

The Journalist's Dilemma: Asymmetric Politics and Journalistic Norms

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Abstract

Journalistic norms require describing partisan conflict as symmetric, but not all partisan conflict is symmetric. This paper presents a signaling model in which two parties bargain to avoid a calamity. A centrist voter prefers symmetric compromise, and would like to punish any party that demands asymmetric concessions, but the voter doesn't observe the bargain. The voter only observes whether or not a journalist criticizes one party disproportionately. Thus, the voter must determine whether one-sided criticism indicates actual asymmetry or journalistic bias. The stronger the voter's prior belief in symmetry, the more ineffectual journalistic criticism becomes. Thus, even nonpartisan journalists must decline to point out actual asymmetry, creating a vicious cycle. Even if journalists can deter asymmetric bargaining in the short-run, doing so incentivizes asymmetric bargaining in the long-run.

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Watchdog journalists in an era of asymmetric partisan conflict find themselves in a bind. They cannot signal to voters that partisan conflict is *asymmetric* if they also signal their own nonpartisanship by describing all partisan conflict as symmetric. When faced with one party displaying intransigence, watchdogs can either decline to point out that fact thereby allowing the intransigent party to benefit from its intransigence, or criticize the intransigent party knowing that they will be accused of bias, which undercuts the value of the criticism anyway.

This professional bind is the result of a collision between journalistic norms and asymmetric political conflict. While early newspapers were party-owned and operated, many modern observers have forgotten this fact and simply expect journalists to abide by the norms that have developed in the post-muckraking era. These norms require those who do not wish to be labeled “opinion” journalists to treat candidates and officials of both parties, as well as any other visible actor with equal measures of openness and scrutiny as long as they adhere to whatever can be called “mainstream” policy positions at the time. These norms have developed for two closely related reasons. If ideal policy and objective truth are at the precise midpoint between the two parties’ platforms— a sort of principled centrism— then anyone who does *not* describe partisan conflict as symmetric must be biased. Therefore, journalists signal that they are *not* opinion journalists by observing these norms. Hence, journalists who want reputations for nonpartisanship have strong pressure to describe all partisan conflict as symmetric. The problem is that even if we accept the notion that centrism is intrinsically right, not all partisan conflict is symmetric, and in order for voters to adjudicate partisan conflict, they must know the positions between which they are adjudicating.

While accurately describing the party's locations in a policy space is central to the operation of spatial models such as Downs (1957), this role becomes even more crucial during times of divided government when inter-party bargaining must reach some resolution in order to prevent catastrophic policy failures. While early studies of divided government, such as Mayhew (1991) suggested that divided control does little to reduce productivity, experience since the 2010 midterm election calls into question whether or not that still applies in an era of extreme polarization among elected officials, in line with later research by skeptics of Mayhew's claims, such as Binder (1999) and Edwards et al. (1997). Since 2010, policy-based bargaining at the national level has occurred primarily around pieces of must-pass legislation, such as new appropriations (or continuing resolutions) and debt ceiling increases. Since Congress must pass, and the President must sign a piece of legislation in order to prevent a catastrophic policy failure in these circumstances, the question is not whether or not a bill will pass, but whether or not one party manages to secure greater concessions from the other in order to avoid catastrophe. If one party is less afraid of the catastrophe, then that party has more bargaining leverage, and in the absence of outside actors, the risk-acceptant party will be able to extract greater concessions from the risk-averse party. To principled centrists, this is a problem. The question is whether or not a centrist electorate can reign in a party demanding asymmetric concessions.

If a centrist electorate can punish a party for risking catastrophe in order to pull policy away from the center, then in principle, the outcome can revert to a symmetric compromise with policy outcomes converging to the preferences of the median voter. The problem is that a weakly informed electorate may not know how to evaluate inter-party negotiations. They rely on journalists to tell them who has demanded how much. If journalists are constrained by

professional norms to describe all inter-party bargaining as symmetric in order to avoid being accused of partisanship, then even if a risk-acceptant party demands asymmetric concessions because of their willingness to court disaster, they will go unpunished because professionally constrained journalists will not inform voters about the asymmetric nature of the dispute. So, how should journalists who attempt to serve the electorate and the cause of symmetric compromise handle asymmetric bargaining? That is “the journalist’s dilemma.”

As an example, consider the challenge of describing the 2011 Budget Control Act and the politics leading up to its passage. The Act was necessitated by the federal government reaching its “debt ceiling,” meaning that the Treasury was no longer allowed to issue more bonds. The problem was that Congress had directed the Treasury to disburse more money than it allowed the IRS to collect in tax revenue, so the gap could only be made up by selling bonds. Without the authority to sell more bonds, then, the Treasury would fail to meet a large portion of its Congressionally-mandated financial obligations. In order to stave off a catastrophe, the Treasury needed the authority to issue more bonds. The question was, under what type of budgetary structure would that authority be granted? President Obama and the Republican-controlled House of Representatives had very different ideas about how the budget should be structured. The political question was which side would get more of what they wanted. The so-called “grand bargain” demanded by many self-styled centrists, consisting of a combination of tax increases and cuts to entitlement programs, never materialized, and a smaller bargain was reached to avoid a debt ceiling breach at the last minute. The journalistic challenge was that one could make a strong case that one side was being more “unreasonable” than the other and demanding asymmetric concessions. The problem is that attributing more blame to one party, no

matter how justified, runs the risk of getting the accuser labeled a partisan for the opposing side, which is why even this manuscript ducks the question of who was being more intransigent.

In order to examine this type of situation and its broader implications, this paper presents a series of bargaining models in order to show what is necessary to impose symmetry on inter-party bargaining. The paper will begin simply with a canonical bargaining model, and then add layers to construct a full signaling model with Bayesian updating. The first model is a simple bargaining model of symmetrically risk-averse parties. In this case, simple repetition should be sufficient to force the parties to agree to symmetric compromise. Next, partisan asymmetry is introduced. If one party is relatively unafraid of the disaster created by bargaining failure, then that risk-acceptant party can extract more concessions from the risk-averse party, which pulls the outcome away from the midpoint between the parties' ideal points. Next comes the introduction of a centrist journalist, who can impose a cost on one party for making asymmetric demands by informing the electorate that the risk-acceptant party is courting disaster and demanding asymmetric concessions. If the journalist can impose that cost, then she can impose symmetry on the final compromise, even when one party is more willing to risk disaster. The problem is that imposing such a cost requires violating journalistic norms by accusing one party of being more intransigent than the other. Finally, then, the paper presents a signaling model in which the voter must attempt to distinguish between valid criticism of a party that makes asymmetric demands, and criticism from a partisan operative who will always criticize one party disproportionately.

