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# **Conservative talk radio programs as political interest group and their ideological but pragmatic relations with the Republican Party (1988 – 2010)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Political and media commentators have noted the current symbiotic relation between the Fox News network and the Trump administration. While the phenomenon of revolving doors between a media outlet and a branch of government is unprecedented, the relationship between Fox and the Trump White House in fact taps into a long-standing tradition of conservative media operating as Republican role players. Focusing on nationally syndicated conservative talk radio (CTR) programs in the ante-Trump era (1988-2010) and mobilizing the theory of political parties as coalitions of interest groups, I examine how CTR negotiated a delicate position within the Republican coalition operating as an interest group in its own right. Using Clive S. Thomas's typology of group-party interaction models (2001, 20-21), I argue that CTR programs engaged in a form of ideological but pragmatic relationship with the Republican elite, namely one that is based on ideological affinity and sometimes identical policy goals but formed on an ad hoc basis. I show how, though mutualistic, this relation fluctuated throughout the two decades as CTR programs acted as willful though autonomous allies of GOP officials, working in tandem with Republican officials when deeming it consistent with their own views and interests, but without ever being subservient to them.

## **Introduction**

In her *New Yorker* article “The Making of the Fox News White House”, Jane Mayer describes how the conservative cable news network Fox News and the Trump administration operate in a “formalized partnership” (Mayer, 2019). Such a close relation between a media outlet and a branch of government—particularly the system of revolving doors—is an unprecedented phenomenon, in part because the US media model precludes the kind of “political parallelism” typical of some European countries (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, 207-217). While the current repair of Donald Trump’s relations with the conservative media establishment is unprecedented, it in fact builds on and amplifies a long-standing tradition of conservative media operating in tandem with Republican leaders which culminated in the 1990s and the following decade with the advent of conservative talk radio (CTR) programs. Attacking Democrats, vetting Republican candidates for office, and often supporting the Republican leadership actively, CTR programs have since then operated as political role-players in their own right within the Republican coalition.

## **Literature review**

Since the advent of the *Rush Limbaugh Show* in the early 1990s, CTR has received a great deal of scholarly attention. One strand of research has described the specificity of CTR as a genre in the post-Fairness Doctrine era (Hofstetter et al., 1994; Davis, 1997), analyzing its thematic and rhetorical content (Cappella et al., 1996; Lattin, 2000; Nicola, 2010; Mort, 2012), examining the demographics and sociology of listeners (Hollander 1999) as well as the predictors of exposure (Hollander, 1996; Bennett, 2002b; Christie, 2007). Another dominant line of research has focused on the effects of CTR on listeners’ attitudes on issues (Barker, 1998a; Barker & Knight, 2000), opinions of political role-players and institutions (Hollander, 1996; Pfau et al. 1998; Holbert,

2004; Barker & Lawrence, 2006) and interpersonal trust (Lee et al, 2003), and levels of information and political knowledge (Hofstetter et al., 1999; Bennett, 2002a; Cappella & Hall, 2002; Hofstetter et al., 1999; Bennett, 2009). Some studies have explored the genre's effects on political mobilization and voting behavior (Hofstetter, 1994; Bolce et al., 1996; Barker, 1998b; Hofstetter, 1998; Jones, 1998; Barker, 1999; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Still others examine callers' participation and the interaction between callers and hosts (Dori-Hacohen, 2012a; Dori-Hacohen, 2012b; Dori-Hacohen, 2013; Mort, 2015; Mort, 2020). In addition, the controversy over Rush Limbaugh's use of abusive language against Sandra Fluke, a student who had advocated for a contraceptive mandate during a congressional hearing before House Democrats was the focus of a symposium whose papers were published in *The Journal of Radio & Audio Media* (Blaney, 2012).

While CTR has been the focus of a large body of scholarship, the interaction between CTR programs and the Republican Party has received but scant attention, with the exception of Brian Rosenwald's seminal *Talk Radio's America: How an Industry Took Over a Political Party that Took Over the United States* (2019). Disputing the accepted narrative that CTR hosts served as "GOP water carriers" (6) and "mindless automata who blessed whatever elected Republicans did" (7), Rosenwald shows how CTR programs in fact operated as autonomous agents, wielding spectacular clout on the Republican Party, which they contributed to reshaping. Following this framework, I revisit the history of CTR programs' interaction with the Republican Party, approaching these programs as a type of interest group—or "policy demander"—consistent with the group-centered theory of political parties. Challenging the notion that elected officials and party officers are the only key players, this body of theory approaches parties as coalitions comprising a broader range of more diverse actors (Cohen et al., 2008; Karol, 2009; Bawn et al., 2012). Cohen et al. (2008) propose that "Parties should not be defined in terms of leadership

structure. They should be understood as [...] a coalition of interest groups, social group leaders, activists, and other “policy demanders” working to gain control of government on behalf of their own goals” (6). In this interest-group-centered theory of parties, officeholders remain major role players in elections, but they influence nominations in different ways. They coordinate during the “invisible primary,” sorting through candidates ahead of primary season, building coalitions behind a chosen candidate, and encouraging voters to rally behind him or her. Also differing is the goal these officeholders set for themselves, which in the group-centered theory of parties is to “achieve the intense policy demands of their constituent groups” (36).

### **Argument and methodology**

Using a historical lens, I examine CTR programs’ interaction with the Republican Party from the syndication of *The Rush Limbaugh Show* in 1988 to the campaign for the 2010 midterm elections, a high-profile moment of cooperation between CTR programs and a protest movement aiming to defeat moderate Republicans and force the GOP to adopt a harder political line. Besides Limbaugh, I focus on *The Sean Hannity Show* and *The Laura Ingraham Show*, two of the top-ranking programs during the period (Talkers Magazine, 2010) and the most representative of the sector of nationally syndicated CTR programming.

