

# The Micropolitics of Legitimacy: Political Positioning and Journalistic Scrutiny at the Boundary of the Mainstream

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## Abstract

*When journalists elicit opinion and policy pronouncements from politicians, this engages a two-dimensional struggle over (1) where the politician stands on the issue in question and (2) the legitimacy of that position. Using data drawn from broadcast news interviews and news conferences, this paper anatomizes the key features of political positioning questions and their responses, and documents a tension surrounding relatively marginal or extreme views that tend to be treated cautiously by politicians but are pursued vigorously by journalists. The findings shed light on how politicians balance appeals to centrist and partisan viewers, how journalists police the boundaries of mainstream politics, and how both parties contribute to a process of legitimation that enacts and at times modifies the parameters of the sociopolitical mainstream.*

## Keywords

interaction, politics, journalism, legitimacy, news interviews, news conferences, conversation analysis

Politicians take positions. They do not always do so willingly or with absolute clarity, but the association of politicians with identifiable positions on salient issue and policy debates is central to processes ranging from social movements and political campaigns to negotiations within and between governments.

This study examines the public act of political position-taking as it emerges in direct encounters between politicians and journalists, where the task of linking politicians to positions is discharged primarily through questions and answers. Such *political positioning sequences* have

not figured in previous research concerned with more general practices of journalistic questioning (e.g., Clayman and Heritage 2002; Ekström and Patrona 2011; Montgomery 2007) or with position-taking as a causal moment in political outcomes (e.g., Brady, Han, and Pope

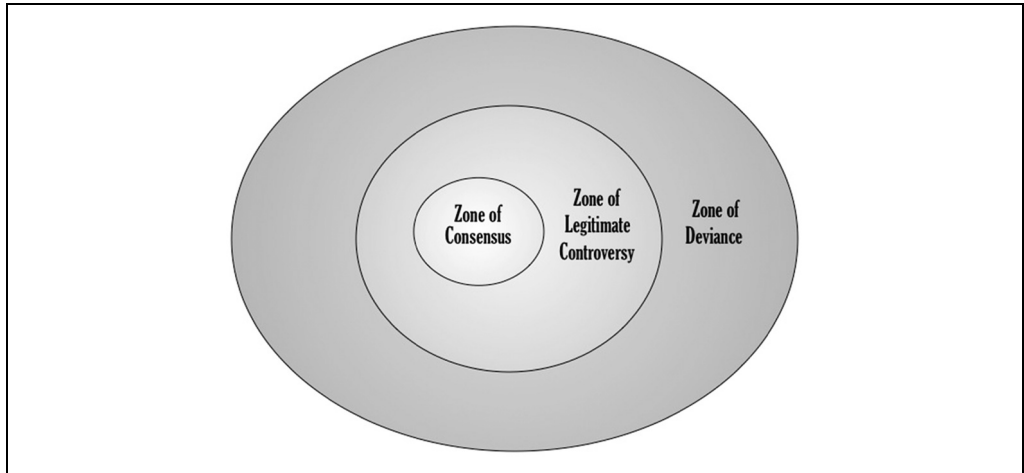
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**Figure 1.** The Sociopolitical Landscape

2007; Downs 1957). But the act of position-taking itself—endorsing a viewpoint or policy position as a situated public performance undertaken in real time—provides a window into the divergent norms and incentives operating on politicians and journalists and has a broader import for the constitution of legitimacy and the sociopolitical mainstream. Positioning exchanges are thus a locus for an unexamined form of micropolitics, an interactional arena for the enactment of various macrolevel institutional and cultural forms.

The present investigation builds on the line of interactionist social psychology launched by Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel and developed by scholars in the conversation analytic tradition. It regards the interaction order as foundational to shared sense-making (Garfinkel 1967), the presentation of self (Goffman 1959, 1967), and institutional realities (Goffman 1983; Schegloff 2006), while extending that perspective to the domain of the political. In the spirit of sociological miniaturism (Stolte, Fine, and Cook 2001), it focuses on one situated form of action for insight into aspects of politics, journalism, and sociopolitical culture.

Regarding the latter, the paper illuminates how mainstream legitimacy is made visible within interaction—how it is enacted and at times contested through elite interactional conduct.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### *The Sociopolitical Landscape and Legitimacy in Action*

Much social science scholarship converges on the idea that meaningful components of society—beliefs and values, practices and institutions, and associated individuals—do not have equal standing. They are endowed with varying degrees of legitimacy on the basis of recognized levels of popular support, official validation, and cultural normativity. Following Hallin (1984), this implicates a sociopolitical landscape structured by spheres of varying centrality, as in Figure 1. At the center of this conceptual space is (1) the zone of *consensus*, comprising social forms regarded as very broadly supported and culturally normative. Beyond that is (2) the zone of *legitimate controversy*, encompassing “issues” about which it is believed that reasonable people may disagree and still remain within the societal

mainstream. At the outer region is (3) the zone of *deviance*, comprising what is broadly rejected as marginal, nonnormative, or otherwise illegitimate.

This model of the sociopolitical landscape is an ideal type, with the inner and outer labels representing poles on a continuum, and the boundaries between spheres fuzzy and contested. In the area of political discourse, the two inner zones comprise the domain of mainstream opinion and policy, whereas the outer zone is that of marginality and extremism.

Scholarly recognition of this landscape has a long history in social thought. Parsons (1951:317–18) characterizes the political domain as relatively “permissive” regarding the expression of divergent viewpoints, implicating a social space for sanctioned debate bounded by nondebtable zones of consensus. A similar framework is implicit in multidimensional models of political power (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lehman 2010; Lukes 2005) distinguishing the power to prevail in deliberative decision making from the capacity to set the agenda and exclude issues and viewpoints as beyond debate. In news media research, Hallin (1984) demonstrates that different journalistic norms apply within the zones sketched above, with the intermediate zone of legitimate controversy being the home environment for objectivity and the balanced presentation of “both sides” of an issue, whereas the other zones are environments for the promotion of consensus values. More broadly, theorizing about legitimacy as a general social phenomenon emphasizes its import for conformity and social stability (e.g., Berger and Luckmann 1966; Berger et al. 1998; Johnson, Dowd, and Ridgeway 2006; Ridgeway and Berger 1986; Zelditch 2001).

As these theoretical accounts demonstrate, the zones are often treated as analytically independent of interactional process and as consequential for varying

social norms and patterns of conformity. There are, to be sure, historical accounts of the erosion of consensus in particular issue areas and the expansion of what is regarded as legitimately controversial (e.g., Baum and Groeling 2010; Hallin 1984) as well as shifts in the opposite direction as areas of controversy become settled (e.g., Bennett 1990; Molotch and Lester 1975). What remains underdeveloped is an account of the processual underpinnings of legitimacy as a social reality that is enacted and registered by societal actors.

