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Sources of Citizens' Experiential and Reputational Relationships with Political Parties

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Abstract

Strömbäck and Kiouisis's (2011) definition of political public relations stresses that both reputation and relationship management are important to the practice of public relations within a political context. Acknowledging this proposition, we sought to integrate concepts related to reputational relationship management into Seltzer and Zhang's (2011a, 2011b; Zhang & Seltzer, 2010) model of *political organization-public relationships* (POPR). Using a national marketing panel, we conducted a survey of US citizens 18 and older balanced to US Census data ($n=451$). Respondents were asked about possible sources of information regarding political parties including indirect experience via second-hand reports and direct experience via exposure to the strategic communication efforts of the two major political parties. Perceptions of reputation and of POPR with both parties were also assessed. For both parties, strategic communication emerged as the primary influence on perceptions of POPR while indirect experience had little to no influence on POPR or reputation. The findings strengthen the POPR model by including concepts related to experiential and reputational relationships suggested by Grunig and Hung (2002) and provide an empirical test of the proposed reputation-relationship continuum within political public relations.

Keywords: political public relations, political organization-public relationships, reputation, political parties

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Introduction

Grounded in the literature on relationship management (Ledingham, 2006) and organization-public relationships (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Ferguson, 1984; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999), Seltzer and Zhang (2011a, 2011b; Zhang & Seltzer, 2010) have investigated the role of relationship management and organization-public relationships in a political context. These *political organization-public relationships* (POPRs) between citizens and political parties are important due to the function that parties serve in acting as a gateway through which citizens engage in the democratic process (Dennis & Owen, 2001; Rozell, Wilcox, & Madland, 2006).

Ki and Hon (2007a) proposed that perceptions of OPRs are cognitions that lead to attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. A number of other public relations scholars (e.g., Brønn, 2010; Yang, 2007) have suggested that organizational reputation is also an outcome of these cognitions regarding relationships. The current study sought to extend Seltzer and Zhang's existing POPR model by investigating whether these relationships can be based on direct interactions with the parties, developed through indirect experience via second-hand accounts of direct interactions, or both.

Using a national marketing panel, we conducted a survey of U.S. citizens 18 and older prior to the 2012 presidential election. Respondents were asked about their indirect experience with political parties via second-hand accounts and direct experience via exposure to the strategic communication efforts of the two major political parties. Perceptions of reputation and of relationships with both major parties were also assessed. The findings strengthen the POPR model proposed by Seltzer and Zhang (2011a, 2011b) by including concepts related to experiential and reputational

relationships suggested in Grunig and Hung (2002) and provide an empirical test of the reputation-relationship continuum that Strömbäck and Kioussis (2011) have suggested is particularly relevant within a political public relations context. In addition to making a theoretical contribution to the literature on political public relations, the findings also inform best practices in political public relations by identifying the relative influence of direct and indirect experience on reputation and relationships.

Literature Review

Relational Perspective

The relational perspective has its roots in Ferguson's (1984) assertion that the primary unit of analysis in public relations research should be the *organization-public relationships* (OPRs) that form between organizations and their stakeholders. This perspective has not only influenced modern definitions of the public relations function (e.g., Broom, 2009), but has also led to the development of models of relationships, the identification of dimensions of relationships, the development of tools for measuring relationships, and the development of relationship-centered theory. Ledingham (2006) articulated a theory of relationship management wherein "effectively managing organization-public relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics" (p. 476).

Models of OPRs, although featuring slight differences and nomenclature, essentially decompose relationship formation into four basic components:

- (a) *Antecedent* conditions that exist prior to relationship formation; these can include preexisting attitudes, behaviors, and situational factors linking the

parties in a relationship (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Grunig & Huang, 2000).

(b) *Maintenance strategies* (or *cultivation strategies*) are utilized by organizations to manage relationships with stakeholders (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Ki & Hon, 2009). In particular, *dialogic communication strategies* that feature two-way communication with the objective of engendering mutually beneficial outcomes for both parties have been posited as being the most effective means for forming positive OPRs (e.g., Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006).

(c) *OPR* perceptions can be measured along four dimensions: trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality. These dimensions have been used in numerous studies (e.g., Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001; Jo, Hon, & Brunner, 2004; Ki & Hon, 2007b; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2009).

d) *Outcomes* (or *consequences*) that result from OPR state can include the attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behaviors of organizations and stakeholders (e.g., Ki & Hon, 2007a, Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

Political OPRs

While OPRs have been studied in a variety of settings, Seltzer and Zhang have developed a line of research examining OPRs and relationship management within a political context in which POPRs between citizens and political parties were described as:

having politically relevant antecedent variables; as being mediated by cultivation strategies employed by political parties; as being measured along dimensions of control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment; and that the state of the POPR between citizens and political

parties results in attitudinal and behavioral outcomes that have consequences for parties as well as the larger political system. (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011a, p. 28)

They first sought to integrate OPR concepts into social capital theory (Zhang & Seltzer, 2010), demonstrating that positive OPR with political parties led to increased political participation and confidence in government. Next, Seltzer and Zhang (2011a) considered the influence of exposure to partisan strategic communication efforts on voters' OPR perceptions, examined partisanship as an antecedent, and focused on outcomes such as attitude and supportive behavior (i.e., vote choice). Their findings suggested that increased dialogic communication resulted in citizens holding more favorable OPR perceptions, which was associated with positive attitudes and supportive behavior. Seltzer and Zhang (2011b) sought to extend their POPR model by examining antecedent factors and strategic communication efforts related to a specific political issue (e.g., healthcare reform). Findings suggested that issue-specific strategic communication with political parties led to more favorable perceptions of OPR, more favorable attitudes, and support for parties' issue positions. The commitment dimension of OPR was identified as contributing to stronger party identification. Furthermore, perceptions of positive OPR with one party could potentially undermine perceptions of OPR with the opposition party, suggesting some potential relational destabilizing effects of OPR within a political context.

