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Claremont McKenna College

**Blue Dog Blues: The Fall of the Blue Dog Democrats in the 2010
Midterms and the Future of Swing District Representation in a
Nationalized Congress**

submitted to
Professor John J. Pitney, Jr.

by
Henry Schulz

for
Senior Thesis
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Abstract

Nationalization has defined American politics in recent years as voters increasingly view state and local government through their national party loyalties. The 2010 midterm elections were intensely nationalized: Hundreds of races for the United States House of Representatives focused on President Barack Obama's agenda instead of local issues. After election night, Republicans gained 63 seats in the US House, giving them their largest majority since the 1940s. One of the political victims of the election were members of the Blue Dog Coalition, a caucus of centrist, fiscally conservative Democrats in Congress. Over half of the Blue Dogs lost re-election, including Stephanie Herseth Sandlin of South Dakota and Harry Mitchell of Arizona's 5th District. In *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, congressional scholar David Mayhew outlines three re-election strategies that members of Congress pursue: credit claiming, advertising, and position taking. This thesis applies those three approaches to Sandlin and Mitchell's races to argue that nationalization may increasingly pose a threat to traditional, swing district re-election strategies in the future; vulnerable incumbents may not be able to avoid national controversy as the significance of local political issues recede in the minds of American voters.

Key words: Nationalization; United States Congress; Blue Dog Coalition; 2010 Midterms

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I also want to thank Professor Matt Glassman who originally inspired me to write this thesis after he tweeted this summer about the expanding political networks of US House members. His class during my time in the CMC Washington DC Program transformed my view of the United States Congress. I became a realist in how I thought about the levers of power in Washington DC, but I also learned that there is nothing more important than getting into the political arena. Professors Glassman and Pitney were also both students of David Mayhew at Yale, so it is very fitting that his work is a central part of this thesis.

Finally, thank you to my friends and family who have expressed such sincere interest in this project. I am very grateful for my support system at CMC and back home in New York City.

Introduction: The Political Puzzle of Nationalization in Congress

During my freshman year at Claremont McKenna, I took Professor John Pitney's introduction to American government class during the 2018 midterm elections. In that election, the Democrats took back the US House of Representatives. The results followed historical trends where the incumbent party in the White House lost at least one chamber of Congress. The 2018 midterms were also a referendum on former President Donald Trump: voters disapproved of his administration and wanted a Democratic majority in the US House to serve as a check on the executive. What I did not think about back then, however, was how many voters went to the polls with mostly national political issues in mind, such as the Trump Administration's attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act.¹ Recently, nationalization—and its political and institutional consequences for Congress—became a puzzle for me. A tweet from Professor Glassman prompted some thinking about it as thesis topic²:



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, among other young members of the US House of Representatives, attract national media attention and raise a significant amount of money from across the country. The nationally oriented US House member is a relatively new

phenomenon: in the 1970s, many freshman members of Congress were primarily concerned with acquiring power through committee positions and influencing public policy.³ This shift in political incentives has important consequences for both the individual Congress member and the institution. I am studying government during a time where Congress is comprised of largely national political actors instead of locally focused politicians. The US House of Representatives transformed from the *Federalist Papers*' vision of responsive, constituent-focused representatives to Twitter media stars. This nationalization of the US House led me to one election in particular: the 2010 midterms.

As I explain later, the 2010 midterm elections were widely considered a nationalized election as Republican candidates ran against President Obama's agenda. The existing literature explores the role of the Tea Party in the midterms and situates the electoral results in a larger history of election referendums on presidents. What was missing from the literature, however, was an analysis that provides texture to these macro political trends and nationalization. It became clear that I needed case studies to highlight how exactly national political issues in 2010 affected the electoral behavior of members of Congress. So, I looked to a caucus that would provide a contrast to nationalization: the Blue Dog Coalition.

Blue Dog Democrats try to avoid controversial national political issues because they all represent swing districts, or competitive electoral areas that are usually decided within 5 percentage points in either partisan direction.⁴ As a result, independent voters have a significant electoral impact on the result and swing district members try to adhere to centrist positions. The Blue Dog Coalition, therefore, provides a nice juxtaposition to nationalization and the partisan positions it creates. In 2010, over half of the Blue Dog

caucus lost re-election, which followed historical data that demonstrates a decline in the amount of swing districts since at least the 1992 election.⁵ In the 111th Congress of 2009-2010, 34 Democrats—most of whom were members of the Blue Dog Coalition—voted against one of their party’s major policy priorities: the Affordable Care Act (ACA).⁶ Only four of those members, however, were re-elected in 2010.⁷ One of the members who lost was Representative Stephanie Sandlin, and she justified her vote by arguing that the bill, in her words, “wasn’t right for South Dakota.”⁸ Sandlin approached re-election solely focused on local district issues and throughout the campaign, distanced herself from President Obama and national Democratic leadership. Despite her efforts, she still lost.

Sandlin’s race and Harry Mitchell’s in Tempe, Arizona are the two campaigns that I analyze in this thesis. I picked those two because they differed in both district representation and policy preferences. Mitchell’s district included the city of Tempe and was mostly suburban. Sandlin’s at-large district was mostly rural and represented the entire state. On policy, Mitchell voted for the ACA while Sandlin did not. The two members’ campaigns are helpful as case studies because they represent a variance within the Blue Dog Coalition but still highlight how nationalization shaped their political fates. Of course, there are Blue Dogs who escaped the GOP’s nationalization strategy and won in 2010. These members, however, were the exception rather than the rule.

I argue that swing district re-election strategies that the two Blue Dogs followed in the 2010 midterms may be increasingly ineffective in the future where politics is widely nationalized. I use a variety of primary sources, including press releases, debate clips, advertisements, and legislation. I do not make any causal claims about the relationship between the evidence and electoral outcomes. For example, I could not prove

that Mitchell's vote for the ACA cost him re-election. Rather, the value of this thesis is its deepening of macro trends such as nationalization that are discussed broadly, but its specific implications are lost. Now, when someone wonders what the political consequences are of voters' prioritization of the national over the local, they can refer to the case studies in this thesis. It is also important, however, to acknowledge some limitations of the work.

This thesis only evaluates two congressional races and therefore, I cannot draw conclusions about how nationalization affected other Blue Dog Democrat campaigns in 2010. The two case studies are also isolated examples, and so a definitive claim about the future of swing district representation is analytically flawed. The thesis does not make an argument that the two races prove that certain swing district representation strategies will fail in the future. Rather, the two case studies highlight certain electoral approaches that Blue Dog Democrats share, such as fiscal conservative messaging and detachment from the national party. The analysis of the campaign strategies raises questions about its efficacy in swing districts, but it does not make correlative claims about those approaches on electoral outcomes. The thesis is most useful as a supplement to more quantitative studies, including one that found that voting against major Democratic policies was the more effective re-election strategy for Democrats in Republican-leaning districts.⁹

This thesis takes the reader beyond the scholarly literature on nationalization and illustrates how certain electoral trends shape the political strategies and policy choices of individual members of Congress. Political science is full of theories that are sometimes difficult to understand on a very practical level. I hope my analysis is useful to a wide audience, from congressional scholars to voters who want to understand why their

Congress members are more focused on the president and not their communities' pot holes.

Chapter 1: The Nationalization of American Politics

National issues increasingly define American elections. Every election cycle, more candidates from state legislatures to US Congress take positions on the incumbent president's agenda instead of sticking mostly to local district issues. Attack ads tie incumbent members of Congress to their party leadership. Constituency issues take a back seat to the national political landscape. The nationalization of politics is all-consuming and pervasive. As this thesis will explain, nationalization has shaped how members of Congress pursue re-election. First, however, it is important to define nationalization and its causes. This chapter will rely on Daniel Hopkins's *The Increasingly United States* and other scholars to do so.

Hopkins defines the two facets of nationalization: "The first is when the political interest and issues dominant at the national level are reflected in subnational political competition and behavior. The second is when political engagement is primarily oriented nationally, to the exclusion of subnational governments [state and local] or political affairs."¹⁰ In other words, nationalization is present when the dominant national issues are present in local politics, and voters are more concerned with national politics than their state and local affairs. For example, many towns in Maine have announced that they are Second Amendment sanctuary cities in response to President Biden's inauguration and gun control legislation in Congress.¹¹ Hopkins's definition of nationalization is very useful for this thesis, especially how national political issues can dominate all levels of government and geographies across the country.