The constitutive process of legitimation has been theorized in broad strokes (Berger et al. 1998; Berger, Ridgeway, and Zelditch 2002; Ridgeway and Berger 1986; Zelditch 2001, 2006). Congruent with Goffman’s (1967) insight regarding the interactional basis of social validation, Zelditch (2001:13) characterizes this process as one in which extant presumptions regarding legitimacy are subject to confirmation or disconfirmation by the developing course of social behavior. Actions are thus conceptually dichotomized as legitimating/delegitimizing but are otherwise undifferentiated as to internal design or local impact. Moreover, allied empirical research—small-group experimental studies of status and authority structures (e.g., Ridgeway, Berger, and Smith 1985; Ridgeway and Correll 2006; Walker, Rogers, and Zelditch 2002; Walker, Thomas, and Zelditch 1986)—has addressed the conditions, causes, and consequences of legitimacy more than the process of legitimation per se. The present study takes up this problem in the political domain, where the contingent realization of legitimacy delimits the boundaries of mainstream politics and is potentially of macrolevel consequence. With the affordances of naturalistic data and an analytic focus on the particulars of action formation and response, this study offers a more granular account

of the concrete sequence of actions at the heart of this constitutive process.

To unpack the process of legitimization-in-action, consider first that each public act of position-taking occurs not only *within* a sociopolitical landscape but also necessarily *contributes* to that landscape. At one level, each act shows a politician to be joining a bandwagon of like-minded actors, which may in itself boost the standing of the viewpoint or policy being endorsed (cf., Walker et al. 1986). At another level, the *specific manner* in which this is done can enhance or diminish the effect of the endorsement per se and can have further legitimating implications.

These constitutive implications are socially generated, arising not only from the endorsement itself but from the interactive sequence of moves in which it is embedded. As viewpoints are (1) elicited, (2) embraced, and (3) responded to, some are treated as routine and presumptively legitimate, requiring only elaboration and routinely supportive arguments. Other viewpoints, by contrast, are treated as out of the ordinary, more deeply problematic and accountable, and in need of more fundamental and culturally resonant grounding. Episodes of position-taking thus provide an opportunity for both political and journalistic actors to endow viewpoints with varying levels of legitimacy and socio-cultural centrality. And because perceptions of acts and persons are reflexively intertwined (Goffman 1959, 1967; Walker, Rogers, and Zelditch 2002), the social standing of expressed viewpoints can “color” the standing of their advocates.

Accordingly, political positioning exchanges link politicians to issue positions while simultaneously conditioning the legitimacy of both and, in the aggregate, structuring the parameters of the sociopolitical mainstream. One contribution of the present study is to anatomize the linguistic and interactional practices by which these outcomes are achieved.

### **Politics, Journalism, and the Dynamics of Positioning Sequences**

A second contribution is to illuminate the institutional complex of politics and journalism, in particular how professional norms and incentive structures guide positioning exchanges.

Politicians face the perennial dilemma of balancing appeals to centrist and more partisan base voters (Brady et al. 2007; Downs 1957). Although their relative salience is situationally variable, the underlying dilemma is broadly relevant not only during election campaigns but also for governance and more generally for many circumstances of organizational and collective leadership requiring the mobilization of support from diverse audience segments (Bavelas et al. 1988; Bull 1998; Eisenberg 1984). This leadership dilemma may be reconciled by the overt persuasion of explicit accounts (cf., Heritage 1988; Scott and Lyman 1968) or by what has been termed strategic ambiguity (Downs 1957; Eisenberg 1984) or equivocation (Bavelas et al. 1988). Notwithstanding countervailing pressures toward clarity (Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012), expressions lacking in specificity can have socially unifying payoffs (Eisenberg 1984; Jarzabkowski, Sillence, and Shaw 2010; Tomz and Van Houweling 2010).

Journalists, for their part, face a different set of pressures. Despite their dependence on officials as sources of information and opinion (e.g., Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007; Fishman 1980; Gans 1979), journalistic independence and the watchdog role remain broadly supported professional ideals (Weaver et al. 2007:139–45). These ideals often converge with mundane commercial pressures (Schudson 2008) to favor news content with a skeptical, critical, or investigative edge (e.g., Patterson 1993), which extends to the manner in which

politicians are questioned (Clayman and Heritage 2002; Clayman et al. 2006).

Against this backdrop, political positioning sequences may be theorized as predominantly conflictual in character, such that the position proffered through the journalist's question [P(Q)] recurrently differs from that taken by the politician in response [P(R)]. This can be represented schematically as  $[P(Q) \neq P(R)]$ .

Moreover, this difference tends to be in a particular direction. Because politicians reap benefits from appealing to both partisans and centrists, the act of position-taking is geared to a self-presentation interweaving at least some partisan and moderate elements. In contrast, journalists will be driven by normative ideals and commercial incentives to probe for controversy and extremism. Consequently, when they interact, journalists' questions tend to portray politicians as *more* peripheral than politicians portray themselves in response. If the sociopolitical landscape is conceived as numerically scaled with the center = 0 and the periphery  $> 0$ , then  $[P(Q) > P(R)]$ .

Finally, the conflict between politician and journalist is expressed in two analytically distinct but empirically intertwined ways: (1) a primary and manifest clash over where the politician stands on the issue in question, and (2) a secondary and often more latent clash over the contested position's legitimacy. Thus, in response to a question proffering a relatively marginal position, the politician may resist in favor of a more centrist (or equivocally centrist) position (depicted in Figure 2, top), or they may embrace what is proffered while advocating for its legitimacy (Figure 2, bottom). These alternative responses amount to either a shift toward the mainstream or a bid to expand the mainstream to encompass the politician's position within it.

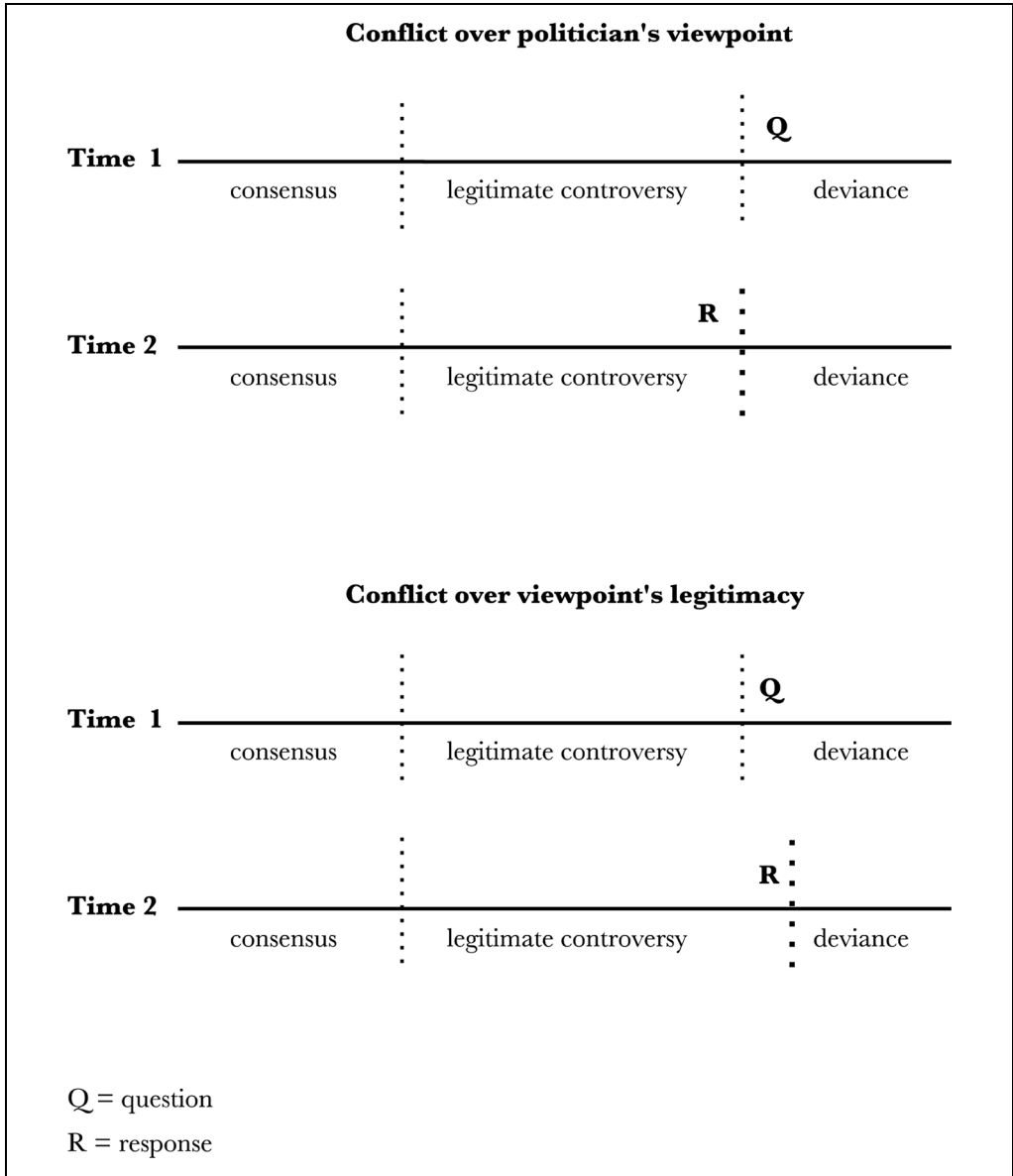
The realization of these conflicts has implications for the positioning of

