

# A Pressing Concern? How Newspaper Coverage Affects Accountability in State Legislatures\*

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## Abstract

State legislatures are critical policymaking bodies, yet recent studies suggest that elections rarely hold state legislators accountable for their representation and voters generally know little about legislative politics. Would elections function and legislators behave differently if voters had access to more information about legislative politics? I construct and validate a measure of congruence between newspaper markets and legislative districts in all 99 state legislative chambers for the years 2000-2022 to evaluate how the quantity of legislative news coverage shapes elections and accountability. Leveraging these data, I demonstrate that newspaper coverage has an important monitoring effect on legislative elections and legislator behavior. Specifically, I find that the electoral returns to ideological moderation are significantly higher in districts with robust press coverage. Beyond elections, I show that press coverage incentivizes legislators to work more for their constituencies. When newspapers cover legislative politics closely, legislators miss fewer roll-call votes, sponsor more bills, and are more-active on committees. Finally, I find that legislators diverge less from their district's median voter when newspaper coverage is strong. These results underscore the importance of robust media coverage for legislative accountability and suggest that legislative elections and state legislators would be more moderate, representative, and productive were press coverage strengthened.

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# 1 Introduction

State legislatures are critical policymaking bodies, yet recent studies suggest that elections rarely hold state legislators accountable for their lawmaking (Birkhead, 2015; Hogan, 2008; Rogers, 2017), and voters know little about legislative politics (Songer, 1984; Squire and Moncrief, 2019). Since the electoral connection between voters and legislators underpins canonical theories of legislative behavior (Fenno, 1978; Mayhew, 1974), its breakdown has important implications for legislative representation and elections. The absence of robust legislative accountability mechanisms is commonly attributed to the low-information news environment in which state legislatures operate (Carey et al., 2006). Without active political news coverage, incumbents may work less for their constituencies (Arnold, 2004; Snyder and Stromberg, 2010) and face limited threat of being thrown out of office for unresponsive policy making (Ferejohn, 1986). Despite widespread concern about accountability and the decline of local news, there is limited evidence on how the state legislative media environment shapes legislator behavior. Would elections function and legislators behave differently if voters had access to more information about legislative politics? Understanding how the legislative news environment shapes elections and legislator behavior is important in light of the secular decline of local news sources in general (Hayes and Lawless, 2015, 2018; Martin and McCrain, 2019; Peterson, 2021*b*) and legislative reporting resources in particular.

While observers have long worried about elections and accountability in low-information media environments, empirical evidence on the effect of news coverage on legislative races is sparse because news coverage is endogenous to many political and economic outcomes. In this article, I construct a measure of congruence between newspaper markets and state legislative districts that is plausibly exogenous to confounding political and economic variables (Peterson, 2021*a*; Snyder and Stromberg, 2010). Pairing this measure of news congruence with a modified regression discontinuity design and models of electoral selection, I am able to identify the causal effect of newspaper coverage on elections and representation. To guard against concerns about omitted variable bias, throughout the analysis I show that my re-

sults are robust to the inclusion of a battery of legislative race, representative, and district controls.

I begin by investigating whether my measure of congruence predicts observed levels of legislative news coverage. To do so, I count the number of newspaper articles written about incumbent state legislators in 256 geographically-representative newspapers for the years 2000-2020. This dataset encompasses 75% of all state legislative districts for the period of study. Using these data, I find that the number of newspaper articles written about the incumbent state legislator is strongly increasing in district readership share. Since legislative news coverage is a function of readership share, my measure of congruence between newspaper markets and legislative districts also strongly predicts legislative news coverage. Specifically, a shift in congruence from zero to one is associated with 86 more newspaper articles written about the average legislator.

Having validated my measure of newspaper coverage, I investigate how news congruence affects state legislative elections. First, I evaluate prominent claims that electoral returns to moderation are higher when races receive stronger news coverage (Canes-Wrone and Kistner, 2023; Hall, 2015; Rogers, 2017). Drawing on the design of (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, 2001), I find that active newspaper coverage of state legislative elections has an important moderating effect on electoral selection. The electoral return to moderation in contested general elections is doubly as large in districts with the strongest newspaper coverage in comparison to those with the weakest coverage. Second, I test the prediction that the incumbency advantage is larger when media coverage of elections is stronger (Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2002; Ashworth and Bueno De Mesquita, 2008). Leveraging the regression discontinuity design of Lee (2008), I find suggestive evidence that the combined personal and party incumbency advantage is larger in more-congruent legislative districts.

In the second half of the paper, I explore how news coverage shapes legislator behavior, including performance and representation. I find robust evidence that the fourth estate incentivizes legislators to work harder for the constituency and converge to the median

voter. Drawing on extensive roll-call, bill sponsorship, and committee assignment data, I demonstrate that legislators who receive more news coverage are more productive: they sponsor more bills, are absent from roll-call votes less often, and are more likely to serve on important legislative committees.

Finally, I test whether the well-documented ideological divergence between Democratic and Republican representatives' roll-call records (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, 2001; Fowler and Hall, 2017, 2016; Lee, Moretti, and Butler, 2004) is reduced in highly congruent legislative districts. Following these previous studies, I use a regression discontinuity design to estimate how the quality of news coverage affects divergence in roll-call representation. I find that active newspaper coverage produces strong moderating forces in state legislative elections, enabling voters to discipline their representatives for non-median ideological positions (Downs, 1957; Hotelling, 1929; Black, 1958). Specifically, in close elections, the gap in representation between Democratic and Republican state legislators is 26% smaller in districts with the highest level of newspaper congruence.

This article builds most directly on work by Snyder and Stromberg (2010) on media coverage and political accountability in Congress. Snyder and Stromberg 2010 find that members of Congress better represent their constituencies when local news coverage is stronger. I extend these results on representation to state legislatures. My extension of congressional results to state legislatures is important for at least two reasons. First, because an identifying feature of state legislatures is precisely their low levels of transparency (Broockman et al., 2012; Rogers, 2017), it is not clear whether results about congressional media coverage apply to state legislatures. State legislatures also differ from Congress in terms of electoral competition (Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall, 2022; Rogers, 2015; Squire, 2000), professionalism (Squire, 2017), and policy domain (Jewell, 2014), all of which limit the comparison of results across levels of government. Second, replication of existing research—particularly in novel settings—is an essential part of scientific research. That I identify effects of active news coverage in state legislatures that are similar to those in Congress should bolster our

confidence in this literature’s overall conclusions.

My research also follows in a vibrant literature on accountability in legislatures. One strand of this literature emphasizes how elections function as mechanisms that force self-interested officeholders to advance the interests of their constituents (Austen-Smith and Banks, 1989; Barro, 1973; Ferejohn, 1986), and that electoral competition forces legislators to adopt median-representative policies (Downs, 1957; Wright, Erikson, and McIver, 1994). In parallel with these expectations, extensive work on Congress (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan, 2002; Carson et al., 2010; Hall, 2015) and state legislatures (Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall, 2022) find that ideologically extreme candidates receive lower vote shares.

A growing literature, however, suggests that the strength of these accountability mechanisms is conditional on active media coverage. In congressional elections, the penalty to nominating an extremist primary candidate may be as much as three times larger when congruence is high (Hall, 2015), and news congruence strengthens the tie between candidates’ ideology and electoral outcomes (Canes-Wrone and Kistner, 2023). Evidence on how news coverage affects accountability in state legislative elections is largely missing, with one important exception. Rogers (2017) finds that voters in states with more state legislative newspaper reporters are better able to hold their representatives accountable for ideological divergence. While foundational, these results are based on a coarse measure of news coverage that is likely correlated with many other facets of legislative elections. Following Snyder and Stromberg (2010), my newspaper congruence design addresses these concerns while expanding the analysis across time and legislative chambers.