Nationalization and polarization are related but different concepts. Hopkins writes: “Polarization is a process in which elected officials from two major political parties adopt increasingly divergent policy positions, one that has heightened ideological sorting and reduced partisan defections at the ballot box.”¹² There are fewer and fewer voters who vote cross-party. For example, in the current 117th Congress, there are only 16 House members who represent a district that voted for the opposing presidential candidate.¹³ Of all the candidates in the 2020 general elections for the Senate, only Susan Collins (R-ME) won in a state that went to the other party’s presidential candidate. Nationalization, however, affects both political participation and knowledge, “Nationalization is a multifaceted, mass-level process through which voters care less about state and local politics and use the same criteria to pick candidates across the federal system. When the parties adopt clear and divergent ideological positions, voters may be increasingly likely to see state and local candidates through the lens of their national loyalties.”¹⁴

One of Hopkins’s explanations of why political behavior has become nationalized deals with political parties. He argues that political parties have nationalized vote choice for citizens, “They [parties] simplify the task of voting by developing well-known reputations that can help voters make informed choices without knowing much about specific candidates. It stands to reason that a contemporary voter might not distinguish between voting at the state and federal levels because the major parties no longer differ at those levels to the extent that they used to.”¹⁵ In the 1950s and 1960s, it was common to find conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans in Congress.¹⁶ The Obama

Administration, however, found that there was rarely any policy agreement between congressional Republicans and Democrats.¹⁷

Hopkins analyzes multiple facets of political parties to highlight the increased nationalization trends, including the alignment of national and state party platforms,¹⁸ similar partisan identification across all levels of government,¹⁹ and the polarization of state legislatures through roll call voting.²⁰ A particularly illuminating piece of evidence that Hopkins uses is an original 2014 survey that he commissioned that asked respondents about their perceptions of state and national political parties.²¹ Hopkins asked 251 respondents to evaluate one of the two major political parties in their state while the other 250 respondents assessed one of the two national parties.²² Many of the respondents who evaluated state level parties tied their performance to national politics, such as this one respondent from North Carolina who said that the North Carolina GOP was “not fighting Obama tactics enough.”²³ He also points out that there is little difference between the negative descriptions provided for the state and national parties.²⁴ Specifically, 40 percent of respondents held negative views of their state Republican parties while 41 percent did for the national Republican Party.²⁵ Hopkins assembles a wide range of evidence to make the case that both parties and voters have engaged with politics at a national level.

Hopkins also argues that changes in the media market can explain nationalized voting behavior and the decline in local civic participation.²⁶ Cable news and social media dominate American media consumption, and both mostly emphasize national politics.²⁷ The news sources do not have spatially bound viewers like print newspapers do, so the nationalized content can reach anyone in the United States.²⁸ Voters need

information to mobilize for elections, and the civic information they are exposed to centers around national issues.²⁹

Media incentives also have a nationalizing effect on content. There has been a recent consolidation of local television station ownership and local newspapers.³⁰ Specifically, 12 companies owned 589 local television stations as of 2014 and the companies had owned only 304 a decade earlier.³¹ From an economic perspective, the owners have an incentive to focus on national news instead of local developments in order to cut cost with regional stations.³² In the newspaper industry, newsrooms employed 33,000 reporters in 2014 -- a 20,000 decrease from the mid-1990s.³³ The cuts in reporters include a decline in journalists who cover state politics, which may well contribute to the decrease of voter knowledge in local issues.³⁴ Hopkins also does an analysis of the *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times* to evaluate how the two newspapers covered different levels of government from 1930-1989.³⁵ He conducts a word search analysis of “governor,” “mayor,” and “president,” in addition to a Latent Dirichlet Allocation model that tracked how the two newspapers covered political topics over time.³⁶ The results find that national politics consistently attracts more media attention than local government.³⁷ A similar study conducted in 2012 found the same conclusion: national politics commands the attention of media outlets at the expense of state and local government.³⁸ For this thesis, it is important to keep in mind that the American voter’s political lens has national blinders and have increasingly neglected state and local concerns.

Alternative explanations of nationalization are worth considering. Hopkins discusses two: residential mobility and economic shifts.³⁹ Increased residential mobility,

or the populations that are born in one state, educated in another, and live in a third, are probably not going to be knowledgeable about the politics of their home state.⁴⁰ He posits that the mobility of certain socio-economic groups could influence party nationalization, such as if elites attend college outside of their home state, enter politics, and help form a network of party staffers who do not have strong local political ties.⁴¹ Another study from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth and Young Adults found that Republican affiliation was connected to a lower probability of rural to urban migration.⁴²

Another possible explanation deals with certain economic changes. The rise of the consumer economy, for example, means that Americans are exposed to the same brands and their marketing.⁴³ As a result, economic interest may not rely on one's geographic location and therefore national economic trends are more pertinent to Americans.⁴⁴ Hopkins points to research by McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) that demonstrated a strong correlation between rising income inequality and polarization; income difference leads to sharp policy disagreements among voters, which then map onto their representatives.⁴⁵ There is also evidence that suggests a direct relationship between campaign finance law changes and polarization.⁴⁶ Specifically, since 1990, candidates have relied on individual and outside-district donors who are more likely to reflect nationalized, ideological views than alternative sources.⁴⁷

In "The (Re) Nationalization of Congressional Elections," Morris Fiorina nicely distills nationalization, "When elections are nationalized, people vote for the party, not the person. Candidates of the party at different levels of government win and lose together. Their fate is collective."⁴⁸ He points out that the recent nationalization of the 2006, 2010, and 2014 midterm elections was a return to the era between the mid-

nineteenth century and early twentieth that had nationalized congressional election patterns.⁴⁹ Cross-party voting is a useful piece of evidence when evaluating nationalization trends. Split-ticket majorities were rare in the late nineteenth century, but increased quickly after World War II, leading to the 1972 and 1984 elections in which almost half of congressional districts across the country split the ticket.⁵⁰ In 1985, 114 Democratic members represented districts that President Ronald Reagan won.⁵¹ Fast forward 28 years and only 16 Republicans in the US House in 2013 held districts that President Barack Obama won.⁵² Fiorina provides evidence of a recent, clear trend around the decline of candidate-based elections as cross-party voting decreases. Fiorina points out that there is an agreement among political scientists that party sorting among voters produces two ideologically different parties which can partly explain nationalization.⁵³

This thesis will focus on the 2010 midterms and how its nationalized politics affected members of Congress's re-election behavior. In doing so, it will provide case studies in how representatives electioneer in a world where their political fate is pinned to their national party. It is helpful, however, to first understand the movement of nationalization and its timeline in US elections.

Nationalization has had its ebbs and flows. Political scientist Larry Bartels looked at presidential voting from 1868 to 1996 to examine the influence of partisanship, state, and national-level factors to explain presidential election outcomes.⁵⁴ He concluded that state-level variables could explain presidential support patterns between the 1870s and 1920s, but then the state-level factors declined in influence between the 1920s and 1940s.⁵⁵ His findings were consistent with the consensus that nationalization of elections rose during the New Deal in the 1930s.⁵⁶ Bartel demonstrated, however, that in the 1950s

and 1960s, state-level factors became more influential in presidential election outcomes.⁵⁷ Then, in the 1980s, Bartel found that nationalized behavior returned after President Reagan's election.⁵⁸ The 1994 midterm was widely viewed as a nationalized election when Republicans won 54 seats in the US House of Representatives during President Clinton's first term.⁵⁹ The 1994 midterm election is a story that continued to unfold as the 2006, 2010, and 2014 midterms were all elections that were referendums on the sitting president.⁶⁰ The Blue and Red waves that swept Congress then—and the nationalized behavior of voters who came out to the polls—is the political context in which this thesis is situated.

It is widely accepted by political scientists that the American electorate has become more nationalized over the past century.⁶¹ The aim of this thesis, therefore, is not to put forward an alternative explanation of nationalization; it will be accepted as a premise that these explanations suffice and the electorate is nationalized. In this thesis, nationalization is the political backdrop to explore an institution that originally intended to best represent local interests. Now, members of the US House of Representatives are almost inextricably linked to their national party leadership and agenda. Scholarly works, such as *Congress: The Electoral Connection* by David Mayhew, have explored the incentive structures of an earlier era of Congress. This thesis, using the 2010 midterms as its focus, applies that work to provide insight into how nationalization has affected members of Congress and their re-election strategies, especially Blue Dog Democrats. To understand and draw conclusions about Congress in a nationalized age, one must first understand how the institution has evolved. *Congress: The Electoral Connection* is a great frame of reference to do that.