politicians relative to viewpoints and the positioning of both relative to an emergent boundary of mainstream legitimacy. These practices and outcomes are the focus of the remainder of this paper. After a discussion of data and methods and an illustrative empirical case, the analysis takes up (1) the design of positioning questions and their moderating and marginalizing variants, (2) forms of damage control deployed by politicians in response to the latter, and (3) follow-up questions geared to the pursuit of marginalization.

## DATA AND METHODS

In this exploratory study, the objective of identifying and analyzing elementary practices takes precedence over questions of frequency or distribution. Accordingly, specimens of position-taking were collected from various media contexts. The primary database includes the main U.S. news programs broadcasting live interviews nightly (ABC's *Nightline*, PBS's *NewsHour*) and on Sunday mornings (NBC's *Meet the Press*, CBS's *Face the Nation*, ABC's *This Week*). This database ( $n = 65$  interviews) includes a systematic sample of one week of news broadcasts as well as some intentional oversampling of interviews with more liberal and conservative politicians to address the constitutive puzzle at the heart of the paper. Mainstream views are naturally more commonplace than marginal views, but the latter are of particular interest for what they can reveal about how the boundary of the mainstream is enacted or contested. Some additional interview materials ( $n = 12$ ) were drawn from various other sources: nightly network news programs, cable news programs, public radio news, and presidential news conferences.

The database is temporally broad, spanning a three-decade period of relative stability in journalistic question design (mid-1980s through mid-2010s; Clayman



**Figure 2.** Dynamics of Positioning Sequences

et al. 2010). It emphasizes traditional questioning conducted by professional journalists over other varieties of broadcast talk (e.g., partisan interviews, celebrity talk shows, etc.). Other talk show formats have supplemented rather than superseded the journalistic interview,

which remains significant as an arena for political communication and journalistic professionalism, a focus of secondary news coverage and commentary, and a benchmark for appreciating what is distinctive about other “infotainment” forms of talk (Loeb 2015).

(1) [Reagan News Conference, 21 Feb 1985: Nicaragua]  
 1 IR: Mr. President on Capitol Hill: (.) on Capitol Hill the  
 2 other day, Secretary Schultz suggested that a goal of your  
 3 policy now (0.4) is to remove the Sandinista government in  
 4 Nicaragua. Is that your goal.  
 5 (1.4)  
 6 RR: Well remove it in the sense of (0.5) its present structure.=  
 7 in which it is a communist totalitarian state . . .  
 8 ((response continues))  
 9 IR: Well (0.2) sir when you say remove it in the sense of its  
 10 present structure, (.) aren't you then saying that you  
 11 advocate the overthrow: of the present government of Nicaragua?

The materials were recorded and transcribed using conversation analytic conventions (Hepburn and Bolden 2013). All materials were subject to analytic induction, with attention to both general patterns and deviant cases in pursuit of a comprehensive analysis of the database.

#### **POLITICAL POSITIONING SEQUENCES: AN INITIAL ILLUSTRATION**

Shortly after his reelection, President Ronald Reagan was asked in a news conference about his policy toward Nicaragua in the aftermath of a leftist revolution there (Excerpt 1; IR denotes interviewer/journalist).

Typical of positioning sequences, this exchange begins with a yes/no question (lines 1–4) proffering a specific policy (“to remove the Sandinista government in Nicaragua”) for the president to confirm and embrace (“is that your goal”). The question does not critically assess that policy or address its motivations or consequences but merely seeks confirmation as to what the current policy actually is.

Although the question is uncritical and benign on its face, Reagan’s response is manifestly cautious and defensive (lines 6–7). His initial “well” projects resistance to the question’s agenda (Heritage 2015; Schegloff and Lerner 2009). He subsequently avoids answering *yes* or otherwise affirming the proffered policy

(Raymond 2003) and instead rephrases it (Clayman 1993; Stivers and Hayashi 2010). By operating on the keyword “remove” (“Well remove it in the sense of its present structure”), he euphemistically downplays the policy in a way that implies bureaucratic restructuring rather than the use of force. In so doing, he treats the policy in question as somewhat “toxic,” that is something that must be toned down before it can be endorsed, while presenting himself as more moderate than the question implied. Even so, he immediately raises the specter of totalitarian communism (line 7) to defend this ostensibly modulated version of his policy objectives.

The basis for Reagan’s caution may be understood by considering the intense controversy then surrounding the policy in question. Given the debate over funding the paramilitary Contra resistance, that policy could be seen in context as entailing the use of force by proxy to bring about regime change in a sovereign nation-state. Because there was a recent Congressional ban on such funding, the policy would put the Administration at odds with Congress.<sup>1</sup> It was also deeply unpopular with the general public, with opinion polls then showing majority

<sup>1</sup>The Iran-Contra affair would not emerge as a public scandal until the year after this interview.

(2) [CBS Face the Nation 8 Dec. 1985: genetic engineering]  
 1 IR: Mister Rifkin you are an opponent=h of genetic >engineering,=  
 2 =.hhh< D'you oppo:se h thuh kind of work that Doctor  
 3 Rosenberg is doing with interluken two<which is  
 4 de[veloped through genetic engineering,=  
 5 JR: [.hh  
 6 JR: =No I don't.=I- I think that=uh: (.) that work is  
 7 very exciting. . .

opposition by a 2:1 to 3:1 margin (Sobel 1989). Moreover, this unpopular and perhaps legally problematic policy is not being offered as mere speculation but rather as a well-founded inference about the president's actual policy objectives.

Despite Reagan's moderating efforts in response, the journalist treats the response as newsworthy enough to warrant a follow-up question (lines 9–11). The follow-up punctures the euphemism and retoxifies the policy by rephrasing it in the blunt language of governmental "overthrow."