In this article, I focus on media effects revealed through newspapers. Existing research shows that local television allots less time to congressional (Hess, 1991; Vinson, 2003) and state legislative (Kaplan, Goldstein, and Hale, 2003) activity than newspapers. Future work should consider whether local television also augments accountability in state legislative elections.

Finally, an important drawback on my analysis is that my data only cover the years 2000 to 2020. Over recent decades, increased choice in news options has shifted mass media consumption away from sources with traditionally high political coverage to outlets with more-limited political coverage that is often highly nationalized (Hindman, 2008; Hopkins, 2018; Prior, 2007; Stroud, 2011). Further, due to economic pressures, the overall quantity of local news has declined significantly (Hayes and Lawless, 2018, 2015; Martin and McCrain, 2019). However, recent research suggests that newspapers remain an important driver of political knowledge, although these effects may be as much as one-half to one-third the size of previous eras (Peterson, 2021*a*). Importantly, these trends should bias my analysis against finding meaningful effects of newspaper coverage on legislative elections and representation.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section two outlines my empirical strategy, including my measure of newspaper market–legislative district congruence and data sources. In Section three, I validate my measure of congruence. Section four evaluates how media coverage affects legislative elections, including returns to moderation and the incumbency advantage. In Section five, I show how congruence shapes legislative productivity and representation. Section six concludes.

## 2 Empirical Strategy

### 2.1 Measuring Newspaper-District Congruence

Despite widespread interest, there is limited evidence on the impact of news coverage on local elections because the quantity and quality of news media are often endogenously determined by political and economic variables. To overcome this challenge, I adapt the newspaper congruence design of Snyder and Stromberg (2010) to state legislative elections. This design leverages the fact that a newspaper’s coverage of a legislator is partially a function of its share of readers residing in that legislator’s district (Hayes and Lawless, 2015; Snyder and Stromberg, 2010; Vinson, 2003). Intuitively, if the majority of a newspaper’s readers reside

in a single district, the newspaper will cover that district’s legislator much more closely than legislators in other nearby areas. Conversely, a newspaper that straddles multiple districts will split its coverage of legislators accordingly, resulting in less-active political newspaper coverage. Identification in this design relies on the fact that the economic factors that shape newspaper markets are often orthogonal to political boundaries.<sup>1</sup> The result is natural variation in newspaper coverage that is plausibly orthogonal to economic and political confounding variables.

Following previous work, I formalize this relationship by calculating the overlap (i.e., “congruence”) between newspaper markets and state legislative districts. Specifically, let  $x_{mdt}$  be the number of newspapers sold by newspaper  $m$  in district  $d$  in year  $t$ .<sup>2</sup> Then  $m$ ’s market share in  $d$  is given by

$$MarketShare_{md} = \frac{x_{md}}{\sum_{m'} x_{m'd}} \quad (1)$$

and  $m$ ’s share of readers in district  $d$  is given by

$$ReaderShare_{md} = \frac{x_{md}}{x_m}. \quad (2)$$

Intuitively, *MarketShare* represents the share of a newspaper’s readership that resides in a given district while *ReaderShare* captures the newspaper’s market share in a given county. To capture congruence, I weight *ReaderShare* by *MarketShare* to account for the probability that coverage reaches a given reader:

$$Congruence_d = \sum_{m=1}^M MarketShare_{md} ReaderShare_{md}. \quad (3)$$

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<sup>1</sup>See Snyder and Stromberg (2010) for a full validation of this assumption.

<sup>2</sup>Henceforth, the index  $t$  is implicit. I observe paper-county circulation data,  $x_{mc}$ . Following Snyder and Stromberg (2010), I assume that the number of copies of newspaper  $m$  sold in county  $c$  is proportionate across district  $d$ . Hence, I impute district-level circulation as  $x_{md} = \sum_{c'} \frac{n_{cd}}{\sum_{d'} n_{cd}} x_{mc}$ , where  $n_{cd}$  is the population of the part of district  $d$  in county  $c$ .

In equation 3,  $Congruence_d$  ranges from zero to one. When congruence is equal to one, there is perfect overlap between newspaper markets and legislative districts, suggesting that the newspaper will concentrate its coverage on that district’s incumbent. Congruence near zero indicates that voters will often be exposed to newspaper coverage about an incumbent that is not their legislator.

I calculate  $Congruence_d$  for every district in all 99 state legislative chambers for the years 2000-2020, accounting for both decennial and court-initiated redistricting. County level newspaper circulation data (i.e.,  $x_{mc}$ ) are from (Peterson, 2021a). These data were digitized from the 2008, 2014, and 2018 editions of the Standard Rate and Data Service *Circulation* handbook.<sup>3</sup> Population statistics were imputed from the 2000, 2010, and 2020 Census Redistricting File at the Census Block level.

## 2.2 Data on Legislative Performance and Representation

To implement my study, I build datasets on legislative performance and representation from a variety of sources. First, to measure legislator productivity, I assemble data on state legislative roll-call voting and bill sponsorship from Fournaies and Hall (2022) and the online data vendor Legiscan.com. These data include roll-call votes and bill introductions for the near-universe of chamber-years for the years 2010-2022 and roughly half of chamber-years for the years 2000-2009. Approximately 20% of the data originate from Fournaies and Hall (2022) and the remaining 80% were collected by the author from Legiscan.com.<sup>4</sup> To this dataset I merge in data on state legislative committee assignments and chamber leadership positions for the years 2000-2014 from Fournaies and Hall (2018).

Lastly, I build an extensive battery of controls legislative race, representative and district controls, matching Snyder and Stromberg (2010) at the state legislative-level. These data cover this article’s full period of study and were collected from IPUMS and the Census

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<sup>3</sup>Following Peterson (2021a) and Snyder and Stromberg (2010), I interpolate circulation for missing years.

<sup>4</sup>While every effort was made to assemble a complete panel, data for a limited number of state-chambers was unavailable for early years of the analysis. Exact details on the sample are provided in Appendix Section A.1.



Bureau.

All these datasets were matched to a master dataset of state legislative election returns and candidate ideology scalings from Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall (2022) and Myers (2023).