As decisions about group-party relations are usually made at the elite level (Witko, 2009, 215), I conceptualize CTR programs’ status as role players in the Republican coalition in terms of their position with respect to prominent office holders or candidates, working off the premise that “relationships between parties and interests result from complicated processes rather than simple attempts at influence or control by either organization” (Witko, 2009, 218). Employing qualitative analysis and relying on a variety of press sources, trade publications, available episodes of the shows, but also semi-directed interviews with Tony Blankley—Press Secretary to

former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich—and Taylor Gross—George W. Bush’s White House Radio Director—I assess the relation between CTR programs and the Republican Party, tracking any form of contact and interaction between hosts and party officials during both high- and low-profile moments of the GOP’s history throughout the period, such as campaigns, elections, political crises, or celebratory events. I argue that CTR operated as an interest group in its own right and engaged in ideological but pragmatic relations with GOP officials, negotiating a delicate position within the Republican coalition between cheerleader and watchdog and always favoring its own interests over those of the coalition. First, I conceptualize the status of CTR programs as interest group; second, I discuss the framework for analyzing CTR’s relations with Republican officials; and third, I identify and examine four phases in the history of CTR programs. In conclusion, I propose a model of CTR-GOP relations throughout the period.

### **Conceptualizing CTR programs as conservative interest group**

Though some nuances exist across studies, an interest group is defined as (1) an association of individuals whose goal is to (2) articulate specific policy demands and (3) work actively towards their implementation, and (4) that is large enough to influence the political process (Cohen et al., 2008, 30; Karol, 2009, 9; Thomas, 2001, 7). Interest groups comprise different kinds of entities, ranging from advocacy groups focusing on one single issue or a subset of related issues (i.e. reproductive justice, gun ownership, traditional values) to broad-based organizations (i.e. pro-business organizations, labor unions) (Thomas, 2001, 8). Political parties’ and interest groups’ respective goals are often at odds with each other (Berry and Wilcox, 2018, 82) because interest groups are “policy maximizers,” promoting and seeking the implementation of a narrow range of issues, while parties are “vote maximizers,” whose goal is to secure the election of the candidates they support. While they operate within broad and firmly

established political coalitions based on converging interests, they usually prioritize their own agenda over that of the coalition.

Based on this definition, I propose that CTR programs operate as members of the Republican coalition in the same way as traditional policy demanders, though they differ from them in many regards and as such represent a unique type of interest group. They are identical to traditional interest groups in four main respects: (1) they bring together a large group of like-minded, demographically homogeneous, and ideologically consistent individuals whom they represent (Cappella et al., 1996, 14; Hollander, 1999, 240-242), (2) they articulate policy demands and at times advocate for—or oppose—particular policy agendas (Davis, 1997, 326; Barker, 1998a; Mort, 2012), (3) they work towards influencing political outcomes (Barker, 1998a; Hall & Cappella, 2002; Donovan, 2008; Stephenson, 2010), and (4) they have a large enough audience to be influential (Davis, 1997, 328; Barker, 1998a, 83). In addition, they (5) enjoy a certain degree of ideological affinity with one of the two major parties (Davis, 1997, 324; Pfau et al., 1998, 740; Lee & Cappella, 2001, 386; Bennett, 2002a, 16; Rosenwald, 2019) and (6) have to work to find revenues to ensure their financial survival independently of the party they seek to associate with.

However, CTR programs also differ from traditional interest groups in several respects. First, when the latter primarily aim to influence policy agendas at various levels of government, the former primarily aim to ensure their financial viability, by securing the highest possible ratings and attract advertising revenue (Berry & Sobieraj, 2011; Rosenwald, 2019, 4-5)—influencing the GOP’s policy and political agendas is only a secondary goal. While CTR programs’ economic and political interests are intertwined, by essence, economic interests supersede political interests. As profitable business ventures, CTR programs enjoy much greater financial independence than traditional interest groups—which depend on donations and fundraising operations for their livelihood (Wilson, 1990, 52)—and can articulate their contentions at no financial cost. In

addition, CTR programs' financial livelihood is independent from their capacity to influence electoral politics. Second, as CTR programs' constituent group are brought together through the act of listening to the radio, CTR programs represent a kind of "open interest group", as opposed to traditional ones, which have stricter conditions of membership (Yoho, 1998, 237). Third, just as CTR programs' political aim is secondary, their audience does not engage in the act of listening primarily to have their interest and ideas translated into actual policy, but to receive validation for their beliefs and to experience the satisfaction of seeing them represented and given visibility, thereby participating in an imagined community of like-minded fellow conservative listeners. Last, as "personalized programs", CTR shows are focused primarily on promoting and mediating the ideas and preferred policy positions of the host (Davis, 1997 ; Mort, 2020), and not so much on producing expertise per se. In that respect, Limbaugh considers that he is "nothing but a regurgitation of what [...] original thinkers have labored all their lives to produce" (Bowman, 1993, 48). Overall, the personality of the host is as important, if not more, as the ideas he or she champions. Lastly, and more importantly, the community that coalesces through the act of listening only becomes an interest group when the host engages with the political process. In other words, CTR programs' status as interest group is activated through the host's interaction with Republican officials. In summary, CTR programs can therefore be defined as loosely structured but not unorganized for-profit interest groups enjoying great financial independence, with looser conditions of membership but clearly delineated boundaries, primarily geared towards securing revenue by defending the conservative orthodoxy and working to influence policy outcomes as a secondary goal.