Equilibria provide little comfort to those hopeful about the role of the neutral press in an era of asymmetric political conflict. When the voter has strong prior beliefs that the parties are

symmetrically afraid of disaster, then any criticism, valid or not, will be interpreted as an indication that the journalist is a shill. Thus, any watchdog who pays a non-zero cost for violating norms will decline to criticize asymmetric bargaining. Thus, a risk-acceptant party cannot be deterred from courting disaster in order to extract asymmetric concessions from a risk-averse party. That creates a vicious cycle in which watchdog journalists reinforce voters' prior beliefs in party symmetry, which makes it even more difficult for future watchdogs to point out actual partisan asymmetry. Moreover, even if watchdogs *can* deter asymmetric bargaining by a risk-acceptant party, the result is that watchdogs *don't* criticize the risk-acceptant party because it has abided the demand for symmetry. Thus, even that result will reinforce voters' beliefs in partisan symmetry, undercutting the capacity of future watchdogs to deter asymmetric bargaining. Thus, watchdog journalists are unable to reconcile professional norms with asymmetric partisan conflict. Moreover, the central paradox is that the existence of partisan media outlets can actually hurt their own sides by obscuring the difference between legitimate one-sided criticism and reflexive partisanship.

Model 1: Symmetric bargaining

In order to demonstrate the dilemma faced by journalists in an asymmetric situation, let us begin by reviewing the basic and well-known bargaining game on which the paper will build.

Consider two parties, A and B, with quadratic loss utility functions for policy.

$$(1) \quad U_A(p) = -(p - A)^2$$

$$(2) \quad U_B(p) = -(p - B)^2$$

Suppose that $B > A$. In a time of divided government, the two parties are charged with agreeing to a compromise policy, and if they fail to agree on a compromise, a collapse will occur. In that case, the utility that each party receives will be $U_A(\text{Collapse})$ and $U_B(\text{Collapse})$ where $U_A(\text{Collapse}) = U_B(\text{Collapse}) < 0$. Thus, each party is equally interested in avoiding the collapse. Each party simultaneously makes an offer, O_A and O_B respectively. If $O_A \geq O_B$, then the policy outcome will be $(O_A + O_B)/2$. Otherwise, the collapse occurs. Suppose, further, that $U_A(\text{Collapse}) < U_A((A + B)/2)$. Symmetry, then, implies $U_B(\text{Collapse}) < U_B((A + B)/2)$. Thus, each party prefers a symmetric compromise to the collapse. However, suppose that $U_A(B) < U_A(\text{Collapse})$, and $U_B(A) < U_B(\text{Collapse})$. Thus, each party prefers the collapse to the opposing party's ideal point. Without these conditions, collapse would be either inevitable or too easy to avoid.

The Nash equilibria to the game are quite simple. Consider the range, $(U_B^{-1}(\text{Collapse}), U_A^{-1}(\text{Collapse}))$. As long as $U_B^{-1}(\text{Collapse}) \leq O_A = O_B \leq U_A^{-1}(\text{Collapse})$, we have a Nash equilibrium. Neither party has any incentive to make further concessions since doing so would give up more than necessary, and neither party has any incentive to make fewer concessions because doing so would lead to a collapse, and both parties prefer this outcome to the collapse. Thus, there is a range of Nash equilibria. However, one equilibrium is a focal point: $O_A = O_B = (A + B)/2$. A midpoint is not only an obvious compromise, it has a unique mathematical property. It maximizes $U_A + U_B$. This is simple to demonstrate, and follows from the fact that both parties are equally risk-averse.

$$(3) \quad -(p - A)^2 - (p - B)^2 = -p^2 + 2Ap - A^2 - p^2 + 2Bp - B^2 = -2p^2 + 2p(A + B) - A^2 - B^2$$

Differentiating with respect to p yields:

$$(4) \quad -4p + 2A + 2B$$

Maximizing $U_A + U_B$, then, implies the following:

$$(5) \quad -4p + 2A + 2B = 0$$

$$(6) \quad p = (A + B)/2$$

Therefore, the total utility received by all parties is maximized at the midpoint between the two parties' ideal points, which is itself a Nash equilibrium. To the degree that there is a defense of principled centrism, this is it. Moreover, the media should not be necessary in order to produce symmetric concessions. All that is necessary is repetition. Since the payoffs for symmetric compromise are greater than the payoffs for collapse, each party can threaten to cause collapse in subsequent rounds as punishment for failure to offer symmetric compromise, and that threat can maintain symmetric compromise. In a repeated game, then, neither party has any incentive to accept less than symmetry by the folk theorem.

Model 2: Asymmetric bargaining without media oversight

If media oversight is unnecessary in a symmetric conflict, then what happens when we introduce the very possibility that journalistic norms prevent acknowledging-- asymmetry? Suppose that $0 > U_B(\text{Collapse}) > U_A(\text{Collapse})$, so Party A is more interested in averting the collapse than Party B. Clearly, without oversight, this gives Party B a bargaining advantage. In a conventional game of brinksmanship, the actor willing to run a greater risk of disaster can force the more cautious actor to yield earlier. In this case, suppose that $U_B(\text{Collapse}) > U_B((A + B)/2)$, but $U_A(\text{Collapse}) < U_A((A + B)/2)$. Thus, Party B prefers the collapse to the midpoint between the parties' ideal points, but Party A does not. Consider a policy that provides Party B with

utility equivalent to the collapse, $U_B^{-1}(\text{Collapse})$ where $U_B^{-1}(\text{Collapse}) < B$.¹ If $U_A(U_B^{-1}(\text{Collapse})) < U_A(\text{Collapse})$, then bargaining is hopeless because there is no policy that both parties prefer to the collapse. However, if $U_A(U_B^{-1}(\text{Collapse})) > U_A(\text{Collapse})$, then any combination of offers $O_A = O_B$ such that $U_B^{-1}(\text{Collapse}) < O_A = O_B < U_A^{-1}(\text{Collapse})$ will be a Nash equilibrium. Nevertheless, such an equilibrium tilts towards Party B. Party B achieves a reward for willingness to court disaster.

Moreover, repetition is no longer sufficient to avert Party B's reluctance to compromise. Suppose that the game is repeated indefinitely. Suppose, further, that Party A offers a midpoint between the parties' ideal points in the first round, but threatens to punish Party B by demanding its own ideal point if, at any time, Party B offers anything less than the midpoint between the parties' ideal points. Even with that threat, Party B will not offer the midpoint between the parties' ideal points because Party B would prefer to pay the cost of the disaster in every round rather than accept a compromise. In a conflict with one party that is more intransigent because of its willingness to court disaster, intransigence pays dividends.

Model 3: Asymmetric bargaining with unconstrained media

Model 2 presents two challenges to the media. First, the outcome breaks from the midpoint between the parties' ideal points, which is troubling to those who treat the midpoint between parties' locations as intrinsically good. More difficult for journalists, though, is that the reason for that outcome is a fundamental asymmetry, which journalistic norms deny. Party B is more willing to accept disaster than Party A, so it offers fewer concessions. Can a watchdog

¹ The equivalent policy to the right of B is irrelevant.

journalist who prefers symmetric compromise impose symmetry? Not directly. Only voters can directly punish an intransigent party. Voters can threaten to punish a party that makes asymmetric demands, but only if they know about the asymmetry, and that requires being told by journalists that the asymmetry exists. So, suppose we add a watchdog journalist and a voter to Model 2, and assume that both prefer symmetric compromise.