### 3 Congruence Predicts Legislative Newspaper Coverage

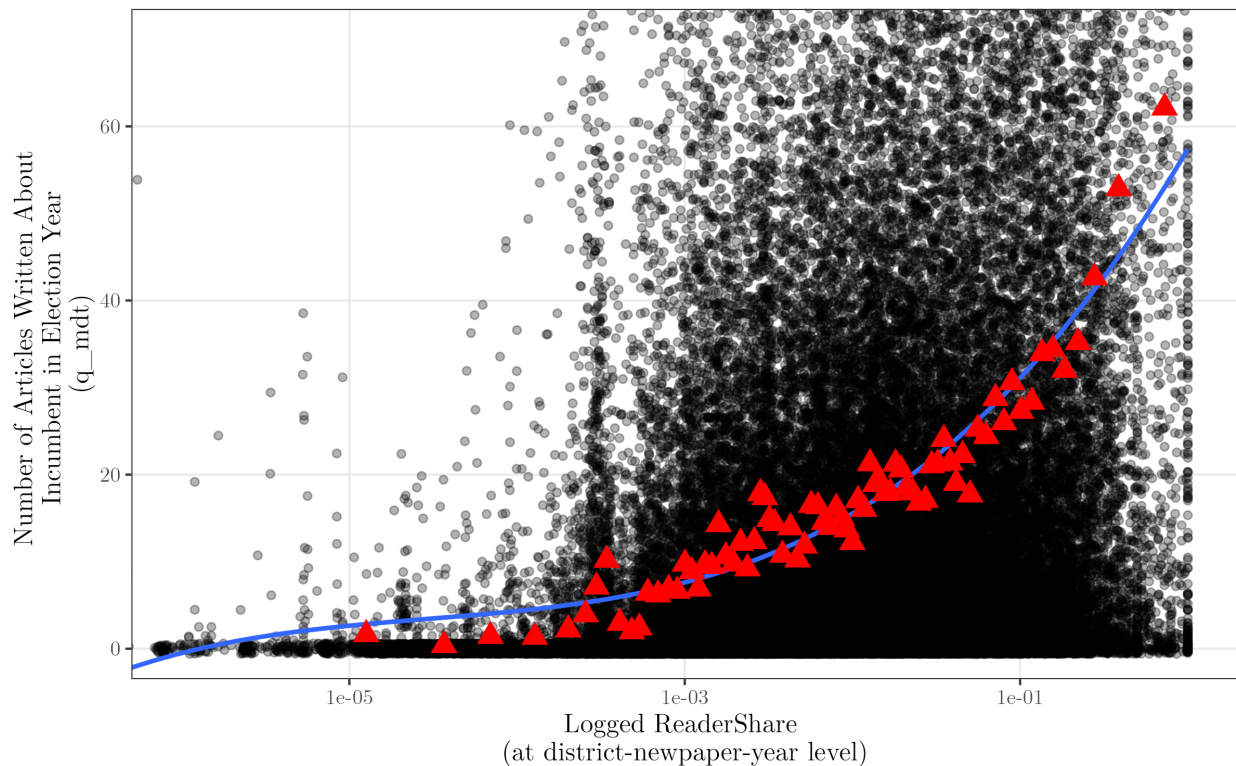
The driving force behind my analysis rests of the assumption that the number of articles a newspaper publishes about a legislator is increasing in that newspaper’s share of readers who live in the related legislative district. This section introduces a novel legislative news coverage dataset and tests this assumption.

To measure legislator newspaper exposure, I use Newspapers.com to search 286 local and regional newspapers for articles about every incumbent state legislator in every election year between 1998 and 2020. These 286 newspapers cover 75% of all state legislative districts and contain 1.3 million articles about state legislators. Using these data, I construct the variable  $q_{mdt}$  which records the number of newspaper articles written by newspaper  $m$  about the incumbent in district  $d$  in year  $t$ . See Appendix Section A.2 for a complete description of this dataset.

As an initial test, I plot the relationship between the number of articles in newspaper  $m$  that are written about the legislator in district  $d$  in election cycle  $t$  ( $q_{mdt}$ ) and  $m$ ’s readership share in  $d$  and  $t$  ( $ReaderShare_{mdt}$ ). The results are shown in Figure 1 where  $ReaderShare_{mdt}$  is logged for ease of presentation and the red dots represent averages of equally-sized bins. I find a strong positive relationship between  $ReaderShare_{mdt}$  and  $q_{mdt}$ . That is, the number of articles written about the incumbent state legislator increases strongly in newspaper reader share.

Now, I formally test this motivating assumption while controlling for a variety of variables that likely affect legislator news coverage. This battery of controls includes all controls

**Figure 1 – Newspaper Reader Share Shapes Legislator Press Coverages.** The number of newspaper articles written about the incumbent legislator (y-axis) is strongly increasing in that same newspaper’s reader share in the associated district (x-axis).



Note: Blue line depicts 3rd order polynomial line of best fit using all available data. Values above 70 are omitted from the figure for ease of interpretation.

employed in Snyder and Stromberg (2010), with the exception of an indicator for political scandal.<sup>5</sup> These controls fall into three categories. First, I add legislator-specific controls, including indicators for whether the legislator is a freshman, a member of their chamber’s majority party, and a chair of a legislative committee. I also control for the legislator’s experience as measured by their tenure in the legislature. Second, I control for race characteristics, including whether the race was close (within 10%), was for an open seat, or was uncontested. Finally, I add district controls, including population density, median income, percent urban, percent retired, percent veterans, and percent foreign born. The summary

<sup>5</sup>I add additional district and race controls to the original Snyder and Stromberg (2010) specification in order to match the specifications employed in subsequent sections. In Appendix Table B.5, I replicate the Snyder and Stromberg (2010) specification (with the exception of the scandal indicator), the results of which are nearly identical to those presented in the main text.

statistics for these controls, along with their sources, are shown in Appendix Table A.3.

The results from this analysis are reported in Table 1. In columns one and two the unit of analysis is the district-newspaper-year and the outcome is  $q_{mdt}$ , the number of articles written by newspaper  $m$  about the legislator representing district  $d$  in year  $t$ . The key independent variable is *ReaderShare*. Following Snyder and Stromberg (2010), I include year fixed effects. Column one demonstrates that the relationship plotted in Figure 1 is highly statistically significant. In column two, the addition of legislator, race, and district controls does not meaningfully change these results.<sup>6</sup> I find that change in newspaper reader share from zero to one is associated with between 86 and 90 more articles written about the incumbent state legislator.

Many of the control variables in column two enter with the expected effect. Longer-serving legislators, legislators in the majority, and legislators who chair committees receive, on average, more news coverage. Uncontested races receive less news coverage as do, surprisingly, close races and open seat races, although this relationship is quite noisy.

Overall, the strong relationship between newspaper *ReaderShare* and newspaper coverage drives the results for the remainder of this paper. To emphasize this point, I calculate the sales-weighted number of articles written about the legislator representing district  $d$  in year  $t$  as

$$q_{dt} = \sum_{m=1}^M MarketShare_{mdt} \cdot q_{mdt}.$$

Columns three and four of Table 1 regress  $q_{dt}$  against district congruence, *Congruence<sub>d</sub>*. Again I find a strong positive relationship between congruence and press coverage. An increase in congruence from zero to one is associated with an 86 or 88 article increase in newspaper coverage. These estimates are roughly half the size of previous estimates for Congress (Snyder and Stromberg, 2010).<sup>7</sup>

In sum, I find that newspaper *ReaderShare* is highly predictive of legislative news cov-

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<sup>6</sup>I have also confirmed that the results hold using any subset of the three sets of control variables.

<sup>7</sup>Note, however, that Snyder and Stromberg (2010) analyze newspaper references for the years 1991-2002, while I examine the period 2000-2020.

**Table 1 – Newspaper Reader Share and Legislator Press Coverages.** After controlling for legislator, race, and district variables, newspaper *ReaderShare* strongly predicts observed press coverage. As a result, the *Congruence* between newspaper markets and districts is also highly predictive of legislative newspaper coverage.

	Count of Articles About Legislator ( <i>q_mdt</i> )		Sales-Weighted Articles About Legislator ( <i>q_dt</i> )	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
ReaderShare	86.22 (7.85)	89.97 (7.00)		
Congruence			86.62 (5.13)	88.45 (5.14)
Freshman		-1.64 (1.03)		-0.58 (0.23)
Experience		0.42 (0.11)		0.12 (0.01)
In Majority		0.92 (0.93)		0.22 (0.17)
Chair		5.26 (2.55)		0.97 (0.55)
Close Race		-0.43 (0.76)		-0.11 (0.22)
Uncontested Race		-2.43 (0.72)		-0.62 (0.17)
Open Seat		-1.08 (0.94)		-0.32 (0.25)
Population Density		-1.32 (0.89)		-0.62 (0.18)
Median Income		-0.00 (0.00)		-0.00 (0.00)
% Urban		0.09 (0.04)		0.02 (0.02)
% Retired		-0.22 (0.29)		-0.32 (0.04)
% Veterans		0.12 (0.34)		0.05 (0.05)
% Foreign Born		0.34 (0.19)		-0.02 (0.02)
N	82,031	82,031	44,419	44,419
Unit of Observation	Dist.-Paper-Year	Dist.-Paper-Year	District-Year	District-Year
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
Fixed Effects	Year	Year	Year	Year
Standard Error Clusters	Newspaper	Newspaper	District	District

Note: Results are stronger after logging *ReaderShare* and *Congruence*.

erage. As a result, newspaper coverage of state legislators is stronger when *Congruence*—or the degree of overlap between newspaper markets and legislative districts—is higher.

