Public Goods and the Press: Policy Implications of Disparities in Local Political News*

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Abstract

Dramatic, decades-long declines in local news has raised alarm bells about democratic accountability in cities and towns where legacy local news outlets are often the only sources of information for the public. But even in its heyday, local news covered most municipal governments. Using text analysis on a large archive of stories published in U.S. newspapers, I identify the cities and towns where local politics is most frequently covered by the press. I show that although decisions about where to prioritize coverage of local politics is broadly consistent with news organizations' profit incentives, there are striking disparities in access to information about municipal governments. The local press is more likely to cover politics in larger cities and those with more white residents. I also find some evidence that cities with more wealthy residents are more likely to be covered. These coverage decisions in turn affect policymaking in local governments. In cities and towns that the press covers frequently, local governments spend more on popular and visible public services, such as policing, parks and recreation, fire protection, and libraries. An implication of these findings is that increasing financial pressures on news outlets may have negative implications for local public goods provision that may exacerbate existing inequalities in American democracy.

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Over the past 20 years, local news in the United States has faced dramatic decline as audiences increasingly turn to national and online sources for information. This has prompted growing concern among scholars and public observers alike because of the central role that the press plays in theories of democratic accountability. The implications for policymaking in local governments are of particular concern: local news outlets are often the singular sources of information about municipal public affairs. When the New York weekly *The Milbrook Independent* closed in 2019, its editor told *The New York Times*:

> "School boards, town and village boards, county news local news—it all disappeared. We were a check on governments, on endless environmental and zoning hearings, on budgets that we often published in detail, on misdoings and good doings. There is now a void." (Takenaga 2019)

It isn't just journalists sounding the alarm about their own industry's decline. A growing literature links local news outlets to a variety of important political outcomes, including engagement in local politics (Shaker 2014; Hayes and Lawless 2021), polarization (Darr, Hitt and Dunaway 2021), political competition (Rubado and Jennings 2020), and the health of city finances (Gao, Lee and Murphy 2020).

But even before the recent retrenchment of local news, the press did not routinely cover most local governments. News organizations have long been constrained by the number of reporters that they employ; without an incredibly large reporting staff, most mayors' offices and city or town councils in a region can possibly be covered full-time (Kaniss 1991). As traditional local news organizations continue to shrink, they have declining resources for political coverage (Peterson 2021). As a result, editors for local news organizations must make decisions about how to deploy limited reporting capacity to cover local politics in their areas. In some municipalities, they may employ a full-time "beat reporter" to cover city hall, monitoring it as a "burglar alarm" or "police patrol" and writing frequent stories (Zaller 2003). In others, meanwhile, there may be little to no coverage at all.

This paper focuses on the decision made by news organizations' leadership about which

local governments should be the focus of high-frequency political news coverage. It then follows this decision through to its implications for local policymaking via the municipal budget. I find that news organizations generally focus their reporting resources on a limited number of city and town governments within their circulation areas. They typically do so in a manner consistent with their own profit maximization interests: they are particularly likely to write about local governments in larger cities and cities closer to the newsroom.

But I also uncover disparities in where local politics is covered that may exacerbate class- and race-based inequalities in American politics. Governments in municipalities with more white and fewer Black residents are more likely to be covered by the press than the reverse, and majority-nonwhite municipalities are especially unlikely to be routinely covered. Likewise, newspapers are more likely to cover cities and towns with a greater number of wealthy residents.

These findings are concerning given the large literature on the importance of the press to political accountability. But I also find that high frequency news coverage is associated with greater government spending, especially on high-visibility public goods and services. In particular, I find that cities and towns where the local government is covered at least weekly on average spend more per-capita on policing, fire protection, parks and recreation, and libraries.

In order to observe the relationships between news coverage and government spending, I use text analysis methods to extract detailed data about when and where the press covers local politics from an archive of nearly 130 million stories published in 464 U.S. newspapers from 1992-2021. I develop an approach to identify not only which newspapers publish stories about local politics, but also which cities and towns in their coverage area they emphasize in doing so. This diverges from typical empirical strategies that rely primarily on the geolocation of news organizations and assume that their home cities or counties are routinely covered. My text-based method permits a much more fine-grained analysis of news coverage *within* media markets than this previous work.

I begin the paper by outlining the role that the press plays in local politics and a theory of the political economy of local newsrooms. In Section 2, I discuss how the structure of news organizations—around "beats" in which reporters focus on particular topics or governmental entities—forces editors to make difficult decisions about where to allocate the scarce resource of reporters' time. To maximize newsroom profits, they focus on larger cities with more potential subscribers, suburbs nearest to the newsroom, and communities with more disposable income. These decisions may also be shaped by editors' biases. Due to the press's well-established role in accountability, decisions about how to prioritize political coverage can be expected to shape public good provision in the cities they cover.

I then turn, in Section 3, to describing the newspaper data and text analysis methods I employ to obtain a more fine-grained picture of local political coverage within media markets, and compare this to more typical location-based methods. I use this method in Section 4 to show how infrequently most local governments are actually covered in local papers. Section 5 shows the relationship between this coverage and the characteristics of cities and towns, including disparities in news coverage by race and class. Finally, in Section 6, I present results on the policy implications of coverage decisions for municipal budgeting. Together, these results suggest that the scarcity of reporting time contributes to inequalities in political representation in American local governments.

1 News Decline and Local Politics

The news media play an essential role in producing political accountability in democracies. By informing the public about the actions taken by elected officials, the press links representatives to their constituents and allows voters to replace politicians with whom they disagree (e.g., Snyder and Strömberg 2010; Strömberg 2015). Likewise, the threat of electoral retribution by an informed public can make politicians more likely to take positions supported by constituents and to exert greater effort on their behalf (Arceneaux et al. 2016).

In local politics, the burden of information in processes of political accountability falls to local news outlets—especially newspapers, which are often the primary independent sources of accessible, mass information about public affairs in subnational governments. In a study of news content in 100 communities, Mahone et al. (2019) found that newspapers produced more stories that were original, relevant to the local community, and "addressed a critical information need" (i.e., stories about government, economic development, health, education, and other topics) than television and radio broadcasts and online-only news outlets combined.

It is not surprising, then, that a growing literature has found that local news is particularly important in politics and policymaking at the city level. The presence of local press reduces polarization in local politics (Darr, Hitt and Dunaway 2018) and increases competition in mayoral elections (Rubado and Jennings 2020). There is also some evidence that where there is less coverage of politics in major local news outlets, citizen engagement and voter turnout in elections declines (Hayes and Lawless 2021); however, other scholars find that there is no electoral effect in either participation or incumbency advantage in local elections when newspapers close (Auslen, Hirano and Snyder N.d.).

In policymaking, cities and towns with local newspapers are different from those without. Cities with newspapers obtain more favorable interest rates on the municipal bond market (Gao, Lee and Murphy 2020). Police forces that are covered by local TV stations have higher crime clearance rates (Mastrorocco and Ornaghi 2021). Jiang and Kong (2021) showed that counties with local newspapers have fewer toxic emissions from industrial plants. Recent experimental evidence showed that when local elected officials know there is robust news coverage, they are more willing to spend municipal funds on necessary infrastructure improvements. This is consistent with findings at other levels of government. Snyder and Strömberg (2010) found that members of Congress who are more likely to be covered in the press secure more federal funding for their districts. Likewise, recent work found that state legislators who are more likely to be covered by local newspapers and television stations are more responsive to constituent preferences (Auslen N.d.).

1.1 Resource Implications of Media in Decline

Nevertheless, most municipal governments are not routinely covered by local news outlets. There are now just 30,820 journalists working in U.S. newspapers, compared to 71,640 in 2004 (Waldman 2022). This means fewer resources exist to cover roughly the same number of city and town councils, county commissions, and state legislatures that existed two decades ago—in addition to the other topics covered by the typical news outlet. Newsroom managers face significant constraints, chief among them the scarce resource of reporters' time, which is the primary input to news coverage. Outlets with less political reporting *capacity* (i.e., fewer reporters dedicated to covering government and politics, or those whose reporters are pooled across many newspapers owned by a single chain) generally produce less news about politics and news of lower quality (Darr 2016; Schaffner and Sellers 2003; Dunaway 2008).