Suppose initially that the journalist is not constrained by professional norms, and that the voter can trust the journalist to send an accurate signal. Thus, we construct a new game by adding a new round to Model 2. In the first round, Parties A and B simultaneously make policy offers, leading to either an agreement or a collapse as in Model 2. Then, a journalist describes the outcome to the median voter. The journalist's utility function for policy is as follows:

$$U_J(p) = -(p - ((A + B)/2))^2$$

Thus, the journalist values balance for its own sake, and since the median voter's utility function is identical, so does the electorate. However, both the journalist and the median voter are forward-thinking actors who pay a large cost if the collapse occurs, and do not want a party anywhere near the levers of power if that party is willing to risk collapse by bargaining asymmetrically. Thus, if a party bargains asymmetrically and the voter leaves that party in control of either branch, both the voter and the journalist pay a cost $U_v(\text{reckless party in power}) = R$ where $R < U_v(B)$ and $R < U_v(A)$. Therefore, even though the voter (and the journalist) would prefer even an asymmetric compromise to giving full authority to one party, the cost of leaving a reckless party in office outweighs the cost of giving unified control to a non-reckless party.

Thus, if the journalist criticizes one party as reckless for bargaining asymmetrically, then the electorate will favor its opponent in the upcoming election, and provide the more compliant

party with unified control of the entire federal government (recall that the bargaining game exists because of divided government). In the absence of such criticism, the electorate will simply maintain the current divided state since it is producing the symmetric compromise that the voter wants. Since neither party wants to lose control of a branch, we will denote the cost a party pays for losing control of a branch as C_E where $U(C_E) < 0$.

So, suppose that Party B makes an offer of O_B where $O_B > (A + B)/2$. If Party A were to offer O_A where $O_A = O_B$, then despite the fact that the result tilts towards Party B in such a way as to pull the outcome away from symmetric compromise, the result would be a Nash equilibrium to Model 2 as long as $U_A(O_B) > U_A(\text{Collapse})$ and $U_B(O_A) > U_B(\text{Collapse})$.

However, neither the journalist nor the voter are willing to risk leaving Party B in power if it bargains asymmetrically. If the voter is informed by the journalist that Party B *is* bargaining asymmetrically, then the voter's optimal move is to punish Party B by giving unified control to Party A, and since the journalist pays no cost for sending that signal (which will be revisited in Model 4), then there is a credible threat to impose punishment on Party B for asymmetric bargaining. Is that threat sufficient to force symmetric compromise?

If the journalist threatens to impose a cost, $U(C_E)$, on any party demanding asymmetric concessions by informing the voter of the asymmetry, then as long as $U_B(O_B) + U_B(C_E) < U_B((A + B)/2)$ and $U_B(C) + U_B(C_E) < U_B((A + B)/2)$, then B's strategy of demanding O_B would no longer be optimal since pursuing a compromise would provide more utility than the combination of the policy victory coming from the "unreasonable" demand and the media-imposed punishment for doing so, and adding electoral costs to the collapse makes the compromise preferable to that as well. Thus, media attribution of blame for asymmetric demands can force

parties to compromise symmetrically, even when one party is disproportionately willing to court disaster. The Nash equilibrium, and in fact, subgame perfect Nash equilibrium, is for both parties to make symmetric concessions because while Party B would have preferred a collapse to the compromise, the cost of not compromising in the face of media attribution of blame nullifies their aversion to compromise. Thus, a trusted watchdog journalist unconstrained by professional norms can impose symmetry in an asymmetric conflict by threatening to criticize a party for demanding asymmetric concessions while risking catastrophe in the process.

Constraints on the media

The challenge to Model 3 is the journalistic norm of symmetry. In a media environment that combines non-aligned journalists with party-aligned journalists in a country of imperfectly-informed voters, journalists signal to the audience that they are not partisan by adhering to the symmetry norm. To assert any asymmetry in violation of journalistic norms opens one to the charge of partisanship and permits anyone who is either politically independent or aligned with the spurned party to disregard the charges on the grounds that the journalist is nothing but a partisan shill. Suppose Party B is more willing to court disaster than Party A, and uses that willingness to force Party A to make large concessions beyond the midpoint between the parties' ideal points. Suppose, further, that a particular media outlet criticizes Party B for such behavior. Party B will simply respond by accusing that media outlet of being a shill for Party A, and since such outlets exist, an imperfectly informed voter who assumes symmetry as a prior may be more likely to believe that the journalist is a partisan hack than that Party B really is making asymmetric demands. If Party B can convince enough people that anyone laying more criticism

on Party B than on Party A is merely a partisan operative, then the criticism itself loses its effectiveness. Moreover, if the claim that the journalist is a hack imposes any professional cost in terms of ratings, reputation, access to sources, etc., then the journalist has a dilemma—levy asymmetric criticism, at a personal and professional cost and risk being dismissed anyway, or adhere to journalistic norms and decline to criticize the intransigent party. Examining the dilemma requires a signaling model.

Model 4: A signaling model with potentially asymmetric partisan conflict

Actors

There is a single, pivotal voter, whose objective is a symmetric policy concession from each party. Thus, the voter's ideal point for policy is $(A + B)/2$.

There is a single journalist. That journalist has a type determined by “nature”—either she is a watchdog (W) with policy preferences identical to the voter, or she is a shill (S) for Party A who will reflexively criticize Party B in all circumstances.

Party B must engage in a negotiation with Party A. Party A is not a strategic actor. Party A prefers a symmetric compromise to a bargaining failure, but will accommodate Party B's demand for asymmetric concession when Party B forces the issue by courting a disaster that it sincerely prefers to symmetric compromise. Party B is the strategic actor. Party B has a type determined by “nature”—either they are as afraid of the disaster as Party A (labeled “Risk-

averse,” or “Av”), or they prefer the disaster to a symmetric compromise (labeled “Risk-acceptant,” or “Ac”).²

Structure

Figure 1 here

The structure of the game is given by the extensive form representation in Figure 1. The first round is a move by “nature” selecting a journalist type and a type for Party B. Since each actor has two types, there are four total possibilities, with $\Pr(WAc)+\Pr(WAv)+\Pr(SAc)+\Pr(SAv)=1$. Both the journalist and Party B observe the nature’s decision. The voter does not. The sequence then depends on “nature’s” choice.