This case exemplifies the phenomenon of *political positioning sequences*, question-answer exchanges geared to the task of revealing politicians' opinions and policies. The case also illustrates the conflictual nature of this task, with journalists probing for controversy while politicians present themselves as relatively mainstream, and with the issue of socio-political legitimacy infusing the conflict as a secondary and more latent concern.

### POLITICAL POSITIONING QUESTIONS

The questions that initiate political positioning sequences differ from other journalistic questions in their primary focus on *identifying where the politician stands on some salient issue*, as opposed to critically scrutinizing that position or exploring its motivations or consequences. Such questions can take a variety of forms, but they tend to share certain basic features.

First and most obviously, such questions typically set a topical agenda that is narrow and viewpoint-specific rather than broad or philosophical. Although journalists may occasionally invite commentary on a general area of current interest (e.g., "How do you see the role of the United States in the world?"), the vast majority of positioning questions *target a specific viewpoint or policy* for the recipient to address. The question to Reagan on removing the Nicaraguan government (Excerpt 1) and the following question on opposition to genetic engineering (Excerpt 2) are typical.

Questions of this sort are normally designed so as to *invite affiliation with the proffered viewpoint or policy*. This is generally done by means of a *yes/no* interrogative that favors or prefers an affirmative answer, which in context would endorse the viewpoint (Clayman and Heritage 2002:208–17). Thus, the questions concerning Nicaragua (Excerpt 1) and genetic engineering (Excerpt 2) both take this form, as highlighted in the following simplified renderings.

- (1) *Is that [removing the government] your goal?*
- (2) *Do you oppose ... genetic engineering?*

The response preference linguistically encoded in the interrogative—its "tilt" toward *yes* in these cases—is independent of the content of the viewpoint, its social standing, and whether it is supportive or



(3) [CBS Face the Nation 20 Nov. 2012: Ron Paul]  
 1 IR: -> .hh Let's move on then. Do you think there is any place in  
 2 the wor:ld where United States forces should be stationed,  
 3 You've talked about bringin' em home from Afghanistan:,  
 4 from: uh (.) from Iraq, uh-  
 5 -> Is there any place where you think .hh uh: it helps  
 6 us to have U.S. forces stationed.  
 7 (1.1)  
 8 RP: .h No.=other than th'fact that I think a: submarine is a  
 9 very worthwhile weapon. .h And I believe we can defend  
 10 ourselves with submarines and all our troops back at ho:me...

oppositional. In both examples, the interrogative invites the politician to answer affirmatively and thereby endorse the viewpoint, which in the latter case is one of opposition (to genetic engineering).

Although *yes*-preferring interrogatives are the most common vehicle for political positioning in news interviews, other forms may be used including *no*-preferring interrogatives (e.g., *You don't favor X, do you?*) and declaratives constituted epistemically as questions (e.g., *It's been reported that you favor X*; see Heritage 2012). Certain lexical items, such as *any*, are negatively polarized (vs. the answer *some*, see Heritage et al. 2007) so their inclusion favors a disaffirming response. For instance, in Excerpt 3 a question regarding Congressman Ron Paul's opposition to U.S. troop deployments (lines 1–2) includes this negative polarity item (“any”) and thus invites a *no* answer conveying opposition to all deployments worldwide. Adding to this polarization, the interviewer goes on to invoke Paul's previous remarks favoring troop withdrawals (lines 3–4) and then renews the question with another *no*-preferring interrogative (lines 5–6), inviting a fully isolationist response.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The questions in Excerpts 1, 2, and 3 directly address positioning. Other questions do so indirectly through presupposition (Clayman and Heritage 2002:203–208) and association (by referencing a politician's colleagues), forms beyond this paper's scope.

### MAINSTREAMING VERSUS MARGINALIZING QUESTIONS

Among positioning questions, a key substantive distinction hinges on the nature of the viewpoint or policy targeted, which may vary in centrality or marginality. These gradations are available to anyone with commonsense knowledge of the opinion climate and sociopolitical culture. They may also be actively registered by the participants—occasionally within the question itself but more often within its sequelae.<sup>3</sup>

In what shall be termed *mainstreaming questions*, the viewpoint can be understood as lying well within the boundaries of consensus or legitimate controversy. For instance (Excerpt 4), when President Clinton is asked if prior difficulties with peacekeeping operations make him more cautious about the effort in Bosnia, the proffered position—to be cautious about such deployments—is clearly within the bounds of legitimate controversy if not outright consensus. Correspondingly, Clinton embraces this policy without qualification

<sup>3</sup>To distinguish between mainstreaming and marginalizing questions requires attention to both (1) sociopolitical context and (2) interactional practices that treat positions as routine/nonroutine. The analytic necessity of attending to both language practices and relevant context has long been recognized (Schegloff 1984; Wilson 1991) and is reinforced by recent studies of action formation and ascription (Heritage 2012; Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2014).

(4) [Clinton News Conference 14 Oct 1993: peacekeeping operations]  
 1 IR: -> Mr. President, ih- would your experiences this uh:: month in  
 2 Somalia and Haiti .hh make you more cautious about sending  
 3 American peacekeepers to Bosnia,  
 4 (1.0)  
 5 BC: Well my experiences in Somalia (2.2) would make me (.)  
 6 m-more (0.7) uh (.) cautious (0.6) about having any  
 7 Americans .hh uh- in a peacekeeping role where there was  
 8 any ambiguity at all:: .hh about (0.9) what the range of  
 9 decisions were which could be made by- by a command other  
 10 than an American (.) command. . . .

(5) [NBC MTP Press Pass 23 March 2011: Kucinich on impeachability]  
 1 IR: ...D'you think he [Obama] failed to grasp unintended  
 2 co:n:sequences that could .hh attach to an operation  
 3 like this.  
 4 DK: tch (.) Uhm (0.9) Yes. ((answer continues))  
 5 IR: -> .hh You even said this should(m) be an impeachable offense.  
 6 -> That's very strong language.  
 7 DK: Well- eh-ah-ah I didn't exactly put it that way. I- what  
 8 I said (.) was that .hh (0.5) the: (.) President (0.4) uhm (0.5)  
 9 on its face this decision (1.4) uh- (0.4) could be an impeachable  
 10 offense. (0.5) That's different from a process of impeachment.  
 11 I'm not interested in impeaching the President, but. . .

and even upgrades his support by generalizing beyond the Bosnian case (lines 5–10).

By contrast, *marginalizing questions* target views or policies that are highly controversial and hence vulnerable to being seen as “extreme.” The next question (Excerpt 5, arrowed) attributes to Congressman Dennis Kucinich (a Democrat and 2008 presidential candidate) the view that President Obama committed an impeachable offense in acting militarily against Libya without Congressional consent. This position is treated as extreme both implicitly in the initial quotative frame (“You even said,” line 5) and

explicitly in the subsequent characterization (“very strong language,” line 6). Kucinich, in response, disavows the terms of the paraphrase (line 7) as well as any interest in impeaching the president (lines 10–11). Both parties thus actively register the marginality of the proffered viewpoint.

On the other side of the ideological spectrum, consider this question (Excerpt 6) to 1996 Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan regarding the teaching of creationism in public schools. In this case, the journalist does not publicly register the proffered viewpoint’s marginality, but the politician appears to.

