



# Words and Deeds:

Evaluating How Legislators' Constituent-Facing Communication about Federal Agencies Compares to Their Behind-the-Scenes Work with Federal Agencies

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# Research Question

- Do legislators' words match their deeds?
- How legislators' constituent-facing communication about federal agencies compares to their behind-the-scenes work with federal agencies?

# Promise-Keeping and Democratic Accountability

## Theory: Promise-Keeping

- Promissory Representation ([Mansbridge 2003](#))
- Principal-Agent Theories of Representation ([Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2006](#); [Gordon and Landa 2009](#))

## Empirical Literature on Promise-Keeping

- Party Platform Fulfillment ([Thomson et al. 2017](#); [Naurin, Royed, and Thomson 2019](#); [Royed, Baldwin, and Borrelli 2019](#))
- Individual Promises ([Sulkin 2009, 2011](#))
- Credit Claiming ([Mayhew 1974](#); [Grimmer 2013b, 2013a](#); [Grimmer, Messing, and Westwood 2012](#); [Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2014](#); [Crosson and Kaslovsky 2024](#); [Hunt and Miler 2025](#); [Simas et al. 2025](#))

# Our Contribution

- Link promise-keeping with promise fulfillment by way of advocacy to federal agencies
- Contact with federal agencies not easily observed by those providing accountability - ex: voters; journalists
- New Data: congressional contact w/ federal agencies
- New Measure: identifying constituent-facing correspondence about agencies

# Theory

- **H1 - Promise Keeping: Attention Consistency Hypothesis:**
  - Legislator's Newsletter Attention to Agency Correlates w/ Behind the Scenes Work with Agency
- **H2 - Conditional on Ideological Alignment**
- **H3 - Conditional on Ideological Disagreement**

# Data

## Dependent Variable: Legislator Requests to Federal Agencies

- 434 Freedom Of Information Act (FOIA) requests with all agencies and sub-agencies for all incoming communication from members of Congress

## Primary Explanatory Variable: Attention to Federal Agencies in Congressional Newsletters

- We use 150,581 newsletters collected by the DC Inbox Project ([Cormack 2025](#))
- We count # legislator newsletters that mention each agency

# Additional Explanatory Variables

- Legislator-Agency Ideological Alignment ([Lewis et al. 2024](#); [Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis 2018](#))
- Institutional Power
  - Legislator capacity and experience ([Judge-Lord, Grimmer, and Powell 2025](#))
  - Majority Party ([Cox and McCubbins 2005](#))
- President's Party ([Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010](#))

# Examples: Agency Mentions in Newsletters



# Informational

“The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs VA announced today telehealth video appointments using VA Video Connect increased from approximately 10000 to 120000 appointments a week between February and May of 2020. This is attributed to VA providers and Veterans taking precautions against COVID[-]19 VA Video Connect allows Veterans and their caregivers to meet virtually with their VA care teams [...]” - Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI)

# Position Taking

“On the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, I will work to expand the Veterans Choice Program, reduce wait times at VA clinics, and ensure the mental health needs of our veterans are being met” - Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN)

# Oversight

“[I] signed a bipartisan letter to ask the US Department of Veterans Affairs VA why it denied New Jersey’s request for additional medical personnel needed to combat coronavirus outbreaks in the state long-term care facilities”  
- Rep. Mikie Sherrill (D-NJ)