Reputation and POPR

Current thinking about the role of the public relations function within political contexts has been advanced through the publication of *Political Public Relations*, edited by Strömbäck and Kioussis (2011). After an exhaustive review of the literature in public

relations, political communication, political science, political marketing, and other related areas, they suggested the following definition of *political public relations*:

Political public relations is the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial *relationships and reputations* [emphasis added] with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals. (p. 8)

While similar to the existing definitions of “general” public relations practice, their definition notably differs in one important regard by stressing the importance of reputation management in addition to relationship management. This is relevant to the development of the POPR model in that Seltzer and Zhang (2011a, 2011b; Zhang & Seltzer, 2010) have not included reputation as part of their model.

In comprehensive reviews of the reputation literature, both Walker (2010) and Schreiber (2008) note that *reputation* suffers from an abundance of conceptual definitions. According to Brønn (2010), *reputation*:

represents the reality of the organization for the stakeholder regardless of what the organization believes about itself, chooses to communicate, or thinks it knows about what stakeholders are thinking . . . Reputation is what people think about organizations and also what organizations are in the eyes of others. (p. 309)

Brønn (2010) states that three levels of information influence perceptions of organizational reputation: (a) the primary level of personal experience, (b) the secondary level of indirect, “second-hand” experience, and (c) a tertiary level wherein information is gleaned from the mass media. The greatest impact on reputation is at the primary level of direct experience. This idea is compatible with the relationship management perspective wherein organizational strategic communication efforts are used to maintain and cultivate relationships, highlighting the connection between reputation and relationships. Fombrun’s (1996) states that to “acquire a reputation that

is positive, enduring, and resilient requires managers to invest heavily in building and maintaining good relationships with their company's constituents" (p. 57). In short, reputations are an outcome of well-managed relationships (Brønn, 2007, 2010; Fombrun, 1996; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Yang, 2007). Like relationships, reputations are built over time (Walker, 2010) and in fact could be the result of an organization's relational history (Coombs, 2000). In addition to direct experience, Gotsi and Wilson (2001) note that reputation is also based on "any other form of communication that provides information about the firm's actions" (p. 25) (i.e., indirect communication).

Thus direct and indirect communication play a role in reputation and relationship management. Strömbäck and Kioussis (2011) posit that reputation quality and relationship quality exist along a continuum of stakeholder engagement; reputation quality is more relevant for low-engagement stakeholders while relationship quality is more relevant for high-engagement stakeholders. Similarly, Grunig and Hung (2002) have proposed that relationships vary in the degree to which they are experiential (i.e., based on direct interaction and greater familiarity) or reputational (i.e., based on indirect interaction and lower levels of familiarity). Here, familiarity is the "extent to which a relational entity has knowledge about another entity" (Yang, 2007, p. 97) and is based on direct (first-hand) or indirect (mediated communication) experience.

Yang's (2007) study is particularly enlightening in that he proposed a conceptual model of organizational reputation and relationships that sought to integrate the two concepts and fill a gap in public relations research by extending OPR and relationship management theories. In reviewing the literature regarding corporate/organizational reputation, Yang made a strong case for the impact of relationships in forming

reputation. He proposed a model in which reputation was predicted by OPR and familiarity. Familiarity was in turn predicted by experience, where experience was assessed by asking participants to indicate whether they had direct, indirect only, or no experience with each organization.

Cultivating a favorable reputation has been posited as an important endeavor for organizations in that reputation is presumed to be an organization's most valuable asset (Schreiber, 2008; Walker, 2010). In his review, Schreiber (2008) argued that positive reputation acts as an indicator of quality organizational offerings, provides protection against competitors, and can portray the organization as socially responsible. Although the literature generally does not explicitly state a link between reputation and attitude toward an organization, the link is implied in that social responsibility presumably leads to positive attitudes or supportive behaviors (Schreiber, 2008). However, such a connection seems logical given the conceptualization of reputation as an accumulation of perceptions of an organization over time. In a similar vein, some studies on country reputation have found a link between country reputation and attitude toward products produced in that country (e.g., Kang & Yang, 2010).

Hypotheses and Conceptual Model

Based on the preceding literature review, the following conceptual POPR model and hypotheses are offered. As illustrated in the conceptual model presented in Figure 1, this study proposed antecedents (i.e., demographics, political interest, ideology, and media use) act as exogenous variables in the model; however, the relationship between these variables and the endogenous variables are not explicitly hypothesized.

Perceptions of organization-public relationships and perceptions of party reputation are driven by the degree of indirect and direct experience with the parties (Brønn, 2010;

Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). Building on Yang (2007), *experience* is divided into indirect experience (i.e., second-hand information about others' direct experience) and direct experience, which is represented in the model via exposure to the strategic communication efforts of each party.

