators." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1974.

Ghanem, Salma, and Dixie Evatt. "A Salience Scale to Enhance Interpretation of Public Opinion." *World Association for Public Opinion Research*, 2001.

Gilboa, Eytan. "The CNN Effect: The Search for a Communication Theory of International Relations." *Political Communication* 22, no. 1 (2005): 27-44. doi:10.1080/10584600590908429.

Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine Publishing, 1967.

Goldschmidt, Kathy. *State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate.* Report. August 2017.

Harcup, Tony, and Deirdre O'Neill. "What Is News? Galtung and Ruge Revisited." *Journalism Studies* 2, no. 2 (2001): 261-80. doi:10.1080/14616700118449.

Harder, Raymond A., Julie Sevenans, and Peter Van Aelst. "Intermedia Agenda Setting in the Social Media Age: How Traditional Players Dominate the News Agenda in Election Times." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 22, no. 3 (2017): 275-93. doi:10.1177/1940161217704969.

Herbst, Susan. *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Center for Effective Lawmaking. "Highlights from the New 115th Congress Legislative Effectiveness Scores." News release, February 27, 2019.

Hindman, Matthew. *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan.: Or the Matter, Form an Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil*. Routledge, 1651.

Kuhn, Deanna. *The Skills of Argument*. Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999.

Ladd, Jonathan M. *Why Americans Hate the News Media and How It Matters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Ladd, Jonathan. "The Era of Media Distrust and Its Consequences for Perceptions of Political Reality." In *New Directions in Media and Politics*, by Travis Ridout. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014.

Lazarsfeld, Paul, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet. *People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. New York, 1948: Duell, Sloan & Pearce.

Lopez, Edward. "The Legislator as Political Entrepreneur: Investment in Political Capital." *The Review of Austrian Economics* 15, no. 2/3 (2002): 211-28. doi:10.1023/A:1015770705872.

Mancini, Paolo. "Media Fragmentation, Party System, and Democracy." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18, no. 1 (2012): 43-60. doi:10.1177/1940161212458200.

Mayhew, David R. *Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, and Investigations, 1946-1990*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.

McCombs, Maxwell E., and Donald L. Shaw. "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176. doi:10.1086/267990.

McCombs, Maxwell. "A Look at Agenda-setting: Past, Present and Future." *Journalism Studies* 6, no. 4 (2005): 543-57. doi:10.1080/14616700500250438.

McCombs, Maxwell, Donald Shaw, and David Weaver. "New Directions in Agenda-Setting Theory and Research." *Mass Communication and Society* 17, no. 6 (2014).

McCracken, Grant David. *The Long Interview*. Sage Publications, 1990.

Meyer, Katherine. "Legislative Influence: Toward Theory Development through Causal Analysis." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1980): 563. doi:10.2307/439574.

Meyer, Robinson. "A Centuries-Old Idea Could Revolutionize Climate Policy." *The Atlantic*, February 2019.

Miquel, Gerard Padró I, and James M. Snyder. "Legislative Effectiveness and Legislative Careers." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2006): 347-81. doi:10.3162/036298006x201841.

Nisbett, Richard E., and Lee Ross. *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985.

Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth. "Return to the Concept of Powerful Mass Media." *Studies in Broadcasting* 9 (1973): 67-112.

Parker, Richard. "Why the Wall Will Never Rise." *The Atlantic*, February 2019.

Redman, Eric. *The Dance of Legislation*. University of Washington Press, 2001.

Reynolds, Molly, and Jackson Gode. *Vital Statistics on Congress: Data on the U.S. Congress*. Report. Brookings Institution, 2019.

Sandalow, Marc. "Bush Claims Mandate, Sets 2nd-term Goals / 'I Earned Capital in This Campaign, Political Capital, and Now I Intend to Spend It'." *SF Gate*, November 5, 2004.

Schneider, William, Jr. "What Political Capital?" *The Atlantic*, 2005.

Schudson, Michael. *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the past*. New York: Basic Books, 1993.

Schuman, Daniel. *Keeping Congress Competent: Staff Pay, Turnover, and What It Means for Democracy*. Report. Sunlight Foundation, 2010.

Smith-Shomade, Beretta E. "Narrowcasting in the New World Information Order." *Television & New Media* 5, no. 1 (2004): 69-81. doi:10.1177/1527476403259746.

Tarlock, A. Dan, and James David Barber. "The Lawmakers: Recruitment and Adaptation to Legislative Life." *Stanford Law Review* 18, no. 3 (1966): 539. doi:10.2307/1227281.

Tewksbury, David, and Vincent Price. "News Values and Public Opinion: A Theoretical Account of Media Priming and Framing." Edited by George Barnett and Franklin Bostner. In *Progress in Communication Sciences: Advances in Persuasion*, 173-212. Vol. 13. Greenwich, CT: Ablex, 1997.

Turcotte, Jason, Chance York, Jacob Irving, Rosanne M. Scholl, and Raymond J. Pingree. "News Recommendations from Social Media Opinion Leaders: Effects on Media Trust and Information Seeking." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20, no. 5 (2015): 520-35. doi:10.1111/jcc4.12127.