# Descriptive Statistics

# Constituent Newsletters

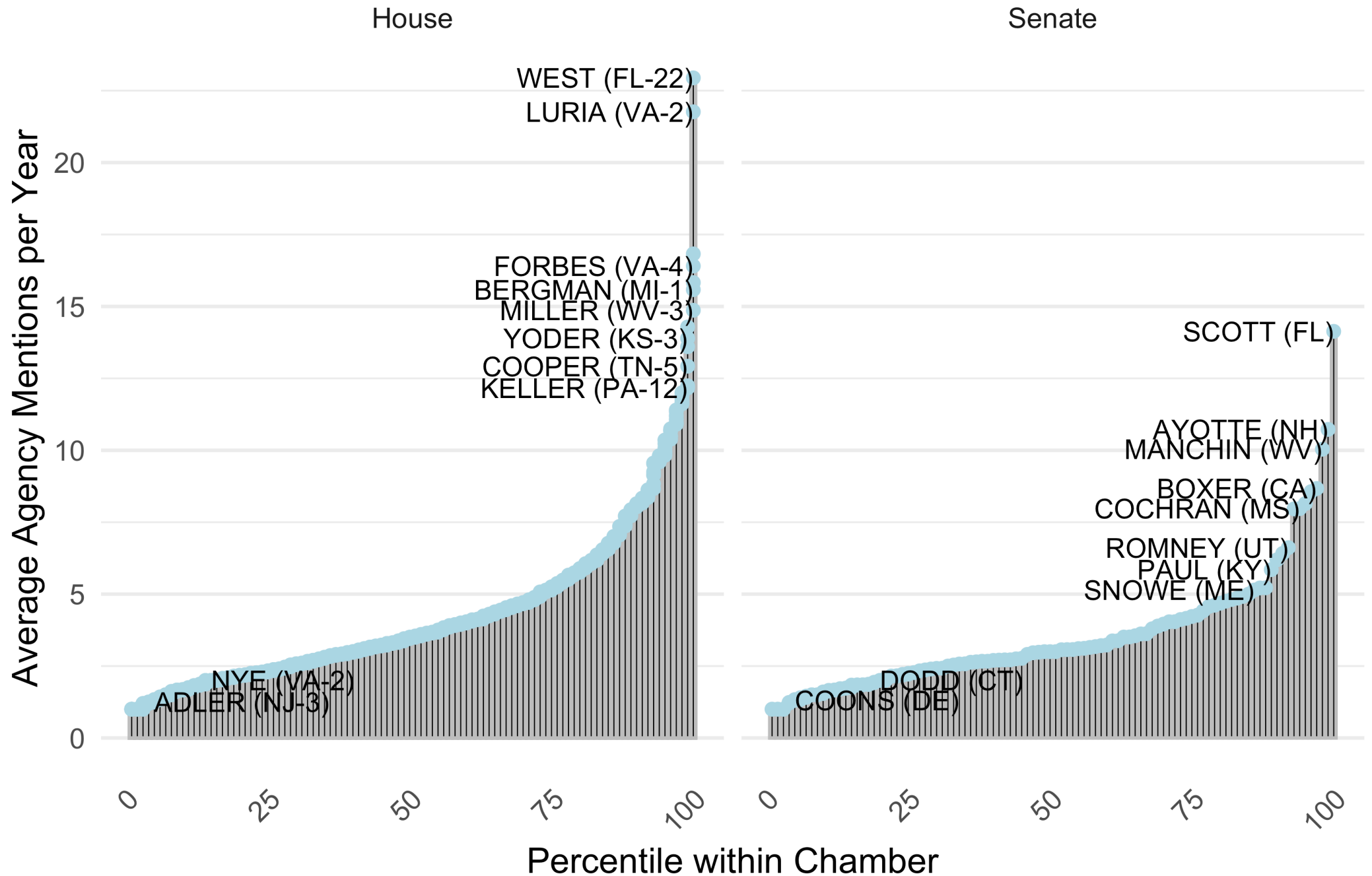