H1a: Indirect experience with a political party is associated positively with perceptions of the party's reputation.

H1b: Indirect experience with a political party is associated positively with perceptions of the relationship with the party.

H2a: Exposure to a party's strategic communication efforts is associated positively with perceptions of the party's reputation.

H2b: Exposure to a party's strategic communication efforts is associated positively with perceptions of the relationship with the party.

Perceptions of organization-public relationships with political parties are hypothesized to influence perceptions of the parties' reputation (Brønn, 2007, 2010; Fombrun, 1996; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Yang, 2007) and attitudes toward the party (Ki & Hon, 2007a; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011a, 2011b). In addition, party reputation should also influence attitudes toward the party (Kang & Yang, 2010; Schreiber, 2008).

H3: Perceptions of the relationship with a political party are associated positively with perceptions of the party's reputation.

H4a: Perceptions of a party's reputation are associated positively with attitudes toward the party.

H4b: Perceptions of the relationship with a political party are associated positively with attitudes toward the party.

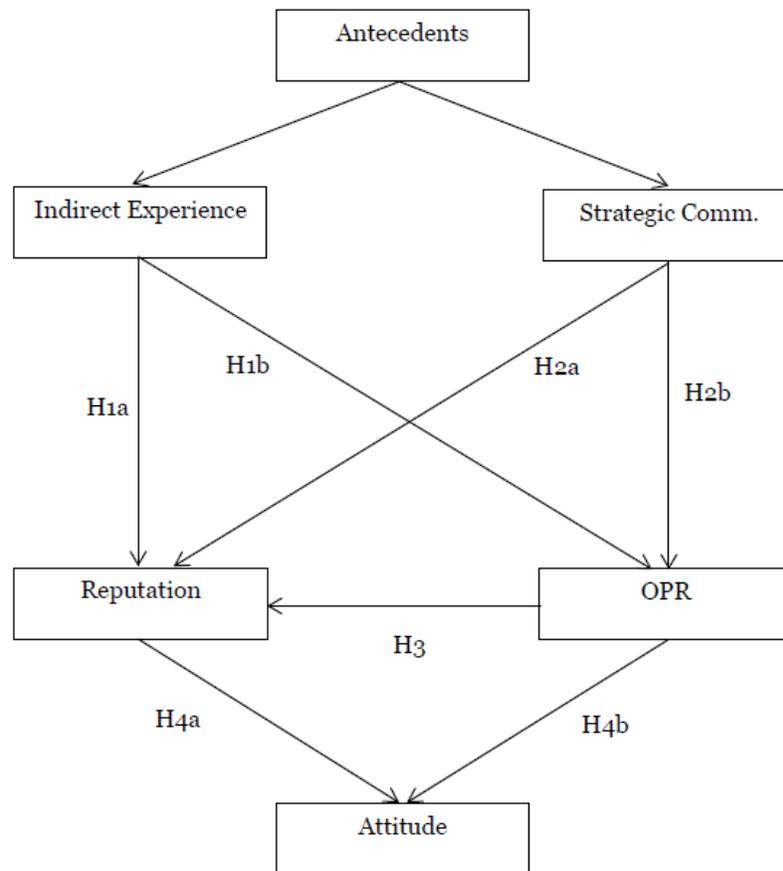


Figure 1. Proposed Political OPR-Reputation Model.

Methodology

Data Collection

A nationwide survey of US citizens 18 and older ($n=451$) was conducted online between Nov. 2 and Nov. 5, 2012. The research team secured access to the sample through a panel maintained by a professional firm that provided incentives to panel participants. The firm utilized a dimensional sampling technique to balance the sample to reflect U.S. Census data.¹ The median time to complete the questionnaire was 15

¹ The researchers acknowledge that the use of the sampling technique and marketing panel presents concerns regarding generalizability; however, the goal of this study was to investigate the hypothesized relationships between the independent and dependent

minutes; to protect data quality, respondents who completed the survey in less than half of the median time to complete were dropped from the sample to remove “speeders” (i.e., respondents rushing through survey). In addition, each respondent was assigned a unique identification number by the marketing panel to prevent multiple submissions. Finally, respondents were prompted to answer all of the questions on each screen prior to continuing the next.

Measures and Descriptive Statistics

Antecedents. A variety of demographic and political variables served as antecedents in the model. Demographic variables included gender, age, education, income, and ethnicity. In regard to *gender*, the sample was 46.1% male and 53.9% female; for data analysis purposes, males were recoded as 0 and females as 1. For *age*, respondents' birth year was used to estimate their current age. The median age was 40 ($M=41$; $SD=13.25$). For *educational level*, respondents were asked the highest year of school that they had completed using an 8-point scale where 1 indicated “less than high school” and 6 indicated “graduate degree;” the median was 3, indicating “some college,” while the mode was 6, indicating “graduate degree.” For *income*, respondents were asked to indicate their annual household income on an 8-point scale where 1 indicated “less than \$10,000” and 8 indicated “more than \$100,000;” the median was 4, indicating an annual household income of “\$40,001 to \$55,000,” while the mode was 3, indicating “\$25,001 to \$40,000.” Respondents were also asked to indicate their

variables and to test the proposed model. The goal was not to make inferences about the larger population. This approach is consistent with published studies that focus on theory application rather than effects application (e.g., Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1981; Judd, Smith, & Kidder, 1991; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011a; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011b; Yang, 2007).

ethnicity; 10.2% of the respondents self-identified as black/African American; 71.9% as white (non-Hispanic); 6.1% as Hispanic; 9.0% as Asian/Pacific Islander; 0.5% as Native American/Alaskan Native; and 2.3% responded “other.” For data analysis, whites were coded as 1 and all other ethnicities were coded as 0.