### **Analysis framework of CTR programs' relations with the Republican coalition**

Thomas (2001) provides a preliminary typology of four models of group-party proximity, organized along a continuum from “integration” to “conflict.” Particularly relevant to this study are the “Cooperation/Ideological Model” and the “Separation/Pragmatic Involvement Model” (20), the most typical model of group-party interaction in the US (79). In the first model, interest groups relate with a political party through a “strong connection” based on ideological affinity and identical policy goals, but it is not a relation of formal integration. In the second model, interest groups interact with a party on a nonideological basis and have no fixed partisan attachment. In this model, “involvement with a party occurs on an ad hoc basis determined largely by political pragmatism” (20).

CTR programs' relations with the GOP elite seem to borrow both from the ideological and pragmatic models of Thomas's typology of party-group interaction (Thomas, 2001, 20). As they negotiate a delicate position between policy demander and watchdog within the Republican coalition, CTR programs engage in a form of ideological but pragmatic relation with the Republican elite, namely one that is based on ideological affinity—and sometimes identical policy goals—and while it can be strong at times, is neither systematic nor unconditional but formed on an ad hoc basis as a function of political cycles. Regarding the modes of interaction proper, Thomas (2001) proposes that group-party interaction typically happens in three different ways: (1) electoral cooperation, with groups providing financial and nonfinancial resources to parties and candidates, (2) policy development and promotion, particularly ahead of elections or once the party is in power, (3) philosophical affinity (92-93). In the following sections, I revisit the history of CTR to determine to what extent and in what ways these three parameters shape the programs' relations with the Republican Party.

### **Expansion phase (1988-1992): forging the partnership with the Republican Party**

Following its national syndication on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1988, *The Rush Limbaugh Show* experienced almost immediate success and was emulated by whole swaths of CTR programs in local markets, thereby opening the expansion phase of the genre. While he had initially operated at the margin of the Republican coalition, engaging in limited interaction with leaders and only having sporadic contacts them in 1990 and 1991, Limbaugh was officially inducted in 1992, when he established himself as a primary political, particularly in the presidential primaries.

From the very start of his show, Limbaugh displayed strong philosophical affinity with Republican officials, particularly through his staunch defense of Ronald Reagan's legacy. Since he left office, Reagan has indeed been a totemic figure for GOP leaders, an "era-defining figure [...] whose influence on the political culture was as important as what [he] did in office" (Courtwright, 2010, 151) and whose presidency is invoked as the epitome of a bygone conservative golden age. So much so that, prior to Trump, the policy positions of Republican candidates and elected officials would be assessed in terms of how they measured up to Reagan's own accomplishments and pronouncements, each going to great lengths "to stake out their case as true heir to the political legacy of the man [...]" (Bunch, 2009, 9). CTR hosts, and Limbaugh most notably, have played an active role in perpetuating the mythology surrounding the 40<sup>th</sup> president and his presidency, acting as

custodians of Reagan conservatism and of a specific account of the Reagan legacy [...]. Their archived memory of the Reagan years provides conservatives with a standard to which to aspire, a touchstone against which to assess Republican leaders, and a way to cast conservatism as a philosophy vindicated in practice" (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, 67).

Particularly salient in this narrative is the notion that Reagan's supply-side economics revived the US economy and brought about an era of unparalleled prosperity, where industry and personal work ethics were rewarded by material security. Under such circumstances, poverty can only be a

matter of personal choice, a notion that was reflected in Reagan's lack of response to rampant homelessness and flat out refusal to recognize the exogenous causes of poverty (Moser Jones, 2015).

As he described a picture of homeless people living under a beam bridge in Reno, Nevada, in the spring of 1990, Limbaugh argued that "there is no starvation in this country", using the urine-filled bottles, "bags of defecation," and "remnants of meals gone by" visible in the picture as evidence that even the homeless can feed themselves in the USA. At worse, Limbaugh concluded, homeless people die of cirrhosis. To the news anchor's forceful assertion that this condition was significantly compounded by starvation and malnutrition, the host sarcastically retorted, "which is Reagan's economic policies to blame?" (Limbaugh, 1990). Through this rhetorical question, Limbaugh absolves Reagan of any responsibility in the homelessness crisis and shifts the blame away from the structural flaws of the US economic system to the individuals themselves, whose predicament results from flawed personal ethics. As he indefatigably worked to vindicate the Reagan legacy, Limbaugh promoted a narrative that had, up until Trump's emergence as a contender for the Republican nomination, served as a compass for contemporary Republican leaders. This proved particularly crucial in the spring of 1990, a time when George H.W. Bush was about to break a central campaign promise and violate one of the fundamental tenets of Reaganism by consenting to a tax increase for the fiscal year 1991 (Wilentz, 2008, 308).

The alliance between CTR programs and the Republican elite was forged during the 1992 Republican primaries. Facing a primary challenge by conservative commentator Pat Buchanan—who garnered 37% of the vote during the New Hampshire primary—an embattled Bush turned to movement conservatives to jump start his lackluster reelection campaign (Barilleaux & Rozell, 1992, 41). In the spring of 1992, senior adviser to Bush's 1988 presidential campaign Rogers Ailes, introduced the President to Limbaugh (Chafets, 2010, 81), with whom he was working on

what was to become the TV version of his show. While Bush and Limbaugh would enjoy a personal relationship based on mutual respect and affection (Colford, 1993, 168), they were at odds politically, with Bush's realism and moderation striking a sharp contrast with Limbaugh's ideological orthodoxy and no-holds-barred approach to politics.