## 4 Press Coverage and Legislative Elections

In this section, I use my data on district *Congruence* to evaluate two prominent claims about how news coverage affects elections. First, a key concern about the decay of local news media is that voters are less able to sanction candidates for ideological extremity. Previous work on congressional elections suggests that the electoral penalty for ideological extremism is indeed higher when news coverage is stronger (Hall, 2015; Canes-Wrone and Kistner, 2023), but there is little evidence for state legislative elections. In the first subsection, I test whether the electoral returns to moderation in state legislatures are higher when elections receive more news coverage. In the second subsection, I evaluate the prediction that the incumbency advantage will be greater for more visible races (Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2002; Ashworth and Bueno De Mesquita, 2008).

### 4.1 Electoral Returns to Moderation

Downsian logic suggests that candidates will perform better the closer they locate to the median voter (Downs, 1957; Hotelling, 1929; Black, 1958). In line with this expectation, extensive work finds that voters prefer more-moderate candidates to more-extreme candidates (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, 2001; Burden, 2004; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan, 2002; Erikson et al., 2000; Tomz and Van Houweling, 2008; Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall, 2022). It is plausible, though, that voters will be less able to respond to candidates’ ideology when news coverage of legislative elections is low. In this subsection, I test whether the well-documented electoral returns to moderation in state legislative elections (Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall, 2022) require active media coverage.

To assess how news coverage affects electoral returns to moderation, I compare the ideol-

ogy of competing Democratic and Republican candidates and predict their electoral returns to changes in ideological platform. Following Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001), I estimate an equation of the form

$$Y_{dct} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Midpoint}_{dct} + \beta_2 \text{Distance}_{dct} + \beta_3 \text{Congruence}_{dct} + \beta_4 \text{Midpoint}_{dct} \cdot \text{Congruence}_{dct} + \Omega X_{dct} + \alpha_d + \delta_t + \epsilon_{dct}. \quad (4)$$

where  $Y_{dct}$  is either the Democratic candidate's general election vote share or a victory indicator in district  $d$  in chamber  $c$  in year  $t$ .<sup>8</sup> *Midpoint* and *Distance* are the midpoint and distance between Democratic and Republican candidates, respectively, and *Congruence* is my measure of newspaper market-legislative district congruence.  $X_{dct}$  is an optional vector of controls and the error term,  $\epsilon_{dct}$ , is clustered by district  $d$ . Finally, to hold the districts' median voter constant, I control for the Republican presidential candidate's vote share in the most recent presidential election.<sup>9</sup>

Previous research on state legislatures suggests that  $\beta_1$  is positive, indicating that candidates benefit from ideological moderation (Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall, 2022).<sup>10</sup> The term  $\beta_4$  tests whether this advantage is stronger in districts with more-congruent newspaper coverage.

Table 2 reports my estimates of the midpoint model (i.e., Equation 4). Across all specifications, I find robust evidence that newspaper congruence strengthens the relationship between ideological moderation and electoral success. In column one, without any additional controls, I find that a shift from congruence of zero to one nearly doubles the expected electoral returns to moderation. After adding controls for candidate contributions (column 2) and district, race, and representative controls (column 3), I again find that the relative

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<sup>8</sup>Since this design requires competition between one Democratic and one Republican candidate, I restrict my sample to elections in contested single-member districts when using the midpoint model.

<sup>9</sup>This decision matches Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001). Note that, since congruence is generally constant within district-regimes, I cannot employ district fixed effects to hold the median voter constant.

<sup>10</sup>More specifically, a positive  $\beta_1$  indicates that the Democratic candidate receives an electoral boost from a rightward (i.e., positive) shift in *Midpoint*.

**Table 2 – Effect of News Congruence on Advantage of Moderate Candidates in Contested General Elections.** Moderate candidates receive higher vote-share and win-probability returns in districts with more-congruent newspaper coverage.

	Dem Vote Share		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Midpoint	0.26 (0.02)	0.06 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)
Midpoint · Congruence	0.26 (0.06)	0.14 (0.05)	0.10 (0.04)
Rep. Pres. Vote Share	-0.83 (0.01)	-0.63 (0.01)	-0.56 (0.01)
Dem Contributions		0.02 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)
Rep Contributions		-0.02 (0.00)	-0.02 (0.00)
N	18,444	15,830	15,830
District Controls	No	No	Yes
Race Controls	No	No	Yes
Representative Controls	No	No	Yes

Note: The outcome is either Democratic vote share or a Democratic win indicator. Robust standard errors are clustered by district in parentheses. Midpoint and Distance variables are scaled to run from 0 to 1. The sample is limited to contested general elections in single member districts. Models include state-by-chamber and year fixed effects.

importance of congruence for electoral returns to moderation grows. Columns two and three suggest that the electoral returns to moderation are nearly tripled in the most congruence districts compared to the least congruent districts. In Appendix Table C.6, I show that similar results hold for the Democratic candidate’s win probability.

## 4.2 The Incumbency Advantage

The incumbency advantage has received extensive scholarly attention in the context of congressional and state legislative elections. In addition to highlighting the extraordinary advantage incumbents receive in their reelection bids, previous research suggests that the in-

cumbency advantage is larger for higher-visibility offices and races.<sup>11</sup> I test this prediction, using my measure of *Congruence* as a proxy for race visibility.

To evaluate this prediction, I employ the regression discontinuity design of Lee (2008).<sup>12</sup> This design compares party vote shares in time  $t + 1$  in districts where the margin of victory (and, hence, incumbency status) was close in time  $t$ . Since vote share is continuous around  $50\% + 1$  but incumbency status changes discontinuously, this difference estimates the change in vote share that is attributable to being the incumbent. However, since I am interested in how *Congruence* affects the incumbency advantage, I modify the original Lee (2008) design to allow for heterogeneity in the incumbency advantage following recent. Specifically, for district  $d$  in election  $t$  I estimate OLS regressions of the form:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Dem Vote Share}_{dt+1} = & \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 V_{dt} + \alpha_2 T_{dt} + \alpha_3 C_{dt} + \\ & \beta_1 V_{dt} C_{dt} + \beta_2 V_{dt} T_{dt} + \beta_3 C_{dt} T_{dt} + \\ & \gamma_1 V_{dt} C_{dt} T_{dt} + \\ & [\alpha_4 \mathbf{W}_{dt} + \beta_4 V_{dt} \mathbf{W}_{dt} + \beta_5 T_{dt} \mathbf{W}_{dt} + \gamma_2 T_{dt} V_{dt} \mathbf{W}_{dt} +] \\ & \delta_t + \varepsilon_{dt}. \end{aligned} \tag{5}$$

The term  $\text{Dem Vote Share}_{dt+1}$  is the Democrat’s vote share in time  $t + 1$ ,  $T_{dt}$  is an indicator for the Democrat’s victory in time  $t$ ,  $V_{dt}$  is the Democratic candidate’s general election win margin in time  $t$ ,  $C_{dt}$  is the district’s *Congruence*,  $\delta_t$  represents a year fixed effect, and  $\mathbf{W}_{dt}$  is an optional vector of control variables. This specification matches recent empirical and theoretical work on so-called “heterogeneity-in-discontinuities” designs (Bansak and Nowacki, 2022; Olson, 2020; Desai and Frey, 2023).