As a result, editors must make tough decisions about how to use this valuable resource: which cities should have dedicated reporters covering politics? Is it better to have more local politics coverage, or an additional reporter to cover a local sports team? In the face of economic turmoil in the local news industry, these questions may increasingly become focused on where a news outlet can afford to make cutbacks. As local newspapers have shed reporting staff, they have done so roughly equally across reporters covering politics, entertainment and sports, and general news (Peterson 2021). The upshot is that there are now fewer reporters covering local politics, so residents of many more municipalities do not have ready access to information necessary to hold politicians accountable.

Even in the heyday of local news, there was no political news produced in the vast majority of cities and towns. Data presented by Peterson (2021) suggests that in 2004, the average newspaper had between 15 and 35 reporters covering politics at all levels. In a coverage area with potentially dozens of cities and towns—not to mention county, state, and national governments and special districts—this means that some simply cannot be routinely covered. In Section 3 below, I present evidence that confirms this intuition. First, I consider how editors may respond to the need to make such decisions, and the implications that this

decision process may have for the kinds of communities that routinely receive coverage of local politics.

2 Political Economy of Local Newsrooms

Editors' decisions of how to allocate the scarce resource of reporter time has a direct hand in shaping the information published in newspapers. This is largely because newsrooms operate on a system of "beats"—topics on which reporters specialize and act as close monitors (Boydstun 2013). A reporter's beat might be covering one or more governmental bodies, a sports team, an important topic, community events, or breaking news. In summer 2023, some of beats covered in U.S. local newspapers included: Fulton County government (*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*), Township education (*The Indianapolis Star*), Pinellas County criminal justice (*Tampa Bay Times*), growth and development (*The Providence Journal*), transportation (*Austin American Statesman*), and San Francisco city hall (for which there are two reporters at the *San Francisco Chronicle*). Beats shape the focus of the individual reporter and how they spend their time. Aggregating over all the beats in a newsroom, decisions over how to allocate reporters into beats determine what information is published in the newspaper (Kaniss 1991).

Zaller (2003) notes that beat reporters often act as "burglar-alarm" monitors of public officials. Under this standard of news coverage, journalists pay close attention to their beats, similar to "police patrol" monitoring in government oversight (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984), attending public meetings, becoming well sourced to understand actions that are not happening in the public eye, and examining government documents. Unlike police patrols, however, they do not sound the alarm unless something is sufficiently interesting or important for the public to know; then, they put considerable attention on that issue until it is resolved. The nature of beat reporting in a resource-constrained environment is that some local governments in a coverage area have dedicated, full-time, burglar-alarm watchdogs,

while other local governments have no monitor and may only be covered very rarely, if at all, and only when if the newspaper finds out about some particularly newsworthy story and can reallocate resources to cover it.

This raises two important questions with implications for political inequality and accountability. First, in what kinds of communities is local government most likely to be covered as a beat? And second, how does frequent coverage affect policymaking in cities?

2.1 Editors' Coverage Decisions

Facing staffing constraints, editors must make decisions about which cities and towns should have a reporter dedicated to covering local government. To do so, they must decide among potentially dozens of municipalities in their coverage area. Two reasonable expectations can be expected to shape how they prioritize coverage: First, we might expect that editors seek to maximize newsroom profits (Kaniss 1991; Strömberg 2015). Second, we might expect that editors' decisions are subject to their own biases (Craft and Wanta 2004).

2.1.1 Profit Maximization

In seeking to maximize profits, news organizations can be expected to focus greater attention on politicians who represent their readers or viewers (e.g., Snyder and Strömberg 2010; Campbell, Alford and Henry 1984; Arnold 2004). Likewise, we might expect editors to assign reporters to cover municipalities where it is most important to retain or grow subscribers and advertisers. This yields several predictions about newspaper coverage of local politics.

First, editors are likely to prioritize larger cities, as they offer a greater number of potential subscribers, as well as a larger audience for local advertisers. In large cities, they can publish information relevant to more readers with a smaller investment of staff time.

Second, they are likely to prioritize communities closer to the newspaper's headquarters—which are usually in major cities. Nearby cities offer two advantages: people living in these places are more likely to identify with the region or city covered by the paper and choose

to subscribe, and the proximity makes news coverage easier to accomplish without opening additional bureaus farther afield.

Third, editors may prioritize wealthier cities and towns over less affluent but otherwise similarly situated communities. In wealthier communities, people have more disposable income to spend on newspaper subscriptions; these readers are also more valuable to advertisers.

2.1.2 Editorial Bias

Editors are human, and may not always be perfectly rational actors. As such, their decisions may be affected by unconscious biases. As recently as 2018, the overwhelming majority (81%) of newspaper editors were white (News Leaders Association 2019). As a result, they may overemphasize the familiar, resulting in more coverage than a pure profit motive might expect in some places, and less in others.[1]

As a consequence, editors may focus greater reporting resources on cities and towns with more white residents and fewer on those with more residents of color. A similar pattern could occur as a result of the high correlation between race and class in American politics. In this paper, I do not disentangle these potential explanations, and indeed both may contribute to racial inequalities in local politics news coverage.

2.2 Policy Effects of Watchdog News

The important role that the news media play in political accountability anticipates that governments may produce different policy outputs when they believe they are being watched closely by a beat reporter and covered more frequently in the press. There are several reasons to expect this.

[1] One dramatic example is the town of Montclair, New Jersey, which was featured in *Vanity Fair* as being "disproportionately on the radar of Manhattan media outlets" (Klein 2021). Because so many reporters and editors for *The New York Times* and major news magazines live in Montclair, *Vanity Fair* argued it was covered far more frequently than might otherwise be expected.

Most straightforwardly, when cities are covered more often, the public simply has access to a greater amount of information about local public affairs. Frequent coverage may also make clear to the public what the government is doing, producing electoral benefits to politicians who delivered these goods (Mullin and Hansen 2023).

Even if the public is able to access information about the official actions of their local government through other sources (e.g., minutes and recordings of public meetings, newsletters issued by local officials), the press may still uncover information that is not visible to voters. For example, reporters may uncover scandals or details of policy proposals that politicians would prefer to keep hidden. But they also can provide information with greater context and detail about the implications of policy decisions and budget allocations that may otherwise appear arcane to ordinary citizens, thereby reducing uncertainty as to the effects of policies.

Because beat reporters focus their attention on a single government or topic (or a small number of them), their coverage is likely to be of higher quality. A beat reporter acting as a burglar-alarm monitor increases the likelihood of a news organization finding out about an important news story that the public may not find out about otherwise. This is especially true because of journalists' interests in making a "distinctive journalistic contribution to the news" via scoops, investigative reporting, and analyzing complex issues (Zaller N.d., p. 2). The presence of a beat reporter also means that there are dedicated resources available to cover a story when it is uncovered.

For their part, local politicians acknowledge the importance of this "watchdog" function of the press. In a 2018 survey of local governments, 48% of city, township, and county elected officials said that criticism from local news organizations "keeps leaders from doing things that should not be done," compared to 33% who said criticism "keeps leaders from doing their job" (CivicPulse 2018).

2.2.1 Consequences of Coverage Decisions

In response to high-frequency, watchdog reporting, then, governments should produce different policies. Municipal budgets offer a useful lens to observe policymaking in local governments across a variety of policy domains, particularly as many functions of local governments are fundamentally questions of resource allocation (e.g., Alesina, Baqir and Easterly 1999; Trounstine 2018).

First, local governments that are covered more frequently should be incentivized to take more action, as measured by greater per-capita spending. This stems from the electoral incentives that come with the media communicating what the government is doing, as well as the pressures to respond to a greater number of problems that watchdog journalists may uncover.

Second, more frequently covered governments should invest in particular in highly visible services, such as policing, fire protection, parks and recreation, libraries, and highways.