In addition to demographic variables, the block of antecedents also included several individual political variables, including general political interest, interest in the 2012 campaign, ideology, and media use. *General political interest* was measured on a 7-point scale where 1 meant that respondents were “not at all interested” and 7 meant that respondents were “very interested” ($M=4.88$, $SD=1.71$). *Interest in the 2012 presidential campaign* was measured on the same 7-point scale ($M=5.7$, $SD=1.62$). Finally, respondents were asked to report their *political ideology*. This was assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from “very conservative” to “very liberal.” Both the median and the mode was 3, indicating “moderate” ($M=2.90$, $SD=0.97$); 8.1% considered themselves to be “very conservative,” 21.8% considered themselves to be “conservative,” 48.9% considered themselves to be “moderate,” 14.6% viewed themselves as “liberal,” and 6.5% self-identified as being “very liberal.” The *media use* measure was a composite of media attention and reliance on a variety of sources of political information. Respondents were asked how much attention they paid to a variety of political topics, including coverage of the presidential campaign in general, political opinion polls, any of the three presidential debates, and the vice presidential debate. Attention paid to each topic was assessed on a 7-point scale where 1 indicated paying “little or no attention” and 7 indicated paying “very close attention.” Respondents were also asked how much they relied on various sources for their political information, including newspaper websites, websites for the major broadcast networks, social networking sites, broadcast television

news, cable television news, traditional newspapers, talk radio programs, and face-to-face discussion with others. Each source was assessed on a 5-point scale where 1 indicated “don’t rely on at all” and 5 indicated “heavily rely on.” All of the media use and source reliance measures were standardized and summed to create the *media use* variable ($M=-.057$, $SD=8.46$, Cronbach’s $\alpha=.91$).

Indirect Experience. The second information source variable was *indirect experience* with political parties and was assessed for each party via a single item that asked “how much indirect experience have you had with each political party during the last 6 months? Indirect experience includes hearing about direct experiences with the parties second-hand, for example, from acquaintances or from the media.” Responses were measured on a 5-point scale that ranged from 1 (“none at all”) to 5 (“a lot”). The mean response for indirect experience with the Republican Party was 3.03 ($SD=1.32$) and was 3.11 ($SD=1.33$) for the Democratic Party.

Strategic Communication. The third and final information source variable was exposure to partisan strategic communication efforts. This was assessed using items adapted from Huang’s (2004) Public Relations Strategy Assessment (PRSA), consistent with previous POPR studies (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011a, 2011b); the battery included measures of mediated, interpersonal, and dialogic communication. Respondents were asked how frequently each party used a variety of methods to communicate with them over the previous 6 months; responses were measured on a 5-point scale where 1 meant “never” and 5 meant “often.” Mediated communication was assessed by asking “how often did they use the mass media, whether it was through advertising, TV or radio appearances, or by distributing printed materials such as flyers or direct mail.” Interpersonal communication exposure was assessed by asking how often “they

communicated directly with you person-to-person, whether it was face-to-face at an event, over the telephone, or online using e-mail, through social networking sites, etc.” Dialogic communication exposure was assessed through the following items: (a) “how often did each party make an effort to understand your opinions and suggestions while you were communicating?,” (b) “how often did each party contact you to get your feedback after they finished communicating with you?,” (c) “how often did you feel like each party consulted you while they were making decisions?,” (d) “while communicating with you, how often do you feel like each party took into account the possible impact their decisions could have on you?,” (e) “while communicating with you, how often do you feel like each party considered your opinions and positions on issues?,” and (f) “how often do you feel like each party considered the possible influence that their activities had on you?” Items were summed to create *strategic communication* variables for the Republican Party ($M=17.84$, $SD=8.61$, Cronbach’s $\alpha=.93$) and the Democratic Party ($M=19.49$, $SD=9.17$, Cronbach’s $\alpha=.93$).

Perceptions of OPRs. To determine respondents’ perceptions of the OPR between themselves and the political parties, several items were adapted from Hon and Grunig’s (1999) Relationship Management Scale, consistent with Seltzer and Zhang (2011a, 2011b). Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements regarding the four dimensions of OPRs for each party using a 5-point scale where 1 indicated “strongly disagree” and 5 indicated “strongly agree.” Four items were used to measure trust: (a) “this party treats people like me fairly,” (b) “whenever this party makes an important decision, I know it will consider the decision’s impact on people like me,” (c) “this party can be relied on to keep its promises,” and (d) “this party takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.” Three items

were used to measure satisfaction: (a) “this party and people like me both benefit from our relationship with each other,” (b) “I am happy with this party,” and (c) “generally speaking, I am pleased with the relationship that this party has established with people like me.” Four items were used to measure commitment: (a) “this party is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to people like me,” (b) “this party wants to maintain a positive relationship with people like me,” (c) “compared to other organizations, I value my relationship with this party more,” and (d) “there is a long-lasting bond between people like me and this party.” Three items were used to measure control mutuality: (a) “this party believes the opinions of people like me are legitimate,” (b) “this party neglects people like me” (reversed), and (c) “this party really listens to what people like me have to say.” The items were summed create *OPR* variables for the Republican Party ($M=34.78$, $SD=14.44$, Cronbach’s alpha=.96) and the Democratic Party ($M=41.22$, $SD=15.14$, Cronbach’s alpha=.96).

