Statehouse Democracy without the Electoral Connection: Local News and Representation in State Legislatures*

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Abstract

Electoral accountability is central to theories of representation in democracies, and it is widely believed that the news media play a critical role. This paper examines whether and how the media contribute to accountability. Drawing on an extensive archive of local newspaper transcripts, media market and circulation data, state legislative roll-call votes, and measures of district-level public opinion on five policy areas, I find that media coverage is associated with greater policy responsiveness in state legislatures. Defying the seminal theories of electoral accountability, however, I find no evidence that the media affects what the public knows about state politics or how they behave in state legislative elections. Rather, I conjecture that local news affects representation via a more direct, elite-focused "watchdog" mechanism—by informing legislators about public opinion or increasing the perceived costs that politicians face when deciding to cast an unpopular vote.

Democratic theory expects that politicians are responsive to the policy preferences of the public because of the threat of electoral accountability. Politicians vote for policies that their constituents support in order to secure reelection; if they fail to represent the public's wishes—and voters are made aware—they may be removed from office at the next election (Downs 1957; Mayhew 1974). This dynamic requires that the public is sufficiently attentive and informed to hold politicians accountable.

Because of the central importance that information plays in the typical story of political accountability, the news media are critical actors. Implicit to the media's role in the theory are three steps (Snyder and Strömberg 2010): First, the media covers politics, providing information to citizens about the behaviors of their representatives. Second, the public becomes more informed as a result of this news coverage, and uses that information to make better decisions in elections. And third, the threat of being held accountable shapes the actions taken by politicians themselves, making them better representatives of the public.

However, this classical account stands in contrast to scholarship on American political behavior, which has routinely found that the public as is generally disengaged from politics (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964) and knows little about who their representatives are or the positions they hold (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Nor do most people routinely follow news about public affairs (Prior 2009; Kernell, Lamberson and Zaller 2018). This tension raises fundamental questions about why politicians are responsive to the preferences of a largely disengaged public.

To reconcile these perspectives, this paper considers the role of local newspapers and TV news broadcasts in strengthening dyadic representation on substantive policy in America's state legislatures. Scholars have not, to my knowledge, explored the media's role in daydic representation—the extent to which legislators' roll-call votes on policy are correlated with constituent public opinion. Existing research has instead emphasized inputs to the policy-making process (e.g., elections), aggregate measures of legislative behavior (e.g., committee participation and votes against party leadership), and success in securing federal spending

(Snyder and Strömberg 2010; Peterson 2019).

There has likewise been surprisingly little research about the role that the news media play in shaping politics at the state level, with most scholarship centered on either Congress or local politics.[1] As such, I present novel evidence about the role of the media in shaping representation in the states. State legislatures are also a useful context in which to test the media's role in accountability more generally. Although they have become central actors in an array of high-profile policy areas—including social issues, economic inequality, and the nature of democracy itself (Grumbach 2022)—Americans generally have very little interest in the actions taken by their state legislatures (Delli Carpini, Keeter and Kennamer 1994; Rogers 2023). As politics has nationalized in recent decades, the electorate is even less focused on state politics (Hopkins 2018).

Specifically, I test the three conditions that must be present in order for the media's role in the classical theory of accountability to be operational in the state context. First, I explore whether the news media cover state legislative politics using a corpus of stories from 287 local newspapers over 10 years. Second, I construct a national dataset of media activity, state legislative roll-call votes, and district-level opinion on five issue areas to test whether the association between roll-call voting and opinion is strengthened by news coverage. The data include bills from 2011-2022 on abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, Medicaid expansion, and the minimum wage—all policies on which states have considerable authority and are actively engaged in policymaking. Finally, I test whether there is evidence that media coverage contributes to mass knowledge about state legislative politics or behavior in state legislative elections.

The paper begins by exploring the tension between seminal theories of the media's role in political accountability and political behavior. I pay particular attention to the low-information environment of state politics, which presents a particular set of challenges versus

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[1]Two notable exceptions are the recent book by Rogers (2023), which in part considers how state capitol press corps at the aggregate level contribute to accountability, and a recent working paper by Myers (N.d.), which argues that news coverage produces greater electoral returns to moderation by state legislators.

more frequently studied domains such as Congress; lower baseline levels of political knowledge and interest in state politics may make it more difficult for even robust news coverage to improve political information and shape electoral behavior.