WAv

If nature selects a watchdog journalist and a risk-averse Party B, the bargaining process is equivalent to Model 1. The watchdog is unnecessary because symmetrically risk-averse parties will converge to a symmetric bargain. The watchdog will then decline to criticize Party B because it has not made any excessive demands. The voter does not observe the bargain itself, nor the types of actors. The voter simply observes a lack of media criticism. The voter must then decide whether or not to punish Party B, keeping in mind that she may be at a different node. The voter can either provide unified control of the government to Party A in order to punish Party B, or maintain the current divide. Thus, if nature selects WAv, the only strategic

² Note that both types have risk-averse utility functions for *policy*. The risk-acceptance/risk-aversion distinction refers only to their utility for stability versus disaster.

choice is that of a voter who must either punish Party B or not, but this choice is made as a part of “information set 1.”

WAc

If nature selects a watchdog journalist and a risk-acceptant Party B, Party B then faces a choice. Party B can either make an asymmetric demand, or offer a symmetric compromise. If Party B offers a symmetric compromise, Party A accepts it, the watchdog has no reason to criticize Party B, and the next strategic choice belongs to the voter, who must either decide to punish Party B or not. However, since all the voter has observed is a lack of criticism from the journalist, this choice is also made at “information set 1.”

Alternatively, if Party B makes an asymmetric demand, Party A will meet it by the logic of Model 2, but the watchdog must decide whether or not to criticize Party B. If the watchdog declines to criticize Party B (sending that signal will have a cost), the voter simply observes the lack of criticism, and despite the fact that Party B demanded and received asymmetric concessions, the voter makes her choice as part of information set 1.

However, if the watchdog criticizes Party B, the voter observes only that criticism, and must decide whether or not to punish Party B as a part of information set 2.

SAc

If nature selects a shill and a risk-acceptant Party B, then Party B knows it will be criticized by the shill no matter what it does, so it simply demands asymmetric concessions from Party A because there is no point trying to pacify the shill. Party A is forced to grant those

concessions. The shill then criticizes Party B, which happens to be valid, but since the voter only sees the criticism itself, she must decide whether or not to punish Party B as part of information set 2.

SAv

If nature selects a shill and a risk-averse Party B, then Party B knows it will be criticized no matter what it does, but the symmetric aversion to risk reduces the bargain to Model 1. Thus, Parties A and B agree to a symmetric compromise, Party B is unfairly criticized by the shill, which could not have been averted, and the voter must decide whether or not to punish Party B as part of information set 2.

While the structure is complicated by nature's four-way choice at the first stage, the game itself only includes strategic decisions at four information sets. The voter's choice occurs at one of two information sets—the voter decides to punish Party B or not having only observed whether or not the journalist criticizes Party B. The other two strategic choices come when nature selects a watchdog and a risk-acceptant Party B. The risk-acceptant Party B must either make an asymmetric demand or offer symmetric compromise, and if a risk-acceptant Party B makes an asymmetric demand, the watchdog must decide whether or not to criticize Party B.

This leads to four potential outcomes:

Symmetric compromise followed by non-punishment: SymNon

Symmetric compromise followed by punishment: SymPun

Asymmetric demand followed by non-punishment: AsymNon

Asymmetric demand followed by punishment: AsymPun

Actors' preferences over outcomes

The voter's most preferred outcome must be symmetric compromise combined with non-punishment. That way, she receives a centrist policy and by not carrying out a punishment, she creates no perverse incentives for potential future iterations. (While the game as constructed is one-shot, we must at least consider the possibility of future interaction). Moreover, punishment leads to unified control by Party A, which tilts against centrist compromise in the future. Clearly, the voter's least preferred outcome would be an asymmetric demand combined with non-punishment. In that case, she does not get her preferred policy, and she implies that any threat to punish asymmetric parties is not credible. Between SymPun and AsymNon, the voter may prefer SymPun to AsymNon on the grounds that the potential perverse incentives created by punishing an innocent Party B are outweighed by the immediate policy consequences of an asymmetric bargain, but changing that preference ordering would not affect the game substantively. Thus, we arrive at the following:

$$(7) \quad U_V(\text{SymNon}) > U_V(\text{SymPun}) > U_V(\text{AsymPun}) > U_V(\text{AsymNon})$$

The shill makes no strategic choice— she simply criticizes Party B because that is her function. Since she makes no strategic choice, her preference ordering is irrelevant. However, the watchdog shares the voter's preference ordering between SymNon, SymPun, AsymPun and AsymNon, with one additional component. If the watchdog criticizes Party B, she loses

$U_w(\text{Crit}) > 0$. This reflects the professional cost of breaking from journalistic norms and levying asymmetric criticism. This can come in the form of reduced readership or ratings, ostracism, losing access to sources who now view her as hostile, or some other consequence. The point is merely that journalistic norms make it costly for journalists to *break* from those norms, which creates the signaling cost important to the structure of the game and the substantive dilemma.

Just as the shill makes no strategic choice, the risk-averse Party B makes no strategic choice since symmetric parties should be able to arrive at symmetric compromises without journalistic intervention by the logic of Model 1. Thus, the risk-averse Party B's preferences are immaterial. However, the risk-acceptant Party B clearly prefers an asymmetric demand combined with non-punishment to any other outcome. Similarly, their least-preferred outcome is a symmetric compromise combined with punishment. In order for there to be a strategic dilemma, we must assume that even a risk-acceptant Party B prefers to make a symmetric compromise in order to escape punishment rather than facing punishment for an asymmetric demand, otherwise there would be no way to achieve compliance. Thus, a risk-acceptant Party B must have the following preference-ordering:

$$(8) \quad U_{Ac}(\text{AsymNon}) > U_{Ac}(\text{SymNon}) > U_{Ac}(\text{AsymPun}) > U_{Ac}(\text{SymPun})$$

The inevitability of perverse outcomes in Model 4

Two of the potential outcomes to the game are perverse: AsymNon and SymPun. In the first, a non-compliant Party B manages to escape punishment for making an asymmetric demand, and if it is a possibility in equilibrium, then a risk-acceptant Party B is at least not fully deterred

from bargaining asymmetrically by the threat of punishment. The other perverse outcome, SymPun, occurs when a compliant Party B is punished anyway. Either creates a serious problem if we add repetition because a party that will be punished even when it is compliant has no incentive to be compliant, just as a party that escapes punishment for non-compliance has no incentive to comply. Moreover, even if Party A is willing to bargain symmetrically, handing unified control to Party A just to punish Party B pulls future policy outcomes away from the center, which is only justifiable if there is a long-term risk of leaving a reckless party in office, as discussed earlier. The problem is that *all* equilibria include non-zero probabilities of a perverse outcome. Avoiding perverse outcomes from information set 1 is possible. As long as the watchdog's equilibrium strategy is to criticize a non-compliant Party B with probability 1, the voter can deterministically decline to punish at information set 1, and perverse outcomes are avoided. However, there is no such possibility at information set 2. At information set 2, the voter cannot determine with certainty whether she is facing a compliant Party B being criticized by a shill, a guilty Party B being criticized by a watchdog, or even a guilty Party B being criticized by a shill that would have criticized it anyway. Thus, the voter must punish with probability $\Pr(\text{punish}|\text{criticism})$ at each node within that information set. If $\Pr(\text{punish}|\text{criticism}) > 0$, then there is a non-zero probability that a risk-averse Party B (selected by nature) is being punished unfairly. If $\Pr(\text{punish}|\text{criticism}) < 1$, then there is a non-zero probability that a risk-acceptant Party B is avoiding punishment despite making asymmetric demands. Since $\Pr(\text{punish}|\text{criticism})$ cannot be both 0 and 1, information set 2 makes perverse outcomes a necessary possibility in all equilibria.