3 Measuring Coverage from Newspaper Text

Understanding the frequency with which the press covers local politics is not a trivial task. Some newspapers may not cover local politics at all, or do so infrequently. On the other hand, newspapers may cover local politics in multiple municipalities in their coverage areas.

I use the text of newspapers to uncover the municipalities in which the local government is being covered in a given year. I obtained an archive of newspaper texts from a vendor. The dataset includes 129 million news stories from 464 newspapers over the period from 1992-2021. However, some newspapers enter or leave the dataset at some point in the 30-year window due to varying license agreements between the vendor and newspaper publishers, who hold copyrights for the text. Most of the analyses presented here will focus on a subset of 279 newspapers (79 million stories) from newspapers that appear in the dataset for at least 10 years. On average, this subset includes 232 newspapers per year. Appendix A reports

the geographic and temporal distribution of the newspapers in the dataset.

3.1 Text Searching Method

I quantify local news coverage by determining whether individual news stories in the text archive are about specific municipal governments. To do so, I developed a dictionary of local politics search terms, matched with specific cities and towns in newspapers' coverage areas. I briefly explain each step in the process below.

First, I manually identified the headquarters city for each newspaper in the archive. In most cases, these cities are in the name of the newspaper or the metadata made available by the vendor. In some cases, I turned to other sources, primarily newspaper websites and the Alliance for Audited Media, although Wikipedia was useful for some newspapers that have closed.

Next, I placed each newspaper inside Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs), which serve as the rough boundary of a newspaper's coverage area in my analysis. In the case of newspapers that are not located in MSAs, I constructed a coverage area using the county where the newspaper is published along with neighboring counties. MSAs provide useful but imperfect boundaries for the areas where newspapers circulate. While TV stations exist in defined media markets (called Designated Market Areas) based on the geographic reach of television signals in the 1950s and '60s (Moskowitz 2021), newspapers do not have a common geography. Circulation data can provide some insights as to where newspapers distribute, but this data is not available for all newspapers, nor as far back as the text data extend. By using MSAs, I attempt to cast a wide net for searching that corresponds to the commuting zones and economic interdependence among sets of communities in a single region. The newspaper text itself then reveals whether individual cities or towns are being covered.

Then, I identified all cities and towns located in each newspaper's MSA and used this to create a dictionary of possible municipalities that could be covered. City and town names may appear in news coverage for reasons having nothing to do with local politics,

so I construct a more complex search term that combines the name of the city or town with phrases associated with local politics. Specifically, I constructed a search term for the municipality name in close proximity (within 30 characters) to the words mayor, city (or town or village) manager, or city (or town or village) council, commission, board, trustee, or alder[man/woman/person].

Using this dictionary of terms, I searched all 129 million news stories in the archive to identify the number of stories about local government at the newspaper-municipality-year level.

3.2 Comparing Approaches: Newspaper Exit and Entry

My text-based approach differs considerably from typical approaches that primarily use newspapers' locations. A typical strategy assigns news outlets to the city or county in which they are headquartered and then assumes that these local governments are covered (e.g., Gentzkow, Shapiro and Sinkinson 2011; Darr, Hitt and Dunaway 2021). In some cases, scholars may augment this with data on the numbers of stories published (Hayes and Lawless 2021), or counts of stories mentioning particular offices (Hopkins 2018). This general approach is reasonable in some cases. It is commonly used because it allows for a more complete picture of news media across the country, not subject to the inconsistencies of which news outlets are included in text datasets, and it is useful for estimating sharp effects from the entry or closure of newspapers. However, it can lead to over- or under-estimation of which local governments are routinely covered in the press.

Coverage can be over-estimated in cases where declines in reporting staff results in no reporter assigned to cover local politics; Abernathy (2020) calls these publications "ghost newspapers" because they are a shell of what they once were with "greatly diminished newsrooms and readership." More commonly, coverage is under-estimated in cases where a single newspaper covers a large metropolitan area, including one or more larger cities as well as suburbs surrounding its headquarters. If local politics is covered routinely in any

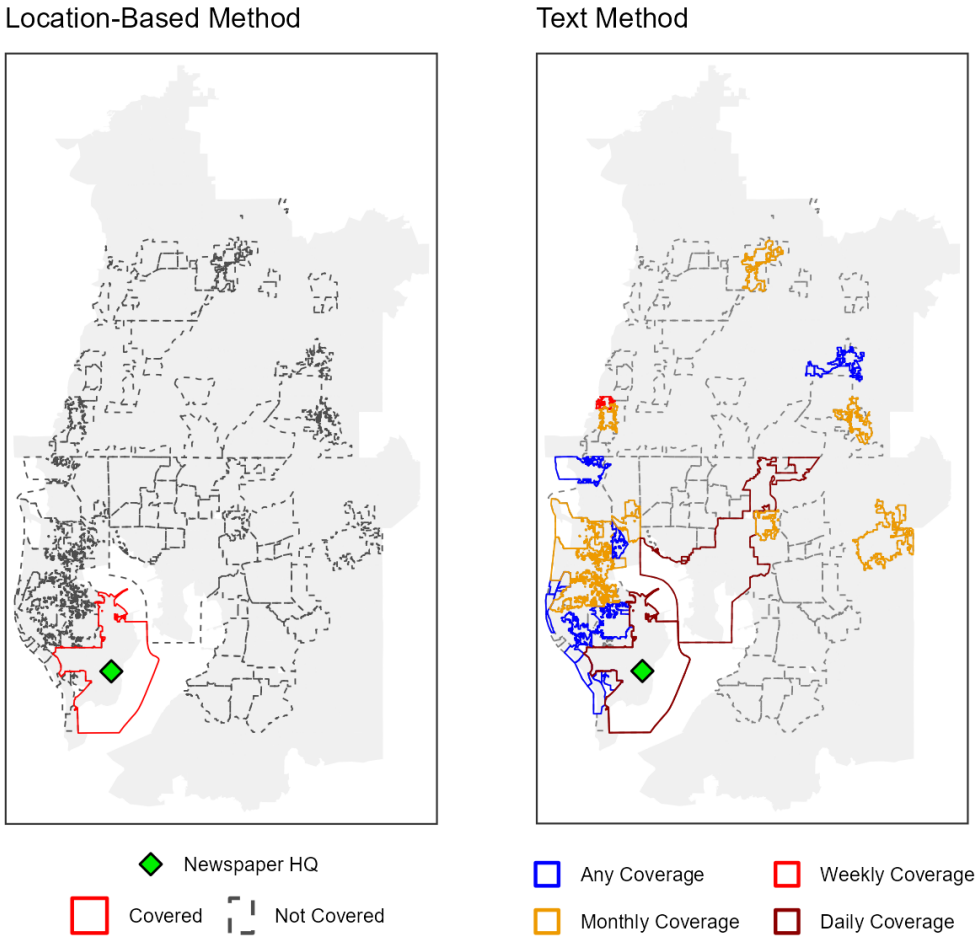
of these municipalities beyond the headquarters city, coverage is under-estimated by these typical approaches.

Figure 1 presents an example of the differences between the two methods, using news coverage from the *Tampa Bay Times* in 2016. The shaded area of each map in Figure 1 shows the Tampa–St. Petersburg–Clearwater MSA, which includes four counties in Florida. The dashed and colored lines are municipal boundaries. In the lefthand panel, I show how the standard location-based method would understand news coverage by the *Times*. The green diamond indicates St. Petersburg, where the newspaper is headquartered. The typical location-based study would assume that St. Petersburg is covered and other cities are not. (Alternatively, one might consider all municipalities in the *Times*' home county to be routinely covered by the newspaper.) These studies are useful to identify effects of newspaper entry or closure on the headquarters city. But they are not informative about changes in the intensity of news coverage or symptoms of media decline short of closure.