I next turn to the three tests of the media's role in state politics. First, I show that there is considerable coverage of state legislative politics, but that the intensity of this coverage varies by legislator; in particular, newspapers are more likely to cover legislators who represent a greater share of their subscribers. Second, I explain my data and present results on the role that newspapers and TV stations play in dyadic representation. I find that when individual legislators are more likely to be covered by the local newspapers and TV stations in their districts, they are also more responsive to the policy preferences of their constituents. This effect is present for social and economic issues alike and across both types of media I examine. Third, after establishing that the media plays a role in policy responsiveness, I test the informational and electoral effects of the media on the general public. I find no evidence that the public is more informed in districts that are more likely to be covered by newspapers and TV broadcasts. Nor do I find evidence of higher electoral participation or differences in incumbency advantage or nationalized voting in these districts.

This suggests a need for new explanations of the media's role in democratic accountability in contexts where the electoral connection is not operational. I argue that one channel through which the press may contribute to accountability is by acting as a "watchdog" of politicians. Because of repeated interactions with reporters, politicians who know they are being closely monitored should face higher costs to casting unpopular policy votes. Even if the public is not paying attention, these legislators may be motivated by career concerns if they seek higher office, fear that more engaged subsets of the public (e.g., campaign donors or lobbyists) will learn about their votes, or be concerned about their reputations in their communities. Additionally, politicians may learn about public opinion among constituents from news reports in their districts.

Together, these results present a challenge for classical theories of accountability in

contexts with low levels of public engagement in and information about politics. While I find that the media are important players in shaping political representation in state legislatures, my results also suggest that news coverage need not inform the public nor shape its behavior in elections in order to have a positive influence on legislators' policy votes.

1 News Media and Accountability

Policies enacted at all levels of American government are routinely found to be responsive to public opinion; when constituents support a policy more, elected leaders are more likely to pass it (e.g., in Congress: Page and Shapiro 1983, Erikson 1978; in the states: Erikson, Wright and McIver 1993, Lax and Phillips 2012, Caughey and Warshaw 2018; and in local governments: Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). The dominant explanation for this responsiveness is that the public holds politicians accountable via an "electoral connection." Because voters can use elections to sanction politicians who take unpopular stances on issues and replace them with more favorable representatives, reelection-minded incumbents face an incentive to support popular policies, or risk being voted out of office (Downs 1957; ?).

In order to hold politicians accountable, the public must be sufficiently attentive to politics and informed about the actions taken by elected officials. As a result, the news media play a critical role in theories of electoral accountability. By observing politicians and reporting information to readers and viewers, the press provides the public with information that they can use to hold elected leaders accountable (Strömberg 2015).

The typical explanation of the media's role in political accountability expects that people learn about politics from the news, and then use this information to decide whether and how to vote. This, in turn, affects who is elected and the incentives that they face to enact popular policies once in office. These electorate-focused explanations depend on two crucial linkages: First, the public must consume *and learn from* news coverage of politics. Second, elected officials must either themselves be products of an informed electorate who proactively

chose a candidate based on this information, or they must respond to the public becoming informed by supporting policies in line with mass preferences.

There is considerable evidence of this first linkage in the domain of national politics, although the results are more mixed at subnational levels of government. Local newspapers and TV broadcasts are associated with voter turnout in congressional elections (Gentzkow 2006; Gentzkow, Shapiro and Sinkinson 2011) and reductions in split-ticket voting (Moskowitz 2021). Voters whose members of Congress are more likely to be covered in the press are also more knowledgeable about their representatives (Peterson 2019; Hayes and Lawless 2015), and more likely to support the incumbent (Snyder and Strömberg 2010).

In subnational politics, there is less consistent evidence for the mass effects of the news media. Some scholars find that news coverage increases participation (Hayes and Lawless 2021) and decreases polarization (Darr, Hitt and Dunaway 2021) in mayoral elections. On the other hand, losing a newspaper has been found to have no impact on turnout or incumbency advantage in elections for city and county offices (Auslen, Hirano and Snyder N.d.), and receiving a newspaper subscription appears not to change voting propensity or gubernatorial vote choice (Gerber, Karlan and Bergan 2009). On average, survey respondents are more knowledgeable about state legislatures generally when there are more reporters covering them (Rogers 2023). However, the public's ability to learn about their own state legislator from local news in their district has to my knowledge not been established.

The second linkage is also supported by existing evidence, though again focused on Congress. Snyder and Strömberg (2010) showed that members of Congress who are more likely to be covered in local newspapers are better held accountable by the public in elections and, as a result, are less extreme, less partisan, and better at delivering federal spending. Arceneaux et al. (2016) showed that the rollout of Fox News in the 1990s caused members of Congress to cast more conservative votes in the final run-up to the election if they represented districts with more likely Fox viewers.