The alliance between an initially unenthusiastic Limbaugh and a president in need of support from the conservative base was sealed on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, when Limbaugh was invited to dinner and a sleepover at the White House. The conservative radio host, who had endorsed Buchanan as "an affirmation of continued loyalty to Reaganism" (Seib, 1993, 87), would thenceforth support the Republican ticket. Vice-President Dan Quayle was invited on *Limbaugh* the following month (July 7<sup>th</sup>), and Bush himself made a stop at Limbaugh's ABC radio studio in New York after addressing the United Nations on September 21<sup>st</sup>. While Quayle's exchange with Limbaugh is remembered for the Vice President's memorable slip of the tongue—he used the word "trick" instead of "challenge" to describe the difficult task of making the case for a second term (Wines, 1992)—Bush's appearance on the show was a success. Limbaugh's question to Bush on Bill Clinton's record of draft-evasion during the Vietnam war provided the president with an opportunity to question his opponent's character, an issue which garnered headlines the following day (Colford, 1993, 207-208). Bush's exchange with Limbaugh proved mutually beneficial: not only did it enable the president to burnish his conservative credentials by stressing the importance a Commander-in-chief's military record and energize the Republican base, it also legitimized Limbaugh as an effective ally of the president and acknowledged him as a Republican role-player. This electoral cooperation also involved Limbaugh opening for Bush at a rally in Madison, New Jersey on Election Day, with a speech in which he pitted the president's moral strength against Clinton's shady character and which he concluded by declaring that Bush is "a fine man, he's a decent man" (PBS Frontline, 1995). Later that day Limbaugh welcomed the

president on the air for six minutes, offering him one last opportunity to “drill that home to the undecided voters in America, that truth, trust, and character are relevant (Colford, 1993, 211).

While Limbaugh had rallied the president, he nonetheless remained a critical observer. Worried that he might be reluctant to go toe to toe with Clinton, Limbaugh entreated a rhetorically cautious Bush to switch to a more aggressive mode in an October 15<sup>th</sup> *New York Times* editorial. “President Bush needs to cut through the noise,” Limbaugh argued, “so that his strong message will connect with the public. To do this, he must marshal his passion, his energy, his conviction, his confidence. [...] It is time for the President to [...] take off the gloves” (Limbaugh, 1992). Such an entreaty was a warning that the conservative base might waver in its support should Bush fail to go on the offensive, in much the same way as his initial support to Buchanan was meant as an “effort to send the President a message. The Republican Party and George Bush got in trouble when they moved to the left [...]. He let down people who elected him” (Carlson, 1992).

### **Golden Age (1992-1996): conservative talk radio hosts and GOP officials as “Republican Tact Team”**

Bush’s defeat to Clinton in November and the ensuing Republican leadership vacancy opened the Golden Age of CTR programs, with Limbaugh and his counterparts in local markets *de facto* taking the helm of the party, later to enter a partnership with congressional Republicans ahead of the 1994 midterm elections. This phase stretched to 1996, a year when Senator Bob Dole emerged as the leading figure of the GOP. As Dole tried to shed the party’s “revanchist” image after three years of Gingrich leadership, CTR programs’ partnership with the GOP started to erode.

After the 1992 defeat, Limbaugh played a crucial role in lifting up the spirits of devastated Republicans, offering comfort and hope to despondent GOP supporters that conservative ideas

would eventually prevail. Among them was Bush's Deputy Campaign Director Mary Matalin, who testifies to Limbaugh's importance in the early months of the Clinton presidency when "all we had to hold us together was Rush Limbaugh. He was the only voice, in that huge defeat, in the face of the arrogance of the Clintonese just rushing into town, that really kept us collected" (PBS Frontline, 1995).

Former White House staffers were not alone in recognizing Limbaugh as the standard bearer of the Republican cause: Reagan himself acknowledged him as such. In a letter dated December 1992, he thanked the host for his visible and active commitment to conservative principles, noting that "now that I've retired from active politics, I don't mind that you've become the number one voice for conservatism in our country [...]. Keep up the good work. America needs to hear 'the way things ought to be'" (Seib, 1993, 114). Most strikingly, by handing the conservative torch over to Limbaugh, Reagan signaled unambiguously that he had no heir in the Republican political establishment, and that the leadership of the conservative movement was to be found outside the GOP. These different acknowledgements seem to suggest that, from Bush's defeat to the emergence of Gingrich as a uniting figure, Limbaugh was *de facto* in charge of the Republican interregnum, being featured on the cover of *National Review*'s September 1993 issue, which discussed his status as "leader of the opposition." Texas Senator Phil Gramm confessed that "there are many days when I think he's doing a lot more good than the Republicans in the Senate are doing" (Bowman, 1993, 44).