(6) [ABC This Week 18 Feb 1996: Buchanan on creationism]  
 1 IR: -> On thuh subject of=uh culture do you favor thuh teaching  
 2 of creationism in public schools,=  
 3 PB: .mlk=I think these=I believe that God created heaven an'  
 4 earth, I believe in thuh <Bible George. . .

(7) [NPR All Things Considered 15 July 1995: Bosnian Conflict]  
 1 IE: Uh:: (u-) well quite a few old men are capable- perfectly  
 2 capable of: (.) holding a rifle an' shooting at you.  
 3 (0.9)  
 4 IR: An[:d how- how: are you: treating them. How are the troops=  
 5 IE: [Whu-  
 6 IR: =treating them.  
 7 (0.6)  
 8 IR: -> Are they being beaten? Or will you be: are you treating them:  
 9 (u-)humanely according to inter[national] conventions.  
 10 IE: [Hhh!  
 11 (.)  
 12 IE: -> Well I mean your line of questioning really suggests that we  
 13 -> are the most awful creatures on earth. That we a:re beating  
 14 the prisoners, raping women, and so on and so forth. 'hh  
 15 Please I think I have been very: uh:uh correct in my answers,  
 16 an' I would expect you to: 'hh be more correct in your line  
 17 of question=because it's extremely provocative. . . .

Buchanan expresses personal belief in the Biblical account of creation but declines to provide a *yes-type* response that would endorse it as instructional policy. Buchanan's reluctance is consistent with the establishment mainstream. Notwithstanding its supporters, the policy contradicted a century of U.S. precedent, was not officially endorsed by either party, and was not advocated by presidential candidates including those associated with Christian conservatism.<sup>4</sup>

The import of the mainstreaming/marginalizing distinction extends beyond inviting subsequent alignment with the viewpoint; such questions have a latent positioning import that operates in the here and now. Merely by proffering a particular viewpoint for confirmation, the journalist displays an expectation that the politician is quite probably a mainstream/marginal figure. This entails a form of "altercasting" (Weinstein and Deutschberger 1963), albeit one expressed indirectly through ostensibly neutral information-seeking questions.

The reputational implications of positioning questions may be overtly registered in response, particularly when the question is marginalizing. Consider the exchange in Excerpt 7 with a Serbian spokesperson regarding the treatment of Bosnian prisoners. The interviewer first asks an open wh-type question (lines 4-6), but when this receives no uptake (line 7) he pursues response with a policy-specific query (line 8). In asking if prisoners are "being beaten," the interviewer has proposed what is by any measure an extreme and politically damaging policy.

He moves to mitigate the negative import of this choice by adding a more mainstream policy alternative ("or ... are you treating them humanely according to international conventions"), but in a variety of ways this addition fails to undo the damage. It arrives only as an "afterthought" to an already-completed question. Because the addition is consensual and normally "beyond question," treating it as open to question itself carries negative altercasting overtones. Moreover, the use of the collective reference form "you" (versus "the troops") casts the conduct as official policy rather than the rogue actions of some soldiers. Correspondingly, the interviewee takes

<sup>4</sup>Candidate Sarah Palin, asked about this issue in 2008, declined to support creationism teaching, asserting that "science should be taught in science class."

(8) [Reagan News Conf 21 Feb 1985: Nicaragua]  
 1 SD: Mr. President on Capitol Hill: (.) on Capitol Hill the  
 2 other day, Secretary Schultz suggested that a goal of your  
 3 policy now (0.4) is to remove the Sandinista government in  
 4 Nicaragua. Is that your goal.  
 5 (1.4)  
 6 RR: Well remove it in the sense of (0.5) its present structure.=  
 7 in which it is a communist totalitarian state . . .

umbrage at the suggestion of inhumane treatment (lines 12–17).

Political positioning thus begins *before* the politician expresses any viewpoint. That positioning questions have an alter-casting import runs contrary to the common view of questions as neutral “requests for information.” In actuality, questions convey information in the course of seeking it, in general by presuming the matters they raise are relevantly subject to question (Heritage 1998; Stivers 2011), and for the case of yes/no questions that the embedded proposition is the most plausible or likely answer (Heritage 2010; Pomerantz 1988; Sacks 1987). So merely by selecting a *particular* position as the focus of inquiry, the journalist casts the politician as a plausible supporter. This implicit portrayal is built into viewpoint-specific positioning questions as a matter of course, but it may be further enhanced through practices conveying greater certainty about the answer (e.g., prefatory assertions as in Excerpt 1, declarative syntax as in 5; see Clayman and Heritage 2002; Heritage 2012; Raymond 2010; Stivers 2010).

### HOW POLITICIANS RESPOND TO MARGINALIZING QUESTIONS

Next I focus on those positioning questions that are marginalizing and consider their interactional sequelae. Politicians respond to such questions in ways that both register and work to mitigate

potentially damaging implications. Each form of damage control has elements geared, respectively, to centrist and partisan viewers and is implemented early in response.

#### **Operating on the Issue Position: Sympathetic Resistance**

One form of damage control operates on the degree to which the politician affiliates with the proffered viewpoint and entails what may be termed *sympathetic resistance*. Here the politician avoids straightforwardly endorsing the position as would be conveyed through a *yes*-type response but offers an expression of sympathy through nonconforming responses (Raymond 2003) that transform (Stivers and Hayashi 2010) or otherwise resist (Clayman 2001) the terms of the question. In sympathetic resistance, the element of resistance is geared to the median viewer; the sympathy to the partisan base.

The example with which this study began—the initial question to Reagan about removing the Nicaraguan Sandinista government (reproduced in Excerpt 8)—receives this type of sympathetic but not quite endorsing response. As noted earlier, Reagan declines to provide a *yes*-type answer that would endorse the viewpoint, but neither does he reject it. He instead (re)defines a keyword (“remove”) in terms that imply bureaucratic restructuring rather than force (“Well, remove it

(9) [ABC This Week 18 Feb 1996: Buchanan on creationism]  
 1 IR: -> On thuh subject of=uh culture do you favor thuh teaching  
 2 of creationism in public schools,=  
 3 PB: .mlk=I think these=I believe that God created heaven an'  
 4 earth, I believe in thuh <Bible George. . .

in the sense of its present structure”), and it is this sanitized version that he embraces. Overall his response is more endorsing than rejecting, but *what* it endorses has been moderated relative what was originally proffered by the question.

Correspondingly, the question to Pat Buchanan on creationism teaching in public schools (Excerpt 9) also receives a sympathetically resistant response. In response to a polar question explicitly targeting his policy preference (“Do you favor...”), Buchanan eschews a conforming *yes*-type answer and speaks instead to his personal belief in the Biblical account of creation (“I believe...”). This shift from policy position to personal belief implies sympathy but does not necessarily endorse incorporating creationism into public school curricula. The distinction between “official policy” and “personal views” is a recurrent resource for sympathetic resistance and, more generally, for balancing appeals to mainstream and partisan viewers (see also Excerpt 12).