Deterring asymmetric bargaining in equilibrium

While perverse outcomes cannot be deterministically avoided in Model 4, we can pose a more narrow question about the watchdog's and voter's collective capacity to deter asymmetric bargaining by a risk-acceptant Party B. So, what is necessary for an equilibrium in which a risk-acceptant Party B is deterred from bargaining asymmetrically?

There are two components to such deterrence: the watchdog's threat to levy criticism, and the voter's willingness to punish Party B in information set 2, which includes the node following an asymmetric demand and media criticism. Let us begin with the threat to levy criticism itself. Since the watchdog pays a cost for criticizing Party B, we must derive the conditions under which that criticism can be rational. In order for the watchdog to be willing to criticize, the utility of criticizing must be greater than or equal to the utility of not criticizing. Let $\Pr(\text{punish or no} | \text{criticism or no})$ represent the voter's strategy at either information set 1 or information set 2. (We will derive those strategies shortly).

$$(9) \quad U_w(\text{AsymNon})\Pr(\text{no punishment} | \text{no criticism}) + U_w(\text{AsymPun})\Pr(\text{punish} | \text{no criticism}) \leq U_w(\text{AsymNon})\Pr(\text{no punishment} | \text{criticism}) + U_w(\text{AsymPun})\Pr(\text{punish} | \text{criticism}) - U_w(\text{Crit})$$

Given that rule, even if the voter deterministically punishes Party B given criticism and deterministically refrains from punishment otherwise, it would still be irrational for the watchdog to criticize Party B if $U_w(\text{Crit}) > U_w(\text{AsymPun}) - U_w(\text{AsymNon})$. Thus, the greater the cost watchdogs pay for levying asymmetric criticism, the weaker the threat to punish Party B for

making asymmetric demands, as we would expect. Moreover, the existence of a non-zero probability of escaping punishment after making an asymmetric demand creates a possibility of perverse outcomes in information set 1 in addition to the necessary perverse outcomes from information set 2.

However, since the goal of this section is to derive the conditions under which a risk-acceptant Party B is deterred from asymmetric bargaining, let us proceed by assuming that the costs of signaling asymmetry are sufficiently small that the watchdog deterministically criticizes asymmetric bargaining, and refrains from criticizing compromise. What, then, would be necessary for this threat to deter asymmetric bargaining?

If the watchdog deterministically criticizes asymmetric demands, then the voter's equilibrium strategy must be to decline to punish Party B in information set 1 because the only nodes in the information set in that equilibrium are nodes in which Party B has agreed to a symmetric compromise, and $U_v(\text{SymNon}) > U_v(\text{SymPun})$ by assumption.

Given that, Party B is deterred from making asymmetric demands when faced with a watchdog only if the following condition holds. We can derive the condition in terms of the voter's strategy at information set 2, which can be denoted as $\Pr(\text{punishment}|\text{criticism})$.

$$(10) \quad U_{Ac}(\text{SymNon}) \geq U_{Ac}(\text{AsymPun})\Pr(\text{punish}|\text{criticism}) + U_{Ac}(\text{AsymNon})(1 - \Pr(\text{punishment}|\text{criticism}))$$

Moreover, recall the following:

$$(11) \quad U_{Ac}(AsymNon) > U_{Ac}(SymNon) > U_{Ac}(AsymPun)$$

Thus, the risk-acceptant Party B is only deterred from making asymmetric demands in equilibrium if the voter's strategy in equilibrium meets the following condition:

$$(12) \quad U_{Ac}(SymNon) \geq U_{Ac}(AsymPun)Pr(\text{punish}|\text{criticism}) + U_{Ac}(AsymNon)(1 - Pr(\text{punishment}|\text{criticism}))$$

$$(13) \quad U_{Ac}(SymNon) \geq U_{Ac}(AsymPun)Pr(\text{punish}|\text{criticism}) + U_{Ac}(AsymNon) - Pr(\text{punishment}|\text{criticism})U_{Ac}(AN)$$

$$(14) \quad U_{Ac}(SymNon) - U_{Ac}(AsymNon) \geq U_{Ac}(AsymPun)Pr(\text{punish}|\text{criticism}) - Pr(\text{punishment}|\text{criticism})U_{Ac}(AN)$$

$$(15) \quad U_{Ac}(SymNon) - U_{Ac}(AsymNon) \geq Pr(\text{punish}|\text{criticism})(U_{Ac}(AsymPun) - U_{Ac}(AsymNon))$$

$$(16) \quad (U_{Ac}(SymNon) - U_{Ac}(AsymNon))/(U_{Ac}(AsymPun) - U_{Ac}(AsymNon)) \leq Pr(\text{punish}|\text{criticism})$$

$$(17) \quad Pr(\text{punish}|\text{criticism}) \geq (U_{Ac}(AsymNon) - U_{Ac}(SymNon))/(U_{Ac}(AsymNon) - U_{Ac}(AsymPun))$$

Can the voter have such a strategy in equilibrium? That depends on her priors. The basic problem for the voter's strategy in information set 2 is that even if she knows a watchdog never shirks, there is still a non-zero probability that any criticism is valid, and a non-zero probability that the criticism is unfair— recall the inevitability of perverse outcomes at information set 2. The voter's incentive to punish in information set 2 is strongest when the risk-acceptant Party B always demands asymmetric concessions, and the watchdog always criticizes asymmetric bargaining, so let us focus on that possibility. If it is irrational for the voter to punish Party B here, then it is always irrational to punish Party B. If the risk-acceptant Party B always bargains asymmetrically and the watchdog never shirks, then the voter's updated belief that she is facing a risk-averse Party B unfairly criticized by a shill in information set 2 is given by Bayes' rule.

$$(18) \quad \Pr(\text{Risk-averse \& shill}|\text{criticism}) = \Pr(\text{SAv})/(\Pr(\text{SAv})+\Pr(\text{SAc})+\Pr(\text{WAc}))$$

The other two nodes in information set 2 are nodes at which an asymmetric bargain has been reached. Thus, the updated probabilities that the voter is facing a party that has bargained either symmetrically or asymmetrically given criticism are as follows:

$$(19) \quad \Pr(\text{Symmetric compromise}|\text{criticism}) = \Pr(\text{Risk-averse \& shill}|\text{criticism})$$

$$(20) \quad \Pr(\text{Asymmetric bargain}|\text{criticism}) = 1 - \Pr(\text{Risk-averse \& shill}|\text{criticism})$$