If Senate Republicans' seemed to wobble in their dedication to conservative principles, Gingrich was aggressively making the case of congressional Republicans to the public, his team having established contacts with CTR programs at the very beginning of the 1990s. "By 92 and into early 93," Blankley confirms, "we were much more systematically accumulating records and making contact and trying to have [talk radio programs] help drive the news to the point where

mainstream media will start covering it” (Blankley, 2010). Emblematic of Republican officials’ cooperation with CTR programs was the concerted effort to derail the Lobby Reform Disclosure bill, designed to prevent elected officials from accepting gifts and perks from lobbyists, who would henceforth be required to register with Congress and fully disclose the range of their activities (*New York Times*, 1994). Sponsored by Texas Representative John W. Bryant as “one of the best bipartisan efforts I have ever been involved in” (Bryant, 2009), the bill was supposed to sail through both chambers. When Gingrich realized that it would give Democrats political capital, he and the Republican Minority decided to block the bill. “At the last minute,” Bryant recalls, “Gingrich [...] went on the floor of the house late in the evening and got special order time and made a speech condemning it [...]. And the next morning, 500 talk show hosts around the country were parroting a list of talking points that had been provided to them by him! Including Limbaugh!” (Bryant, 2009). Among such talking points were the outlandish claims that ordinary citizens would have to register as lobbyists if they tithed to their church and might end up in jail if they failed to do so (Drew, 1994). While Limbaugh had initially seen some merits to the bill, he rallied congressional Republicans in their effort and “acknowledged that he rushed onto the air to mock part of it after receiving a faxed critique from Gingrich” (Drew, 1994).

Contacts with CTR programs proved particularly useful as the 1994 midterms started looming into view. Ahead of the elections, congressional Republicans adopted the *Contract with America*, a series of 10 policy positions “that epitomized antigovernment conservatism” (Mickelthwait & Wooldridge, 2004, 116). Among others, the *Contract* was designed to substantially reshape the federal welfare apparatus, overhaul social security programs, enshrine the necessity of a balanced budget and the procedural mechanisms to raise taxes in the constitution, and increase the defense budget (Meyer, 2015, 68-71). Departing from the usual “all-politics-is-local” paradigm of running multiple local campaigns, Gingrich’s team decided to

give the election a national scope by having congressional candidates run on a common platform. Therefore, as a conservative media with a national audience of 20 million weekly listeners, *The Rush Limbaugh* was the ideal outlet to promote their message.

CTR was thus identified as medium likely to help set the agenda in a way that would benefit Republicans. His way to conceive politics aligning more closely with Gingrich's, Limbaugh enthusiastically engaged in electoral cooperation with House Republicans. As part of this effort to help nationalize the election, he launched "Operation Restore Democracy", as a way to keep conservative voters' spirits up, mobilize them, and influence the outcome of the election. The day after the Republican victory, Limbaugh sounded energized and enthusiastic as he opened his show: "This is a special edition of the Rush Limbaugh program: 'America the way it ought to be!' [...]. The agenda for the remaining two years of this Administration will not be set by this Administration if the voice of the people is listened to" (Limbaugh, 1995, 00:06:52). On December 10<sup>th</sup>, during a three-day training retreat for Republican freshmen in Baltimore, Maryland, he was honored by the new majority for aggressively promoting the *Contract*, even "before there was one," in the words of Karl Rove (Chafets, 2010, 77). As a sizable number of Republican were CTR listeners, former Minnesota Representative and Gingrich long-time ally Vin Webber declared that "those are the people that elected the new Congress, that's why this is the *Limbaugh Congress!*" (PBS Frontline, 1995).

Beyond *Limbaugh*, a whole swath of other syndicated and local CTR programs were acknowledged as allies of the new majority and welcomed to Capitol Hill. As radio commentators, they were not credentialed as journalists and were therefore barred from using the press rooms. Upon the inauguration of the 104<sup>th</sup> congress on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1995, Gingrich invited CTR hosts to air live from the Capitol during the first "Capitol Hill Talk Radio Row," providing them with their own room; the operation was repeated several times during the first 100 days of



the Contract with America. “They literally came to town and we had rows of them [...],” Blankley recalls, “our congressmen would go up and down the rows and do interviews with their hometown talk radio station. [...] We had over a hundred and we did that a number of times. So, we were in active coordination with them” (Blankley, 2010). Republicans’ historical recapture of the House therefore firmly sealed CTR programs’ electoral cooperation with the GOP elite, until the moment Dole had a lock on the Republican nomination in the spring of 1996.

### **Consolidation and stagnation (1996-2005)**

While the relationship had thrived during the first two years of the new Republican majority, it slowly eroded from the mid-1996 onwards, opening a phase of consolidation and stagnation for CTR programs which lasted to the fall of 2005, when the Bush administration started facing various domestic and foreign policy scandals, at the same time that top CTR programs experienced a significant drop in ratings.

CTR programs, and political talk radio more generally, did not play as significant a part in the 1996 presidential election as it did in the 1994 midterms, with the two major candidates using the mainstream news media to get their message across (Bennett, 2002b, 18). Besides, even though he followed the conservative script meticulously (Courtwright, 2010, 240), Republican candidate Bob Dole, a “Gerald Ford-style Midwestern stalwart” (Kabaservice, 2012, 278), worked to disassociate himself and the party from Gingrich’s brand of politics. As such, he did not enjoy—or seek to have—a particular relationship with CTR. However, House Republicans’ loyalty remained intact: when Limbaugh officially announced that he was affected by profound deafness five years later, the Republican congress paid him tribute for his role in the 1994 landslide victory. Indiana Representative Mike Pence, who had been elected in 1994, declared that “after Ronald Reagan left the national stage in 1988 and many of us conservatives were

searching for a voice and for over 20 million Americans, that voice was and is Rush Limbaugh” (Congressional Records, 2001).