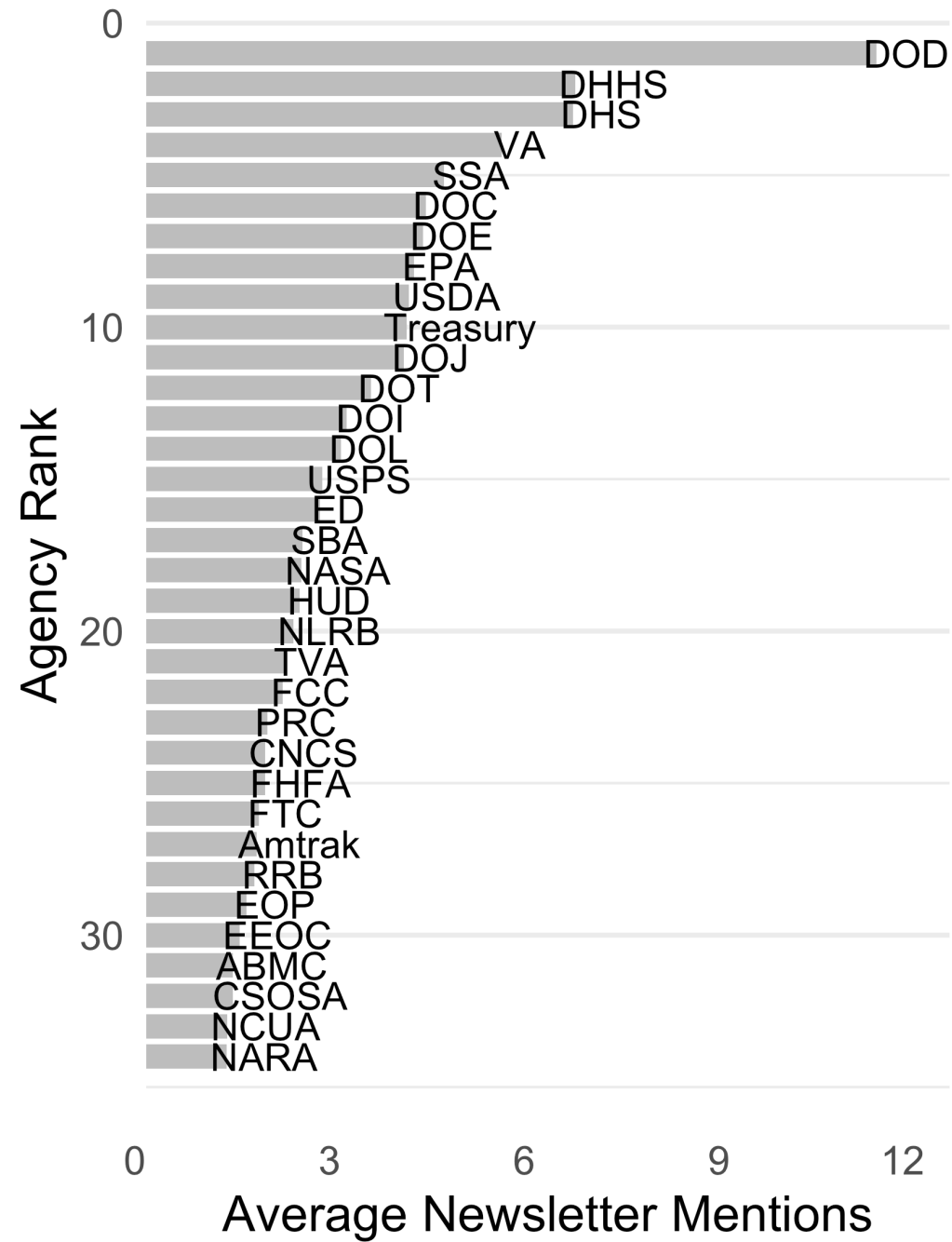
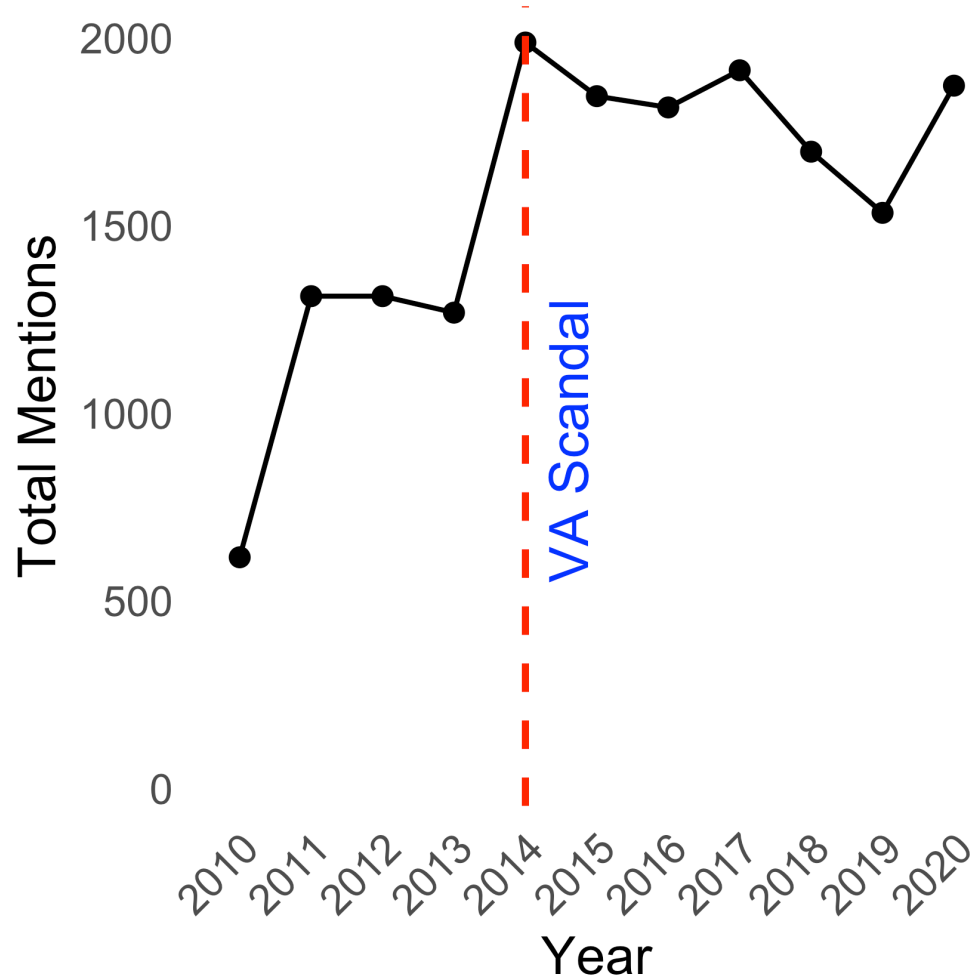