Chapter 2: Advertising, Credit Claiming, and Position Taking in a Modern Congress

David Mayhew's *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (1974) is among the most important congressional studies. Mayhew argues that a member of Congress has one goal in mind: re-election.⁶² Mayhew works from the premise of re-election to evaluate how that incentive drives their policy and political goals within the institution.⁶³ The idea of members as re-election seekers aligns with the three goals of a Congress member Richard Fenno outlines: (1) getting re-elected, (2) achieving power in the legislative body, and (3) making good public policy.⁶⁴ Fenno coined the term "home style" in reference to how members of Congress view their voters; a "home style" approach is district-focused in an effort to gain their constituencies' trust and get re-elected.⁶⁵ Mayhew argues that members engage in three central re-election activities: advertising, credit claiming, and position taking.⁶⁶ We need to update this explanation within the context of the modern Congress-- which refers to the 2009-2012 period-- and the nationalization of politics.

According to Mayhew,, "[advertising is] ... any effort to disseminate one's name among constituents in such a fashion as to create a favorable image but in messages having little or no issue content."⁶⁷ The goal is to build a brand name for a member, most often with an emphasis on experience, independence, concern, and knowledge.⁶⁸ House incumbents have an advantage in advertising because they visit the district regularly, give speeches, and send out constituent newsletters.⁶⁹ In the mid-1960s, political scientist Walter Wilcox interviewed 158 members.⁷⁰ Of those, 121 said that they sent constituent newsletters on a regular basis; 48 wrote opinion columns in newspapers; 82 reached out

to their constituents through the radio or TV; 89 Congress members sent mail questionnaires.⁷¹

Credit claiming is the attempt to convince voters that the member of Congress is responsible for a government policy action that helps the constituency.⁷² Members usually take credit for government benefits for a geographic constituency and, in turn, the voters repay the representative with their votes.⁷³ Examples of the kinds of credit claiming include constituent casework, earmarks, and legislation that benefits the district.⁷⁴ Mayhew writes:

The emphasis here is on individual accomplishment (rather, than, say, party or governmental accomplishment) and on the congressman as doer (rather than, say, expounder of constituency views). Credit claiming is highly important to congressmen, with the consequence that much of congressional life is a relentless search for opportunities to engage in it (53).

Credit claiming places the member of Congress at the center of the government benefits for a district; the representative becomes the face of the pork barreling which gives them political support during their re-election.

Position taking is the support of political issues in the interest voters.⁷⁵ Mayhew discusses how position taking is about rhetoric, not policy implementation, “The congressman as position taker is a speaker rather than a doer. The electoral requirement is not that he makes pleasing things happen but that he makes pleasing judgmental statements. The position itself is the political commodity.”⁷⁶ The political setting of position taking can vary. For example, members can take a certain position through floor speeches, press releases, or television appearances.⁷⁷ For most representatives, it is rational to maintain their past views and adopt new ones with caution if it is necessary.⁷⁸

Taking innovative positions, however, may make more sense for members who are in electoral danger; entrepreneurial position taking is politically intelligent if a member faces defeat because their old positions may not fit the views of the electorate.⁷⁹ Mayhew gives the example of Senator Joseph McCarthy who faced a difficult re-election campaign in 1952, so he turned anti-communism into his calling card in 1950.⁸⁰ The relationship between position taking and voter behavior, however, is very difficult to measure because as Mayhew says, there is a variance problem: members do not differ much in the position-taking methods.⁸¹ Despite the difficulties in measuring the electoral impact, position taking is still a crucial component of how members of Congress try to get re-elected.

All three activities are still alive and well today. The electioneering strategies, however, have evolved. The three re-election activities are also more connected. For example, TV ads for candidates that advertise their campaign and advocate for certain positions can also include credit claiming about certain government benefits.

Since the 1970s, political advertising has grown into multi-billion-dollar industry.⁸² During the 2010 midterm elections, independent expenditure (IEs) groups spent \$4 billion on advertising, in part because of the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision.⁸³ IEs spent only \$69 million during the 2006 midterm elections and \$27.2 million in 2002.⁸⁴ On October 14th, 2010, the *Center for Responsive Politics* reported that outside political organizations gave more than \$153 million to independent expenditures that overtly supported or opposed candidates for federal office.⁸⁵ The independent expenditure spending tripled between 2006 and 2010 election cycles.⁸⁶ The emergence of social media also changed political advertising and its reach.

During the 2010 midterms, many voters engaged with politics online. More than half of American adults were online political users during the 2010 elections, according to a Pew Research Center poll conducted from November 3rd-24th, 2010.⁸⁷ The survey also found that 1 in 5 adults, or 22% of the respondents, used Twitter or a social networking site for political purposes.⁸⁸ In the survey, 53% of adult internet users said they did at least one of the eleven online political actions that Pew measured, including sharing election content, watching political videos, and “fact checking” politicians’ claims.⁸⁹ The survey also found that 31% of adult internet users watched political videos online in the months before the 2010 election which was a 12% increase from respondents after the 2006 midterms.⁹⁰ Nationalization effects were also present: 20% of online adults followed an election in another part of the country.⁹¹ The three groups that were most likely to follow a campaign outside of their geographic location were males, whites, and respondents with strong views, especially people who supported or opposed the Tea Party movement.⁹² The 2010 midterms also coincided with the rise of a new communications era that has since become the norm for campaigns.

The 2008 presidential election represented the beginning of a new era in political media.⁹³ For example, campaign websites became a central location for voters to find information about the race, donate to the candidate, volunteer, and watch campaign videos.⁹⁴ The key development, however, was social media, including Facebook and YouTube, which Americans used to share election information and organize for campaigns.⁹⁵ The media developments in 2008 continued during the 2010 midterms when Twitter and blogging websites played a larger role in the political discourse.⁹⁶ Despite the

rise of social media, however, TV was still the main source for election news in 2010 for voters.⁹⁷

Issuing press releases is an important credit claiming method. In “Appropriators, not Position Takers: The Distorting Effects of Electoral Incentives on Congressional Representation,” Justin Grimmer analyzes over 64,000 Senate press releases between 2005 and 2007 and concludes, among other findings, that senators in swing states emphasize appropriations in their press release communications instead of policy positions.⁹⁸ In his book *Representational Styles in Congress*, Grimmer mentions that press releases can generate coverage of the member, especially in local newspapers where the publications sometimes use the exact language in the release for articles.⁹⁹ Press releases also drive coverage of the member in non-election years.¹⁰⁰ The press releases allow representatives to control the information framing independent of reporters’ articles.¹⁰¹ With the digitization of releases, press secretaries can disseminate the information quickly to a large list of reporters, which allows communications teams to shape the narrative early.¹⁰² Much of credit claiming has also moved to Twitter in recent years. Annelise Russell found that senators from rural states and rank-and-file members dominate credit claiming on Twitter.¹⁰³ Party leaders, however, spend more time position taking on the social media site.¹⁰⁴ Technology has bolstered credit claiming’s role in the re-election process.

Social media sites create a communications environment for members of Congress to engage in position-taking before a national audience. A 2013 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report found 83.4% of the House of Representatives members and senators had a Twitter account, and 90% of the representatives were registered on

Facebook.¹⁰⁵ CRS focused on the period between August and October 2011 where a total of 30,765 tweets were sent and 16,261 Facebook posts were published.¹⁰⁶ The report coded the tweets and Facebook posts into seven categories: “position taking, district or state, official congressional action, policy statement, media, personal, and other.”¹⁰⁷ CRS defined position taking as the following, “Tweets or Facebook posts in which a Representative or Senator took a position on a policy or political issue. The expressed position could concern a specific bill under consideration or a general policy issue.”¹⁰⁸ After CRS gathered the data, the results found position taking was the most frequent category for both Twitter and Facebook posts at 41% and 39%, respectively.¹⁰⁹ The second most frequent category was “district or state” with 26% of tweets and 39% of the Facebook posts.¹¹⁰

A study at the Illinois Institute of Technology reached a similar conclusion about position taking on Twitter among members of Congress. In “What’s Congress Doing on Twitter?” the authors used data from 380 members of Congress Twitter accounts in December 2012.¹¹¹ They found that the most common Twitter behavior is providing information (41%) followed by position taking (22%).¹¹² Both the CRS and Illinois Institute of Technology findings highlight an important feature of how social media aids a member of Congress’s re-election activities. Position taking still dominates as a political strategy, even above references to a home district or state. Now, it is even easier for Congress members to communicate their views to both their constituencies and outside actors through social media platforms.

In a preface to a later edition of *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, David Mayhew addresses how he views the book in a post 1970s political context. He mentions

that he was disappointed with how the political science community viewed his concept of position taking, “I remain convinced that politicians often get rewarded for taking positions rather than achieving effects.”¹¹³ Though it is implicit in the preface, Mayhew seems to think that political scientists have misplaced their focus on legislative productivity and its relationship to re-election, dismissing position taking as an electoral commodity. He later says, “In general, my guess is that position taking has not been examined thoroughly since 1974 because its importance exceeds its modelability. And if it implicates causal relations it is especially tough to address.”¹¹⁴ This thesis re-centers position taking, along with advertising and credit claiming, as the key framing to analyze House members’ political behavior. It will also not make correlative claims between the three re-election activities and electoral success. Instead, the thesis will analyze multiple Blue Dog Democratic campaigns to construct an argument about how those electioneering strategies interacted with a nationalized political environment. The scholarly contribution of the work is not to discover new explanations of electoral loss, but rather to understand how nationalization shaped Blue Dog Democrats and their local-oriented re-election activities.