This electoral explanation anticipates that politicians who are more frequently covered

by the news media should be more responsive to the policy preferences of their constituents when casting roll-call votes. When voters have access to more information about their representatives, they may be able to use this information in elections to select representatives who better align with their preferences, or sanction those who step out of line with the district.

1.1 Accountability with Inattentive Publics?

However, the extent to which the public is attentive to political news and informed about politics is a longstanding source of debate. Core findings in the political behavior literature argue that the American public pays little or no attention to public affairs (Prior 2009; Kernell, Lamberson and Zaller 2018), and has minimal knowledge about the identities, policy positions, and behaviors of their representatives (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). When they do pay attention, voters can be myopic in their retrospective evaluations of politicians and unable to accurately apportion credit and blame (Achen and Bartels 2016; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020).

At the subnational level, voters are especially inattentive and unaware. A routinely affirmed feature of American state politics is that the public knows very little. Consistently, scholars have found that less than 30% of the public can identify their state representative (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Patterson, Ripley and Quinlan 1992). More recently, Rogers (2023) showed that only 11% of people can correctly name their state representative. For decades, scholars have argued that a significant barrier to accountability in state politics is the public's lack of attentiveness (Treadway 1985). As American politics has nationalized and national partisan identities have overtaken bespoke local and regional preferences, this interest has likely waned further (Hopkins 2018). Likewise, the public increasingly lacks access to political information about state politics.

The rise of the Internet and growing media choice has pushed audiences away from traditional news sources (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011). Local newspapers and television

news broadcasts—which are often the only sources of information about the actions of state governments (Mahone et al. 2019)—have been particularly hard-hit.[2] Indeed, experimental evidence has shown that an incredibly small number of participants subscribed to local news outlets even when offered a free online subscription (Hopkins and Gorton 2023). If voters do not use the media to become informed, or are unable to reliable convert this information to political action, then they may not be able to hold politicians accountable in elections.

On the other hand, there is some evidence that enough of the public is sufficiently attentive to politics at the national level for electoral accountability to be possible. Several studies show that constituents are more knowledgeable about their congressional representation when they are more likely to be covered by the press (Campbell, Alford and Henry 1984; Snyder and Strömberg 2010; Peterson 2019). There is also evidence that constituents who are aware that their member of Congress cast roll-call votes they support evaluate those incumbents more favorably (Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki 2022). Local news coverage of Congress typically emphasizes local delegations, providing the public with the opportunity to learn about congressional behavior (Arnold 2004).

1.2   Assessing Media's Role in Accountability

Taken together, these central findings in the literatures on responsiveness and mass political behavior raise an important question about the nature of political accountability, namely, why are representatives so well constrained by public opinion when the public is seemingly not sufficiently attentive to hold them accountable when they take unpopular positions? This is a particularly relevant question in the context of state legislative politics, where the especially low levels of mass engagement with politics may make it even more difficult for the public to become sufficiently informed to take sanction out-of-step representatives.

The canonical theory of the media's role in political accountability can generally be

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[2]Since 2004, the number of "news deserts"—communities without a daily newspaper—have risen dramatically (Abernathy 2020), and the number of journalists working in newsrooms has fallen. One important consequence of this decline is that the amount of news being produced about politics has decreased (Peterson 2021), so political information is less accessible even to interested members of the public.

summarized in three claims. First, the news media covers politics. Second, legislators who are covered more often by the news media behave differently from those covered less often; in this case, the more-covered legislators should be better at reflecting constituent preferences in their roll-call votes. Third, the public is better informed and behaves differently in elections in districts with higher levels of news coverage. In the remainder of the paper, I test each of these claims in the state legislative context. I find evidence supporting the first two, but fail to do so for the third. I reconcile my results with an alternative "watchdog" theory of the media's role in accountability in Section 6 below.

2   Local News in State Politics

In order for the media to have any effect in state politics, they must first produce news coverage in state capitols. In this section, I show that local news outlets are active in state capitols. Indeed, local news plays a singular role in state politics. While there are many potential sources of information about national politics (e.g., national newspapers, cable and network TV newscasts, and online sources), there are fewer alternatives at the state level. Instead, almost all coverage of state capitols is generated by local newspapers, TV and radio stations, and a small but growing number of digital publications.