Figure 1: Variation in Average Legislator Agency Mentions in Constituent Newsletters by Percentile

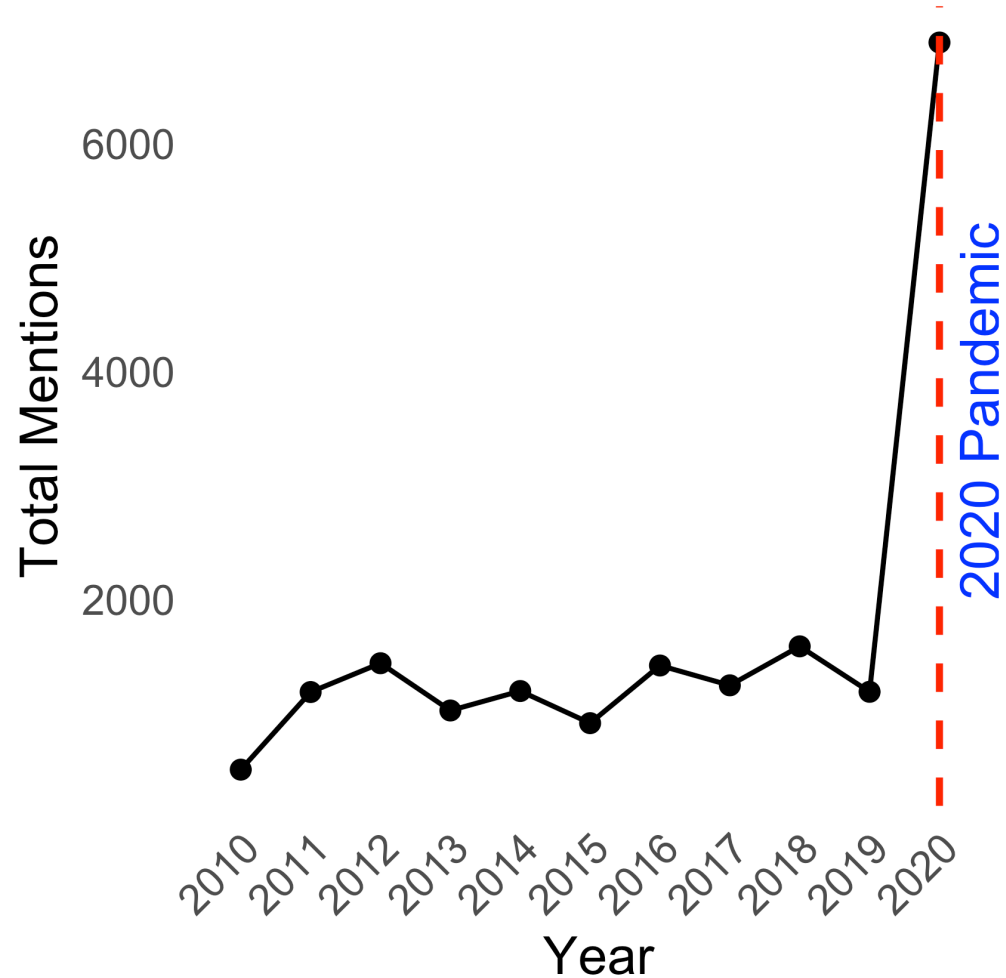
# Most Mentioned Agencies





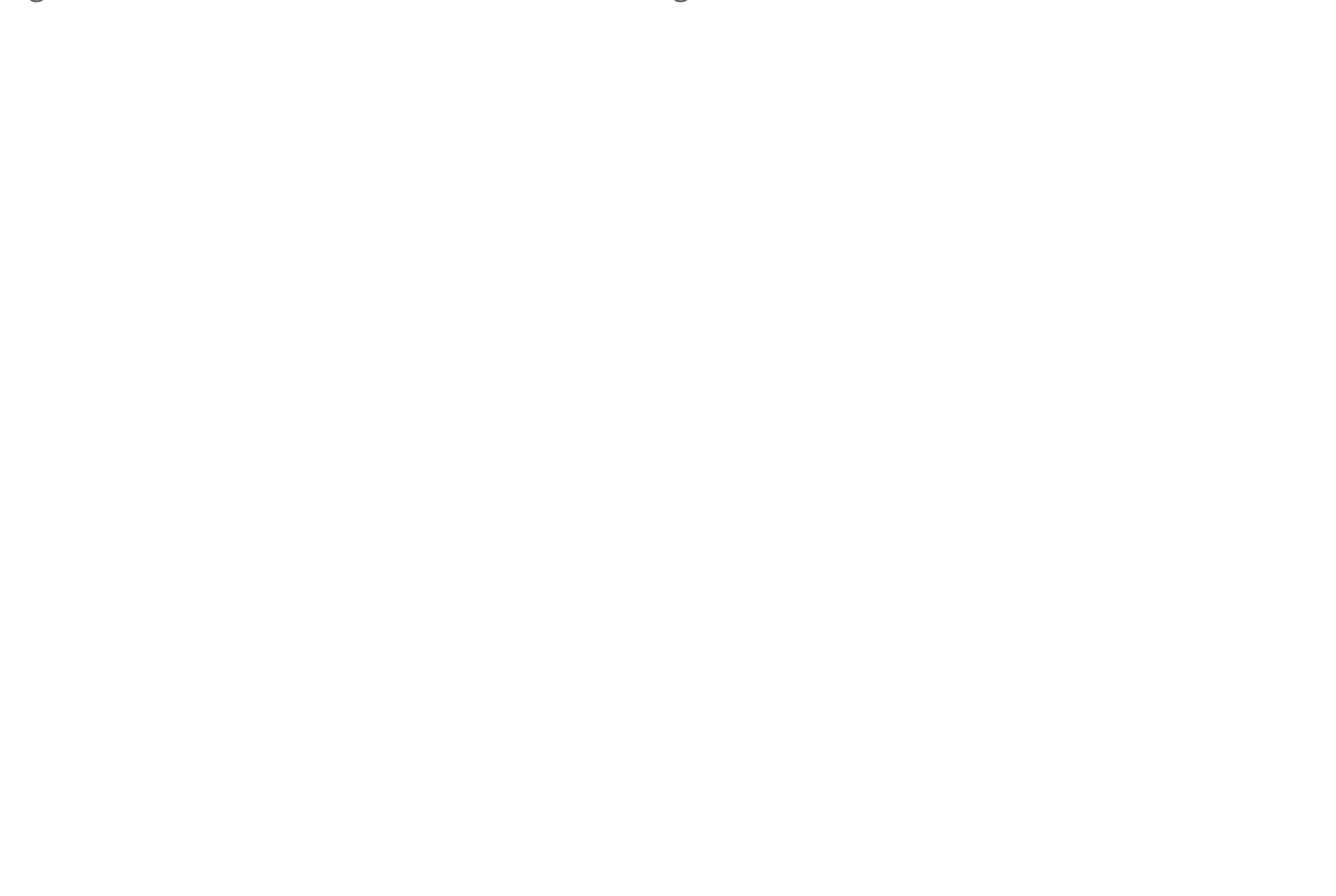


(a) Department of Veterans Affairs



(b) Department of Health and Human Services

Figure 3: Total Mentions of Selected Federal Agencies Over Time



# Analysis

$$\log(Y_{ijt} + 1) = \beta_1 \log(\text{Newsletter Mentions} + 1)_{itj} + \beta_{2:n} X_{it} + \sum_{s=1}^6 \eta_s I(\text{tenure}_{it} = s) + \gamma_{ij} + \delta_{jt} + m_{it} + p_{it} + \epsilon_{ijt} \quad (1)$$

- With and without controls (committee position, tenure, majority, etc.,  $X_{it}$ )