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<sup>11</sup>Specifically, Ashworth and Bueno De Mesquita (2008) propose that, if news environments are equally informative across elections, the incumbency advantage is increasing in the informativeness of the news signals. This comparative static arises because, as voters receive better information, they become more confident about their selected candidate. Hence, future information is less likely to change their mind, helping the incumbent. Ansolabehere and Snyder (2002) find support for this hypothesis across levels of government, but previous research has not examined this prediction across state legislative races.

<sup>12</sup>As CITE note, this design captures the weighted average of the personal and party incumbency advantages.



**Table 3 – Regression Discontinuity Estimates of the Incumbency Advantage in High and Low-Congruence Districts.** The incumbency advantage is higher in more-congruent districts. Note that this effect includes both personal and party incumbency advantages.

	Baseline			Interactive Model			Interactive Model with Controls		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Dem Win · Congruence				0.06 (0.03)	0.06 (0.02)	0.05 (0.02)	0.07 (0.03)	0.09 (0.03)	0.08 (0.03)
Dem Win	0.05 (0.00)	0.05 (0.00)	0.05 (0.00)	0.04 (0.00)	0.04 (0.00)	0.05 (0.00)	0.06 (0.06)	0.02 (0.05)	0.03 (0.04)
Congruence				-0.08 (0.02)	-0.09 (0.02)	-0.08 (0.01)	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.05 (0.02)	-0.06 (0.02)
N	6,471	8,571	10,617	6,137	8,131	10,086	4,153	5,493	6,836
Bandwidth	.069	.069	.069	.065	.065	.065	.088	.088	.088
Bandwidth Factor	.75	1	1.25	.75	1	1.25	.75	1	1.25
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: In all columns the outcome is the Democrat’s vote share in time  $t + 1$ . Controls include race, representative, and district controls. Standard errors are clustered by district in parentheses.

Table 3 reports the results from this exercise. Throughout Table 3 I combine a local linear estimator estimated separately on each side of the discontinuity with the optimal bandwidth from Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014) (e.g., Desai and Frey, 2023). For each specification, I report estimates at the optimal bandwidth and bandwidths that are 25% larger and smaller than the optimal bandwidth.<sup>13</sup> First, as a baseline, columns one through three estimate the incumbency advantage in state legislative elections without reference to *Congruence*. I find that incumbency in time  $t$  causes a 5 percentage point increase in party vote share in the subsequent election. This estimate is slightly smaller than Lee’s (2008) estimate of 7.7 percentage points in U.S. House elections.

Next, in columns four through six of Table 3, I allow the treatment effect to vary according to levels of *Congruence*. The coefficient on the interaction term indicates that incumbents running in districts with perfect congruence with newspaper markets receive a vote-share bonus that is typically double that of incumbents in theoretical districts with

<sup>13</sup>The bandwidth used in each column is the produce of the “Bandwidth” and “Bandwidth Factor.” In Appendix XXX I show that these results are robust to other standard RD specifications.

zero congruence. Finally, in columns seven through nine of Table 3 I introduce district, race, and representative controls and allow their relationship with vote share to vary across the discontinuity. This strategy provides more-compelling identification of a causal effect of the moderator *Congruence* on vote share. After this inclusion, my results are highly similar and statistically significant.

Hence, Table 3 confirms previous theoretical predictions: the incumbency advantage is stronger when news coverage of legislators is better.

## 5 Legislative Productivity and Accountability

The results from the previous section suggest that the presence of active newspaper coverage alter the functioning of legislative elections. When press coverage is strong, the electoral returns to moderation and incumbency advantage are higher. In this section, I explore how news coverage influences legislator behavior, including legislative productivity and representation.

### 5.1 Legislative Productivity

Robust media coverage of politics allows voters to monitor the behavior of their representatives (Arnold, 2004; Snyder and Stromberg, 2010). In the absence of robust media coverage, however, legislators may have weak incentives to engage in costly forms of legislative productivity. This may happen, for example, if legislators serving low-information districts suspect that their shirking of legislative responsibilities will go unnoticed, or that their expenditure of effort will be overlooked by their electorate. While previous work suggests that the removal of electoral incentives leads to lower state legislative productivity, there is no evidence on how press coverage affects state legislative productivity. In this section, I evaluate how news coverage affects legislative productivity.

Voting, working on committees, and writing bills constitute many of the most impor-

tant activities for legislators. By casting roll-call votes, legislators engage in a highly-consequential form of position-taking (Mayhew, 1974), while missing a roll-call vote may reflect non-ideological shirking (Bender and Lott, 1996).<sup>14</sup> Strategic committee membership and service allows legislators to prioritize and expedite the demands of their constituency (e.g., Shepsle, 1989, 1978; Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1987; Weingast and Marshall, 1988, although also see Berry and Fowler 2016). Finally, crafting and sponsoring legislation may aid legislators in building a personal legislative agenda (Schiller, 1995). Hence, following previous work on state legislative productivity, my analysis focuses on these three indicators of productivity (Fouirnaies and Hall, 2022).

I operationalize these three forms of legislative productivity using the roll-call, bill sponsorship, and committee activity data described in Section . First, to capture how often legislators participate in floor votes, I calculate the percent of all floor roll-call votes in which a legislator cast a vote either in favor or against to the motion.<sup>15</sup> Second, to measure legislative bill-writing and sponsorship activity, I calculate the number of bills that each legislator sponsored in a given legislative session. Third, I measure committee service using the committee activity index created by (Fouirnaies and Hall, 2022). This index measures a legislator’s aggregate committee responsibility across all committee assignments.<sup>16</sup> Finally, following Fouirnaies and Hall (2022) and Dal Bó and Rossi (2011), I create a summary measure of legislative productivity by extracting the underlying latent dimension of the three productivity measures using principle components analysis. Appendix Table A.3 reports the summary statistics for these measures.

Table 4 regresses the four measures of productivity on press congruence. Throughout the analysis I include state-by-chamber-by-session fixed effects to account for differential levels of productivity across chambers and time. As a result, Table 4 makes within state-chamber-

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<sup>14</sup>Further, roll-call voting is one of the legislative activities that is most-commonly covered by newspapers (Arnold, 2004).

<sup>15</sup>While I observe both floor votes and votes within committees, I focus on the former to avoid conditioning on committee membership.

<sup>16</sup>Details here.

**Table 4 – Active Newspaper Coverage Increases Legislative Productivity.** Active newspaper coverage is associated with fewer missed roll-call votes, more bill sponsorships, and more-active committee membership.

	Percent of Floor Votes		Sponsored Bills		Committee Activity		Aggregate Productivity Index	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Congruence	2.506 (0.293)	0.992 (0.330)	2.944 (1.062)	1.561 (1.039)	0.346 (0.150)	0.153 (0.148)	0.291 (0.111)	0.215 (0.104)
N	25,424	25,424	25,424	25,424	4,987	4,987	8,943	8,943
District Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Race Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Representative Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
State x Chamber x Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Outcomes are reported in column headers. Standard errors are clustered by state-chamber in parentheses.

session comparisons.<sup>17</sup> In even columns I also include the district, race, and representative controls from Section 5.1. Further, to account for potential non-linearities in the effect of population density and urbanness, I add five dummies for log population density and percent urban intervals.