The righthand panel shows results from the text-based alternative that I employ. The red lines indicate that St. Petersburg's government is, in fact, covered at least once per week, as are city politics in Tampa, the largest municipality in the MSA, and New Port Richey. Many other cities in orange are covered monthly. Finally, several municipalities in blue are covered at least once though less regularly than the major cities in the MSA. In this example, the location-based approach under-counts a considerable amount of political coverage, including in some large cities, but especially in farther-flung arts of the *Times*'s coverage area. This may obscure effects that result from shrinking resources but not closure, especially where those effects are centered outside the newspaper's headquarters.

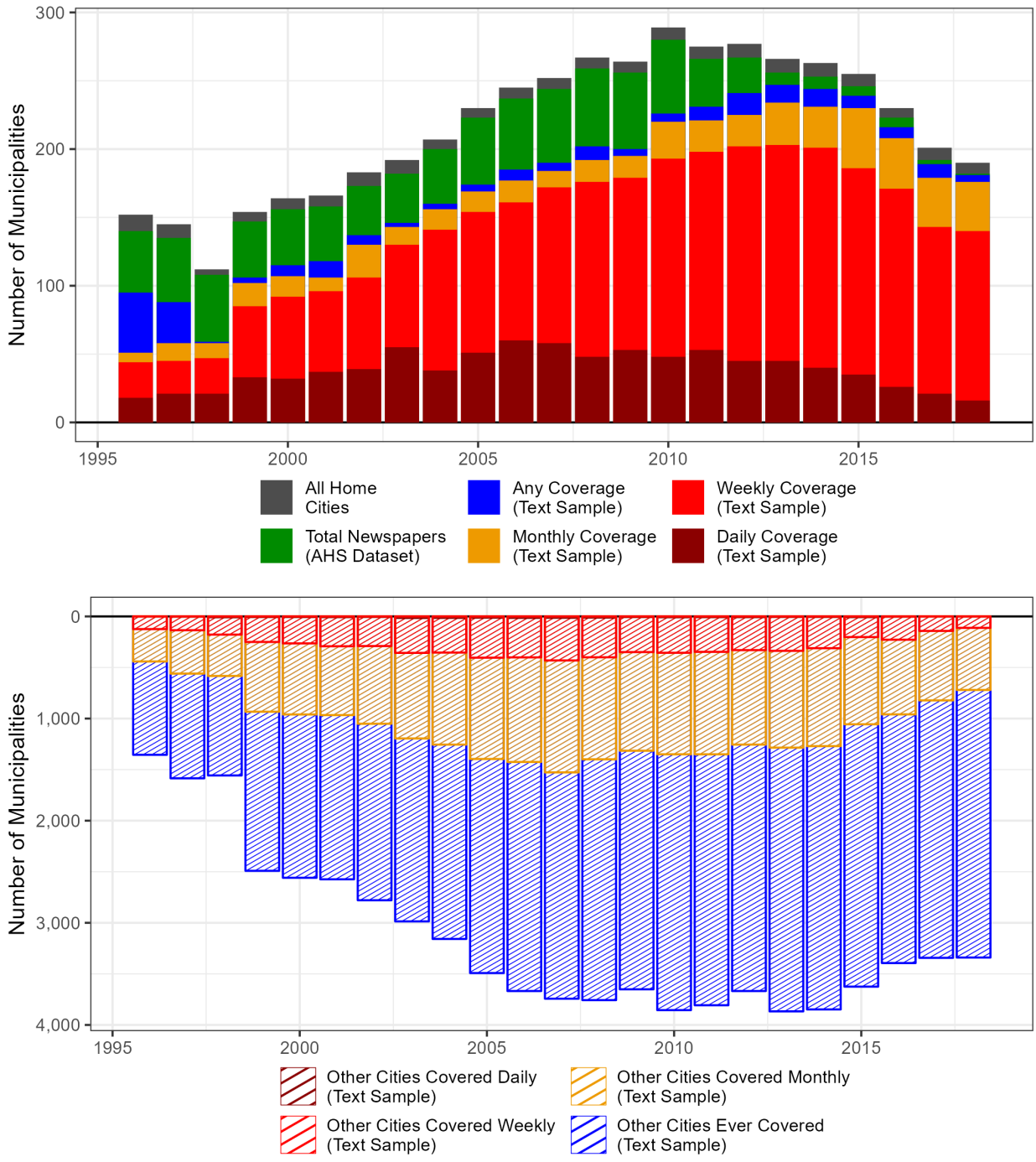
Figure 2 displays the cumulative difference of using this text-based method versus location-based approaches on a national scale. Focusing on the papers in the text archive to allow a complete comparison, the gray bar identifies the total number of newspaper headquarters cities in the dataset. The green bar shows the corresponding number of these municipalities that have at least one newspaper, using data collected by Auslen, Hirano and Snyder (N.d.).

Figure 1: Local Politics Coverage in the *Tampa Bay Times*, 2016



Note: The panels map assumed and observed coverage of local politics from the typical location-based approach and the text-based method described here. Both maps cover the Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater MSA, which includes Hillsborough, Pinellas, Pasco, and Hernando counties in Florida, and data come from text archives of the *Tampa Bay Times*.

Figure 2: Comparing Text- and Location-Based Approaches for Measuring Local Politics Coverage



Note: The top panel compares the number of newspaper headquarters cities from the text archive that correspond to a newspaper in the dataset of newspaper closures from Auslen, Hirano and Snyder (N.d.) (in green). The bar in blue shows the number of these municipal governments that are covered at least once, according to the text archive; orange reports the number covered monthly; and red the number covered weekly. The bottom panel shows the local government coverage that would not be included in the location-based approach but does appear in the text, with bars for weekly (red), monthly (orange), and any (blue) coverage.

These values are essentially the same with some small measurement error. However, a considerable proportion of these municipalities are never covered when looking at the newspaper text. While it is true that most are covered monthly or weekly, many are not.

The bottom panel of Figure 2 shows what is missed by using the text approach. These are municipalities in the MSA of newspapers included in the top panel, where the text reveals some amount of local politics coverage. Potentially hundreds or thousands of newspapers would be left out of a location-based analysis.

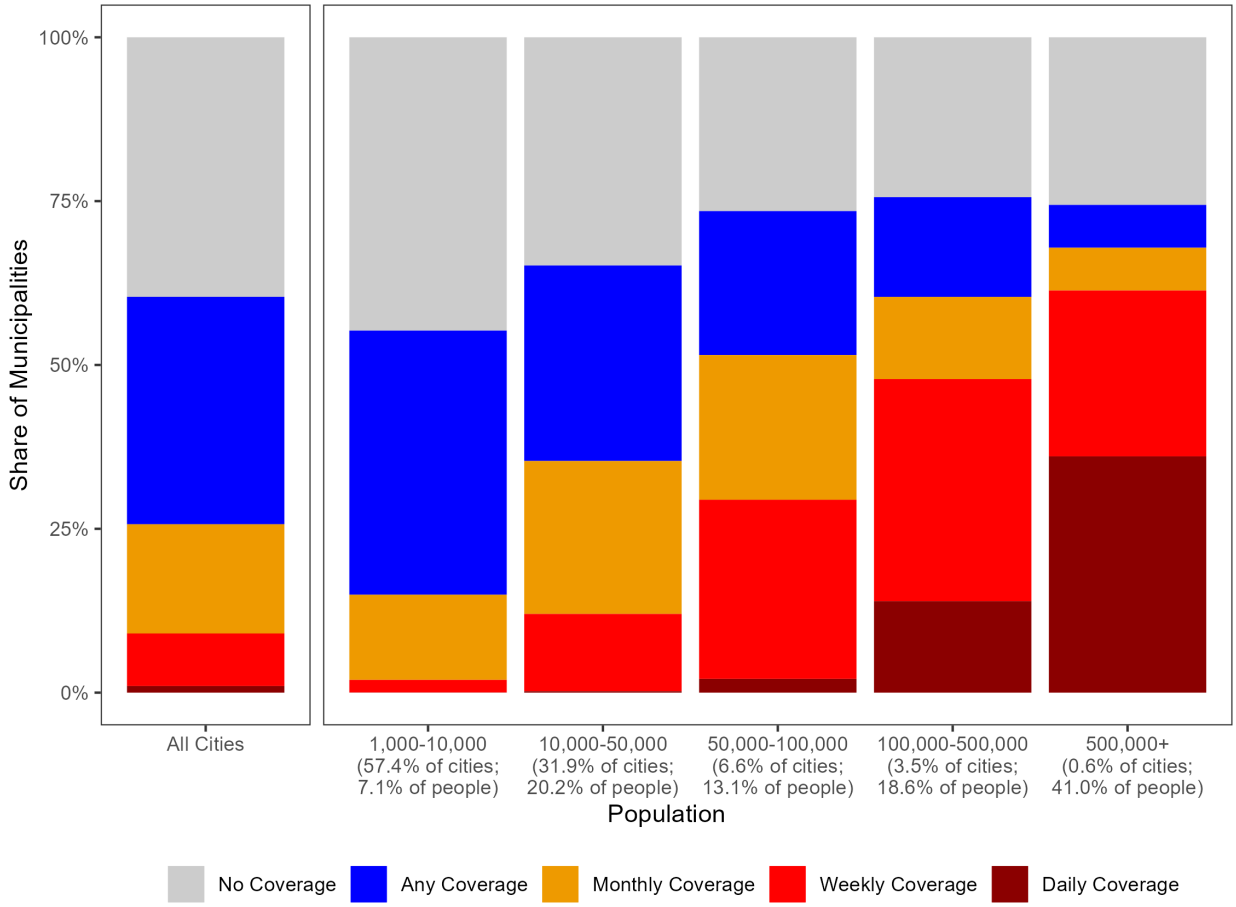
4 How Much Does the Press Cover Local Government?