For the purposes of notational convenience, let us refer to $\Pr(\text{Risk-averse \& skill criticism})$ as P . Thus, we can simplify the voter's decision as follows. It is rational for the voter to punish Party B at information set 2 if and only if the following inequality holds:

$$(21) \quad PU_V(\text{SymNon}) + (1 - P)U_V(\text{AsymNon}) \leq PU_V(\text{SymPun}) + (1 - P)U_V(\text{AsymPun})$$

We can now solve for P :

$$(22) \quad PU_V(\text{SymNon}) + U_V(\text{AsymNon}) - PU_V(\text{AsymNon}) \leq PU_V(\text{SymPun}) + U_V(\text{AsymPun}) - PU_V(\text{AsymPun})$$

$$(23) \quad PU_V(\text{SymNon}) - PU_V(\text{AsymNon}) - PU_V(\text{SymPun}) + PU_V(\text{AsymPun}) \leq U_V(\text{AsymPun}) - U_V(\text{AsymNon})$$

$$(24) \quad P([U_V(\text{SymNon}) - U_V(\text{SymPun})] + [U_V(\text{AsymPun}) - U_V(\text{AsymNon})]) \leq U_V(\text{AsymPun}) - U_V(\text{AsymNon})$$

$$(25) \quad P \leq (U_V(\text{AsymPun}) - U_V(\text{AsymNon})) / ([U_V(\text{SymNon}) - U_V(\text{SymPun})] + [U_V(\text{AsymPun}) - U_V(\text{AsymNon})])$$

Thus, in order for it to be rational for the voter to punish Party B in information set 2, her updated belief in information set 2 must be that the probability of facing a risk-averse Party B

unfairly criticized by a shill must be no higher than the ratio given by Inequality 25. After all, if her updated belief that a risk-averse Party B is being unfairly criticized were 1, then Inequality 25 would reduce to $U_v(\text{SymNon}) \leq U_v(\text{SymPun})$, which is false by assumption.

So, how high is $\Pr(\text{Risk-averse \& shill}|\text{criticism})$? Recall that by Bayes' rule, $\Pr(\text{Risk-averse \& shill}|\text{criticism}) = \Pr(\text{SA}_v)/(\Pr(\text{SA}_v)+\Pr(\text{SA}_c)+\Pr(\text{WA}_c))$. If the voter's prior belief in party symmetry, $\Pr(\text{SA}_v) + \Pr(\text{WA}_v)$, is high, then it follows that $\Pr(\text{SA}_c)+\Pr(\text{WA}_c)$ is low. Moreover, if $\Pr(\text{SA}_c)+\Pr(\text{WA}_c)$ is low, it follows that $\Pr(\text{SA}_v)/(\Pr(\text{SA}_v)+\Pr(\text{SA}_c)+\Pr(\text{WA}_c))$ must be high. In essence, if the voter has a strong prior belief in party symmetry, then upon finding herself at information set 2, her updated belief must be that the criticism is likely to be unfair criticism of a compliant Party B leveled by a journalist who is merely a shill for Party A. In that case, it is irrational to punish Party B at information set 2. Therefore, if the voter has a strong prior belief in party symmetry, then it is *never* rational to punish Party B, even when she observes criticism. Thus, if the voter's prior belief in symmetry is sufficiently strong, then there can be *no* equilibria in which Party B is punished.

The full problem created by the existence of the shill is now apparent through backwards induction. If the voter's prior belief in party symmetry is sufficiently strong, then even when she observes media criticism, she will not punish Party B because her updated belief is that the criticism most likely comes from a shill. Given such a voter's unwillingness to punish Party B when observing criticism, a watchdog who pays any non-zero cost for criticism will decline to criticize, even when a risk-acceptant Party B demands asymmetric concessions. Knowing that, a risk-acceptant Party B will demand asymmetric concessions, knowing that Party A will grant them and that the watchdog will decline to criticize. The voter will thus observe the absence of

criticism, and with a strong prior belief in symmetry, she concludes that she is facing a symmetric bargain and declines to punish Party B. If the voter's prior expectation is party symmetry, every aspect of deterrence falls apart.

Moreover, while this is constructed as a static game in which Bayesian priors are exogenous by definition, in reality, prior expectations are determined largely by experience, making matters worse because if the equilibrium solution to the static game is for even watchdogs to decline to criticize, that reinforces the voter's belief in symmetry, making the prior that much stronger in any future iteration. The result is that the watchdog is trapped in a vicious cycle in which the voter's prior expectation of symmetry makes criticism both pointlessly costly and ineffectual, thereby reinforcing the expectation of symmetry that created the problem in the first place.

The problem isn't even that a shill will always criticize Party B. The problem is the *existence* of the shill, or at least the possible existence of the shill. That possibility undercuts the watchdog's credibility even when nature does *not* introduce the shill into the game. The mere existence of partisan media outlets allows a party criticized for asymmetric behavior to respond by accusing the outlet of being a shill, and since a weakly informed voter has difficulty assessing who is right, the mere *possibility* that the outlet *might* be a shill not only complicates the decision for the voter, it can undermine the watchdog's incentive to actually be a watchdog. In a neighborhood of dogs who constantly bark at each other, barking no longer serves as a warning of actual danger unless one can pick out the sound of the trained dog from the din.

Moreover, let us note the deep irony that it is the risk-acceptant Party B that has a bargaining advantage because of the possibility of a shill for Party A. Conventional questions of

media bias ask whether or not biased sources can advantage the side for whom they work. While there are certainly reasons to believe that a party can benefit from having media skills on their side, this model shows that there can be a cost too. In practice, skills may also help their opponents, who have a strong strategic incentive to convince people that they are the perpetual victims of media bias, real or imagined. Even false claims of bias are made more credible by the existence of real bias elsewhere.

The long-term impossibility of deterrence

The previous analysis demonstrates a point that should be substantively intuitive— if voters have strong priors that partisan conflict is symmetric, then even watchdogs cannot signal asymmetry because such a signal will be interpreted as a partisan bias. The logical question, then, is as follows. What kind of priors facilitate the journalist's and voter's capacity to deter Party B from engaging in asymmetric bargaining?

Having strong priors in asymmetry would be too easy. The most obvious alternative answer is that deterrence can be facilitated by the voter having strong priors that the journalist is a watchdog rather than a shill. Thus, when she finds herself at information set 2, her updated belief is that Party B has demanded asymmetric concessions. In that case, carrying out a punishment is rational at information set 2, in which case Party B is forced to agree to symmetric compromise, even when nature determines that Party B is risk-acceptant. Thus, a risk-acceptant Party B is forced to agree to a compromise if the voter has strong priors that the journalist is a watchdog rather than a shill.