### ***Operating on the Position's Social Standing: Legitimizing Endorsement***

A second form of damage control, typically used within fully endorsing responses, operates on the viewpoint being embraced and addresses its sociopolitical standing. The politician may offer a *legitimizing account* for the viewpoint (cf., Heritage 1988; Scott and Lyman 1968), portraying it as sociopolitically mainstream by invoking public support (e.g., *The people are with me...*), official authorization (e.g.,

*Experts confirm...*), or consensual symbols and values (the U.S. constitution, the principle of equal rights, etc.).<sup>5</sup> The legitimating account, a bid to influence the lens through which the contentious viewpoint will be viewed (Zaller 1992), is geared to the median viewer; the endorsement to the partisan base. The legitimating component tends to be introduced early in response, either intertwined with or immediately following the endorsement itself, and is thus given priority over other supportive arguments.

Popular support is invoked following the exchange concerning Ron Paul's isolationism (examined previously in Excerpt 3 and continuing in Excerpt 10). After Paul expresses unqualified opposition to U.S. troop deployments anywhere in the world (“absolutely,” line 9) but before defending the intrinsic merits of the policy, he asserts that “the people are with me on this.” This claim, whether accurate or not, appears sensitive to the extraordinary nature of the proposal, which if implemented would represent a clean break from U.S. foreign policy since at least World War II. Thus, before he defends the policy substantively (based on efficiency, effectiveness, etc.), he casts it as legitimate by virtue of the support it's attracted.

Official validation, like popular support, also has a legitimating import. When Ron Paul is asked to confirm his

<sup>5</sup>On the import of official authorization for legitimacy, see Walker et al. (1986) and Zelditch (2001).

(10) [CBS Face the Nation 20 Nov. 2012: Ron Paul]  
 1 IR: So you would- you would uh: if you were President you'd  
 2 bring home the troops from Japa:n, you'd bring home the  
 3 troops from South [Korea?  
 4 RP: [(nods))  
 5 (0.3)  
 6 IR: You would.  
 7 (.)  
 8 IR: [Okay.  
 9 RP: -> [Absolutely. >An- and the people are with- the people are with  
 10 -> me on that .hh because we can't afford it, would save us a lot  
 11 of money, All 'ose troops would spend their money here at ho:me,  
 12 .hh An' besides those troops overse:as (.) aggravate our  
 13 enemies, motivate our enemies, I think it's a da:nger to  
 14 our national defense .h and we can save a lot of money  
 15 cutting out thuh ((clears throat)) military expenditures  
 16 .hh that contribute nothing to our defense.

(11) [CBS Face the Nation 20 Nov. 2012: Ron Paul]  
 1 IR: ..your statements... suggest that you belie:ve that 9/11  
 2 happened .h because of actions that the United States  
 3 took. Is that correct?  
 4 (1.0) ((echo))  
 5 RP: Oh yeh- I- I think there's an influence. And that's  
 6 exactly what ah:: you know, the 9/11 Commission said.  
 7 That's what the DOD has said. And that's also what the  
 8 CIA has said and that's what a lot of researchers have  
 9 said...

previous statement that the 9/11 terrorist attacks happened “because of actions that the United States took” (Excerpt 11, lines 1–3), he provides a slightly qualified confirmation (line 5) and then immediately launches into a litany of governmental and expert sources that ostensibly validate his claim.

Finally, these forms of damage control are not mutually exclusive; a resistant/modulated viewpoint may be given a legitimating account (e.g., Excerpt 1 above). Consider the historic exchange with Vice President Biden on same-sex marriage (Excerpt 12), which had never been endorsed by an administration, although opinion surveys showed increasing public

approval.<sup>6</sup> In this evolving context, Biden is asked if he “is comfortable with same-sex marriage now” (line 1).

After Biden aborts and restarts his turn (“I- I- Look”) projecting a non-straightforward response (Sidnell 2007), he offers a prefatory comment framing what follows as his own personal opinion rather than Administration policy (lines 2–3). His subsequent expression of sympathy for same-sex marriage (lines 4–9) invokes the resonant principle of equal rights at the earliest possible opportunity. It does so via a repetitional response (“I am absolutely comfortable with...” in lines 3–4; Heritage and Raymond 2012; Raymond 2003) that preserves and intensifies the initial frame of the question but replaces the predicate (“same-sex marriage”) with a more elaborate formulation referencing gay, lesbian, and heterosexual marriages within a three-part list. The list implicates

<sup>6</sup>A Gallup poll five months earlier showed an even split on same-sex marriage (48% approval, 48% disapproval); the same poll around the time of the interview showed a slight majority in support (50% approval, 48% disapproval).

(12) [NBC Meet the Press 6 May 2012: Biden on gay marriage]  
 1 IR: And you're comfortable with: >same sex marriage now?  
 2 JB: I- I- Look. .hhh I am Vice President of the United States  
 3 of America. uh:m The President (.) sets the policy. .hh  
 4 I: am: absolutely comfortable: .h with the fact (0.5) that  
 5 men: (.) marrying me:n, women marrying women, and (.) h-  
 6 heterosexual m- >men 'n women marrying ('nther)< are:  
 7 entitled to the sa:me exact rights, a:ll the civil rights,  
 8 a:ll the civil liberties, .hh And quite frankly I don't  
 9 see much of a distinction .hh uh: beyond that.

their equivalence (Jefferson 1986) and is brought to completion with explicit reference to the time-honored principle of “the same exact rights” for all (lines 7–9).

Both response practices are geared toward mitigating potential damage inflicted by marginalizing questions, but they do so in complex ways that greatly transcend a simple binary view of legitimation/delegitimation. When responding with sympathetic resistance, the politician distances him- or herself from the viewpoint and closer to the sociopolitical center [ $P(R) < P(Q)$ ] (depicted in Figure 2, top) and in the process treats the proffered viewpoint as problematic [ $P(Q)\uparrow$ ] (upward-facing arrow denotes increase in enacted marginality). The sympathetic component of the response modulates but does not eliminate the problematizing import of the politician’s apparent unwillingness to embrace the viewpoint in question. The practice thus bids to maintain the legitimacy of the politician at the expense of the viewpoint, thereby implicating an emergent boundary of acceptability suggestive of the limits of the mainstream.

On the other hand, with a legitimating endorsement (in the pure form of Excerpts 11–12), the politician straightforwardly affiliates with the proffered viewpoint [ $P(R) = P(Q)$ ] and in that straightforwardness treats the viewpoint as *unproblematic*. Additionally, the provision of a legitimating account, although tacitly

acknowledging controversy surrounding the viewpoint, overtly renders it as mainstream ( $P\downarrow$  down arrow denotes decrease in enacted marginality). It is in effect a more radical mode of response, a bid for the legitimacy of both the politician and the viewpoint in question, and hence an expansion of the mainstream (depicted in Figure 2, bottom).