- Cross-sectional and within-legislator difference-in-differences (with and without legislator-agency fixed effect,  $\gamma_{ij}$ )

# Public Attention to Agencies Correlates with Action

Table 1: Newsletter Attention and Requests to Federal Agencies

	(1)	(2)
<b>Log(newsletters)</b>	<b>0.066**</b>	<b>0.048**</b>
	(0.013)	(0.008)
President's party	-0.009	-0.013
	(0.021)	(0.013)
Observations	36,032	36,032
Year x agency fixed effects	X	X
† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01		

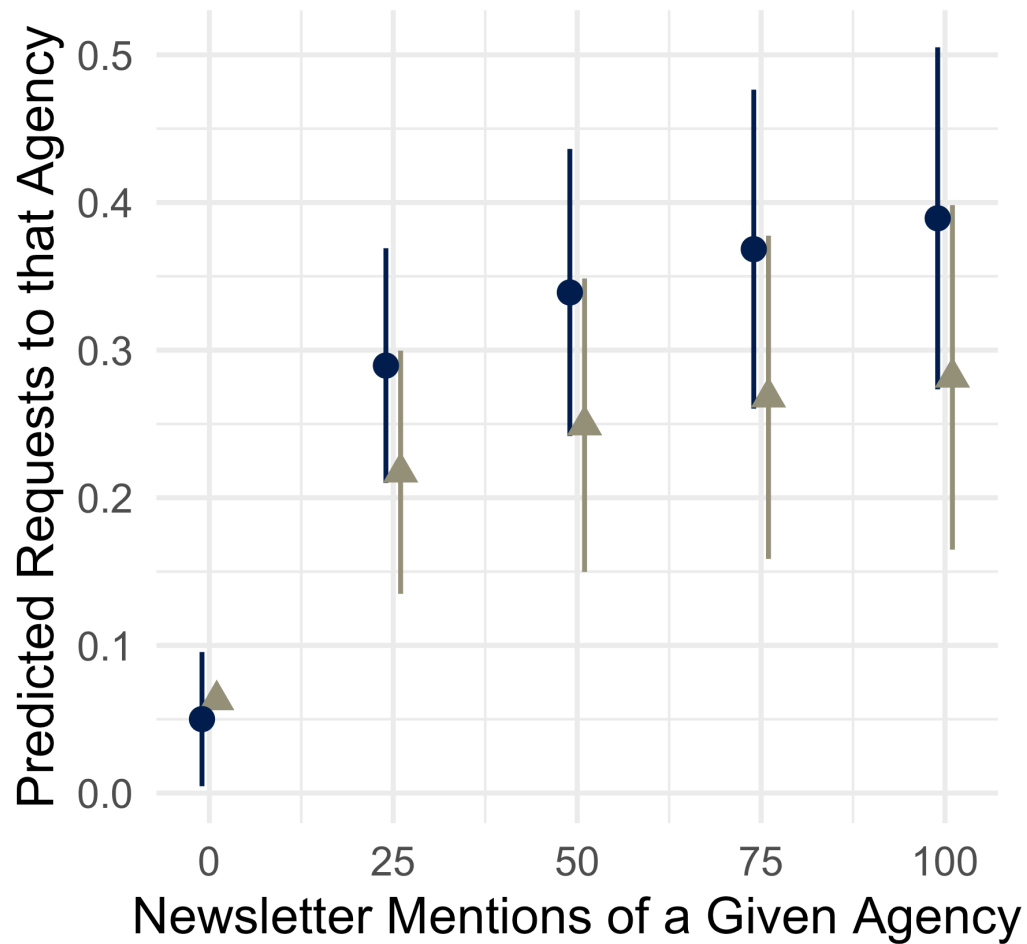
	(1)	(2)
Legislator x agency fixed effects		X
Dependent variable	Log(Count+1)	Log(Count+1)
† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01		