Attitude. As in Seltzer and Zhang (2011a, 2011b), respondents were asked what their overall *attitude* was toward each political party. Responses were measured on a 5-point scale, where 1 meant “negative” and 5 meant “positive.” The mean attitude toward the Republican Party was 2.5 ($SD=1.35$) while the mean attitude toward the Democratic Party was 2.99 ($SD =1.41$).

Reputation. To measure the perceived *reputation* of each political party, we followed a procedure similar to Yang (2007) utilizing a combination of net positive representations, overall personal judgment, and media reputation. Respondents were asked “in a few words and phrases, please tell us what comes to mind when you think of the [Republican/Democratic] Party. Enter your thoughts in the box below.” Two graduate students with prior content analysis experience were trained by the

researchers to code the open-ended responses. Coders were instructed to first decide the number of thoughts in each comment. Next, coders examined each individual thought unit to determine the valence of each thought. Each individual thought was judged to be positive, negative, or non-evaluative. A subsample of the overall comments ($n=40$) was used to check intercoder reliability. Scott's pi reliability testing indicated agreement for number of thoughts in each comment regarding the Republican Party as 1.0 (100% agreement), valence scores for each thought regarding the Republican Party as .789 (85%), number of thoughts in each comment regarding the Democratic Party as .964 (97.5%), and valence scores for each thought regarding the Democratic Party as .897 (92.5%). Net positive representations were then calculated by subtracting the number of negatively valenced thoughts from the number of positively valenced thoughts within each comment. The mean was -0.76 for the Republican Party ($SD=2.15$) and 0.11 for the Democratic Party ($SD=1.98$).

Overall personal judgment was assessed by asking respondents “overall, would you describe the characteristics you listed as positive, neutral, or negative characteristics?” Respondents could respond 1 for “negative,” 2 for “neutral” or 3 for “positive.” The mean was 1.78 ($SD=0.82$) for the Republican Party and 2.05 ($SD=0.83$) for the Democratic Party. For media reputation, respondent were asked to “indicate how you think that the mass media, in general, has covered each party during the last 6 months.” Responses were measured on a 5-point scale where 1 meant “negatively” and 5 meant “positively.” The mean for the Republican Party was 2.79 ($SD=1.14$) and 3.29 ($SD=1.09$) for the Democratic Party.

Net positive representations, overall personal judgment, and media reputation was standardized and summed to create a *reputation* index for each party. The mean for

the Republican Party was -0.12 ($SD=2.05$) and was 0.024 ($SD=2.07$) for the Democratic Party.

Data Analysis

A path analysis was conducted via a series of layered multiple regression analyses. The structural paths between the exogenous and endogenous variables in the conceptual model were modeled separately for the POPR between respondents and the Republican Party and for the POPR between respondents and Democratic Party. Endogenous variables included reputation and attitude. Perceptions of OPR – the most important predictor – were entered first, followed by the two information source variables (indirect experience and strategic communication), and then followed by various exogenous political and demographic antecedent variables (age, gender, income, education, ideology, interest in politics in general, interest in 2012 election specifically, and media use).

The direct effects, indirect effects, and total effects of each variable on reputation, attitude, and OPR were calculated for the Republican Party POPR and for the Democratic Party POPR. A path diagram of the direct effects (using standardized betas) was constructed for the Republican Party POPR and the Democratic Party POPR. Interpretation of the path coefficients was guided by Cohen (1988, 1992), wherein coefficients with values of .10 or lower constitute small effects, coefficients with values around .30 constitute medium effects, and coefficients with values of .50 or greater constitute large effects (see also Field, 2005).

The assessment of model fit in path analysis can only be assessed through hand calculations. It is conducted by obtaining the reproduced correlations and comparing them to the observed correlations (i.e., partial correlation coefficients controlling for

gender, age, education, income, race, ideology, political interest, interest in 2012 campaign, and media use), then assessing them against the difference criterion of .05. Only three reproduced correlations had differences that were larger than .05; thus the model was deemed to fit the data (Mertler & Vannatta, 2002).

Results

Summary

Figure 2 presents a full path diagram illustrating the direct effects of indirect and direct experience on OPR, reputation, and attitude for both political parties. Hypotheses H1a (indirect experience association with reputation), H1b (indirect experience with OPR), and H2a (strategic communication association with OPR) were only supported for one of the two political parties. Hypothesis 2b regarding the positive association between strategic communication exposure (i.e., direct experienced with the parties) and relationship perceptions, as well as Hypotheses 3, 4a, and 4b regarding the positive association between OPR perceptions and attitude, reputation and attitude, and OPR and reputation, were supported for both political parties.