There are two problems with this— one obvious, and one subtle. Arguably, the subtle problem is the greater problem. Let us begin with the obvious. First, this possibility relies on the specific personal reputation of the journalist. In a fragmented media environment with multiple national television stations, local stations, cable stations, a few remaining newspapers, radio and too many blogs and on-line news sources to count, though, few journalists are sufficiently well-known to develop any such reputation. Moreover, the voters who are attentive enough to news sources to be aware of any one journalist's reputation tend to be partisan anyway. Consider the following data from the 2012 American National Election Study. Respondents are asked how often they pay attention to politics and elections. What proportion of respondents at each level of partisanship indicate “always?” Strong Democrats and Strong Republicans “always” pay attention 22.7% of the time and 27.6% of the time respectively. Weak Democrats and Weak Republicans do so 8% of the time and 14% respectively. So-called leaners “always” pay attention 14.6% of the time for Democrats, and 22.3% of the time for Republicans. Pure independents only claim the highest level of attentiveness 9% of the time.

It is the pivotal voter's interpretation of criticism that matters, and if the pivotal voter is the least aware of individual journalists' reputations in a fragmented media environment because that voter pays relatively little attention, then it is difficult for any journalist to develop a sufficiently sterling reputation among the weakly-informed voters who need the signal for priors to inoculate them against the charges of being shills.

While challenging, though, this obstacle to deterrence pales in comparison to the more subtle problem. Suppose the pivotal voter has a strong prior belief that the journalist is a watchdog. This prior makes the threat of punishment for asymmetric bargaining sufficient that

even a risk-acceptant Party B must agree to an asymmetric compromise when faced with a watchdog rather than a shill, but what is the result? The watchdog declines to criticize, and the voter declines to punish Party B. The key here is that what the voter observes is a lack of criticism. The consequence is to reinforce the voter's belief in symmetry. As Schelling (1960) observed, a threat that is effective is one that is never carried out, but that creates a special problem here. The more effectively Party B is deterred from asymmetric bargaining, the stronger the voter's prior in symmetry becomes in any future round, which *limits* the capacity to deter Party B from bargaining asymmetrically in the future, as demonstrated in the previous section. By deterring Party B from threatening collapse in the short run, the watchdog creates the very conditions that strengthen Party B's hand in the long run— voters' beliefs in symmetry.

The long-run tendency in the model, then, is towards asymmetric outcomes whenever nature creates a risk-acceptant party willing to threaten disaster in order to secure extra concessions. If voters have strong prior beliefs in symmetry, then a risk-acceptant party cannot be deterred from demanding extra concessions. But, even if the voter has strong priors that the journalist is a watchdog, the fact that this deters a risk-acceptant party from asymmetric bargaining in the short-run reinforces the belief in party symmetry that strengthens the risk-acceptant party's ability to demand concessions in the long-run. The trap is quite thorough.

Criticism without looking like a shill

Do the media have any way out? In principle, yes. They can simply say, “a plague on both your houses.” They can accuse both parties of being intransigent, regardless of whether or not only one party actually is. In the case of the 2011 Budget Control Act, for example, they

could assert that Democrats refuse to accept any entitlement cuts and Republicans refuse to accept any tax increases, even if one of those statements is false. Mathematically, can this work?

Instead of the signaling game from Model 4, consider a variant of Model 3 in which the media impose a cost, C_E , on *both* parties if they fail to achieve a compromise of $(A + B)/2$. Can Party B still extract disproportionate concessions from Party A because it is more willing to court disaster? If C_E is sufficiently large, then no! The only difference between this game and Model 3 is that A pays a cost for B's intransigence. But, since B is deterred from asymmetric bargaining anyway, A's cost is irrelevant from an equilibrium perspective. Thus, if the media are actually capable of imposing equal costs on both parties even when only one party is being intransigent, the result would be to force a symmetric compromise. Moreover, since they are criticizing both parties so as to adhere to journalistic norms, they cannot be accused of being shills and having their criticism disregarded.

The logic of the threat is akin to school officials threatening to impose equal punishment on any student involved in a fight. If students can argue their way out of punishment by claiming that, "he started it," then any time a student thinks that he can successfully shift blame, he will be willing to start a fight. On the other hand, if students know that they will be punished no matter who really did start the fight, *then if they were rational*, they would never start any fights. If the media can credibly threaten both parties with punishment even if only one party is intransigent, then rational parties would respond by offering "reasonable" compromises, even if they actually prefer the disaster to the compromise.

The central problem, though, is a practical one. School officials actually do have the option to impose punishment on both children involved in a fight. However, the media are

incapable of punishing both the Democratic and Republican parties. While the lives of two arbitrary children do not consist of zero-sum interactions, electoral competition between two parties in a plurality rule electoral system is a zero-sum interaction. Any vote gained by one party hurts the other. Any vote *lost* by one party *necessarily* helps the other. If both parties either gain or lose the same amount of votes, the raw margin between them remains the same. What is the cost, then, imposed when the media compare both parties to squabbling children, equally unwilling to compromise? None because any voter who would prefer a party that *does* compromise has nowhere to go. Duverger's law, which many journalists fail to understand, makes the "plague on both your houses" strategy unworkable.

The question that this raises is, what about systems with more than two parties? Countries that use proportional representation can support many more than two parties, which means that more than one party can be punished at a time. The problem, such as it is, is that countries that use PR also tend to have parliamentary systems that don't produce the divided government scenarios that make bargaining across parties important anyway. If a government formed under PR has no need to negotiate with the parties out of power, then there is no bargaining, no symmetry, no asymmetry and no courting of disaster for journalists to describe. If the parties within a governing coalition disagree too strongly, the coalition simply breaks apart and a new election is held. The very circumstance in which the "plague on both your houses" strategy *can* work is the same one in which it is structurally unnecessary.

Conclusions and implications

The models presented here paint a bleak picture of journalism in an era of asymmetric bargaining since the unaligned press can either decline to criticize an intransigent party, thereby reinforcing its willingness to bargain asymmetrically, or criticize it in a futile attempt to convince weakly informed voters to carry out an electoral punishment that would be irrational given strong priors about party symmetry. Unfortunately, the implications go beyond bargaining games. They extend to the process of evaluating platforms and formal statements. The models presented here used a relative definition of centrism, focusing on the midpoint between the two parties' platforms. But, if there is an absolute center, then one party can be further from it, and spatial models break down if voters are unaware of which party is more extreme. However, the same problem that prevents watchdogs from deterring asymmetric bargaining applies to asymmetric positioning. If journalists cannot observe that one party is more ideologically extreme than the other, then their extremism cannot be punished. Moreover, there are compelling reasons to expect such asymmetric polarization, as Grossman & Hopkins (2015) argue.

Similarly, how should watchdogs respond to lies? They can either point out the dishonesty and be accused of shilling for the other party, or allow the lie to proliferate. What about politicians who are consistently dishonest? Should they be granted interviews under the false pretense that their statements should be taken at face value? What about when a party is systematically dishonest? The logic of the signaling model applies equally to each of these areas, and that puts watchdogs in the same bind.