Vargo, Chris, Lei Guo, Maxwell McCombs, and Donald Shaw. "Network Issue Agendas on Twitter During the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election." *Journal of Communication* 64, no. 2 (2014): 296-316.

Vliegenthart, Rens, and Stefaan Walgrave. "The Contingency of Intermedia Agenda Setting: A Longitudinal Study in Belgium." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2008): 860-77. doi:10.1177/107769900808500409.

Volden, Craig, and Alan Wiseman. "Legislative Effectiveness in Congress." March 2009.

Volden, Craig, and Alan Wiseman. "Legislative Effectiveness and Problem Solving in the U.S. House of Representatives." Compiled by Bruce Oppenheimer. In *Congress Reconsidered*, compiled by Lawrence Dodd, 259-84. 11th ed. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2017.

Volden, Craig, and Alan Wiseman. "Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Senate." *Journal of Politics* 80, no. 2 (2018): 731-35.

Wawro, Gregory John. *Legislative Entrepreneurship in the U.S. House of Representatives*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Weaver, David H. "Thoughts on Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming." *Journal of Communication* 57, no. 1 (2007): 142-47. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00333.x.

Weinger, Mackenzie, and Dylan Byers. "MSNBC Launches the Gun Control Conversation." *Politico*, December 14, 2012.

Whiteman, David. *Communication in Congress: Members, Staff, and the Search for Information*. Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996.

APPENDIX A

Email to Initial Respondents

Hi [NAME],

Hope you are doing well! I'm working on a research study from my graduate program about Capitol Hill staffers and I thought you might be able to help.

For my research I am interviewing staffers about their perceptions of the political and policy making process on the Hill, particularly about the concept of political capital. All I would need from participants is about 30 minutes to participate in the interview, either in person or by phone.

Do you know anyone (who I don't know personally) that might be willing to participate in my study?

Best,
Reed

APPENDIX B

Initial Email to Congressional Staff

Hi [NAME],

I am a graduate researcher at the George Washington University conducting a study about
Capitol Hill staffers. A staffer recommended I reach out to you about participating in the study.

For my research I am interviewing staffers about their perceptions of the political and policy making process on the Hill, particularly about the concept of political capital. All I would need from you is about 30 minutes to participate in the interview, either in person or by phone.

All of your answers to my questions will be kept entirely confidential. Your name won't be linked to the study, you'll just be assigned a random number. The questions won't be about your member, office or anything of that nature, just general questions about political science concepts.

Would you be willing to participate in my research? If so, we can find a time that works you in the coming weeks. I can come to you, we can meet somewhere, or we can do it by phone.

Best,
Reed

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol for Congressional Staff

Thank you again for agreeing to take part in this study. I appreciate your willingness to help me with this research project. As I mentioned, this research concerns the way that staffers like yourself think about the policy-making process, the media, and political capital. Some of the questions I'm going to ask you are specific, asking for concrete examples, while others are more open-ended. In academia, not much is known about political capital, so this study seeks to address that. This interview has 3 parts, but it will hopefully feel more like a conversation. I will let you know as we progress through the three parts. Part one is just some background about you, part two will ask you about some basic democratic concepts, and part three will ask you more open-ended questions about examples you can recall. All of your answers to my questions will be kept entirely confidential. In other words, your name won't be recorded, and your answers will never be linked to you. Even in my notes, you'll be assigned a random number, rather than a name. It will be hard for me to write down all that you say, and I want to make sure I get it all right. So, is it alright if I record our conversation on my phone? This also will only be linked to you by a number, as to preserve your confidentiality.

[If no] No problem, is it alright if I take handwritten notes?

Great! Let's get started.

Part 1 — Background

1. To make sure I have it right, can you confirm the member or committee you work for?
2. Can you take a few minutes to discuss your background—how you came to work on the Hill. Could start by telling me where you are from and where you went to college?
3. How long have you been in your current position?
4. Have you had other positions on the Hill? If so, what?
5. Can you tell me generally about what your work entails? What do you spend most of your time doing?
6. Can you tell me a little about how you fit into the picture, either on the committee or with the member office?
7. Where do you get your news?
8. Do you talk with the media? On the record? Off?
9. Anything else you think would be helpful for me to know about you or your background?

Part 2 — Conceptions of Democracy

1. Let's start with political capital. What is political capital? How do you know when someone has it?
    a. How do others know who has political capital?
    b. Who has political capital right now?
    c. Where did they get it? How will they use it?
    d. Who has a role in shaping it?
    e. The role that politicians play?
    f. The role that staffers play?
2. Public opinion. How would you define that phrase?
    a. Where do you think it comes from?
3. Ideology. What does it mean to you?
4. Can you tell me a little about your view of the media's role with Congress?
    a. How does the media relate to political capital?
5. What about activists or advocacy groups? Talk about their role with Congress.
    a. How do activists impact political capital?

Part 3 — Questions about Lay Theories

1. Can you recall a time that political capital played a role with Congress? Tell me about it.
    a. Did the media cover this?
    b. How do you assess what political capital means in that story?
        i. Where did that capital come from?
    c. Did public opinion play a role? Did activists?
2. Any other examples of political capital in Congress? Anything else you want to add about what we've talked about? Anything I'm missing?