CTR-GOP relations were revived, though not to the same level of intensity and closeness, ahead of the 2000 primary elections, in which Bush immediately became Limbaugh’s favorite. The two men had enjoyed a personal relationship since the early 1990s, and when Bush announced his presidential bid in 1999, Limbaugh threw his support behind him against rival John McCain, rallying behind his Reagan-style conservatism and small government agenda, notably his plan to cut taxes; later, the 9/11 attacks made Limbaugh a stalwart supporter of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Contrary to the campaigns that unfolded between 1992 and 1996, from the 2000 presidential campaign onwards, nationally syndicated CTR programs did not feature prominently in the GOP’s communication strategy, as “President Bush [...] made targeting local news central to his media relations strategy and a top priority throughout his tenure” (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2008, 611).

In stark contrast with congressional Republicans’ nationalization of the 1994 midterm elections, in 2000, the Bush campaign devised a communication strategy tailoring the candidate’s message in a way that aligned with issues relevant to local communities. Bush White House Radio Director Taylor Gross explains this strategy as follows: “We would, on a daily basis, figure out whatever the policies or agendas [...], how to dissect those down into what it meant for you locally, what it meant for you as a state, and then identify the mediums—not just the mediums but the shows, the vehicles for radio, local TV, local newspaper, and go out and communicate those to those constituents and those audiences” (Gross, 2010). Returning to the “all-politics-is-local” paradigm meant that, as national shows conveying the same message across the country in a uniform way, nationally syndicated CTR programs were not as relevant to the GOP’s strategy during the 2000 and 2004 cycles as they had been in 1992 and 1994.

Several factors made 2000 different from 1994. First, throughout the Bush presidency, Republicans controlled both houses, except between May 2001 and January 2003, when Democrats had a short majority in the Senate after Jim Jeffords from Vermont became an Independent and caucused with them (Kabaservice, 2001, 384). Second, contrary to 1994, CTR was not the only conservative media with a large national audience. As its ratings soared and its viewership became more conservative from 2002 onwards (Morris, 2006, 65), Fox News became a reliable ally of the Bush presidency. While CTR programs did not disappear from the media strategy of the executive, they simply were not the primary focus of the administration's media strategy, as the White House packaged its message differently across local communities and could rely on a more diverse mix of national conservative media. Third, starting in the spring of 2001, Limbaugh faced the competition of a new generation of nationally syndicated CTR programs (Mort, 2012). As the field of CTR programs became more crowded and diverse, hosts were forced to compete directly against each other for access. Therefore, while in the 1990s, the GOP leadership courted CTR hosts to enroll them in their effort, the situation was reversed in the years 2000s. "In 2000, [...] we were in power", Gross recounts. "We had it. Both houses of Congress, the Presidency, so what's left for these guys on the radio? So the problem [...] was that everyone was competing [...]. And I had, on more than one occasion, a knock-down, drag-out argument with Sean Hannity on the phone all the time because he would get furious" (Gross, 2010).

Limbaugh and the newly syndicated CTR programs nonetheless acted as almost unswerving Republican allies during Bush's two terms. Despite a very localized media strategy, the Bush administration maintained strategic contacts with national and CTR hosts, which included a blend of official and informal meetings, courtesy phone calls, and invitations to air programs from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Throughout the Bush presidency, the White House invited national and

local CTR hosts to participate in Talk Radio Days during high-stakes political moments—ahead of the 2002 midterm elections (October 30<sup>th</sup>) or the day after the 2004 State of the Union Address (January 21<sup>st</sup>) for instance. Bush’s relationship with Limbaugh was also nurtured through informal contacts, such as the Bush family’s surprise call to *Limbaugh* on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the program on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008, or the informal party that Bush threw at the White House for Limbaugh’s 58<sup>th</sup> birthday in January 2009 (Chafets, 2010, 4).

CTR programs also notably teamed up with the administration and engaged in damage control whenever it was plagued with scandal, particularly over the management of its anti-terrorism operations. When in 2004 former NSC Special Advisor Richard Clarke indicted the Bush administration of its lack of responsiveness to mounting terrorist threats in the period preceding 9/11, Vice-President Dick Cheney participated in a telephone interview with Limbaugh on March 22<sup>nd</sup> to preemptively rebut Clark’s allegations. Later that year, Limbaugh entered the fray to protect the administration from the fallout of a controversy around pictures of US soldiers physically abusing Iraqi inmates at the Abu Ghraib prison. Ahead of Bush’s May 7<sup>th</sup> statement that “the actions of the people in that prison do not reflect the nature of the men and women who wear our uniforms” (CNN, 2004), Limbaugh took to the airwaves to argue that “these people that did this so-called torture may, in fact, be the rotten apples of the good-guy group,” thereby minimizing the importance of such acts and tactically framing the issue in a way designed to prepare the reception of the administration’s line of defense by his audience (Limbaugh, 2004).

During the following summer, CTR shows were instrumental in an effort spearheaded by the so-called “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” (SBVT) to discredit Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, a Vietnam veteran (Ball, 2005; Reyes, 2006; Dionisopoulos, 2009). In a blizzard of TV ads aired throughout the month of August, the group questioned Kerry’s war record and impugned his character (Dionisopoulos, 2009, 494). Reprising the themes of the book *Unfit for*