The first two columns of Table 4 show the estimated effect of a shift in press congruence from zero to one on the percent of roll-call votes a legislator casts. Legislators representing districts with robust newspaper coverage miss between 1 (column two) and 2.5 (column one) percentage points fewer roll-call votes than legislators representing districts with poor press coverage.<sup>18</sup> Focusing on column two, since the average state legislator casts a vote in 94.6% of all roll-calls, the effect of active press coverage represents an 18% increase in the missed-vote rate. This estimate is similar in absolute value to the effect of being a lame-luck term-limited legislator (Fouirnaies and Hall, 2022) or the extension of a legislator’s term length (Titunik, 2016).

Next I consider bill sponsorship. Columns three and four of Table 4 show the effect

<sup>17</sup>Appendix Table D.7 shows that my results are highly similar after accounting for differential party effects.

<sup>18</sup>Since the missed vote rate may be correlated with travel time to the capital, in Appendix Table D.8 I add a control for the distance between each districts’ centroid and the state capital. My results remain unchanged.

of press congruence on the number of bills a legislator sponsors. I find that robust press coverage is, on average, associated with 2.5 more bills sponsored by a legislator. This change represents a 27% proportional increase in bill sponsorship. Finally, in columns five and six I estimate the effect of press congruence on committee activity. XXX

Collectively, the results in Table 4 suggest that press coverage plays an important role in driving legislator effort and productivity. Legislators that receive stronger news coverage are absent for fewer roll-call votes, sponsor more legislation, and are more active on committees.

## 5.2 Representation Divergence

Political polarization has reached historic levels across American legislative landscapes, generating widespread concern about diminished legislative productivity, efficiency, and responsiveness (Mann and Ornstein, 2012; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006; Shor and McCarty, 2011; Krugman, 2004). A defining feature of this polarization is the divergence in representation between Democratic and Republican legislators. Despite Downs’ prominent prediction that candidates will converge to the median voter (Downs, 1957; Hotelling, 1929; Black, 1958), previous work documents systematic and persistent divergence in American legislatures (Fowler and Hall, 2016, 2017; Lee, Moretti, and Butler, 2004). Scholars have advanced numerous explanations for the failure of convergence, including voter preferences for non-ideological characteristics (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2009; Bernhardt and Ingberman, 1985; Eyster and Kittsteiner, 2007; Groseclose, 2001), the threat of a third-party entrant (Palfrey, 1984), and uncertainty over electoral outcomes (Calvert, 1985; McCarty et al., 2019; Wittman, 1983).

Surprisingly, there is little evidence on how news coverage shapes legislative representation divergence. One important exception is Snyder and Stromberg (2010) who show that congressional divergence is smaller in districts with stronger newspaper coverage. We might expect, for example, legislative media coverage to decrease representation divergence by prompting legislators to place more weight on their constituents’ preferences. Alternatively,

the legislative media environment may be too weak to meaningfully alter representatives' behavior. The following section addresses this question.

To assess the effect of press coverage on divergence, I use a regression discontinuity design to compare representation in districts where the Democratic candidate barely won to districts where the Republican candidate barely lost (Fowler and Hall, 2016, 2017; Lee, Moretti, and Butler, 2004) across values of *Congruence<sub>d</sub>*. In the neighborhood of the discontinuity, this design isolates the effect of an election result (Imbens and Lemieux, 2008) and its assumptions have been shown to hold in the context of state legislative elections (Eggers et al., 2015).

As a fundamental element of representation, I use legislators' roll-call votes to capture representation in state legislatures as measured by Shor and McCarty's (2011) NP-Scores. For this design, I focus on contested state legislative elections in single-member districts. Specifically, for district  $d$  in election  $t$  I estimate OLS regressions of the form:

$$\begin{aligned}
NP_{Score}_{dt} = & \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 V_{dt} + \alpha_2 T_{dt} + \alpha_3 C_{dt} + \\
& \beta_1 V_{dt} C_{dt} + \beta_2 V_{dt} T_{dt} + \beta_3 C_{dt} T_{dt} + \\
& \gamma_1 V_{dt} C_{dt} T_{dt} + \\
& [\alpha_4 \mathbf{W}_{dt} + \beta_4 V_{dt} \mathbf{W}_{dt} + \beta_5 T_{dt} \mathbf{W}_{dt} + \gamma_2 T_{dt} V_{dt} \mathbf{W}_{dt} +] \\
& \delta_t + \varepsilon_{dt}.
\end{aligned} \tag{6}$$

In district  $d$  in election  $t$ ,  $NP_{Score}_{dt}$  is the winning candidate's NP-Score,  $T_{dt}$  is an indicator a Democratic candidate victory,  $V_{dt}$  is the Democratic candidate's general election win margin,  $C_{dt}$  is the district's *Congruence*,  $\delta_t$  represents a year fixed effect, and  $\mathbf{W}_{dt}$  is an optional vector of control variables. Note that this design mirrors the specification used above in Equation 5.

The coefficient  $\alpha_2$  is the effect of narrowly electing a Democratic legislator on the associated district's roll-call representation. Previous work uncovers significant divergence in close state legislative elections (Fowler and Hall, 2017, 2016), implying that  $\alpha_2$  is negative.

**Table 5 – RD Estimates of Divergence in High and Low-Congruence Districts.** Districts with high newspaper congruence have less divergence in roll-call representation between narrowly elected Democratic and Republican legislators.

	Baseline			Interactive Model			Interactive Model With Controls		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Dem Win · Congruence				0.36 (0.12)	0.33 (0.10)	0.35 (0.10)	0.19 (0.12)	0.20 (0.10)	0.22 (0.09)
Dem Win	-1.39 (0.02)	-1.40 (0.02)	-1.41 (0.02)	-1.41 (0.03)	-1.43 (0.02)	-1.44 (0.02)	-1.05 (0.22)	-1.14 (0.19)	-1.20 (0.18)
Congruence				0.31 (0.08)	0.32 (0.07)	0.30 (0.07)	0.12 (0.08)	0.11 (0.07)	0.08 (0.06)
N	7,957	10,639	13,364	7,553	10,080	12,633	8,862	11,934	14,925
Bandwidth	.069	.069	.069	.065	.065	.065	.105	.105	.105
Bandwidth Factor	.75	1	1.25	.75	1	1.25	.75	1	1.25
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: In all columns the outcome is legislators’ NP-Score. Controls include race, representative, and district controls. Standard errors are clustered by district in parentheses.

For this study, I am interested in  $\beta_3$ , or the marginal effect of narrowly electing a Democrat on roll-call representation when  $Congruence_d$  shifts from zero to one. In other words,  $\beta_3$  estimates the difference in roll-call divergence that is attributable to active newspaper coverage.

The results are reported in Table 5. Throughout Table 5 I estimate optimal bandwidths using the algorithm in Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014). To emphasize that my results are robust across bandwidths, I report estimates at the optimal bandwidth and bandwidths that are 25% larger and smaller than the optimal bandwidth (the “Bandwidth Factor”).<sup>19</sup> Columns one through three of Table 5 show the estimates from a reference RDD that replicates existing research—that is, it omits all terms containing  $Congruence_d$ .<sup>20</sup> The negative coefficients on *Dem Win* in columns one through three indicate that the coin-flip

<sup>19</sup>In Appendix Table XXX I show that the results are not dependent on this local linear specification and hold after substituting in third- and fifth-order polynomials of the running variable and omitting the bandwidth cutoff.