**As Legislators Talk About a Federal Agency, They Make More Requests to That Agency**

# Does Ideological Alignment or Disagreement Explain the Relationship between Public Communication and Private Action

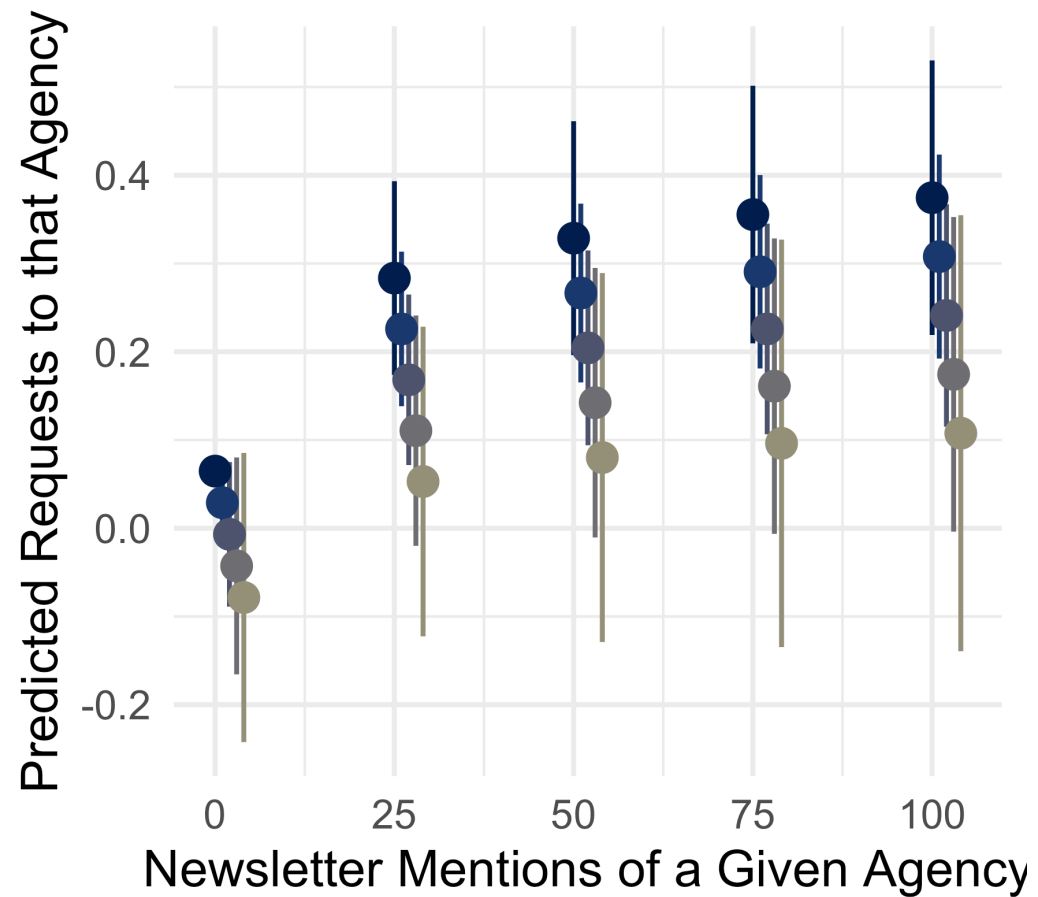
$$\begin{aligned} \log(Y_{ijt} + 1) = & \beta_1 \log(\text{Newsletter Mentions} + 1)_{itj} + \\ & \beta_2 \text{Ideological Alignment}_{itj} + \\ & \beta_3 \log(\text{Newsletter Mentions} + 1)_{itj} \times \text{Ideological Alignment}_{itj} + \\ & \beta_{4:n} X_{it} + \sum_{s=1}^6 \eta_s I(\text{tenure}_{it} = s) + \delta_{jt} + m_{it} + p_{it} + \epsilon_{ijt} \end{aligned}$$