One key result that the text data uncover is that most local governments are not routinely covered by the press. In Figure 3, I report the distribution of coverage frequency over the full dataset by the population of the cities. This shows the relative infrequency with which cities are covered routinely by *any* local newspaper in the text dataset. Each observation is a city-year; the figure excludes municipalities that are not located in an MSA with a newspaper in the dataset in that year.

The leftmost panel reports the headline result for all cities in the dataset. In the average year, 59% of municipalities are covered at least one time (blue bar), but just 25% are covered once per month (orange). Strikingly few are covered on average weekly (red) or daily (dark red), enough to be considered as having a beat reporter. In fact, 21% of local governments are not reported on at any point in the 30 years covered by the dataset, and nearly half never even receive monthly coverage.

The panel on the right breaks out the cities by population. The governments of larger cities on the righthand side, those with more than 100,000 or more than 500,000 are much more likely to be covered on average once per week or daily, meaning that residents of these cities have access to high-frequency beat coverage in their local papers. The very smallest municipalities, meanwhile—those with fewer than 10,000 residents—are unlikely to

Figure 3: Local Politics Coverage Frequency by Municipality Size



Note: This plot summarizes the number of municipalities that are covered with various frequencies by one of the local newspapers in the text dataset, organized by their population. All municipality-years in the text archive are included; cities are not included in a year if there is not a newspaper headquartered in their MSA in the dataset for that year. The lefthand panel reports results for all municipalities.

be covered more than a few times, if at all, in a given year.

There are two key takeaways from this figure. First, most local governments are not covered anywhere near regularly. In fact, 55% of Americans live in a municipality that is covered never or only trivially (less than monthly). Just 17% live in cities whose governments are covered weekly or daily.

The second key takeaway is that these coverage patterns vary considerably by population. Larger cities are much more likely to be covered by local papers. I explore this result, as well as other predictors of coverage, in greater detail in the following section.

5 Disparities in Local Politics Coverage

When local newsrooms face limited reporting capacity, editors must make difficult decisions about where to focus their resources for local political newsgathering. In this section, I seek to understand how they do so, following the logic and expectations outlined in Section 2.

5.1 Data and Empirical Approach

In order to understand how characteristics of communities shape editors' decision-making, I match the coverage dataset, which is identified at the municipality-newspaper level, with census data from IPUMS-NHGIS (Manson et al. 2021). I also used GIS software to find the distance between individual municipalities and the newspaper's headquarters city. This gives me information about news coverage over time and municipality characteristics for nearly 260,000 municipality-newspaper-year triads in which newspaper text is available, covering 5,893 cities and towns with at least 1,000 residents.

My empirical approach separately predicts the intensive and extensive margins of newspapers' decisions to cover individual local governments in their areas. The two-stage approach accounts for the fact that a great many cities are never covered by their local papers. The approach is similar to a hurdle model, though I employ linear probability models and least-

squares regressions, in order to use newspaper-year fixed effects in the models.

For each relevant predictor X_{it} in municipality i and year t, I report results of two regressions. First, I fit a linear probability model for whether *any* stories about local government are published:

$$\mathbf{1}\{\text{Stories}_{itm} > 0\} = \beta_1 \mathrm{X}_{it} + \boldsymbol{\delta}\boldsymbol{\gamma}_{itm} + \omega_{mt} + \varepsilon_m \tag{1}$$

where $\boldsymbol{\gamma}_{itm}$ is a series of controls observed at the municipality-year and municipality-newspaper level,[2] and ω_{mt} represents newspaper-year fixed effects. Newspaper-year fixed effects are a core component of my empirical strategy, as they allow for a within-newspaper-year comparison that accounts for the unobservable total pool of reporting resources available to editors as well as other relevant features of the newspaper and MSA. These may include election timelines, economic pressures, concerns related to chain ownership, or the ferocity of a newspaper war.

Then, I fit a second model to estimate the logged number of stories published about local politics, subsetting only to those newspaper-city-years in which any stories are published:

$$\ln \text{Stories}_{itm} = \beta_1 \mathrm{X}_{it} + \boldsymbol{\delta}\boldsymbol{\gamma}_{itm} + \omega_{mt} + \varepsilon_m. \tag{2}$$

This regression uses the same controls and newspaper-year fixed effects. These regressions have much smaller sample sizes because the models are conditional on the number of stories being nonzero. In both models, standard errors are clustered at the newspaper level.

5.2 Results: Disparities in Local Political Coverage

I begin by considering two key expectations if newspapers are profit-maximizing: that they should focus local political coverage on larger cities and towns nearer to their headquarters.

[2] At the municipality-year level, I control for the percent of adult residents under age 30 and over age 65, the percent with a college degree, log population, and the percent living in urban areas. I also control for quintiles of each population and percent urban to account for non-linearity in the trends. At the municipality-newspaper level, I control for the (log+1) distance in miles between the newspaper and the municipality and an indicator for whether the city is the newspaper's headquarters.

Table 1: Predictors of Local Politics Coverage

	Any Coverage		Log Num. Stories	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Population (log)	0.03**	0.05**	0.40**	0.40**
	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Distance (log)	-0.11**		-0.67**	
	(0.02)		(0.04)	
Paper HQ City		0.00		1.98**
		(0.02)		(0.10)
City Controls	X	X	X	X
Paper-Year FE	X	X	X	X
N	259,084	259,084	88,515	88,515
R^2	0.65	0.63	0.57	0.53
Adj. R^2	0.64	0.62	0.54	0.50

Note: Table reports coefficients from least-squares regressions. All models include newspaper-year fixed effects. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the newspaper level. $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

Table 1 presents results that confirm this intuition. In the first two columns, I first show that local governments in more populous municipalities are more likely to be covered in the newspaper at least once. Meanwhile, cities that are farther away from the newsroom are less likely to be to have any stories. I do not find evidence that newspapers are more likely to cover their headquarters cities at least once.

The third and fourth columns tell a similar story, focusing on the intensive margin in municipality-newspaper-years where there is any coverage to begin with. Here, we can see that larger, closer, and headquarters cities have considerably more stories published about them. Here, I do find that headquarters cities are likely to have about 2 times as many news stories as other cities, conditional on having any at all.

Next, I turn to questions about the economic and racial predictors of news organizations' decision-making, which have much more significant concerns related to the distributional fairness of political accountability.