<sup>20</sup>Specifically, I estimate equations of the form

$$NP\text{Score}_{dt} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 V_{dt} + \alpha_2 T_{dt} + \beta_2 V_{dt} T_{dt} + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{dt}.$$

election of a Democratic state legislator shifts the associated district’s roll-call representation in the liberal direction.

The remainder of Table 5 shows estimates from Equation ?? . In columns four through six I estimate a baseline interactive RDD. The positive coefficient on the interaction term  $Dem\ Win \cdot Congruence$  indicates that divergence in representation is smaller in more-congruent legislative districts. Specifically, I find that a shift from negligible to perfect press congruence reduces divergence by nearly 25%.

The baseline RDD specification suggests that a meaningful difference in divergence exists across values of *Congruence*. In columns seven through nine, I add controls to evaluate whether *Congruence* causes a difference in the RDD effect (Bansak and Nowacki, 2022). The results from this exercise are similar in magnitude in the baseline specification and suggest that *Congruence* can reduce divergence. Finally, observe that the estimates reported in Table 5 are stable across different bandwidths and control specifications.

In sum, I find strong evidence that robust press coverage reduces representation divergence in state legislative elections. The coin-flip election of a Democratic legislator causes a nearly 25% decrease in representation divergence in comparison to a counterfactual Republican legislator representing the same district.

## 6 Discussion

Robust political media coverage is widely regarded a key ingredient of democratic governance. Press coverage is often, however, uneven and lacking across political arenas. This concern is particularly acute in light of the secular decline of state legislative news coverage. By one count, the number of full-time newspaper reporters covering state legislatures has declined by 34% since 2014, further depleting the already low-information legislative news environment.<sup>21</sup> Does the lack of legislative news coverage alter the functioning of legislative elections or

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<sup>21</sup><https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/04/05/the-number-of-full-time-statehouse-reporters-at-u-s-newspapers-has-declined-34-since-2014/>. See also Enda, Matsa, and Boyles (2014).



legislators' behavior?

This is an important question, and future work should continue to investigate how accountability functions in low-information environments. However, the results reported in this article suggest that press coverage has an important monitoring effect on legislative elections and legislator behavior. When press coverage of legislative elections is stronger, I find that the electoral returns to ideological moderation are higher. Hence, newspapers appear to enable voters to sanction candidates for ideological extremity.

Press coverage also shapes legislator behavior. I find that legislators who receive stronger newspaper coverage miss fewer roll-call votes, sponsor more bills, and are more-active on legislative committees. In short, press coverage incentives legislators to work more for their constituencies. Finally, I show that press coverage causes legislators to converge in the direction of the median voter.

Overall, my findings underscore the importance of press coverage for electoral accountability, particularly in low-information environments.

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# Appendix

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## A Data Coverage and Descriptive Statistics

### A.1 Roll Call and Bill Sponsorship Data

State legislative roll-call and bill sponsorship data were collected by the author from the online data vendor Legiscan.com and combined with similar data from Fourniaies and Hall (2022). These data include roll-call votes and bill introductions for the near-universe of chamber-years for the years 2010-2022 and roughly half of chamber-years for the years 2000-2009. Approximately 20% of the data originate from Fourniaies and Hall (2022) and the remaining 80% were collected by the author from Legiscan.com. Table A.1 reports the full coverage of the roll-call dataset.

**Table A.1 – Roll Call Data Coverage Matrix.** This table reports the coverage of my roll-call dataset in terms of states and years. Cells contain the number of roll-call votes observed in thousands.

State	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
AK	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	13	18	13	15	21	22	11	7	17	25	163
AL	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	55	122	157	121	101	139	106	105	111	116	49	178	136	1495
AR	.	141	.	135	.	155	.	121	.	93	.	203	39	220	41	183	40	167	36	163	26	181	33	1979
AZ	76	67	57	46	55	59	70	51	55	36	51	68	74	60	64	67	76	65	67	61	49	91	79	1444
CA	147	137	141	128	132	115	119	118	130	213	187	262	265	254	284	279	296	295	323	321	123	259	315	4843
CO	.	.	.	.	17	6	29	31	28	31	37	46	52	58	49	45	105	87	119	125	90	134	120	1210
CT	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	12	67	52	82	61	70	89	118	98	120	18	117	91	995
DE	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	15	18	16	16	16	19	9	9	18	20	19	5	22	22	225
FL	.	.	.	92	110	95	90	84	82	76	109	112	112	96	87	87	81	69	57	53	53	118	119	1782
GA	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	171	42	113	168	127	123	126	127	116	123	120	107	126	191	1779
HI	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	26	26	53	42	148
IA	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	37	32	110	.	60	28	73	54	393
ID	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	42	43	44	43	43	46	43	44	41	44	48	43	524
IL	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	232	165	191	134	175	149	161	123	162	158	164	10	203	117	2143
IN	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	0	89	53	92	83	91	68	83	66	98	60	77	67	926
KS	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	94	62	53	46	43	44	44	45	31	18	53	38	572
KY	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	56	49	42	60	66	273
LA	55	222	90	208	171	107	163	96	172	112	428	220	364	212	381	246	200	130	203	135	150	153	212	4429
MA	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	58	45	24	30	19	19	195
MD	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	64	202	286	154	215	183	230	254	250	236	200	241	245	2761
ME	.	.	.	43	43	59	38	34	42	43	21	41	25	85	61	88	39	83	46	60	6	78	32	965
MI	.	61	89	61	83	67	100	55	100	61	48	101	147	100	149	84	125	84	167	63	100	94	66	2003
MN	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	51	59	74	60	45	43	49	39	67	32	54	33	606
MO	119	118	122	129	105	104	97	102	107	124	94	105	117	150	122	122	145	104	127	109	56	100	84	2562
MS	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	202	186	185	182	173	168	178	155	148	140	158	134	182	2192
MT	.	459	.	453	.	471	.	423	.	169	.	307	.	276	.	289	.	272	.	298	.	324	.	3740
NC	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	2	12	203	65	207	77	170	62	141	65	142	32	96	27	1303
ND	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	146	.	128	.	149	.	141	.	564
NE	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	13	11	17	8	46	30	40	31	196
NH	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	91	104	68	102	69	99	62	101	106	77	92	99	1069
NJ	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	47	49	46	58	133	116	89	84	100	95	95	104	75	1089
NM	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	62	28	51	29	57	29	55	19	30	13	373
NV	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	39	.	43	0	44	0	49	.	43	1	38	.	257
NY	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	30	122	368	82	367	37	241	14	411	342	456	223	373	393	3461
OH	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	13	21	20	18	39	39	33	43	21	26	20	27	18	22	26	20	405
OK	128	130	149	145	159	159	158	140	141	163	169	308	142	300	134	248	121	272	105	289	101	340	157	4158
OR	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	1	18	119	18	104	18	98	12	91	17	497
PA	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	166	152	266	247	264	7	324	257	307	260	308	216	186	171	3133
RI	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	2	95	63	91	82	67	62	24	78	75	637
SC	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	90	58	98	111	100	97	81	95	97	54	90	118	1089
SD	.	.	.	29	30	28	29	29	29	29	50	42	47	48	48	47	43	41	70	44	48	48	55	836
TN	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	80	73	229	254	213	239	199	243	229	265	284	254	303	333	3196
TX	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	304	.	367	.	486	.	444	.	450	.	2052
UT	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	22	58	58	95	93	93	90	101	103	105	105	96	98	1115
VA	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	333	326	335	284	301	306	307	319	353	346	556	329	389	4483
VT	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	29	14	13	14	13	17	11	9	8	9	137
WA	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	6	2	105	68	98	70	99	73	101	78	106	89	91	86	1071
WI	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	70	25	31	23	26	28	24	20	9	12	21	17	306
WV	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	1	8	58	67	69	73	87	99	95	83	121	104	111	104	1079
WY	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	10	29	37	45	46	71	55	80	48	46	52	37	34	590
Total	525	1336	647	1469	903	1423	894	1296	909	1872	2551	5008	4084	5361	4019	5651	4086	5996	4623	6189	3619	6227	4751	73442

## A.2 Incumbent Newspaper Coverage

To build a comprehensive dataset of observed legislative news coverage, I identify 286 local and regional newspapers on Newspapers.com. Taken together, these newspapers cover legislative politics in 75% of all state legislative districts, including every state except Alaska. For every newspaper I search for references to state legislators representing districts within that newspaper’s circulation area. Due to the extensive nature of this data collection task, I restrict this search to each districts’ legislative election year. These results are then aggregated at the newspaper-district-year level to create  $q_{mdt}$ . Table A.2 shows the coverage of this dataset by year.