#### HOW JOURNALISTS SUBSEQUENTLY PURSUE MARGINALIZATION

What repels the politician—or at least motivates caution—attracts the journalist. Pushing the boundary of legitimate controversy tends to be treated as newsworthy and is recurrently the focus of sustained pursuit. Thus, following responses that embrace or implicate support for marginal positions, journalists typically avoid lateral topical movement (cf., Greatbatch 1986; Heritage 1985; Romaniuk 2013) and seek further affirmation, intensification, or challenge of the viewpoint. These pursuits underscore the politician’s association with the marginal viewpoint, while treating that as newsworthy and in context controversial [ $P(R)\uparrow$ ]. Such pursuits frequently contain additional elements geared to countering prior damage control efforts and otherwise upgrading the implication of marginality. Because overt challenges have been previously explored (Clayman and Heritage 2002; Romaniuk 2013), here

(13) [ABC Nightline, 11 Sep. 2008: Sarah Palin]  
 1 IR: The administration has said we've got to maintain the  
 2 territorial integrity (0.4) of Georgia. .hh (0.6) Do you  
 3 believe the United States (0.4) should try to restore  
 4 Georgian sovereignty. (0.2) over South Ossetia and Abkhazia.  
 5 SP: .hhh eh=First off (.) we're gonna to continue good relations  
 6 with Saakashvili there\_=>I was able to speak with him the other  
 7 day: .h and giving him my commitment as John McCain's running  
 8 mate .h that we: will be committed (.) to Georgia. .hh And  
 9 we've gotta keep an eye on Russia. For Russia to have exerted  
 10 such: pressure, .h in terms of invaiding a smaller democratic  
 11 (.) country, .h unprovoked, (.) >is unacceptable.=and we  
 12 have to [keep  
 13 IR: -> [You believe unprovoked.  
 14 SP: I-I do believe unprovoked.=and we have got to keep our eyes  
 15 .hh on Russia, . . .

we address more neutralistic forms of pursuit.

### **Pursuing (Re)Affirmation**

In the most straightforward trajectory, following a politician's endorsement of a marginal viewpoint, the journalist pursues reaffirmation of that viewpoint. For instance, in the exchange with Ron Paul on troop deployments (Excerpts 3 and 10), after Paul straightforwardly endorses the isolationist viewpoint put to him (Excerpt 3), the journalist formulates the upshot of that endorsement and invites reaffirmation (Excerpt 10, lines 1–4). The pursuit dwells on Paul's isolationism for another round of questioning and has further design features underscoring the extremity of that viewpoint. Whereas the initial question referenced recent controversial deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq as exemplary of what Paul opposes, the pursuit references long-standing deployments to Japan and South Korea. With these entirely consensual deployments now exemplifying Paul's promise to bring the troops home from *all* U.S. bases, the pursuit underscores and dramatizes the magnitude of his proposal.

The pursuit of reaffirmation is typically managed by reformulating the politician's

previous remarks and inviting confirmation (Heritage 1985). Reformulations may operate on the overall gist of those remarks, as in the Ron Paul example, or on one component—often the most controversial part. For instance, following Sarah Palin's assertion that Russia's incursion into Georgia is unacceptable (Excerpt 13, lines 9–11), the interviewer interjects to target and repeat one word (arrowed) that Palin had used to characterize the incursion, while also framing that as reflecting her judgment ("You believe unprovoked").

Although partial repeats can initiate repair on unclear talk (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977), interviewers often use them with falling intonation and without any apparent confusion regarding what was said. Such partial repeats thus appear to be produced for the benefit of the audience (Clayman 2010), and in the present context they highlight the most extreme component of what was just said.

In a related trajectory, a resistant response by the politician prompts the journalist to pursue a clearer affirmation of the viewpoint. Reagan's resistant response to the Nicaragua question (Excerpt 1) led to two pursuits of this sort (Excerpt 14). Recall that Reagan rephrased the policy to suggest bureaucratic reform rather than regime change



(14) [Reagan News Conference, 21 Feb 1985: Nicaragua]

1 IR: Mr. President on Capitol Hill: (.) on Capitol Hill the  
 2 other day, Secretary Schultz suggested that a goal of your  
 3 policy now (0.4) is to remove the Sandinista government in  
 4 Nicaragua. Is that your goal.  
 5 (1.4)

6 RR: Well remove it in the sense of (0.5) its present (0.5)  
 7 structure.=in which it is a communist (0.2) totalitarian  
 8 state. . . .  
 9 ((Response continues, denying legitimacy of the Sandinistas,  
 10 affirming commitment to "freedom fighters".))

11 IR: -> Well (0.2) sir when you say remove it in the sense of its  
 12 present structure, (.) aren't you then saying that you  
 13 -> advocate the overthrow: of the present government of  
 14 -> Nicaragua?

15 RR: Well what I'm saying is that .h this present government  
 16 was one element(h) (.) of the revolution against Somoza.  
 17 .hhh The freedom fighters are other elements: (.) of that...  
 18 ((Response continues, detailing Sandinistas' broken promises  
 19 of democratic reform.))

20 IR: -> Is the answer yes sir?  
 21 (0.9) ((RR points to another reporter, gazes back to IR.))

22 IR: -> Is the answer yes then?  
 23 (0.4)

24 RR: To what.

25 IR: -> To the question aren't you advocating the overthrow  
 26 -> of the present government.  
 27 (0.3)

28 RR: [Not if

29 IR: -> [If you want to substitute another form of what you say  
 30 -> was the revolution.

31 RR: Not if the present government would turn around and  
 32 say, all right, if they'd say "Uncle." All right, . . .

by force (lines 6–7). The journalist then pursues the issue (lines 11–14) while also retoxifying the policy, suggesting Reagan's careful language is a euphemism for governmental overthrow. Furthermore, this is delivered in the form of a negative interrogative ("aren't you then saying..."), which very nearly asserts that Reagan is indeed seeking to overthrow the regime (Heritage 2002).

Reagan's response to this pursuit (lines 15–19) is, again, sympathetically resistant, eschewing *yes* in favor of a transformative response (Clayman 2001; Heritage 1985; Stivers and Hayashi 2010) attacking the legitimacy of the Sandinista government. This suggests sympathy toward a policy of governmental overthrow, while not actually proclaiming that policy in so many words. This prompts yet another clarifying pursuit (line 20, repaired and renewed at lines 22, 25–26, 29–30) geared

to pinning Reagan down to a simple *yes* answer to the overthrow question.

### ***Pushing Further Toward the Margins***

In a different trajectory, following the politician's endorsement of a marginal viewpoint, the journalist pursues a still more marginal viewpoint. This trajectory does involve forward topical movement but in the direction of probing the extremity of the politician's views in this area.

Consider this extended exchange (beginning in Excerpt 15) from the 2008 presidential campaign with Republican Congresswoman Michele Bachmann on the subject of anti-Americanism.<sup>7</sup> The journalist, building on Bachmann's previous remarks regarding Barack Obama,

<sup>7</sup>Bachmann's participation via satellite generates a time lag and many turn-taking dysfluencies (overlaps, silences).

(15) [MSNBC Hardball 17 October 2008: Obama as Anti-American]  
 1 IR: So you believe that Barack Obama may have may have  
 2 anti-American views.  
 3 (1.1)  
 4 MB: Ye-absolutely. I- I- I'm very concerned that he may have  
 5 anti-American views,=That's what the American people .hh  
 6 are concerned about, .h That's why they want to know what  
 7 his answers are. . . .

(16) [MSNBC Hardball 17 October 2008: Anti-Americanism in Congress]  
 1 IR: How many Congresspeople: members of Congress d'you think  
 2 are in that anti-American crowd you describe. .hh (0.5)  
 3 How many congresspeople you serve  
 4 w[ith=I mean, there's 435 members o'Congress  
 5 MB: [Well I'm ( ) right- right now- .hh  
 6 (0.8)  
 7 IR: How many are anti-American in that [Congress right now that=  
 8 MB: [Are th-  
 9 IR: =you serve with\_  
 10 (2.0)  
 11 MB: You'd eh- you'd hafta ask them eh=Chris. I'm- I'm focusing  
 12 on Barack Obama and the people that he's been  
 13 asso[ciating with, and I'm very worried about their anti-American=  
 14 IR: [But do you suspect there're a lotta people you serve with,  
 15 MB: =nature.  
 16 IR: Well he's 'ee United States Senator from Illinois, he's .hh he's  
 17 one o'the people you suspect as being anti-American.=How many  
 18 people in the Congress of the United States do you think  
 19 are anti-American. .hh You've already suspected Barack Obama=  
 20 's he alone or are there others.

invites her to confirm that she believes Obama “may have anti-American views” (lines 1–2). Bachmann embraces this view strongly and without qualification (“Absolutely,” line 4) and then deploys a practice we’ve already observed (lines 5–7): invoking “the American people” in a way that normalizes this view and defends her expression of it.