The first two chapters have covered what nationalization is and David Mayhew’s important scholarly contribution in *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. The three re-election activities he outlines in the book will be crucial for the rest of the thesis to analyze Blue Dog Democrats’ campaigns and the issues that defined the elections. The next chapter will contextualize the political environment before the 2010 midterms, including the major policy accomplishments during the first term of Barack Obama’s presidency and the rise of the Tea Party movement. It will also cover the results of the

2010 midterms and set the stage to introduce the focus of this thesis: the Blue Dog Coalition.

Chapter 3: “A Shellacking:” The Nationalization of President Obama’s First Two Years

On November 3rd, 2010, President Barack Obama spoke to the press about the 2010 midterm results, “Now, I’m not recommending for every future president that they take a shellacking like I did last night. I’m sure there are easier ways to learn these lessons. But I do think that, you know, this is a growth process. And an evolution.”¹¹⁵ The night before, Republicans picked up 63 seats in the US House of Representatives and 6 seats in the US Senate.¹¹⁶ In the next Congress, Republicans would have more seats in the US House than at any time since the 1940s.¹¹⁷ Among the victims of the Republicans’ massive electoral victory were the Blue Dog Democrats, a group of fiscally conservative liberals who represented swing districts. Republicans, and especially the conservative Tea Party Movement, nationalized the 2010 midterms by focusing on the weak economy and Obama’s legislative agenda.¹¹⁸ This chapter will provide an overview of President Obama’s early legislative accomplishments, the rise of the Tea Party Movement, and what happened on November 2nd, 2010.

The first Black President entered the Oval Office amid the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression. Banks were on the brink of collapse and the economy stopped growing with an unemployment rate of 10 percent.¹¹⁹ Foreclosures soared and housing prices plummeted.¹²⁰ President Obama and congressional leaders had to move quickly to avert a complete economic meltdown.

On the campaign trail, Obama endorsed President George W. Bush’s Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP).¹²¹ TARP was a \$700 billion bailout program for the country’s leading banks that lent enough money to maintain their solvency.¹²² When he

became President, Obama authorized \$60 billion in TARP funds for General Motors and Chrysler in order to keep the American car industry from entering bankruptcy.¹²³ The automobile companies survived the crisis after they received TARP funding; auto corporations repaid the federal government more than \$600 billion at the end of 2009.¹²⁴ Despite the policy's success, the political optics were poor: many voters viewed TARP as a bailout for corporate leaders and bankers.¹²⁵

Obama's first major legislative accomplishment was the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act) signed into law on February 17th, 2009.¹²⁶ The Recovery Act was an \$800 billion stimulus package that aimed to prevent further layoffs in the public sector and create new jobs in other industries, including renewable energy.¹²⁷ One-third of the legislation went towards middle-class tax cuts and another third funded various infrastructure projects, including bridge and highway construction.¹²⁸ Research and development grants were included in the infrastructure investment for renewable energy, specifically wind and solar; the renewable energy sector grew in the years after the Recovery Act.¹²⁹ Politically, Obama wanted bipartisan support for the Recovery Act.¹³⁰ No Republican House members and only three Republican senators, however, voted for it.¹³¹

A major part of President Obama's domestic policy agenda was health care reform-- a pillar of the Democratic Party's agenda since Harry Truman.¹³² The most recent attempt before Obama to overhaul the health care system was President Bill Clinton's failed Health Security Act in 1993.¹³³ The political difficulties of reform were familiar to the Obama Administration, and the President decided to pursue health care policy in the beginning of his first term while his approval was high and Democrats

controlled both chambers of Congress.¹³⁴ There was Democratic caucus division on Capitol Hill, however, in how to reform the health care system.¹³⁵ Some Democratic members supported a “public option,” or a federal government-run health insurance plan for uninsured Americans.¹³⁶ Others, however, supported a private insurance expansion; more than 75 percent of Americans had a private insurance plan and many worried that a new system would negatively affect their coverage.¹³⁷

In order to navigate these internal political divisions, President Obama thought that any health care reform policy had to be budget-neutral, or save as much as it spent.¹³⁸ Drawing lessons from Clinton’s failure, Obama brought the hospital and pharmaceutical industries to the negotiating table and invited Congress to help develop the legislation.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, members of Congress felt pressure from constituents back who opposed “Obamacare.”¹⁴⁰ The opposition grew out of the powerful conservative Tea Party movement whose members went to constituent town hall meetings to voice their disapproval.¹⁴¹ The Tea Party movement would become a political force that eventually helped sweep the Republicans into the US House majority. Republicans were winning the messaging war for the health care debate, and so President Obama decided to use the bully pulpit to deliver an address about the proposal to Congress on September 9th, 2009.¹⁴²

The speech succeeded in curbing congressional opposition to reform.¹⁴³ Obama then persuaded many members of Congress to support the reform; the Senate and the US House passed their own versions of the health care reform proposal after a difficult legislative process that sometimes looked like it would end in failure.¹⁴⁴ On March 23rd, 2010, Obama signed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA).¹⁴⁵ The ACA

quickly became the central target for Republicans to attack after its passage; the GOP wanted to tie Democratic members of Congress to the ACA and President Obama's liberal agenda. The Tea Party and its conservative followers led the way in telling that story, culminating in a 2010 Republican sweep of the US House of Representatives.

The Tea Party Movement (TPM) was a grassroots conservative movement that began in 2009.¹⁴⁶ There was no leader or national organization, but the Koch Brothers' group Americans for Prosperity supported various Tea Party activist groups through providing trainings and transportation to congressional town halls.¹⁴⁷ Members were older white citizens who were well educated, wealthier than the average American, and more conservative than the average GOP voter.¹⁴⁸ The dispersed movement had small local groups with usually around 200 members who held far right views and were skeptical of establishment Republicans.¹⁴⁹ Activists were inspired by the Sons of Liberty, a group of men in Massachusetts in the early 1750s.¹⁵⁰ Samuel Adams led the Sons of Liberty, and he mobilized people to protest the taxes that King George and the British House of Commons imposed on the Colonies.¹⁵¹ Adams' most famous protest was against the Tea Act of 1773 which triggered mass protests across the Colonies and increased support for American independence.¹⁵²

One causal story about how the Tea Party formed is worth noting. In 2009, Rick Santelli, a CNBC journalist who covered bond markets at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, gave a passionate speech on CNBC's "Squawk Box."¹⁵³ He was angry that policymakers in Washington DC bailed out sectors that struggled during the 2008 Recession, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore."¹⁵⁴ He then asked traders on the Chicago Exchange floor if they would bail out their neighbors who

irresponsibly spent too much money on their houses.¹⁵⁵ The traders responded with “no” and Santelli said that he would plan a “tea party” in Chicago to demonstrate their anger.¹⁵⁶ He ended the rant with a question, “President Obama, are you listening?”¹⁵⁷ After his speech, millions of Americans formed Tea Party associations across the country.¹⁵⁸ This thesis does not argue that Santelli caused the Tea Party movement, but it is important to acknowledge his role in the movement’s origin story.