**Table A.2 – Number of Newspapers and Articles in Sample.** This table reports the number of newspapers and total newspaper articles included in my sample. Coverage is sparse in odd years because only five states have off-cycle state legislative elections.

Year	N. Articles	N. Newspapers	Year	N. Articles	N. Newspapers
1998	118953	151	2010	106060	193
1999	21259	18	2011	9068	19
2000	132314	147	2012	80004	190
2001	1923	3	2013	2607	8
2002	143681	168	2014	87133	186
2003	15796	19	2015	7097	17
2004	167209	205	2016	70663	183
2005	928	3	2017	2339	7
2006	157903	207	2018	53078	187
2007	13576	19	2019	3548	16
2008	139479	208	2020	40231	183
2009	1450	6	-	-	-

### A.3 Descriptive Statistics

**Table A.3 – Summary Statistics for Key Variables**

Variable	Mean	Median	Min	Max	Std. Dev.	Source
Close Race	0.22	0	0	1	0.41	SLERs
Uncontested Race	0.37	0	0	1	0.48	SLERs
Open Seat	0.19	0	0	1	0.39	SLERs
Freshman	0.22	0	0	1	0.41	SLERs
Experience	7	4	0	60	7.5	SLERs
In Majority	0.64	1	0	1	0.48	Author
Chair	0.38	0	0	1	0.49	Fourinaies (2018)
Population Density	6.4	6.4	-0.11	12	2	IPUMS
Median Income	56040	53839	22020	130890	13848	IPUMS
% Urban	74	81	0	100	25	IPUMS
% Retired	15	15	4.9	45	3.4	IPUMS
% Veterans	4.5	3.4	0.2	25	2.6	IPUMS
% Foreign Born	9.2	6.7	0.18	53	8.3	Census Bureau

**Table A.4 – Summary Statistics for Key Variables**

Variable	Mean	Median	Min	Max	Std. Dev.
Percent of Floor Votes	0.95	0.98	0	1	0.091
Sponsored Bills	9.3	3	0	614	21
Committee Activity	3.5	3	0	11	1.9
Aggregate Productivity Index	0.13	-0.44	-0.81	30	1.2

## B Newspaper Market–Legislative District Congruence Robustness Checks

**Table B.5 – Newspaper Reader Share and Legislator Press Coverages.** After controlling for legislator, race, and district variables, newspaper *ReaderShare* strongly predicts observed press coverage. As a result, the *Congruence* between newspaper markets and districts is also highly predictive of legislative newspaper coverage.

	Count of Articles About Legislator ( <i>q_mdt</i> )		Sales-Weighted Articles About Legislator ( <i>q_dt</i> )	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
ReaderShare	86.22 (7.85)	90.71 (8.12)		
Congruence			86.62 (5.13)	98.60 (7.90)
Leader		11.87 (2.35)		2.44 (0.41)
Sought Higher Office		4.36 (1.55)		0.86 (0.36)
Out of State		-25.58 (2.77)		-4.22 (0.22)
Close Race		0.02 (1.10)		0.19 (0.28)
Freshman		-6.01 (1.24)		-1.72 (0.17)
% Retired		-0.11 (0.37)		-0.40 (0.05)
% Urban		0.25 (0.05)		0.08 (0.01)
Median Income		-0.00 (0.00)		-0.00 (0.00)
N	82,031	52,797	44,419	28,353
Unit of Observation	Dist.-Paper-Year	Dist.-Paper-Year	District-Year	District-Year
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
Fixed Effects	Year	Year	Year	Year
Standard Error Clusters	Newspaper	Newspaper	District	District

Note: Results are stronger after logging *ReaderShare* and *Congruence*.

## C Electoral Selection Robustness Checks

**Table C.6 – Effect of News Congruence on Advantage of Moderate Candidates in Contested General Elections.** Moderate candidates receive higher win-probability in districts with more-congruent newspaper coverage.

	Dem Win		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Midpoint	1.19 (0.07)	0.47 (0.06)	0.26 (0.05)
Midpoint · Congruence	0.81 (0.24)	0.28 (0.21)	0.12 (0.18)
Rep. Pres. Vote Share	-2.38 (0.04)	-1.67 (0.04)	-1.32 (0.04)
Dem Contributions		0.08 (0.00)	0.05 (0.00)
Rep Contributions		-0.08 (0.00)	-0.05 (0.00)
N	18,444	15,830	15,830
District Controls	No	No	Yes
Race Controls	No	No	Yes
Representative Controls	No	No	Yes

Note: The outcome is either Democratic vote share or a Democratic win indicator. Robust standard errors are clustered by district in parentheses. Midpoint and Distance variables are scaled to run from 0 to 1. The sample is limited to contested general elections in single member districts. Models include state-by-chamber and year fixed effects.

## D Productivity Robustness Checks

In Table D.7, I account for differential productivity trends between parties of the same chamber potentially arising from majority party agenda and committee control. To do so, I substitute state-by-chamber-by-year fixed effects for state-by-chamber-by-party-by-year fixed effects. My substantive results remain unchanged.

**Table D.7 – Active Newspaper Coverage Increases Legislative Productivity.** Active newspaper coverage is associated with fewer missed roll-call votes, more bill sponsorships, and more-active committee membership.

	Percent of Floor Votes		Sponsored Bills		Committee Activity		Aggregate Productivity Index	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Congruence	2.079 (0.269)	0.972 (0.321)	0.651 (0.804)	0.851 (0.978)	0.226 (0.125)	0.223 (0.156)	0.020 (0.088)	0.140 (0.094)
N	25,407	25,407	25,407	25,407	4,987	4,987	8,941	8,941
District Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Race Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Representative Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
State x Chamber x Party x Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Outcomes are reported in column headers. Standard errors are clustered by state-chamber in parentheses.

Second, since the missed vote rate may be correlated with travel time to the capital, I Table D.8 I add a control for the distance between each district's centroid and the state capital. My results are again unchanged.

**Table D.8 – Active Newspaper Coverage Increases Legislative Productivity.** Active newspaper coverage is associated with fewer missed roll-call votes, more bill sponsorships, and more-active committee membership.

	Percent of Floor Votes		Sponsored Bills		Committee Activity		Aggregate Productivity Index	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Congruence	2.079 (0.269)	0.972 (0.321)	0.651 (0.804)	0.851 (0.978)	0.226 (0.125)	0.223 (0.156)	0.020 (0.088)	0.140 (0.094)
N	25,407	25,407	25,407	25,407	4,987	4,987	8,941	8,941
District Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Race Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Representative Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
State x Chamber x Party x Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Outcomes are reported in column headers. Standard errors are clustered by state-chamber in parentheses.