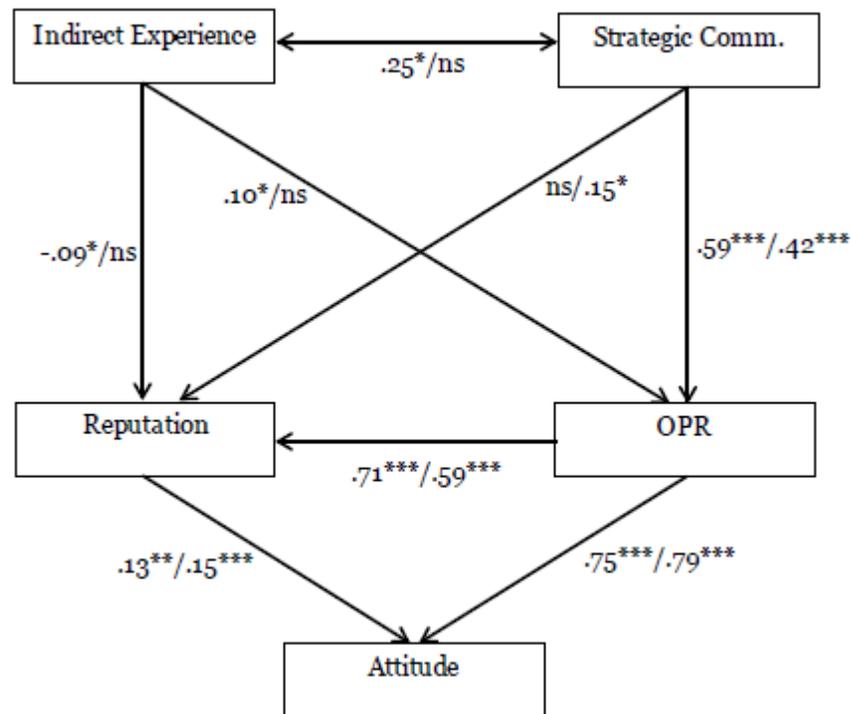


Figure 2. Model of Republican Party political organization-public relationships. Coefficients for each path are displayed for both the Republican Party and Democratic Party POPR respectively (* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 1a

H1a stated that indirect experience with a political party is associated positively with perceptions of the party's reputation. As seen in Table 1, indirect experience with the GOP had a direct negative impact on perceptions of GOP reputation ($\beta = -.09$, $p < .05$) and an indirect influence on GOP reputation through GOP strategic communication efforts and GOP OPR perceptions ($\beta = .17$, $p < .01$) with a total effect of $.08$ ($p < .01$). Thus H2a was supported for GOP. Indirect experience with the Democratic Party did not exert direct or indirect effects on perceptions of the reputation of the Democratic Party either (see Table 2). Therefore, H2a was not supported for the Democratic Party.

Table 1

Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects on Reputation of the Republican Party

	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effects
OPR	.71***	---	.71***
Indirect experience with GOP	-.09*	.17**	.08**
GOP strategic communication	---	.42***	.42***

Note. The beta weights are final standardized regression coefficients

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

Table 2

Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects on Reputation of the Democratic Party

	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effects
OPR	.59***	---	.59***
Indirect experience with DEM	---	---	---
DEM strategic communication	.15*	.25***	.40**

Note. The beta weights are final standardized regression coefficients

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

Hypothesis 1b

H1b maintained that indirect experience with a political party is associated positively with perceptions of the relationship with the party. Indirect experience with

the GOP had a direct effect on perceptions of OPR with the GOP ($\beta = .10, p < .05$) and an indirect influence on OPR perceptions through GOP strategic communication efforts ($\beta = .15, p < .01$) with a total effect of .25 ($p < .01$) (see Table 3). Therefore, H1b was supported for the Republican Party. However, as seen in Table 4, indirect experience with the Democratic Party had neither direct nor indirect effects on OPR perceptions with the Democrats; thus, H2b was not supported for the Democratic Party.

Table 3

Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects on Perceptions of Republican Party OPR

	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effects
Indirect experience with GOP	.10*	.15**	.25**
GOP strategic communication	.59***	.03*	.62***

Note. The beta weights are final standardized regression coefficients

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

Table 4

Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects on Perceptions of Democratic Party OPR

	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effects
Indirect experience with DEM	---	---	---
DEM strategic communication	.42***	---	.42***

Note. The beta weights are final standardized regression coefficients

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

Hypothesis 2a

H2a predicted that exposure to a party's strategic communication efforts is associated positively with perceptions of the party's reputation. Based on Table 1, while exposure to GOP strategic communication did not have a direct influence on GOP reputation, it did influence GOP reputation indirectly via OPR perceptions ($\square = .42$, $p < .001$). Therefore, H2a was partially supported for the GOP. Exposure to Democratic strategic communication not only exerted a direct effect on reputation of the Democratic Party ($\square = .15$, $p < .05$) but also an indirect influence via OPR perceptions ($\square = .25$, $p < .001$) (see Table 2); thus H3a was supported for the Democratic Party.