2.1   State Capitol Press Corps

A 2022 Pew study identified 850 full-time reporters covering state capitols (including "session reporters" who cover the legislative session plus some other beat during the remainder of the year); of these, 29% (a plurality) work for newspapers, and 13% for local TV stations (Shearer et al. 2022).[3]

However, the size of state press corps vary widely from state to state. Figure 1 shows

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[3]As of 2022, there are now more capitol reporters from nonprofit news organizations than from TV stations, although these include some newspaper spinoffs that have nonprofit status. For example, Spotlight PA is a nonprofit investigative journalism collaboration of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and Harrisburg *Patriot-News* that publishes its reporting in these papers.

Figure 1: State Capitol Reporters by State
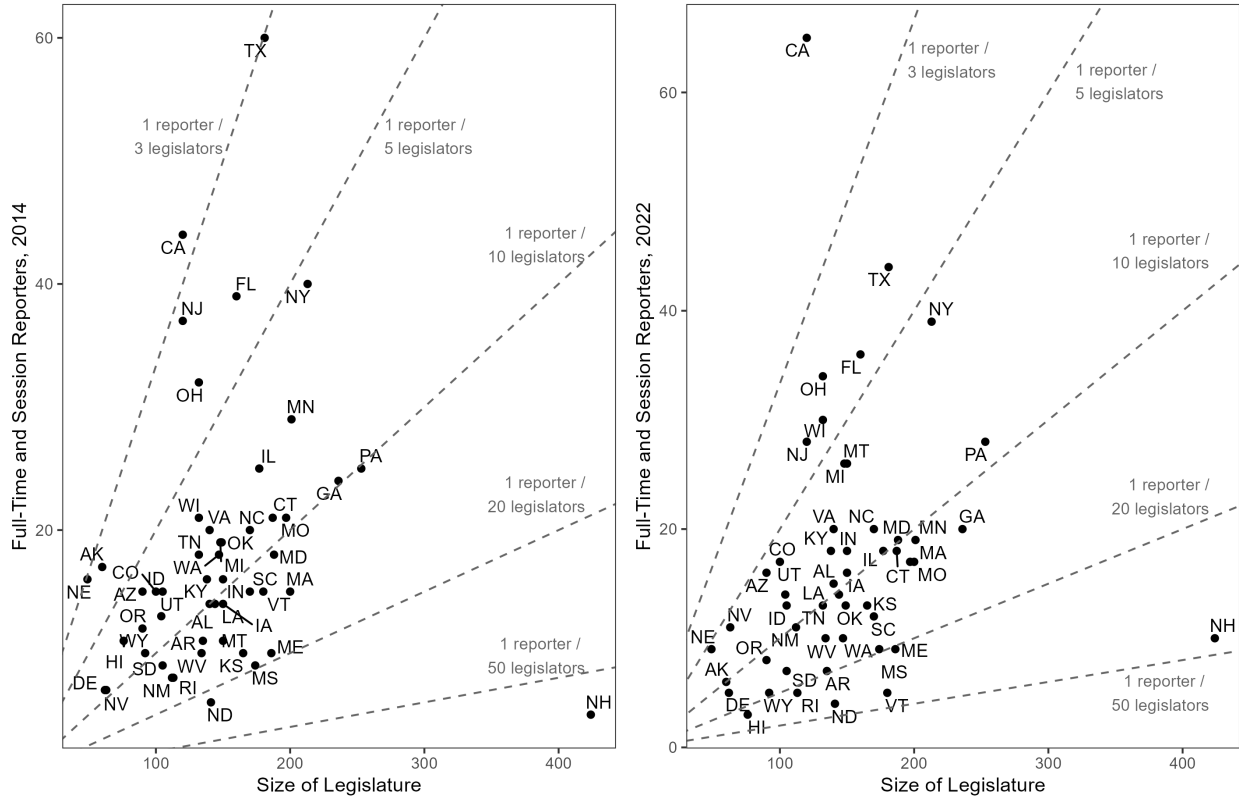
Note: Points show the relationship between the size of state legislatures and the number of reporters assigned to cover the capitol in 2014 and 2022 from Shearer et al. (2022). Dashed lines show different ratios between the number of reporters and legislature size.

the number of full-time and session reporters from Pew studies in 2014 and 2022, and how the size of the press corps varies with the size of the legislature itself. Dashed diagonal lines correspond to ratios between full-time reporters and legislators. Notably, there is considerable variation, both across states and over time. But in most states, there is one reporter for every 10 to 20 legislators across all news outlets and types of media (including wire services, digital sources, and partisan news outlets). At any one news organization, then, each reporter is dramatically outnumbered by the politicians on their beat. This variation underscores that reporters cannot closely monitor every legislator in the state and instead must make decisions about how to focus their efforts.