However, since these are simplified models, the real world picture may be less bleak than it appears. These models suggest that a weakly informed voter's prospects for accurately ascribing asymmetric blame are minimal. However, any time a game of brinkmanship plays

out, voters are asked who is more to blame for the showdown, and voters regularly ascribe more blame to one party. Let us leave aside the question of how accurate these assessments are, and simply focus on how such assessments might be made, and how watchdog journalists can pursue correct assessments without violating journalistic norms.

The mechanics of Model 4 leave out many factors, but two simplifications stand out as particularly important. The watchdog has only two possible signals, and the voter is particularly uninformed. Those simplifications interact. The objective for watchdog journalists covering asymmetric bargaining is to present the simple facts in such a way that a reasonable observer could ascribe blame correctly, but while soft-pedaling the criticism with enough “both sides do it” rhetoric to avoid being labeled shills. That is a difficult needle to thread, and observers’ beliefs about how effectively journalists do so in any given circumstance will be strongly affected by their priors about which party is more reasonable. The point is not that journalistic norms and a partisan media environment make ascriptions of blame and deterrence *impossible*, but merely that they present formidable impediments. Even when one party seems more willing to court disaster, saying that without sounding like a shill is difficult, and the proliferation of shills makes accusations of unfairness plausible to weakly-informed observers.

This result should encourage some rethinking about the role of partisan media. Most of the scholarly research on the consequences of a fragmented media environment populated by partisan outlets has addressed the question of whether or not that environment affects public opinion even though voters can also seek out news sources that share their biases, reducing the potential effects (Arceneaux et al. 2012, DellaVigna & Kaplan 2007, Feldman 2011, Forgette & Morris 2006, Garrett et al. 2013, Gerber et al. 2009, Levendusky 2013, Prior 2009, Smith &

Searles 2013, Turner 2007, Xiang & Sarvary 2007). Whatever direct effects partisan media outlets might have on public opinion, though, may be less important than their systemic effects on the profession of journalism since the actual audience for opinion journalism is small and already committed. The indirect effects can be counterintuitive, though. The existence of media figures who will reflexively defend their own party against any charge, no matter how legitimate, and seek to make accusations about the other party, even if spurious, is precisely what creates the journalists' dilemma. One cannot describe a political asymmetry without being accused of being exactly the type of journalist that exists elsewhere in the fragmented media environment. In principle, an informed observer may be able to distinguish between a partisan shill and a purely analytical commentator describing a real asymmetry, but making that distinction requires having knowledge of the circumstances beyond what is in the article in question, so a layperson attempting to glean information from the article almost by definition lacks the capacity to make that distinction. Moreover, in an environment in which the only journalists who *do* assert asymmetry are partisans because everyone else observes the norms of symmetry, the voter is not necessarily making a *strategic* mistake by inferring that the journalist is a partisan, even if the assessment is incorrect.

Most surprisingly, the existence of a shill for one party can actually benefit the *opposing* party. The strategy of claiming to be the victim of media bias is well known. Moreover, the viability of that strategy increases dramatically in a media landscape that actually includes hostile media outlets who obscure the difference between valid criticism by a watchdog and reflexive partisanship. Thus, even if there are positive benefits to having friendly media outlets, those benefits come with a cost.

Ultimately, though, the journalist's dilemma is truly a collective action problem. If every nonpartisan journalist observes the norm of symmetry in order to distinguish themselves from partisan journalists, then no one journalist can ever describe an asymmetry, no matter how real or important, because doing so is ultimately self-defeating. If *every* nonpartisan journalist recognizes and describes the asymmetry, then it is at least harder to discount the claim because the only people rejecting the asymmetry would be partisan. One could adhere to the belief that there is simply a profession-wide ideological bias among journalists, but the claim is at least somewhat less plausible, and plausibility is what Bayesian updating is about anyway.

Perhaps the most important challenge posed by partisan journalism, then, is not that it promotes polarization, but that it undercuts the profession's ability to comment on asymmetry simply by existing. Moreover, without the ability to comment on asymmetry, journalists have little capacity to act as watchdogs to check the behavior of politicians because if asymmetric assessments of blame are discounted as partisan and symmetric assessments are futile given the zero-sum nature of electoral politics, then journalists have no capacity to check anything.

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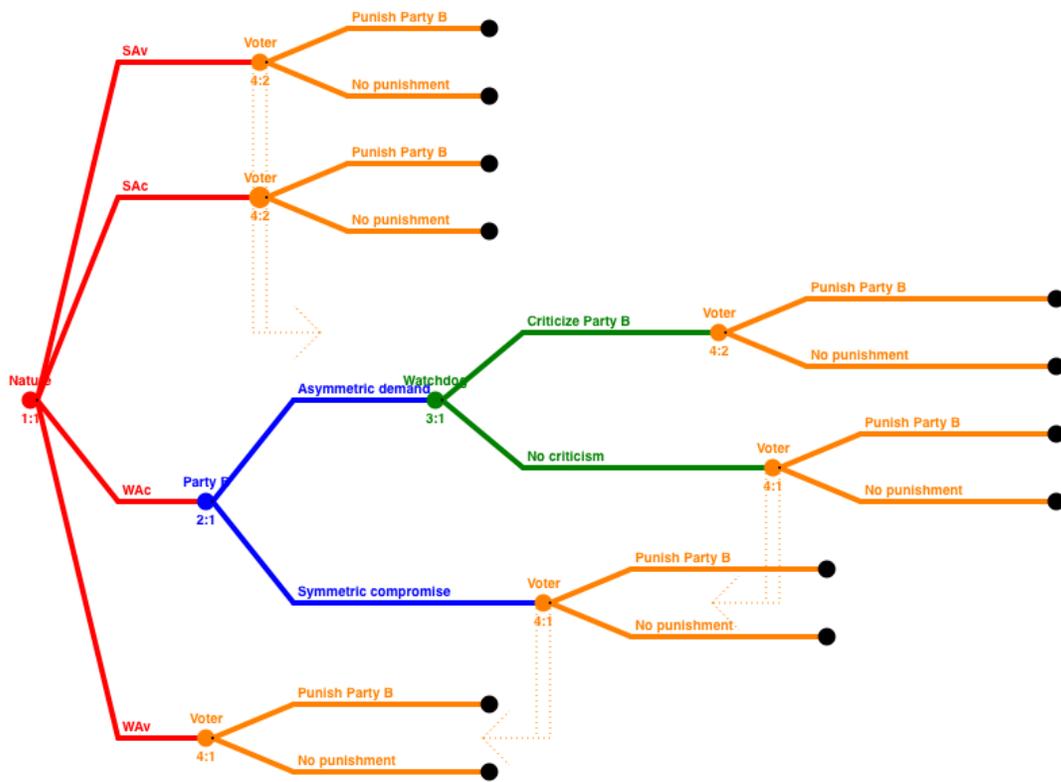


Figure 1