Hypothesis 2b

H2b stated that exposure to a party's strategic communication efforts is associated positively with perceptions of the relationship with the party. As seen in Table 3, exposure to GOP strategic communication had a direct effect on perceptions of relationships with the Republican Party ($\square = .59$, $p < .001$) and an indirect impact on perceptions of relationships with the Republican Party via indirect experience ($\square = .03$, $p < .05$). Therefore, H3b was supported for the Republican Party. Exposure to Democratic strategic communication also had a direct impact on perceptions of relationships with the Democratic Party ($\square = .42$, $p < .001$) (see Table 4), therefore H2b was also supported for the Democratic Party.

Hypothesis 3

H3 predicted that perceptions of the relationships with a political party are associated positively with perceptions of the party's reputation. According to Table 1,

people's perceptions of the relationships with the Republican Party had a direct impact on perceptions of the Republican Party's reputation ($\beta = .71, p < .001$). Thus, H3 was supported for the Republican Party. Similarly, people's perceptions of the relationships with the Democratic Party had a direct effect on perceptions of the Democratic Party's reputation ($\beta = .59, p < .001$) (see Table 2). Therefore, H3 was also supported for the Democratic Party.

Hypothesis H4a

H4a predicted that perceptions of party's reputation are associated positively with attitudes toward the party. As seen from Table 5, perceptions of the Republican Party's reputation had a direct influence on attitude toward the Republican Party ($\beta = .13, p < .001$). Thus, H4a was supported for the Republican Party. Similarly, perceptions of the Democratic Party's reputation also had a direct effect on attitude toward the Democratic Party ($\beta = .15, p < .001$). Thus, H4a was also supported for the Democratic Party (Table 6).

Hypothesis H4b

H4b maintained that perceptions of the relationships with a political party are associated positively with attitudes toward the party. As seen from Table 5, perceptions of the relationship with the Republican Party had a direct influence ($\beta = .75, p < .001$) and indirect impact on attitude toward the Republican Party through its perceptions of reputation ($\beta = .09, p < .001$). Thus, H4b was supported for the Republican Party. Similarly, perceptions of the relationship with the Democratic Party had a direct influence ($\beta = .79, p < .001$) and indirect impact on attitude toward the Democratic Party through its perceptions of reputation ($\beta = .09, p < .001$). Thus, H4b was also supported for the Democratic Party.

Table 5

Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects on Attitude Toward the Republican Party

	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effects
Reputation	.13***	---	.13***
OPR	.75***	.09***	.84***
Indirect experience with GOP	---	.20***	.20***
GOP Strategic communication	---	.51***	.51***

Note. The beta weights are final standardized regression coefficients

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

Similarly, perceptions of the relationship with the Democratic Party had a direct influence on attitude toward the Democratic Party ($\beta = .88$, $p < .001$) (see Table 6).

Therefore, H5 was also supported for the Democratic Party.

Table 6

Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects on Attitude Toward the Democratic Party

	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effects
Reputation	.15***	---	.15***
OPR	.79***	.09***	.88***
Indirect experience with DEM	---	---	---
DEM strategic communication	---	.39***	.39***

Note. The beta weights are final standardized regression coefficients

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

Discussion

In general, the findings seem to indicate that among the two sources of information about the political parties, partisan strategic communication consistently exhibited the strongest direct effects on perceptions of organization-public relationships, as well as direct and indirect effects (via OPR) on perceptions of party reputation. In comparison, indirect experience with the parties produced inconsistent effects on OPR and reputation. It would seem that the strategic communication efforts of the parties are of paramount importance in both reputational and experiential relationship maintenance.

Looking at party reputation individually, reputation was positively associated with perceptions of OPR for both parties and with strategic communication exposure for the Democratic Party; however, there were indirect effects exhibited by strategic communication on reputation for the Republican Party. A comparison of the standardized betas makes it clear that strategic communication exerted the strongest effect on OPR, which in turn exhibited the strongest effect on reputation. In summary, for reputational relationships with the political parties, it appeared that OPR and direct experience via exposure to each parties' strategic communication efforts consistently trumped the effect of hearing about other's experiences with the parties.

Turning to influences on OPR perceptions, OPR was positively associated with indirect experience for the GOP and with strategic communication exposure for both parties. Comparison of the standardized betas again shows that strategic communication exposure by far had the strongest effect (more so for the GOP than the Democratic Party); indirect experience exhibited a small effect on OPR for the GOP.

Examining influences on attitude toward the parties, attitude was influenced by OPR to a greater degree than any other variable for both the GOP and the Democratic Party with a powerful effect being observed for both parties (the largest betas in the model). An examination of the direct, indirect, and total effects for all of the variables, showed that strategic communication exerted strong effects for the GOP and moderate effects for the Democratic Party (both via OPR); indirect experience exhibited a weak indirect effect on attitude (via reputation) for the GOP. Overall, OPR was the key to formation of attitude toward the parties. This was an important finding in that cultivating favorable attitudes toward parties is a significant first step toward achieving other relational outcomes as attitude has been found to be a strong predictor of behavior (or at least behavioral intent) and strength of party identification in previous studies (Ki & Hon, 2007a; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011a, 2011b).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings have both theoretical implications for the study of political public relations and public relations theory development, as well as practical implications for practitioners working in political public relations. Regarding theoretical implications, the present study extends Seltzer and Zhang's (2011a, 2011b; Zhang and Seltzer, 2010) POPR model by integrating theoretical concepts of experience and reputation into the model, thereby allowing for an examination of reputation formation as well as organization-public relationship formation within a political context. The findings demonstrate that indirect sources of information about the political parties via indirect experience (i.e., second-hand) contributed minimally or not at all to reputation and relationship perceptions, while strategic communication exhibited far greater direct and indirect effects on perceptions of OPR, reputation, and attitude. This is not to say that

reputational relationships are not important or that a continuum of experiential versus reputational relationships does not exist, but rather that the means by which reputational relationships could be effectively managed may be similar to or at the very least rely heavily on the same methods utilized to manage experiential relationships with political parties. Ultimately in this study, strategic communication was the driving force in cultivating favorable perceptions of OPR and reputation both directly and indirectly via OPR.