Following this, the journalist asks a series of questions designed to expose the scope of Bachmann’s views on anti-Americanism. He asks (in data not shown) if she regards certain regions of the U.S., self-described liberals, and registered Democrats as anti-American. He then turns to anti-Americanism among her own congressional colleagues (Excerpt 16). His first pursuit along these lines

(“How many Congresspeople...”, lines 1–4) presupposes that Bachmann views numerous legislators as implicated in “that anti-American crowd.”

At this point Bachmann, apparently realizing the danger of this more extreme position, begins to resist (lines 5 and 11–12) by moving to shift the discussion back to Obama. The journalist, however, interjects and presses her again on her perceptions of Congressional anti-Americanism (line 14), and the stronger wording of this pursuit (“a lotta people you serve with”) insinuates that she views it as rampant. He then justifies this line of inquiry (lines 16–20), in effect portraying her as a McCartheyesque figure who suspects that political subversives are plentiful in the halls of Congress.

## DISCUSSION

The interactional micropolitics explicated in this paper simultaneously addresses the positioning of politicians relative to specific viewpoints, and the positioning of both relative to a conceptual space structured by an emergent boundary of mainstream legitimacy. The second dimension is typically secondary and more implicit, a largely indirect byproduct of the manner in which viewpoints are initially put forward, embraced or resisted by politicians, and allowed or pursued by journalists, although the issue of legitimacy can also rise to the interactional surface via explicit legitimating accounts.<sup>8</sup>

Within positioning exchanges, marginalizing questions have a particular significance. They embody a form of journalistic scrutiny, often sustained across lines of questioning, that casts a reputational shadow. This was not previously identified in research on journalistic questioning (e.g., Clayman and Heritage 2002; Clayman et al. 2006), which tended to presume what might be termed a “*boxing model*” of adversarial questioning conceived as overt pressure and explicit attack. By contrast, marginalizing questions embody a “*judo model*” of adversarialness, with politicians’ own “weight,” in the form of imputed controversial views, being used against them. This represents, more generally, an underappreciated aspect of the watchdog role: policing the boundaries of the mainstream by probing how far political actors are willing to go in their policies, and subjecting their more immoderate views to sustained exposure.

The forms of damage control mobilized by politicians in response enact a concern for balancing appeals to centrist and partisan viewers. Some of these practices fit

within the rubrics of strategic ambiguity or equivocation (Bavelas et al. 1988; Downs 1957), but others do not and include explicitly persuasive legitimating accounts. In any case, the analytic framework developed in this paper, building on advances in the study of questions, answers, and ways of resisting a question’s “gravitational pull” (e.g., Clayman 2001; Heritage 2002, 2012; Raymond 2003; Stivers and Hayashi 2010), moves beyond such abstract rubrics to offer a more concrete and textured account of the practices underlying a central form of strategic political action.

These findings may in turn serve as a resource for future work on support mobilization and electoral outcomes. Because individual preferences are known to be sensitive to the language practices of politicians and journalists (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 2010; Zaller 1992), the practices documented in this study may be an unexamined source of variation in mass opinion and voting patterns. They may also illuminate certain puzzles regarding those outcomes. If ideologically extreme candidates are less likely to get elected than their more moderate opponents (Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012; Wright and Berkman 1986), perhaps this is due in part to journalists’ efforts to tether candidates to their more extreme positions. At the same time, if elected representatives have in the aggregate grown more polarized than the general public (Fiorina and Abrams 2008), perhaps one factor is candidates’ greater adeptness at maintaining a posture of moderation in the face of journalistic scrutiny. These explanations are conjectural but may be testable by building on the findings.

These results have implications that extend beyond discrete campaign outcomes. They illuminate the agentic underpinnings of legitimacy, its grounding in processes of social interaction

<sup>8</sup>This study has focused on legitimacy expressed through the sequelae of positioning questions. For its expression in sequence-initiating questions, see Clayman and Loeb (2016).

between political and journalistic actors. They show that activities relevant to the legitimation of issue and policy positions involve far more than the provision of explicit accounts and extend well beyond contexts where legitimacy is a primary focus of discussion. Insofar as these interactional activities enable perceptions and claims to mainstream status and the benefits that flow from it, they have important social structural ramifications.

The present analysis reveals the positional legitimation process to be substantially more complex than previously appreciated. As we have seen, the process extends across a sequence of interactional moves through which viewpoints are (1) elicited, (2) embraced, and (3) responded to, and these are frequently in conflict as to their routinizing or problematizing ramifications. Each component move is impacted by nuanced language practices, suggesting a scalar rather than binary view of legitimation in action. Furthermore, each move has ramifications both for the standing of the viewpoint and more indirectly for the politician, and although these ramifications are often convergent, they may also be in tension. Such complexities must be incorporated into theoretical accounts of the mechanics of legitimation as it bears on viewpoints, politicians, and the limits of the mainstream. Moreover, attempts to develop interaction-based measures of sociopolitical legitimacy would also benefit from these insights.

The thoroughly public nature of this process, played out before a large media audience, suggests broader ramifications for the spread of legitimacy beyond the circle of interacting elites. The mass media are known to be an important, if not exclusive, source for perceptions of the general climate of opinion in society (Mutz 1998), which often diverge from scientific measures of opinion but nonetheless have very real self-reinforcing

consequences (Kuran 1995; Noelle-Neumann 1993). The interactional micro-politics examined in this study offers an expanded view of how the media might cue public perceptions in this area, not only through explicit poll results and story frames but also through the tacit premises of quotidian social activity. Notwithstanding the tensions documented above, politicians and journalists display substantial alignment on what is treated as *the generally recognized extant social standing of viewpoints*, even as some politicians resist association with presumptively toxic views while others work to detoxify them.

Over time, the accumulation and sedimentation of convergent political positioning practices may foster a sense that the boundaries of the mainstream are hardening and rigidifying. Conversely, accumulating variations may be implicated in the perceived loosening of boundaries, of ideological ferment and cultural experimentation. And systematic shifts in such practices over time may expand or contract the boundaries of the mainstream, contributing to the sense that positions once thought beyond the pale are becoming permissible or vice versa, and that the overall political culture is undergoing a transformation.

Finally, these findings could enable new research initiatives incorporating interactional behavior into the study of sociopolitical change. Would the increasing normalization and legitimacy of issue positions be reflected in how they are solicited, expressed, and responded to at the ground level of interaction? If so, how might this interactional index correlate with other indices such as popular support and institutional ratification? The political positioning sequences examined in this paper can be understood as both a running index of elite perceptions of the evolving sociopolitical landscape, as well as a potentially consequential form

of political action in its own right. Its analysis would add a new dimension to the study of the change process.

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