2.2 Newspaper Coverage of State Legislators

The newsgathering efforts of these journalists produce large quantities of news stories about America's state capitols. I examine this coverage using a corpus of full-text newspaper articles published in 287 newspapers over the period from 2012-2021.

To identify stories about specific state legislators, I constructed a dictionary of search terms for each paper. I began by identifying the list of all legislators in states where each newspaper in the sample circulates.[4] Then, I searched for articles in the newspaper text that mention the legislator by name (including variants) and the name of the chamber.[5] This yielded for each newspaper, in each year, the number of stories referencing each state legislator by name.

Using these data, I find that newspapers publish a considerable number of stories about state legislators, despite limited resources and low public interest, though this coverage has declined rapidly. Figure 2 shows the number of stories in the average newspaper mentioning state legislators by name, compared to members of Congress and governors. Over the last decade, the number of stories published about state legislators decreased, as did those about members of Congress, albeit at a slower rate. Stories mentioning governors tracked legislators, declining slightly before peaking in 2020, when governors became central figures in the response to Covid-19.

However, given limited time and reporting capacity, state capitol reporters must choose how to focus their efforts—in particular, which legislators to monitor most closely. Generally, journalists can be expected to prioritize coverage that increases readership (Zaller N.d.; Strömberg 2015). To do so, they may focus on party leadership and other powerful legislators, those who take controversial positions, and those most prone to scandal. Existing scholarship

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[4]Circulation areas are defined using Alliance for Audited Media (AAM) circulation data. I include newspapers' home states, as well as any neighboring states with positive circulation.

[5]For example, to search for stories about New York State Senator Brad Hoylman, I search for stories that mention "brad hoylman" or "brad m hoylman" and one of the terms "new york legislature," "new york senate," "sen", or "senator", in any order. I allow some characters between the terms but require that they to occur near each other in the article. I discuss the text analysis procedure in greater detail in Appendix A.

Figure 2: Newspaper Stories about Legislators and Governors

Note: Points show the number of stories that mention members of Congress, governors, and state legislators in the average newspaper in the full-text sample.

also finds that news outlets pay more attention to politicians who represent their audience (Campbell, Alford and Henry 1984; Arnold 2004). I test whether this expectation from the literature on media and Congress holds in state legislatures by regressing the number of stories about each legislator on the share of newspaper subscribers living in their district.

I calculate the share of newspaper subscribers who live in each district using newspaper circulation data from the Alliance for Audited Media (AAM) using the following formula:

$$\text{ReaderShare}_{md} = \frac{\text{Circulation}_{md}}{\text{Circulation}_m}. \tag{1}$$

Circulation_{md} is the number of newspaper m's subscribers who live in district d, and Circulation_m is newspaper m's subscribers across all districts.[6] I compute this separately

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[6]AAM data are reported at the county level. I use areal interpolation to project these estimates to the district level. This procedure is discussed in more detail in Appendix B.

Table 1: ReaderShare and Coverage of State Legislators

	Lower Chamber		Upper Chamber	
ReaderShare	33.09**	30.97**	33.27**	30.18**
	(3.13)	(3.03)	(3.25)	(3.15)
District Controls		X		X
Legislator Controls		X		X
N	169,383	165,070	64,524	61,750
Adj. R^2	0.09	0.10	0.11	0.13

Note: Results are from OLS regressions where the dependent variable is the number of stories published about a legislator in a given newspaper-year. All models include state-year fixed effects. Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered by newspaper. Full results including covariates are in Appendix J. $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

upper- and lower-chamber districts.

Table 1 reports results. All regressions include state-year fixed effects to account for variations in state legislative institutions, session years, and election timing. Across the models, when ReaderShare$_{md}$ is higher, so is the number of stories published about the legislator. Increasing ReaderShare$_{md}$ from 0 to 1 would yield approximately 30 additional stories per year about each legislator. The models reported in columns 2 and 4 add controls for legislator characteristics (leadership and tenure in office) and district characteristics (race, age, education, income, and urbanness); coefficients for these controls are reported in Appendix J.