*Command: Swift Boat Veterans Speak Out Against John Kerry* published on July 24<sup>th</sup> (O’Neil & Corsi, 2004), SBVT claimed that Kerry had usurped his Purple Ribbon, had acted in a cowardly manner on the battlefield, and upon returning to the US, had vilified the military. Starting concomitantly with the end of the Democratic National Convention on July 29<sup>th</sup>, CTR shows and *The Washington Times* engaged in a concerted effort to give credence to SBVT’s counternarrative, with Laura Ingraham, Sean Hannity, and Michael Savage dedicating a considerable amount of airtime to the story (*Swift Veterans and POWs for Truth*, 08/07/2004; 10/24/2004) and the *Times* reviewing the book in an August 10<sup>th</sup> editorial, the “perfect content for talk radio” (Blankley, 2010). While SBVT’s effort had initially almost gone under the radar of both the mainstream news media and the Kerry campaign, the story started getting actual traction after *The New York Times* covered Kerry’s public rebuttal of the accusations on August 19<sup>th</sup>. From that moment on, SBVT’s challenges to his war record and integrity turned into a controversy that he would not be able to put to rest for a whole two weeks, during which mainstream news media coverage “plac[ed] the counter-narrative on an equal plane with the dominant story that had been relatively unchallenged for over 3 decades” (Dionisopoulos, 2009, 497). The SBVT controversy provides a case in point of the intermedia agenda setting function of CTR programs, that is, the way it interplays with the mainstream news media ecology and influences its agenda (Harder et al., 2017). It testifies to their capacity to steer the agenda of the legacy news media ecology in a way that influences the national conversation to the GOP’s benefit.

### **Crisis and regeneration (2005-2010)**

Stretching from fall 2005 to late 2010, the fourth phase covers the end of Bush's first term, his second term, and the first two years of Barack Obama’s presidency. The dramatic challenges

that the Bush administration faced abroad and at home emerged concomitantly with a significant decrease in the ratings of the top programs, ushering a phase of crisis. CTR programs would later regain vitality in the spring of 2007 as the primary elections were approaching to thrive again during the campaign for the 2010 midterm elections.

Bush's second term put CTR program's relation with the GOP leadership to the test, particularly after the episode of hurricane Katrina in late August 2005. After 10 years of Republican control of the legislative and more than four years of unified government, reconciling their role as proponents of the government's agenda with their traditional antiestablishment stance proved a daunting task. Their position became even more untenable as the administration faced mounting challenges on every front. Not only did it receive intense criticism for the way it handled the aftermaths of Hurricane Katrina, it was increasingly bogged down in the Iraqi quagmire, with a rising civilian death toll and intensifying interethnic tensions between Shiites and Sunnis (Wilentz, 2008, 448). The difficulties of the administration later culminated with the scandal over inappropriate exchanges of text messages between moral conservative Florida Representative Mark Foley and congressional pages, resulting in Foley's subsequent resignation and coming out as a gay man (449).

The crisis caused some CTR hosts to reconsider their position with regards to the Republican Party. Ingraham and Savage tended to distance themselves from the administration and questioned the Republicans' capacity to live up to conservative principles. On her show, Ingraham expressed skepticism as to the GOP's dedication to conservative values: "You have to ask yourself, the people who are in positions of power now in the Republican Party, are they able to credibly articulate the conservative agenda to the American people—to rally the base, to rally the country?" (Rutenberg, 2006). A moral conservative and culture warrior (Mort, 2012, 494-495), Ingraham called into question the GOP's ability to represent the base of conservative

Christians. As it deployed a localized communication strategy, the Bush Administration had certainly been too presumptuous in assuming that CTR hosts would show unswerving support. While stopping short of admitting that the White House took nationally syndicated programs for granted, Gross acknowledges that “one of our faults was that we over-assumed that they would always be with us on every little thing” (Gross, 2010). Halfway through his second term, as the lingering war in Iraq and the poor management of hurricane Katrina had eroded the president’s standing irreparably, an embattled Bush tried to rekindle his relationship with CTR programs. On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006, he invited a group of hosts to the Oval Office to discuss the stakes of the upcoming midterm elections ; a week later, a selection of CTR programs were invited to broadcast from the White House. As for Cheney, while he had participated in only one telephone interview with a CTR host prior to 2006, he gave six of these interviews in 2006, and two in 2007 and 2008 respectively (George W. Bush White House Archives).

When in late 2005 some CTR voices expressed misgivings about the executive, Limbaugh and Hannity closed ranks with the administration and worked towards insulating it from criticism by opening fire on dissenters within the GOP, in an attempt to bring them back into the fold. In accordance with the Administration’s “little interest in compromise or bipartisanship” (Kabaservice, 2012, 383), they engaged in a concerted effort against so-called “Republican-in-Name-Only” or RINOs, namely moderate Republicans critical of the administration or unafraid to cross the GOP leadership. The term was popularized by Club for Growth’s Stephen Moore in his effort to support orthodox fiscal conservatives against centrists and was later seized upon by the National Federation of Republican Assemblies in late 2006 with the creation of “RINO Hunters Clubs” (Brooks, 2006). Chief among CTR’s preferred “RINOs” was Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska who, on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005, declared that “the White House is completely disconnected from reality [and] the reality is that we’re losing in Iraq” (Whitelaw, 2005). A

moderate inclined to stake out positions that contrasted with those of the administration, Hagel was the focus of targeted pressure from the White House, often in tandem with CTR programs. Gross recalls his effort to force Hagel to fall in line: “Nebraska Republicans are not [...] New England Republicans. They’re pretty Middle America, red-white-and-blue type folks. Some of the things that Hagel would do really kind of ran contrary to this, and we would try to target Nebraska radio stations to do that. And those times he would feel the pressure and would back down” (Gross, 2010).

In January 2007, Hagel co-sponsored a non-binding resolution against Bush’s plan to send an extra 20,000 troops to Iraq, stating that “the situation in Iraq is damaging the standing, influence, and interests of the United States in Iraq, the Middle East, and around the world” (New York Times, 2007). Reacting to the introduction of the resolution, Limbaugh reviled the senator on his program: “By the way, we had a caller call, couldn’t stay on the air, got a new name for Senator Hagel in Nebraska. We got General Petraeus, and we got Senator Betrayus. New name for Senator Hagel” (Levy & Waltzer, 2007).