- Only cross-sectional (ideological alignment does not vary over time)

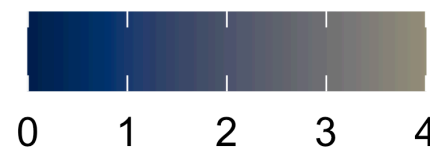


Ideology    ● Aligned    ▲ Unaligned

(a) Model 1



Ideological distance



(b) Model 2

Figure 4: Predicted Number of Total Requests to Federal Agencies by Newsletter Mentions and Ideological Alignment (Cross Sectional), 2007-2020



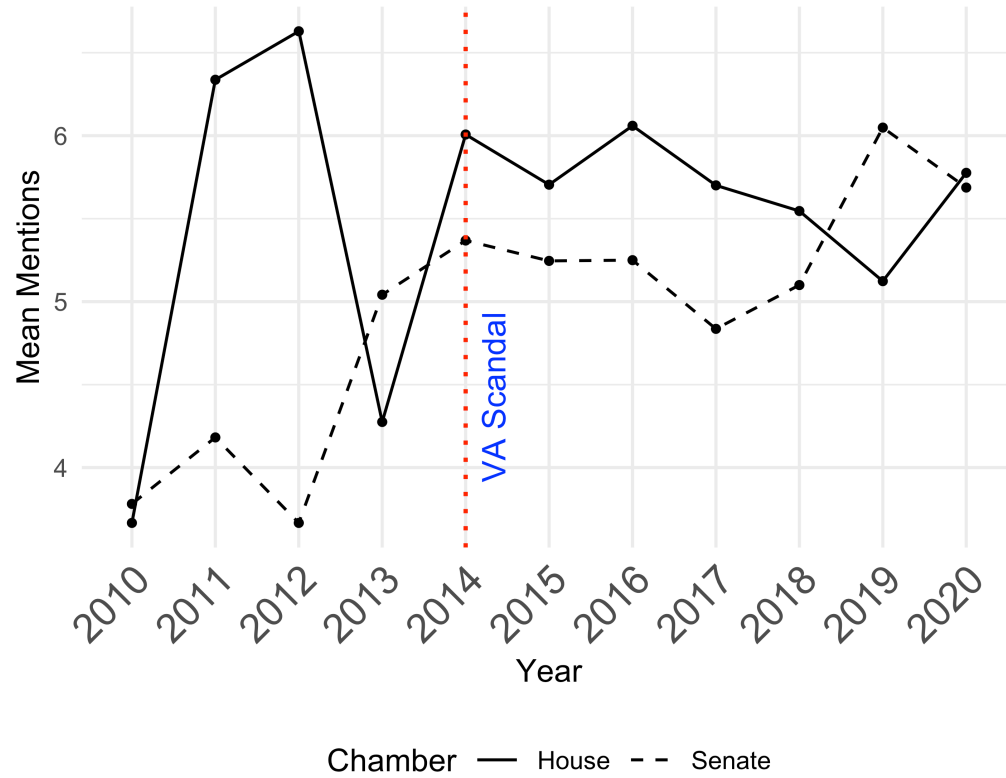
# Takeaways

- # of mentions of agency in newsletters predicts level of correspondence w/ that agency
- Relationship not conditional on ideological alignment/misalignment
- Changed in agency attention in newsletters reflected in changes to # of requests made to the agency
- **Big Picture:** Evidence supports promise-keeping