Table 2: Income and Race and Local Politics Coverage

	Any Coverage					Log Num. Stories				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Economic Predictors										
Median Income ($10k)	-0.01**					-0.02				
	(0.00)					(0.01)				
Pop. Over $100k (log)		-0.01					0.16**			
		(0.01)					(0.04)			
Demographic Predictors										
% White			0.00					0.43**		
			(0.02)					(0.12)		
% Black				0.00					-0.35*	
				(0.02)					(0.14)	
Maj. Nonwhite					0.01					-0.18**
					(0.01)					(0.05)
Geographic Predictors										
Population (log)	0.05**	0.06**	0.06**	0.06**	0.06**	0.39**	0.24**	0.42**	0.41**	0.41**
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Distance (log)	-0.15**	-0.15**	-0.15**	-0.15**	-0.15**	-0.60**	-0.60**	-0.61**	-0.60**	-0.60**
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
City Controls	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Paper-Year FE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
N	259,084	259,084	259,084	259,084	259,084	88,515	88,515	88,515	88,515	88,515
R^2	0.66	0.66	0.66	0.66	0.66	0.57	0.57	0.57	0.57	0.57
Adj. R^2	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.54	0.55	0.55	0.54	0.55

Note: Table reports coefficients from least-squares regressions. All models include newspaper-year fixed effects. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the newspaper level. $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

In the top two rows of Table 2, I report results for regressions using economic predictors. First, in columns 1 and 6, I observe that, contrary to expectations, cities with a higher median income are not covered more in the news. They may even be covered slightly less often. However, in columns 2 and 7, I consider an alternative conceptualization of the economic motives of news organizations. Here, I measure instead the number of residents who are high-income earners likely to have the kind of disposable income attractive to newspaper circulation departments and advertisers. I report results here using the (log) number of residents earning at least $100,000 annually (in 2012 dollars). While I do not find evidence that cities with more wealthy residents are more likely to be covered at all, their local governments are covered much more frequently than those with fewer wealthy residents. This is consistent with a profit motive based on the number of potential subscribers and the overall size of a lucrative advertising market.

In the second section of Table 2, I turn to understanding the role that race plays in shaping the decision to cover local politics. I do not find evidence in columns 3-5 that racial predictors affect the extensive margin of political news coverage. However, municipalities with more white residents are covered much more frequently than those with fewer (column 8). Indeed, among newspaper-city pairs with any local politics coverage, a 1-percentage-point increase in the white population is associated with approximately a 0.5% increase in the number of stories published. Conversely, the results in column 9 suggest that cities with more Black residents are less likely to be covered by the local press, and results in column 10 suggest that municipalities where the majority of residents are not white are covered about 16% less than all other municipalities.

The results presented in this section are consistent with expectations drawn from news organizations' profit motives. First, large, nearby cities are far more likely to be covered and to have a greater intensity of news coverage about local politics. Second, there is some evidence that cities with greater potential for newspapers and advertisers to attract a larger number of people with disposable income are also more likely to be covered, although this

is not reflected by observing the relationship with median household income. Finally, there is evidence of racial disparities in news coverage of local politics. Whiter cities' governments are more likely to be covered at all, and are covered more frequently than those with fewer white residents; evidence suggests that the opposite holds for cities with more Black residents and for majority-nonwhite cities. To the extent that the media matters for political accountability, this may raise serious concerns about distributional fairness of political representation.

6 How Does Coverage Shape Public Goods?

I now turn to the implications of variations in local news coverage for policymaking in local governments. Budgets are a primary policy output of local governments. As Trounstine (2016) notes, many local government functions are primarily about allocating resources.

Existing scholarship has emphasized the role that other political factors play in shaping spending decisions in local politics. For example, decisions by mayors and city councils to tax and spend are generally responsive to the preferences of the public; in more liberal municipalities, spending and taxation are more likely than in more conservative communities (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). Likewise, the partisan leanings and professional backgrounds of mayors may cause cities to invest differently in public goods. Democratic mayors spend less on policing than Republicans Gerber and Hopkins (2011), but they spend more on roads, housing, and libraries, financing these increases primarily by issuing debt (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016). Mayors who were business executives prior to being elected tend to shift spending away from redistributive policies and toward infrastructure (Kirkland 2021). A large literature has also emphasized the role that racial divisions and geographic segregation play in reducing spending on public goods such as roads, sewers, and policing (Alesina, Baqir and Easterly 1999; Trounstine 2018).

The important role that the news media can play in informing the public and in political

accountability suggests that politicians should face incentives to emphasize popular public goods when they are more closely monitored by the press.

6.1 Public Budgeting and News Coverage Data

I study local public good provision using budget data from the Census of Governments. These data include details about cities' and towns' expenditures, collected every five years. I use local budgets from 1992, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2012, and 2017, which I match to municipal government coverage frequency in the newspaper data, as well as Census demographic data.

I focus on municipalities' per-capita *Total Operating* expenditures—spending from a city or town's general fund excluding capital outlays. I also examine per-capita operating expenditures in several specific categories that are more visible to the public: *Policing*; *Fire Protection*; *Parks and Recreation*; *Libraries*; and *Welfare*.[3]

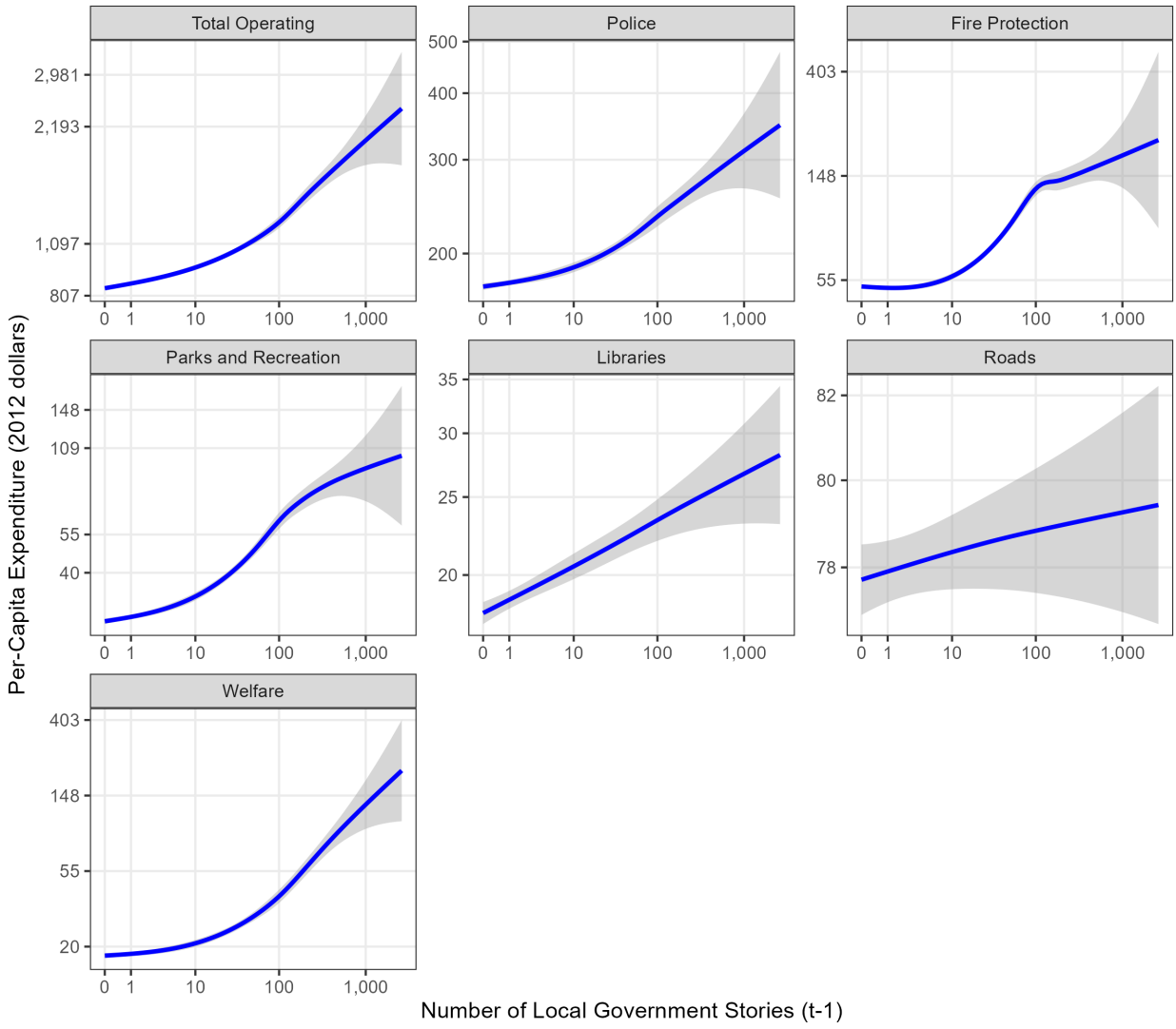
These budget data can be readily matched to the news coverage data described above because both are identified at the municipality level. The Census of Governments is conducted every five years in years ending with 2 and 7, and reports budget data from that year. Because local budgets are passed at some point the prior year, they really reflect political processes from years ending with 1 and 6. Not being able to observe exactly when in the year cities' budgets are passed, I match the spending data to news coverage data for the years ending in 0 and 5, or time $t-1$ from the decision point of the local government.[4] I aggregate news coverage data to the municipality-year level, so that each municipality appears only once per year, even if there are multiple newspapers in their MSA in the text archive. I use the maximum number of stories that any newspaper in the MSA wrote about the local government, regardless of which paper it is.