These findings also have implications for the proposed continuum of experiential versus reputational relationships discussed in Strömbäck and Kiousis (2011). The findings demonstrate that direct communication via the parties' strategic communication channels was critical in fostering perceptions of positive experiential relationships (i.e., favorable perceptions of relationship-based POPR), but less influential in the development of reputation (either directly for the Democratic Party or indirectly for the Republican Party). Simultaneously, indirect experience had small effects on OPR and reputation for the Republican Party and no effect on OPR and reputation for the Democratic Party. Put another way, greater engagement with the parties through direct communication resulted in perceptions of experiential relationships rather than reputational relationships; this provides support, at least in part, for the continuum of relationships model. However, Strömbäck and Kiousis also presume that the less engaged would rely more on second-hand information (i.e., indirect experience) to build reputational relationships; this seems to have happened in a limited capacity in this study.

The literature regarding the link between OPR and reputation has suggested that reputations, like experiential relationships, take time to develop and are tied to

relational history (Coombs, 2000; Walker, 2010). Therefore, it's not surprising that (a) there would be strong correlations between OPR and reputation, (b) strategic communication would exert moderate to strong indirect effects on reputation via OPR, and (c) that indirect experience with political parties would be trumped by experiential relationship; that is to say, it may be that when it comes to political parties specifically (and especially the two major parties in the U.S.), citizens cannot but help seeing these relationships as experiential given the long relational history that has been established over numerous elections at the local, state, and national levels.

This would be especially true if citizens equate governing bodies (e.g., country commissions, city councils, state and federal legislatures, etc.) – bodies comprising elected members of both parties – as analogous to or outgrowths of the two parties. Hutton et al. (2001) observed that “*reputation* is a concept far more relevant to people who have no direct ties to an organization, whereas *relationships* are far more relevant to people who are direct stakeholders of the organization (Hutton et al., 2001, p. 258). As a citizen in U.S. cannot disassociate themselves from government, they may not see themselves as disassociated from political parties due to the existence of an ever present direct relationship with the governing bodies that are populated with partisans. That is to say, citizens may *always* see themselves as stakeholders having direct ties to government entities dominated by political parties, thus they may *always* see themselves as having experiential relationships with parties rather than reputational ones. The same may not be true for other political actors; for instance, a wider range of experiential versus reputational relationships may more likely be observed if the political organization in question was an interest group, third party, or individual candidate who was not well known.

From a practical standpoint, the findings underscore the importance of relationship management and strategic communication efforts in molding not only OPR but also reputation within a political context. Ledingham (2011) advocated that “political stakeholders could benefit from political public relations practitioners adopting some of the concepts of relationship management, such as shared interests, mutuality, and the idea of building relationships over time” (p. 244); however, he seemed somewhat doubtful that political operatives would be likely to adopt such an orientation to political public relations practice. The findings presented in this study highlight the importance – and potential effectiveness – of utilizing strategic communication efforts, including dialogic strategies, in managing not only OPR, but also party reputation. Of course, these strategies, even if perceived as dialogic, could simply represent marketing techniques that wear the trappings of mutuality while in reality failing to represent genuine efforts to engage in mutually beneficial, dialogic relationship building or even market-oriented public relations (Strömbäck, 2007). The potential for citizens being misled (either by accident or by design) by partisan strategic communication has been noted in previous POPR research (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011a, 2011b) and warrants further study.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any study, there are obviously several limitations to our methodological approach that could be addressed in future investigations of POPRs. As noted previously, the dimensional sampling technique makes generalization of the findings beyond this particular study problematic, but as noted above, the goal was theory application rather than effects application. That being said, the use of probability sampling techniques should be encouraged in future research. Additionally, the timing of the study (the week

prior to a presidential election) limits the context of the study in that politics was likely more salient at the time of data collection and in that the study was cross-sectional; future studies should examine POPRs during mid-term elections or outside of the normal election cycle as well as over time to see how POPR dynamics evolve temporally. Aside from the timing issue, a variety of contexts could be examined (e.g., examining POPRs with state- and local-level party organizations or even non-party organizations such as interest groups). From a measurement standpoint, operationalization of some of the information source variables could be improved in future studies. The use of a single-item measure for indirect experience might be one reason it failed to exert significant direct effects in some cases. Additional limitations related to conceptualization of the POPR model could be addressed in future studies. It is possible the pre-existing relationship between respondents and political parties could actually increase the likelihood of being exposed to partisan strategic communication efforts or biased perceptions of strategic communication (noted in Seltzer & Zhang, 2011b); future studies should attempt to investigate the casual nature of the association between these variables.

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