Members of the Tea Party Movement, similar to Samuel Adams and the Sons of Liberty, were driven by patriotism and opposition to high taxes.¹⁵⁹ TPM activists wanted to reclaim freedoms that they thought the federal government took away through regulation, deficits, unsustainable debt, and taxes.¹⁶⁰ TPM did not have a political party affiliation, but activists began with targeting establishment Republicans because of the GOP’s tradition of fiscal conservatism.¹⁶¹ Tea Party activists were part of an elusive political network that organized around a shared feeling: America’s future was at risk after the election of Barack Obama in 2008.¹⁶² The ideological origins of the movement can be traced back to a young lawyer from Houston Texas named Ryan Hecker.¹⁶³

Ryan Hecker was a Texas attorney who wanted to pressure Congress members to follow fiscally conservative policies.¹⁶⁴ He thought that congressional Republicans lost legitimacy to govern because they stopped listening to ordinary citizens’ concerns, especially about federal spending.¹⁶⁵ The 2008 financial crisis was a turning point for Hecker because Republicans joined Democrats to authorize TARP, the \$700 billion bailout for banks.¹⁶⁶ After the 2008 election, Republicans criticized TARP despite voting for the program; many conservative voters viewed the establishment Republicans as hypocritical panderers who wanted to win in the 2010 midterms.¹⁶⁷ After the election of

Barack Obama, Hecker co-founded the Houston Tea Party Society and wrote the “Contract For America.”¹⁶⁸ The platform’s objective: influence the 2010 midterm elections.¹⁶⁹

“Contract From America” became the TPM’s ideological foundation.¹⁷⁰ Inspired by Newt Gingrich’s 1994 “Contract With America,” Hecker’s Contract was a 10 point agenda that guided Tea Party candidates’ policies for the 2010 midterms.¹⁷¹ The 10 points included: “Protect the Constitution”; “Reject Cap and Trade”; “Demand a Balanced Budget”; “Enact Fundamental Tax Reform”; “Restore Fiscal Responsibility and Constitutionally Limited Government”; “End Runaway Government Spending”; “Defund, Repeal, and Replace Government-Run Health Care”; “Pass an “All-of-the-above” Energy Policy”; “Stop the Pork”; “Stop the Tax Hikes.” The “Contract From America” was unveiled at “Tax Day” rallies on April 15th, 2010 across the country.¹⁷² Tea Party activists pressured all Republican candidates for Congress who associated themselves with the Tea Party to sign on to the Contract.¹⁷³ On November 2nd, 2010, the “Contract From America” and its Republican allies succeeded.

The Republican midterm sweep was predictable based on long standing electoral behavior; the party that holds the presidency had lost House seats in 14 of the 16 midterms between 1946 and 2006, averaging a loss of about 24 seats.¹⁷⁴ The magnitude of the win, however, surprised many political observers. Voters did not like the state of the economy: 62% of exit poll respondents said it was the most important issue of the midterms.¹⁷⁵ What was notable about the 2010 midterms was that it was widely viewed as a highly nationalized election.¹⁷⁶ The Tea Party was a key reason for why the election was nationalized because TPM-backed candidates ran campaigns focused on

controversial national issues, such as the ACA and Recovery Act of 2009.¹⁷⁷ The nationalization strategy was very effective: 60 out of 63 Republican candidates who won seats in the House of Representatives were Tea Party-supported.¹⁷⁸ Moderate Democrats, or members of the Blue Dog Democrat Coalition, lost many of their seats to Tea Party candidates.¹⁷⁹

The Blue Dog Coalition was--and still is--a caucus of moderate, fiscally conservative House Democrats who represent swing districts. The coalition's founding members formed the caucus after the 1994 midterm elections when Republicans took both chambers of Congress, winning 54 seats in the House and 8 seats in the US Senate.¹⁸⁰ Blue Dog members thought the 1994 midterms demonstrated that the Democratic Party had become too liberal, so a voting bloc was required in Congress to represent moderate, fiscally responsible views.¹⁸¹ The Blue Dog name is based on both the Blue Dog paintings by George Rodrigue and the term "Yellow Dog Democrat" in reference to Democratic voters who would have voted for a yellow dog before a Republican; The founding Blue Dog members felt "choked blue" by the political parties' extremes.¹⁸² The Blue Dog Coalition members are known for promoting strong national defense policy and working with Republicans on bipartisan legislation.¹⁸³

More than half of the Blue Dog Democrats' coalition lost in the 2010 midterms, including Stephanie Herseth Sandlin of South Dakota and Baron Hill of Indiana, who were the Coalition's two leaders.¹⁸⁴ Many Blue Dogs blamed the nationalization of the midterms for their losses; the members tried to separate themselves from President Obama's agenda and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi but failed.¹⁸⁵ The height of the Blue Dog Coalition's power was in 2009 when the caucus had 54 members.¹⁸⁶ At the start of

the 112th Congress in 2011, they had 31 members and in 2015, they had only 14.¹⁸⁷ Congress has become more polarized because voters have become more ideological, especially during the 2010 midterms.¹⁸⁸ Voters in 2010 sent 60 candidates to Congress who were more conservative than the establishment GOP. The Blue Dogs' moderate positions and home style, or constituent-focused approach, is a useful counterweight to the nationalization of President Obama's agenda during the 2010 midterms. Blue Dog Democrats represented the most politically competitive districts in the country. Many members in 2010 lost because their images were transformed from a local, well-liked representative to an extension of the national Democratic Party. Blue Dog Democrats are the focus for the rest of the thesis because of what nationalization did to their political careers, despite their best efforts to separate themselves from congressional Democratic leadership and Barack Obama.

In the following chapters, Mayhew's three re-election activities will be applied to the campaigns of two Blue Dog Coalition members: Stephanie Herseth Sandlin (SD-At Large) and Harry Mitchell (AZ-5th). Both members lost in 2010. They represented two different types of districts across the country and took differing positions on major Democratic agenda items, including the ACA. Their political calculations varied, but nationalization still defeated them. The campaign analyses will provide insight into how swing district representation—and the re-election strategies that the two Blue Dogs employed—failed them in the nationalized political environment.

Chapter 4: The Last US House Democrat to Represent South Dakota

On November 3rd, 2010, Representative Stephanie Herseth Sandlin of South Dakota's At-Large District lost to Republican Kristi Noem by three percentage points.¹⁸⁹ Sandlin was a leader of the Blue Dog Coalition and held one of the most conservative voting records for any Democrat in the US House.¹⁹⁰ Noem, who is now governor of South Dakota, was a Tea Party rising star and raised twice as much money as Sandlin, hauling in \$1.1 million three months before the election.¹⁹¹ Outside spending against Sandlin also totaled \$1,167,325 which was a large sum for a House race in 2010.¹⁹² In the 111th Congress from 2009-2010, Sandlin voted against major party policy priorities. In advertisements, she tried to separate herself from the national Democratic leadership, including President Obama and Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Her strategy, however, failed on election night. Her home style, conservative approach became obsolete in the nationalized political environment; Sandlin was an extension of the polarizing national Democratic Party instead of a well-liked local representative who had previously won her re-elections.

Stephanie Sandlin was first elected in 2004 when she defeated Republican Larry Diedrich.¹⁹³ She won her 2006 and 2008 re-election campaigns comfortably.¹⁹⁴ In Congress, she served on the House Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Veteran Affairs Committees.¹⁹⁵ Her legislative accomplishments included co-sponsoring the 2008 Farm Bill that supported South Dakotan farmers, renewable biofuel technology legislation, and a women veterans' health care bill that increased education benefits for Iraq and Afghanistan soldiers.¹⁹⁶ She became the co-chair of the Blue Dog Coalition in 2008 and often voted with Republicans.¹⁹⁷ Sandlin voted for the 2009 Recovery Act, but bucked

party leadership when she voted against TARP, the ACA, and American Clean Energy and Security Act.¹⁹⁸ In general, Sandlin was a bipartisan lawmaker who was not afraid to cross Democratic congressional leadership or President Obama's agenda; according to a 2009 *National Journal* vote model, Sandlin had a 51.5% score, meaning she cast more liberal votes than 51.5% of the entire House of Representatives caucus.¹⁹⁹ As the 2010 midterm approached, Sandlin faced Kristi Noem.

Kristi Noem was elected to the South Dakota House of Representatives in 2006 and became the assistant majority leader in 2008.²⁰⁰ She focused on reducing regulations in energy development and passed state budget cuts.²⁰¹ In 2010, she entered a competitive Republican primary for the US House seat and emphasized her background as a small business owner and rancher.²⁰² She also stressed her state government experience during the primary, highlighting the budget cuts and low tax policies she guided through the chamber.²⁰³ In the general election, Tea Party activists supported her as well as establishment groups such as the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC).²⁰⁴ On the campaign trail, Noem promised to vote to repeal the ACA and opposed the 2009 Recovery Act.²⁰⁵ She also supported a balanced federal budget and attacked Sandlin for voting to raise the debt ceiling.²⁰⁶ Noem tied Sandlin to President Obama's agenda, painting her as a party loyalist. Her time in the 111th Congress, however, tells a different story. An analysis of her co-sponsored bills and press releases will reveal that she was a fiscally conservative Democrat who understood her rural constituency; Sandlin was committed to a home style strategy that collided at times with the national Democratic Party.

Stephanie Sandlin's legislation in the 111th Congress signaled her fiscal conservative policy position. Bill sponsorship is a form of position-taking: the support of certain legislation expresses to a constituency what kind of values and policies that the member prioritizes. In the 111th Congress, Sandlin cosponsored 11 fiscally conservative policy bills that all focused on the reduction of public spending.²⁰⁷ The titles included: "Truth in Spending Act of 2010," "Stop Waste by Eliminating Excessive Programs Act of 2010," "Reduce Unnecessary Spending Act of 2010," "Fiscal Honesty and Accountability Act of 2009," and a balanced budget amendment for the US Constitution.²⁰⁸ As the co-chair of the Blue Dogs, she supported fiscal conservative policies that also suggested to her voters that she was not aligned with other Democrats who supported high spending measures.