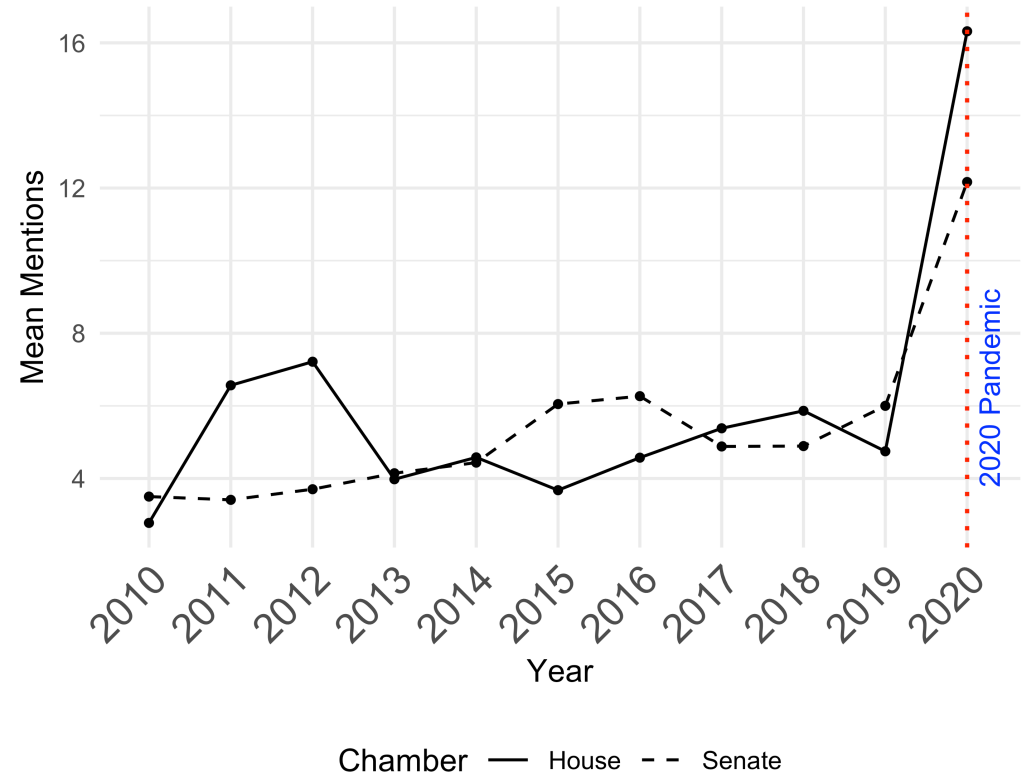
# Thank you!

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**Extra**



(a) VA House and Senate



(b) DHHS House and Senate

Figure 5: Chamber Average Mentions of Selected Federal Agencies Over Time

Table 2: Newsletter Attention and Requests to Federal Agencies

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable	Log(Count+1)	Log(Count+1)	Log(Count+1)	Log(Count+1)
Log(newsletters)	0.066**	0.048**	0.070**	0.044**
	(0.013)	(0.008)	(0.012)	(0.008)
Committee chair			0.326**	0.088†
			(0.056)	(0.046)
Ranking member			0.312**	0.091*
			(0.073)	(0.038)
Prestige committee			0.094**	-0.016
			(0.026)	(0.026)
First year			-0.060*	-0.142**
			(0.029)	(0.039)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Second year			-0.016	-0.083*
			(0.029)	(0.035)
Third year			0.038	-0.005
			(0.028)	(0.031)
Fourth year			0.017	-0.005
			(0.027)	(0.029)
Fifth year			0.030	-0.012
			(0.028)	(0.024)
Sixth year			-0.011	-0.021
			(0.029)	(0.025)
Majority			0.004	0.022
			(0.019)	(0.014)
President's party	-0.009	-0.013	-0.011	-0.021
	(0.021)	(0.013)	(0.021)	(0.014)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Observations	36,032	36,032	35,997	35,997
Year x agency fixed effects	X	X	X	X
Legislator x agency fixed effects		X		X
† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01				

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by legislator.

This table shows how the number of requests changes as legislators acquire more experience and power. Column 1 shows the average differences across legislators. Column 2 presents the difference-in-differences estimates. Column 3 adds covariates. Column 4 presents the difference-in-differences estimates with covariates. All coefficients represent the average effect on the log of requests per year per agency per legislator plus one.

Table 3: Newsletter Attention and Requests to Federal Agencies

	(1)	(2)
Dependent variable	Log(Count+1)	Log(Count+1)
Aligned with agency	-0.013	
	(0.023)	
Log(newsletters)*aligned	0.026†	
	(0.016)	
Ideological distance		-0.036†
		(0.021)
Log(newsletters)*distance		-0.007
		(0.011)
Log(newsletters)	0.047**	0.067**
	(0.013)	(0.017)
† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01		
Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by legislator.		



	(1)	(2)
Committee chair	0.317**	0.316**
	(0.055)	(0.055)
Ranking member	0.303**	0.302**
	(0.072)	(0.072)
Prestige committee	0.082**	0.081**
	(0.026)	(0.026)
First year	-0.044	-0.044
	(0.028)	(0.028)
Second year	0.001	0.000
	(0.028)	(0.028)
Third year	0.044	0.045
	(0.027)	(0.027)
† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01		
Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by legislator.		

	(1)	(2)
Fourth year	0.022	0.023
	(0.027)	(0.027)
Fifth year	0.033	0.034
	(0.028)	(0.028)
Sixth year	-0.006	-0.006
	(0.029)	(0.029)
Majority	0.002	0.004
	(0.019)	(0.019)
President's party	-0.016	-0.017
	(0.020)	(0.020)
Observations	32,919	32,919
Year x agency fixed effects	X	X
† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01		
Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by legislator.		

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