I begin by exploring correlative evidence about how municipal spending varies with the amount of news coverage a city or town government receives. Figure 4 plots the average an-

[3]The welfare category includes cash payments as well as housing and health care, following Trounstine (2016).

[4]The results I present below are robust to an alternative specification in which I average coverage from the previous five years.

Figure 4: Local Expenditure and News Coverage



Note: Curves track a generalized additive model of the annual number of stories published about a city or town (on the horizontal axis) and the per-capita expenditure in the listed budget category (on the vertical axis). Both variables are logged to better elucidate patterns in the data.

nual number of stories about a local government published in the five-year window preceding the collection of city budget data against per-capita spending by category (in thousands of 2012 dollars). Both variables are logged to elucidate patterns in the data. From this initial exploration, it is clear that local governments tend to spend more per-capita on government operations when they are covered more frequently by the local news.

Beginning in the top-left panel, the total per-capita operational expenditure is highly correlated with the number of news stories published about a city. The general trend looks similar within budget categories, although there is some variation in the strength and consistency of the relationship across categories. In particular, spending on roads is much less sensitive to the number of stories.

6.2 Empirical Strategy

This initial analysis, while informative, has two shortcomings, which I now address. First, there are a number of confounding factors that may explain both variation in public spending and news coverage, such as the population and economic and demographic characteristics.

Second, my hypotheses about the policy implications of news coverage depend on high-frequency and routine monitoring by the press. Rather than focus on variation in spending as the number of stories increases, therefore, I instead compare cities and towns that are covered at least once per week by a local newspaper against those that are not. These are cities and towns where it is incredibly likely that a beat reporter has been assigned to cover the municipal government.

My main expenditure analysis results from the following linear regression model:

$$\log(\text{ExpenditurePerCapita})_{i,t} = \beta_1 \text{Coverage}_{i,t-1} + \boldsymbol{\delta}\boldsymbol{\gamma}_{i,t} + \alpha_i + \varepsilon_i. \tag{3}$$

$\log(\text{ExpenditurePerCapita})_{i,t}$ is per-capita spending on a given budget category in municipality i and year t, in 2012 dollars. I log this figure, as even per-capita spending is highly

Table 3: Local News and Per-Capita Municipal Expenditure

	Total Operating (1)	Police (2)	Fire Protection (3)	Parks and Recreation (4)	Libraries (5)	Roads (6)	Welfare (7)
Coverage, t-1	0.03**	0.02*	0.03**	0.04**	0.03*	0.02	0.03
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.03)
City Controls	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
City FE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
N	50,317	46,735	38,239	42,071	21,164	47,950	20,126
R^2	0.87	0.92	0.88	0.85	0.90	0.68	0.77
Adj. R^2	0.85	0.91	0.86	0.83	0.89	0.64	0.74

Note: Table reports coefficients from least-squares regressions of logged per-capita operating expenditures in municipal budgets on an indicator variable of whether local newspapers cover the municipality at least weekly. All models include city fixed effects. Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered at the city level. $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

right-skewed. $\text{Coverage}_{i,t-1}$ is an indicator for whether at least one newspaper covered the municipality weekly in the year before the budget was passed. $\boldsymbol{\gamma}_{i,t}$ is a series of covariates measured at the city level.[5] Finally, all models include city fixed effects, α_i, and standard errors clustered at the municipality level.

Because I am unable to observe news coverage in areas where the text archive lacks newspapers, I drop all city-years in MSAs where no newspapers are present. I also exclude cities where there is zero spending for a category, as the responsibilities of municipal governments vary.

6.3 Results: Local News and Public Services

Table 3 presents results of the effects of weekly monitoring by the press on municipal spending using the regression specification described above. The first column reports results for

[5]I control for the logged population, percent Black, percent Hispanic, percent other nonwhite, percent urban, percent with a college degree, percent of adults under 30 and over 65, median household income in 2012 dollars, and Democratic vote in the most recent presidential election. I also control for quintiles of population, percent urban, and income to allow for nonlinear trends.

the total municipal operating budgets. I find that when cities are covered weekly, they spend roughly 3% more per-capita. The median municipality in the dataset has about 7,800 residents and spends $1,028 per person. A 3% increase would correspond to $242,471 in spending in the median city, and $1.8 million in spending in the median treated municipality (which tend to be larger).

The remaining columns of Table 3 examine the relationship between coverage and spending broken into individual budget categories. I find evidence that weekly coverage is associated with greater per-capita operating expenditure on policing, fire protection, parks and recreation, and libraries. I also find positive correlations between spending on roads and welfare, although these are not statistically significant at the 5% level.

In general, these results reflect that when cities are covered weekly by the press, they invest greater resources into these highly visible public goods. The results here correspond to shifts from fewer than 52 stories per year to more than 52 stories per year. They do not include changes at higher or lower levels of the distribution of coverage, such as a drop from 200 to 100 stories a year or vice versa. The simple pattern of data in Figure 4 would suggest dramatic changes on these higher levels of the distribution.

7 Conclusion

Over the last two decades, the number of working newspaper journalists in the United States has fallen by half. As economic turmoil continues to shutter newspapers and force staffing cutbacks in those that remain open, editors will be forced to allocate increasingly scarce reporting resources to cover fewer and fewer local governments. This paper presents evidence that suggests how these limited resources may be allocated, and highlights the policy consequences of that allocation decision. It also contributes to a growing literature identifying the effects that the dramatic decline of local news continues to have on American subnational politics.

News organizations have always had to make decisions about which local governments to prioritize in political coverage and which to ignore. Even before the rise of online news and the Great Recession led to more than a decade of cutbacks, newspaper texts reveal that local politics were simply never covered in a significant portion of cities. The vast majority of city halls did not have the sustained presence of a beat reporter producing high-frequency coverage.

When faced with limited resources, editors tend to follow profit-motivated reasoning in assigning reporters to particular beats. But they may also be swayed by their own unconscious biases. I show that newspapers tend to be especially likely to cover local political news in larger cities, cities near to the newspaper's headquarters, and municipalities with more white residents and fewer Black residents, and those with more high-income earners.

The political implications of these disparities are potentially great, given the well-established role that the press plays in political accountability. They also produce differences in municipal public policy, as observed in city budgets. Cities where the local government is covered more frequently spend more per-capita on public goods and municipal services. In particular, these cities spend more on highly visible government services such as the police parks, fire protection, and libraries, compared to those covered less frequently or not at all.