Sandlin cosponsored 60 health care bills despite her vote against the Affordable Care Act.²⁰⁹ South Dakota's At-Large District included an aging population; Medicare was an important policy for many of Sandlin's voters.²¹⁰ She cosponsored bills such as the "Medicare Prescription Drug Price Negotiation Act of 2010," "Patient Health and Real Medication Access Cost Savings Act of 2009," and "Medicare Payment Improvement Act of 2009."²¹¹ On the campaign trail in 2010, Sandlin voted against the Affordable Care Act because she thought it was too expensive and did not include the provisions she worked on for South Dakota.²¹² Her vote against the ACA signaled her economic concerns, but she also recognized that affordable health care, which is a pillar of the national Democratic agenda, was also a crucial South Dakotan issue. She bucked President Obama's vision for affordable health care while putting together a health voting record that she thought would deliver good public policy and, in return, votes for her-

reelection. Press releases can also provide more insight into her political calculus for both position taking and credit claiming.

Many of Representative Sandlin's press releases during the 111th Congress focused on her commitment to fiscal conservatism; the messaging was consistent with her legislative track record. On January 27th, 2010, Sandlin's office issued a press release about President Obama's State of the Union Address. It began, "Tonight, the President rightly highlighted the critical need to get spending under control and reduce the national debt, and the importance of meeting the needs of the private sector to achieve sustainable economic growth."²¹³ She then argued that Congress needed to do more to reduce spending, "I support the President's proposals to freeze spending but we must do more, including identifying ways to cut government overspending, passing legislation requiring Congress to spend within its means and establishing an independent, bipartisan commission to address our national debt."²¹⁴ She supported her party's president when it came to spending reduction, but her office made sure to communicate that the Democrats could always do more to implement fiscally economic policies.

In a January 21st, 2009, press release, Sandlin's communications team discussed her opposition to the TARP bailout, "U.S Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin today reiterated her opposition to the Troubled Asset Program, or TARP, as having too little accountability and not enough protection for taxpayers."²¹⁵ The press release continued, "This poorly managed program is a missed opportunity to address the root causes of the financial crisis. I continue to believe we need more oversight, more accountability, and a better plan going forward, and I do not support release of the second \$350 billion in these circumstances."²¹⁶ On March 2nd, 2010, Sandlin issued a press release on her support for

a Constitutional Balanced Budget Amendment, “Every day, families across South Dakota live by common-sense rules that require them to balance their budgets and Congress can and should do the same. I’m proud to again support this balanced budget amendment, a critical part of our overall strategy to get our country’s fiscal house in order.”²¹⁷ All three press releases highlighted her consistent fiscal conservative message that tried to create political space from the national Democratic Party. She brought the same Blue Dog strategy to the campaign trail against Kristi Noem.

A debate on October 27th, 2010, between Sandlin and Noem highlighted Sandlin’s strategy of keeping the national Democratic Party at arm’s length. Debates, like press releases, are an opportunity to both credit-claim and position-take. Specifically, lawmakers can inform the electorate of their legislative activity and support certain politically favorable policy positions that draws a contrast with their opponents. In her opening statement, Sandlin said, “I’ve stood up to both political parties to do what’s right on behalf of South Dakota—to strengthen our economy, to make smart, targeted investments. I’ve been one of the few members of Congress who has been consistent on debt and deficits and restoring fiscal discipline.”²¹⁸ She laid out her arguments about why she should be re-elected, and Sandlin echoed similar messages in her press releases: the South Dakota Democrat was a fiscal conservative who put the state ahead of the Democratic Party. The debate started with questions about the American Recovery Act. Noem tried to nationalize the Recovery Act discussion after the Congresswoman pointed out that Noem and the South Dakota state legislature took the stimulus funding despite her criticism of the bill, “The reason that the legislature decided to take those dollars was because the Congresswoman and her leadership that she agrees with ties our hands. We

didn't have the option to not take the dollars and let it go back to pay down our debt"²¹⁹ Noem connected Sandlin to Speaker Pelosi and Democratic congressional leadership on Capitol Hill despite the member's clear disagreements with them; nationalization was at the center of Noem's counter argument to Sandlin's vote for the stimulus package.

Stephanie Sandlin's vote against the Affordable Care Act separated her from the national Democratic Party agenda, but Noem still linked President Obama to the Blue Dog. Sandlin outlined the reasons why she voted against the ACA, "I was concerned about increased eligibility rates under Medicaid and the pressures it would put on the state's budget. I was concerned with the cuts to Medicare and the cuts to our long-term care facilities in South Dakota...It wasn't a responsible bill. It was deeply flawed and that's why I opposed it."²²⁰ Sandlin clearly articulated the specific reasons why she voted against her own party's most significant policy initiative. Nevertheless, Noem still painted her as a Democratic Party loyalist:

The Congresswoman is part of the Congress that got this bill passed and gave us government run health care... From the very beginning, I was going to hold her accountable to...her endorsement of this administration and leadership that she put into place. The president she endorsed, campaigned for, and voted for who has set the agenda for the past two years that has led us down this path. I was going to talk about that because South Dakotans are alarmed by the direction this country is going.²²¹

In the health care portion of the debate, Noem did not acknowledge Sandlin's policy qualms with the ACA. Instead, Noem characterized Congresswoman Sandlin as an extension of a Democratic-controlled Congress that passed an overreaching, government-led health care system. To Noem, Sandlin was an Obama supporter who campaigned for him; the rhetorical strategy minimized Sandlin's more conservative voting record and

enhanced her connection to the Democratic White House. Campaign advertisements also highlighted the tension of swing district politics in a nationalized midterm race.

Television ads highlighted a home-style approach for Sandlin and Republicans' nationalization strategy. One of Sandlin's ads was a position taking strategy to associate her with conservative South Dakota values, "In Washington, they call this flyover country. They look down on us from 30,000 feet and don't care about our agriculture, our second amendment, or our fiscally conservative values.... I took on liberal leaders to protect our right to own guns and fought people in both parties who just want to throw money away."²²² In the ad, Sandlin did not even mention she was a Democrat; she sounded like a conservative Republican. Her positions on the Second Amendment, budget policy, and agriculture were to the right of almost all House Democrats. Sandlin understood her conservative electorate and reflected its values. Despite this home style approach, the National Republican Committee (NRCC), like Noem, painted her as a liberal ideologue, "Stephanie Herseth Sandlin said she'll always vote for what's right for South Dakota. She voted with Nancy Pelosi 91% of the time. If she thinks that's right for South Dakota, then Washington DC really has changed Stephanie Herseth Sandlin."²²³ The NRCC and Kristi Noem shared the same message: Representative Sandlin is a puppet of Nancy Pelosi, Barack Obama, and the national Democratic Party; her fiscal conservative credentials and home style strategy were erased. Media interviews with Sandlin and Noem also highlighted the nationalization-local representation divide.

The battle to nationalize the South Dakota congressional campaign was clear during an ABC News interview in September 2010. Jonathan Karl of ABC News interviewed candidates about the state of the race. Karl asked Sandlin what grade she

would give Obama and she responded, “It depends on what issue we are talking about. I think that I would give him a C-range overall.... on some other issues, some of the agency action I haven’t been pleased with as it relates to the commitment we would be having to ethanol and biodiesel and an understanding of rural America and dealing with our forestry issues, I don’t think he’s done a great job.”²²⁴ Sandlin voted against the ACA for both substantive policy and political reasons. In the interview, she continued the messaging strategy that created distance between her and Barack Obama, pointing to South Dakota-specific issues that he failed to deliver on. Later in the interview, Karl addressed Noem’s nationalization strategy, “She [Noem] says you are a vote for Nancy Pelosi as Speaker of the House.” Sandlin responded, “John Boehner is no picnic for South Dakota, either. John Boehner voted against the Farm Bill.... This isn’t about Boehner and Pelosi. This is about Kristi Noem and Stephanie Herseth Sandlin and who’s elected and inspires the confidence of South Dakota voters and who’s going to do what’s right for the state and not be a rubber stamp for either party.”²²⁵ Sandlin was well-aware of how Noem framed Sandlin as a Pelosi follower and made clear that a vote for the Blue Dog meant South Dakota would elect an independent, centrist voice. Despite a voting record and position taking strategies that supported Sandlin’s moderate values, Noem nationalized Sandlin.