Following Obama’s victory in November 2008, Limbaugh and his colleagues would *de facto* assume the Republican leadership a second time. In a context very similar to the two years succeeding George H. W. Bush’s defeat, CTR programs reprised their role as Republican regents, working to maintain the cohesion of a party deprived of a unifying figure. Speaking in late 2009, Blankley stated: “Certainly, in the period from August 2005—Katrina—in the Bush presidency to today [2009], talk radio has been *the* dominant force. And it is collectively, but Rush is just a huge piece of that collective. It’s hard to imagine there would be this magnitude or this coherence of the same force without Rush” (Blankley, 2010). In an explicit repudiation of Bush, Blankley testifies to CTR’s unifying function in times when the Republican party is lacking a leader, or its actual leader is ineffective.



RINOs remained CTR's preferred target into the first years of the Obama presidency, particularly ahead of the 2010 midterm elections. In an attempt to revive the spirit of 1980 and 1994—two moments when Republicans faced a unified Democratic government—and energize the conservative base, Hannity equated the Obama presidency with the late Jimmy Carter and early Clinton years: “We, conservatives, need to take back our party. Now that means that we’re going to oppose some Republicans, RINOS—“Republicans In Name Only”—that means we are going to support the conservative candidate in individual races” (Hannity, 2010b, 01:15:57). Reiterating the victories of 1980 and 1994 meant engaging in intense vetting of candidates for office, by winnowing out centrists and supporting those living up to the canons of conservatism. Hannity was won over by Rubio, “a rock star and a real conservative Reaganite” (Hannity, 2010a, 00:52:15), and enthusiastically backed Michelle Bachmann, Eric Cantor, Mike Pence, and Paul Ryan, who “have fought hard night and day against Obamacare, Cap and Tax, the stimulus, [...] are standing for conservative principles, [and are] advancing the conservative movement” (Hannity, 2010c, 00:47:20). In Paul Ryan, Ingraham saw the future of a conservative GOP, describing him as “a bright light in the Republican Party [...], [with] a substantive, forward-looking approach” (Ingraham, 2010, 01:37:34). As exemplified by the 1994 and 2010 midterm elections, CTR programs tend to engage in electoral cooperation with the Republican officials particularly when they are going up against a Democratic president and are attempting to regain control of the legislative branch, that is, when they foster dissensus from, rather than consensus with, the party in power.

## **Conclusion**

CTR programs' relations with Republican officials represent a unique partnership between a perspectival media and a political party. Depending on political cycles and contexts, such

relations appear to be either *mutualistic* or *dysfunctional*. They are mutualistic when the interests of officials converge with those of CTR programs; in this case, power relations are equal, though not necessarily uncontentious. When the relations are mutualistic, they are either *affirmatory* or *critical*; in either case, CTR hosts converge with Republican officials towards reinforcing the core of the coalition. When CTR-GOP relations are *affirmatory*, both parties engage in discursive convergence and allyship, working in tandem—concertedly or autonomously—to advance the Republican agenda, either by effecting positive policy and political change or by undermining Democrats. Discursive convergence—much akin to Thomas (2001)’s “philosophical affinity”—is visible primarily in the part that CTR programs play as keepers of the canons of modern conservatism, which Republicans have come to fully embrace since the beginning of the Reagan presidency. Allyship with the GOP is sealed rhetorically and performatively through public acknowledgements and acts of mutual support and courtship; it materializes in efforts to affect the political process in ways that benefit the Republican Party, through CTR hosts’ support of candidates in or running for office and opposition to Democratic leaders and initiatives. In that respect, CTR programs wield significant mobilizing power and are in a position to play a marginal but decisive role in election by pushing candidates over the hump, like in the 1994 midterms (Bolce and Di Maggio, 1996, 461).

The stance of CTR hosts with respect to the elite appears to become *critical* when they engage in “constructive criticism” of Republican leaders to hold them up to the standards of conservatism. It takes the form of watchdog activities such as criticism of the leadership’s policy positions, efforts to hold the leadership accountable, and vetting of candidates for office. When relations are critical, power relations are unequal, though not necessarily contentious.

The CTR-GOP partnership should not be considered to be systematic, as relations appear to become *dysfunctional* at times when the respective interests of GOP officials and CTR programs

diverge from each other. When relations are dysfunctional, they are either *distal* or *reversed*; in either case, CTR host and the Republican are focused on serving their respective interests. The relation is *distal* when Republican officials choose to distance themselves from CTR programs, which in turn factor less in the leadership's media strategy, as exemplified by George W. Bush's lack of real interest in nurturing his relationship with CTR hosts until he actually needed their support for the 2006 midterms. Limbaugh's tandem with Gingrich was possible because the two men shares the same view on what the Republican Party's agenda and strategy should be, but also because the general political context offered a window of opportunity. The relation is *reversed* when the GOP is in a state of crisis and CTR programs de facto assume the leadership of the Republican coalition and the conservative movement.

In sum, relations between CTR programs and the Republican elite can be best defined in terms of temporary but recurring moments of discursive, ideological, and agenda convergence. Though mutualistic, this relation fluctuated throughout the two decades as CTR programs acted as willful though autonomous allies of the GOP elite, working in tandem with Republican officials when deeming it consistent with their own views and interests, but without ever being subservient to them or accepting to be instrumentalized.

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