Taken together, these pieces of evidence suggest that the decline of local news may contribute to inequalities in American political representation. If past experience is any indicator of future decisions, the continuing decline of local news will likely exacerbate disparities in what local governments are covered—privileging wealthier and often whiter cities and towns that are of particular value to advertisers and news organizations themselves. In so doing, the benefits of news coverage for municipal policymaking are more likely to be realized in the sorts of communities that are most often covered.

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Supplementary Materials for "Public Goods and the Press: Policy Implications of Disparities in Local Political News"

Michael Auslen*

September 3, 2024

A Newspaper Text Coverage

This appendix reports the availability of newspaper text data in the archive. I first report the number of years between 1992-2016 for which I have text coverage for any newspaper in each Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) in Figure A1. Then, Figure A2 reports the number of papers available in each MSA for any period of time. Not all MSAs are included in the map; only those for which at least one paper-year exists in the dataset.

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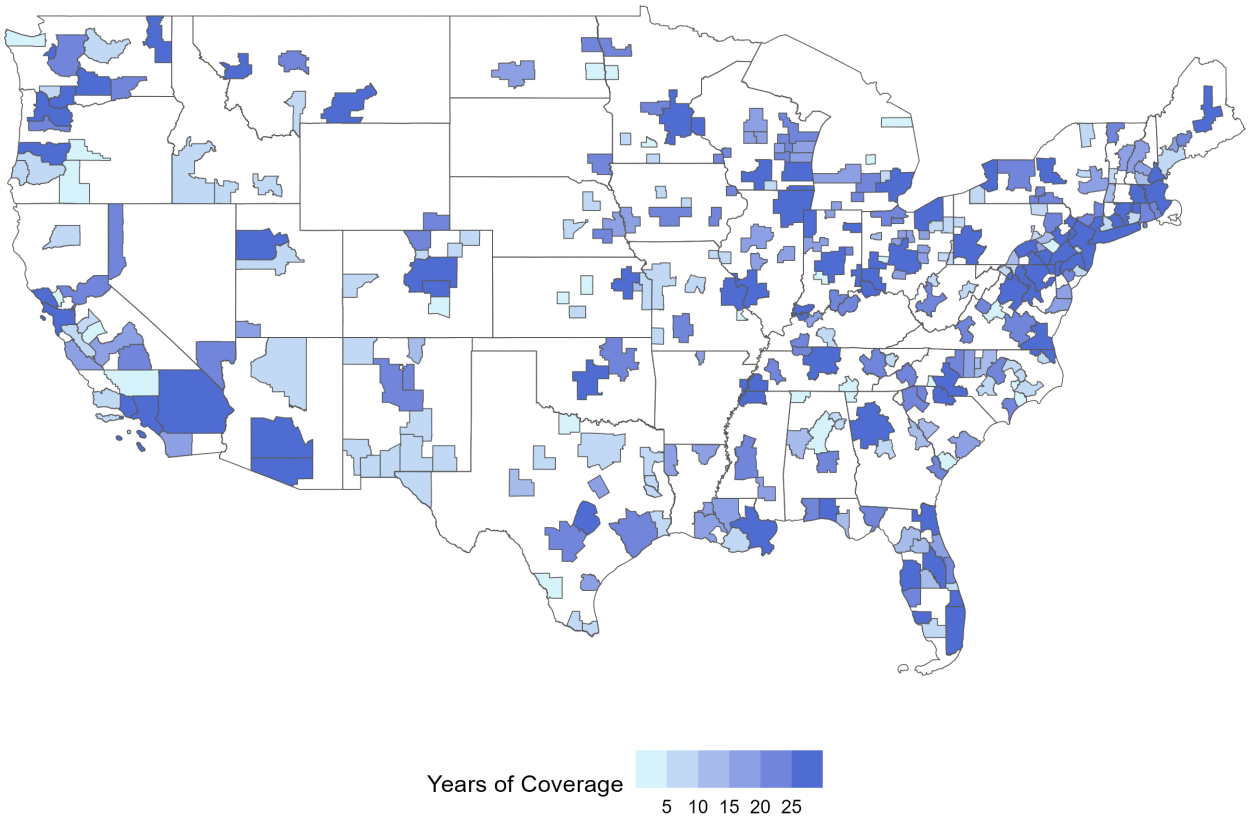
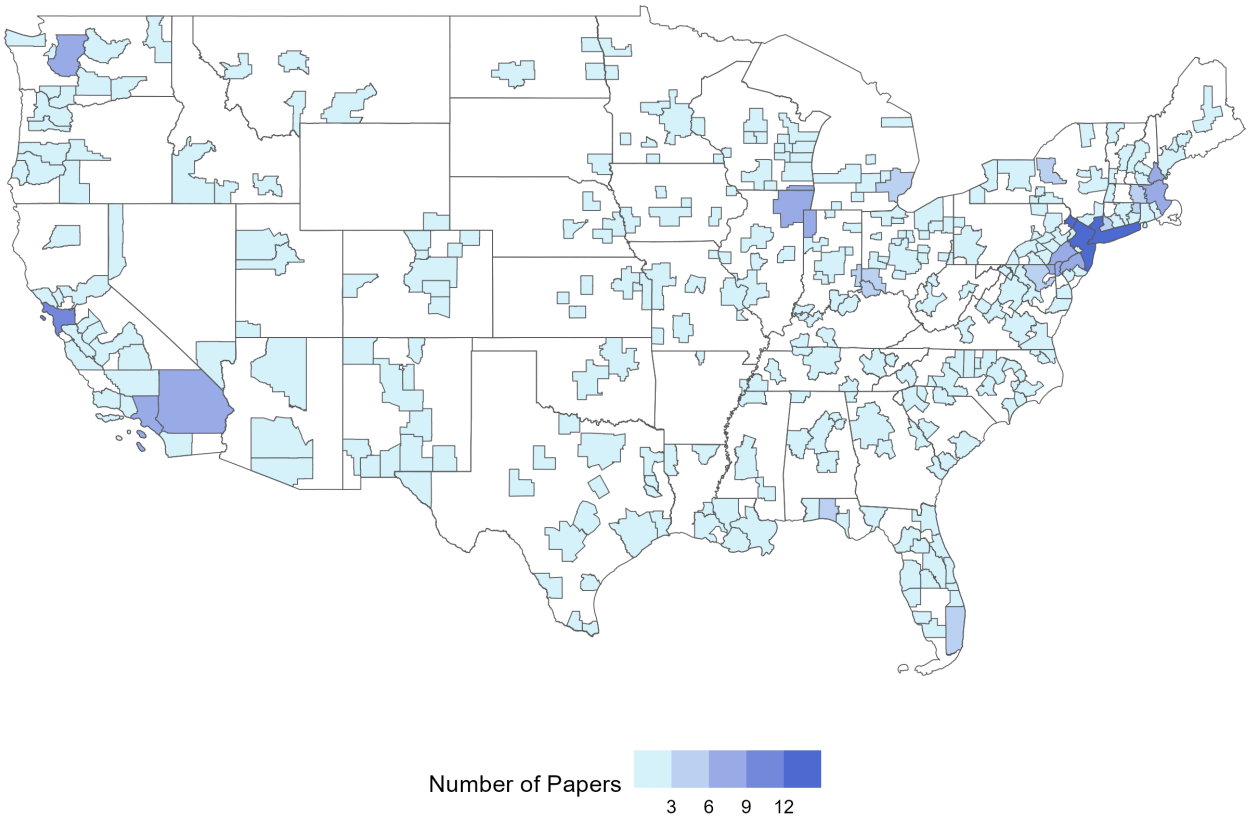
Figure A1: Text Archive Coverage: MSAs by Years of Coverage



Note: This map shows all MSAs in the text dataset and the number of years for which at least one newspaper is present.

Figure A2: Text Archive Coverage: MSAs by Number of Papers



Note: This map shows all MSAs in the text dataset and the total number of newspapers that ever appear in the archive.

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