Karl asked Noem about Sandlin’s tenure in Congress as the two rode horses in South Dakota. Karl pointed out that Sandlin crossed Democratic leadership on Capitol Hill with her votes against the ACA, the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform Bill, and the American Clean Energy and Security Act.²²⁶ Noem barely addressed such votes and emphasized the apparent inconsistency between Sandlin’s campaign strategy in South

Dakota and her time in DC, “That’s how she is campaigning back here in SD, as a moderate, independent voice for South Dakota. But when you really start looking and pointing at her voting record and the fact she is voting with Nancy Pelosi 9 out of 10 times. You look specifically at the health care bill: she voted against it, but since then, she wouldn’t work to repeal it.”²²⁷ Then, Karl pressed Noem to identify similarities between the Speaker and Sandlin, “We’ve certainly seen that over the past two years. They have voted a lot alike, like the stimulus package.”²²⁸ Noem selectively identified one vote that Sandlin shared with Democratic leadership in the House despite Sandlin’s mixed voting record with the Democrats. Noem consistently made the calculation throughout the campaign that she could characterize Sandlin’s tenure in Congress as an extension of Nancy Pelosi and Barack Obama’s liberal agenda. The strategy was misleading, but the nationalization approach succeeded on election night.

In the same ABC interview, Sandlin gave a glimpse of how she viewed congressional representation, “Here in South Dakota, I’ve always known it’s a swing district. That’s the way it should be in my opinion for every congressional district.”²²⁹ Two months before the election, she was cautiously confident about her re-election prospects and understood the political dynamics of her at-large swing district. She then narrowly lost to a candidate who had the support of the NRC and the Tea Party. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin’s loss poses an important theoretical and political question: what is the future of swing district representation in a nationalized Congress? This chapter provided clear illustrations of how Sandlin’s home style approach could not triumph over nationalization. A similar result occurred in Tempe, Arizona, when Blue Dog Harry Mitchell lost to David Schweikert, another Tea Party-backed candidate. An

analysis of Mitchell's race will provide insight into how the tides of nationalization shaped his political fate.

Chapter 5: Lap Dog or Lone Wolf

Politico published an article titled “Arizona race hinges on national party” three months before the November 2010 election. The author began the piece with an analogy that perfectly described the nationalized race, “The question facing voters in Arizona’s 5th District is whether Democratic Rep. Harry Mitchell is more lap dog or lone wolf.”²³⁰ The piece focused on Representative Harry Mitchell’s difficult re-election campaign against his Republican challenger David Schweikert. The Schweikert campaign posted signs across the Tempe district that called Mitchell a “lap dog” for Speaker Nancy Pelosi.²³¹ Mitchell, a two-term Democratic incumbent, voted for the 2008 TARP bailouts, the 2009 Recovery Act, and the Affordable Care Act.²³² The nationalization of politics in Arizona’s 5th District loomed throughout the *Politico* article. The author quoted Schweikert: “The sheer fact that he voted for Obamacare will basically end his career.”²³³ In the end, voters saw Harry Mitchell as a lap dog for the national Democratic Party. Like more than half of the Blue Dog Coalition, Mitchell could not escape President Obama’s poor approval ratings. This chapter will analyze numerous primary sources, such as press releases, a debate, and campaign advertisements, to argue that his traditional swing district representation strategies could not defeat nationalization.

On November 3rd, 2010, Schweikert beat Mitchell by 9 points.²³⁴ The 2010 race was a rematch between the two candidates who faced each other in 2008.²³⁵ That time, Mitchell beat Schweikert by 10 points.²³⁶ Schweikert, a former member of the Arizona House of Representatives, had Tea Party support in 2010.²³⁷ The difference between

those two election years was who occupied the White House: In 2008, George W. Bush was at the end of his second term and in 2010, President Obama just signed the ACA. As this thesis has noted, midterms are usually referendums on the incumbent president. The focus on the White House, however, is also a product of campaign strategy. As political scientist Alan Abramowitz said, “national issues can become a local issue if these issues are raised by local candidates.”²³⁸ Across the country, Republican campaigns chose to connect their opponents to the national Democratic agenda.

Harry Mitchell had deep roots in Tempe, Arizona. His political legacy is physically present around the city: there is a 35-foot statue of him outside Tempe City Hall and its government offices are called the “Harry E. Mitchell Government Complex.”²³⁹ He was a teacher and professor in the area before serving as a member of the Tempe City Council from 1970 to 1978.²⁴⁰ He was then elected mayor from 1978-84 and served in the Arizona Senate from 1999 to 2006.²⁴¹ In 2006, he served as the Chairman of the Arizona Democratic Party before running for Congress.²⁴² Mitchell served in both the 110th and 111th Congresses from 2007-2011.²⁴³ Harry was a member of the Science, Transportation and Infrastructure, and Veterans’ Affairs Committees.²⁴⁴ Mitchell’s press releases signaled his Blue Dog, fiscally conservative re-election approach.

In an April 2009, press release entitled “Mitchell Calls for Accountability for TARP Funds...Again,” Mitchell’s office communicated that the member wanted more oversight over how TARP funds were spent, “U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell and the House of Representatives passed legislation to overhaul the Troubled Assets Relief Program and strengthen accountability measures today. The legislation will work to better protect

taxpayer dollars used to stabilize the nation's financial markets and open up the credit markets to benefit families and businesses."²⁴⁵ Congressman Mitchell voted for the 2008 TARP bill but emphasized through the press release that continued bailouts required more oversight.²⁴⁶

In another press release, his office advertised his vote against the Democratic budget, "U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell today voted against the Democratic budget resolution, saying the measure does not extend key tax cuts.... Mitchell was one of only 20 Democrats to vote against the resolution."²⁴⁷ The press release ended with a quote from the Congressman, "It ought to concern Democrats as well as Republicans when important tax cuts face expiration. Given the unique economic difficulties we face as a nation, we need to retain tax cuts that will encourage the kind of investment that stimulates growth."²⁴⁸ Congressman Mitchell's concern for fiscal responsibility was clear in the release and wanted to signal that he was willing to vote against his party's budget.

Mitchell emphasized bipartisanship when he needed to comment on the Obama Administration. In a press release on President Obama's first address to Congress, Congressman Mitchell focused on the need for bipartisan cooperation: "President Obama struck the right tone for our nation right now. The people of the United States are uncertain and nervous about their economic future. They are struggling to make ends meet and are in no mood for partisan politics. The President called upon us to work together to find solutions, and I believe we must do so. The problems we face right now are too serious for any of us to do otherwise."²⁴⁹ He did not criticize President Obama like Representative Sandlin, but his Blue Dog, centrist messaging was apparent. Mitchell's press office also did not praise the recently enacted American Recovery Act.

Instead, he condemned partisan politics and supported bipartisan solutions. In contrast to the debate between Sandlin and Noem, Congressman Mitchell's debate with David Schweikert focused on district issues.

The debate between the two candidates centered on the economic development for the Tempe area. In the beginning of the debate, both candidates unsurprisingly said that the economy was the most pressing issue facing the country.²⁵⁰ The debate topics included major policy issues including the 2009 Recovery Act, the Affordable Care Act, and immigration policy. In contrast to Sandlin's debate, the two candidates in Arizona focused on serious public policy disagreements and Schweikert did not actively try to nationalize Mitchell. The incumbent argued that his vote for the stimulus package helped stimulate the economy through tax cuts.²⁵¹

When asked to defend his vote for the ACA, Mitchell said, "We could not continue with the status quo. Every year, the cost of medicine went up for individuals, businesses, and the government."²⁵² His answer prompted a debate about the market's role in health care. Schweikert responded, "You either believe in a government top-down, management control with 158 board and commissions in this health care bill or markets, properly managed and properly incentivized, that will work better."²⁵³ Schweikert made an important comment on the philosophical differences between Republicans and Democrats. He also did not use the ACA as an opportunity to tie Mitchell to Obama. Congressman Mitchell responded with a defense of the bill's market impact, "One of the great parts of this bill is that it works with the market and encourages competitiveness"²⁵⁴ Surprisingly, the ACA portion of the debate was focused on its policy implications, not the politics of the legislation.

The debate also focused on a significant district-specific policy issue: immigration. The Obama Administration framed its immigration policies with a security focus. The Obama White House immigration website signaled the emphasis on enforcement, “by setting priorities and focusing its enforcement resources, the Obama administration has already increased the removal of criminals by more than 80 percent.”²⁵⁵ Mitchell aligned with the President’s national security approach. In the debate, he discussed his sponsored bill called the “Stop Drop Houses Act of 2010” that permitted Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other agencies to seize property that was used for illegal immigrant smuggling.²⁵⁶ He also voted to increase to increase fence funding.²⁵⁷

At the end of the debate, the moderator asked Schweikert and Mitchell what issue they thought should get more attention. Schweikert said: “We are very in debt. We will soon cross \$14 trillion, and a lot of organizations out there say we have \$100 trillion of promises on the books that we have to come through on in the next 75 years. If you love your children, you like your grandchildren, you are burying the next couple of generations in something that is unsustainable.”²⁵⁸ Schweikert’s answer was an implicit condemnation of President Obama’s agenda that increased federal spending, but he did not specifically criticize the President. It was another moment where Schweikert focused on broad policy issues without tethering Mitchell to his party leaders. Mitchell criticized Congress as an institution, “People are upset because they think Congress is dysfunctional. I’m a member of Congress and I think it’s dysfunctional... Why can’t people just get together and pass what is best for this country?... I think the most disappointing part of my time in Congress has been because of the partisanship and the

fact that people look more to winning an issue than actually trying to solve issues.”²⁵⁹

Mitchell’s answer was a common strategy among members of Congress: representatives run against Congress as an institution because it is widely unpopular among the public, including in 2010.²⁶⁰ Political scientist Richard Fenno, however, identified a contradiction within the strategy, which became known as the “Fenno Paradox.”²⁶¹ He found that Americans strongly dislike Congress but they support their own member.²⁶² Mitchell hoped that the “Fenno Paradox” would apply to his campaign. It did not. Unlike Schweikert’s debate comments, television spots from his campaign, outside groups, and the national GOP displayed a clear strategy of nationalization.

Republican attack ads tied Harry Mitchell to the national Democratic Party. In a Schweikert campaign attack ad, the narrator said, “Do Harry Mitchell and Nancy Pelosi really understand what they have done to our future? They passed Obama’s government-run health care. They spent \$800 billion on Obama’s failed stimulus plan.”²⁶³ In a National Republican Campaign Committee (NRCC) ad, Mitchell was framed as fiscally reckless: “Harry Mitchell must think your money grows on trees. Mitchell voted for the Obama-Pelosi that cost \$800 billion, doled out bonuses to Wall Street, but unemployment went up. He voted for the new health care law that cost \$1 trillion dollars. It cuts Medicare by \$500 billion and still, your health care costs will go up. Harry Mitchell won’t be satisfied until there’s nothing left on the tree.”²⁶⁴ The conservative group Americans for Prosperity ran an ad that accused Mitchell and Ann Kirkpatrick, another Democratic Arizona House member, of supporting Nancy Pelosi and not their constituents, “They voted for Obama and Pelosi’s big government health care plan that will cost a trillion dollars, limit choices, and cut \$500 billion from Medicare. Arizonans

are overwhelmingly opposed but Kirkpatrick and Mitchell ignore us and put Nancy Pelosi first.... Tell Kirkpatrick and Mitchell: Fight for Arizona, not Nancy Pelosi's big government health care."²⁶⁵ All three of the ads connected Mitchell to Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Barack Obama. The advertising strategy was very similar to Kristi Noem and other Republican House candidates around the country who viewed nationalization as the most effective messaging approach. Mitchell tried to respond to the attacks through an emphasis on bipartisanship.

Mitchell focused on his centrist leanings in Congress to distance himself from the President and other Democratic leaders. One ad included Republicans who endorsed Harry, "Harry is a different type of politician. He is always willing to listen to new ideas. I've seen him reach across the aisle. He's our champion. He fights for us."²⁶⁶ The Mitchell campaign ran another advertisement that emphasized his bipartisanship, "Harry Mitchell: Described as a bipartisan, forward thinker. Praised by anti-tax groups for working to cut taxes, Harry wrote the bipartisan legislation to block pay raises for politicians."²⁶⁷ These ads echoed some of his press release position taking and debate answers. The Blue Dog Coalition was recognized for its members' bipartisan legislation, and Mitchell embraced that. One of the ads was also a prime example of credit claiming: he wanted to ensure that voters knew of his fiscally conservative vote against a pay raise in Congress. The nationalization of Obama's agenda, however, was too powerful of a force despite Mitchell's messaging as a pragmatic bipartisan representative.

Harry Mitchell embodied the classic home style approach. He was a high school teacher for 28 years in Tempe before serving as its mayor for 16 years; he was known as either Mr. Mitchell or Mayor Mitchell by Tempe residents.²⁶⁸ He thought that all politics

were still local. On election night, it was painfully clear that all politics were national as Mitchell and most of the Blue Dogs lost their seats. For Mitchell's race in particular, the political tension between nationalization and local district representation was intense. His loss now poses an important question: what will a swing district member of Congress look like if someone like Harry Mitchell cannot survive nationalization? It is a puzzling and profoundly important question.

Conclusion: From Home Style to US Style

In *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*, Richard Fenno explores how lawmakers' constituency perceptions affects their re-election behavior.²⁶⁹ Fenno argues in the 1978 work that a representative views his or her constituency in four categories: geographic district, potential voters, primary supporters, and their intimate personnel network, including family and advisors.²⁷⁰ The nationalization of Congress has complicated Fenno's argument. Contemporary members are clearly concerned with their districts and the people who live there. National politics, however, cannot be ignored in the calculations of representatives. Some members of Congress—usually those represent politically safe districts—fundraise off controversial issues from people across the country. Swing district members also find it very difficult to avoid national political issues. I describe this shift as US Style, and the new approach to congressional politics ultimately shapes the incentives that govern Congress as an institution. Nationalization also poses important practical political questions: what kind of a campaign should swing district members run in a nationalized climate? How should they position take, credit claim, and advertise? This thesis does not directly answer those questions, but they are critical for swing district candidates, political consultants, and voters to think about.

Federalist 52 in the *Federalist Papers* outlines the structure of the US House of Representatives. Either Hamilton or Madison wrote, "Frequent elections are unquestionably the only policy by which this dependence and sympathy can be effectually secured."²⁷¹ Two-year election cycles ensured that representatives were responsive to constituent needs. The Founders also knew that members of the House would be more closely tied to their voters than senators, who held six-year terms and

were elected by state legislators at the time.²⁷² The two-year terms still exist, but the political center for many House members does not lie only in their districts.

In the current 117th Congress, there are many examples of how representatives have expanded their political calculus beyond Fenno's four re-election categories. On August 31st, 2021, Republican Clay Higgins of Louisiana traveled to DC and called on President Joe Biden to step down while a serious tropical storm hit his district.²⁷³ Usually, there can be significant political consequences for members if they are absent from their district after a natural disaster. Instead of surveying the damage, Higgins made the calculation that criticizing the Biden Administration would bring equal political benefits as being present in the district. During the same recess period, representatives Markwayne Mullin (R-OK), Seth Moulton (D-Mass.), and Peter Meijer (R-Mich.) went to Kabul, Afghanistan to assist with American evacuations.²⁷⁴ Congressional recess is a time for members to travel back to their districts and discuss their legislative accomplishments; recess activities are examples of a home style re-election approach. Those three members instead travelled to Afghanistan.

Fundraising also demonstrates how nationalized Congress has become. John Fetterman, the current lieutenant governor of Pennsylvania and candidate for US Senate, received donations from 50 percent of ZIP codes in the US.²⁷⁵ In 2020, Amy McGrath, Democratic candidate for US Senate in Kentucky, raised a total \$40.8 million for her bid against Mitch McConnell.²⁷⁶ Nearly half of those contributions were from out-of-state donors, mostly in New York and California.²⁷⁷ The national fundraising trend also applies to the US House. First-term Republican member Madison Cawthorn from North Carolina—who is also part of the conservative Freedom Caucus—raised \$1.5 million

between January 1st and June 30th, 2021.²⁷⁸ Cawthorn spends much of the campaign money on travel outside of his district, but is not a productive member in terms of legislation: he has co-sponsored only one bill that became law.²⁷⁹ He also raises more money than any other member from North Carolina, including veteran Republican representatives Virginia Foxx and Patrick McHenry who both serve on the prestigious financial services committee.²⁸⁰ Over half of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's donations during the 2018 cycle came from outside of New York, with most of the contributions coming from Californians.²⁸¹ The money that flows into these US House races is most likely a function of both the digitization of fundraising platform and the nationalization of politics.²⁸² Nevertheless, national controversy can bring in financial support to members, which will further incentivize many of them to embrace US Style.

What does the rise of US style mean for swing district members? It is a complicated question. The two case studies in this thesis make clear that a nationalized campaign can end political careers. Representative Sandlin's vote against the Affordable Care Act demonstrated that even position taking against one's major policy priorities cannot secure re-election. As nationalization only increases in this political environment, it is difficult to see how many vulnerable members of Congress will be able to center their campaigns mostly on local policy issues. Mayhew's three re-election strategies and the messages that they embrace will inevitably shift as a result. Former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill famously said, "All politics is local."²⁸³ On election night in 2010, Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, Harry Mitchell, and other Blue Dogs probably disagreed.

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