3 Data: Media, Opinion, and Policy Action

To understand whether and how the news media contribute to policy responsiveness in state legislatures, I constructed a dataset containing public opinion, roll-call votes, and media activity at the legislative district level for the period from 2011-2022. My data includes final-passage roll-call votes of members of all state legislatures on bills in five policy areas: abortion,

same-sex marriage, gun control, Medicaid expansion, and the minimum wage; district-level public opinion on these issues; and media market-legislative district congruence—a measure of the incentive that local news outlets have to cover legislators—as well as relevant control variables. I describe each below.

3.1 Roll-Call Votes

As a measure of legislators' actions on substantive policy, I obtained roll-call votes from LegiScan. I began by identifying all bills filed in the state legislatures between 2011 and 2022 related to the five policy areas. To do so, I searched the text and titles of bills filed for terms relevant to each domain. These search terms are included in the second row of Table 2. I further limited the search results using a measure of bills' relevance to the search queries reported by LegiScan.[7] Overall, I identified 19,094 bills related to at least one policy area (some matched and are included in multiple issues). Of these, 5,025 received a final passage roll-call vote on the floor of at least one legislative chamber. I focus on these bills.

Substantively, the proposed legislation is wide-ranging. For example, abortion bills include some proposed restrictions on access—e.g., bans after 20 weeks, six weeks, or altogether; regulations on clinics; limitations on who can provide abortion services; waiting periods—while others would clearly liberalize abortion laws—e.g., repeals of existing regulations; expanding scope of practice statutes to allow non-doctors to provide abortions. Other issue areas include bills that would raise or lower the minimum wage, increase access to firearms or add new gun control limits, and explicitly allow or ban same-sex marriage.

In order to place legislators' votes on different bills in a single ideological space within each issue domain, I coded whether each bill took a conservative or liberal position.[8] Table 2 reports

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[7]This reduced the number of bills in the sample that match search queries but are largely unrelated from the topic. For example, state budgets may include references to abortion or the minimum wage, but it would be unrealistic to assume that budget roll-call votes are responding to these specific provisions alone. The exact threshold of "relevance" used to limit varies by policy domain. I determined a threshold for each policy by reading bill summaries and identifying point below which legislation becomes sufficiently irrelevant to exclude from the analysis. Some less germane bills are included in the analysis if they matched the search terms and had relevance scores above the threshold for their policy area.

[8]To do so, I predicted legislators' votes by their partisanship using logistic regression. If being a Democrat

Table 2: Policy Issues and Data Sources

	Abortion	Same-Sex Marriage	Gun Control		Expand Medicaid	Minimum Wage	
Years	2011-2022	2011-2016	2011-2014	2015-2022	2015-2016	2017-2020	2021-2022
Legiscan Search Terms	abortion OR (pregnancy NEAR termination)	marriage AND ((same AND sex) OR gay OR lesbian)	firearm OR handgun OR rifle	firearm OR handgun OR rifle	medicaid AND (increase OR expand OR expansion OR access OR eligibility)	"minimum wage"	"minimum wage"
CES Question	Support for restricting abortion (from multiple questions)*	"[F]avor ... allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally"	"[L]aws covering the sale of firearms should be ... More Strict"	"[S]upport ... Ban assault rifles"	"Should your state refuse ACA expansion of Medicaid"	"[W]ould you vote FOR ... Raises the federal minimum wage to $12 an hour by 2020"	"[D]o you support ... Raise the minimum wage to $15 an hour"
Bills	3,956	440	3,515	8,304	358	1,811	956
Floor Votes	1,304	151	813	1,842	171	437	276
Liberal	44.9%	60.3%	42.4%	49.3%	49.1%	72.1%	80.4%
Passed	93.3%	92.1%	95.1%	94.7%	91.2%	92.7%	97.5%

Note: *Support for restricting abortion is coded as 1 if respondents support banning abortion outright, except in cases where "need is established," or unless the life and health of the mother is at risk.

the share of all final roll-call votes that were liberal (the remaining bills are conservative), as well as the share that passed by issue. There is wide variation in issue ideology, depending on the issue domain. Unsurprisingly, given agenda control powers held by leadership in most legislative chambers, the vast majority of bills that received a floor vote (over 90% in each domain) passed.

3.2 District Public Opinion

A key challenge in studying responsiveness at the state legislative district level is obtaining policy-specific public opinion data for each district. I do so by leveraging the large sample sizes and detailed geographic data in the Cooperative Election Study (CES; formerly CCES) using Multilevel Regression and Poststratification (MRP). MRP estimates constituency opinion from a national poll by pooling information about similar types of respondents across geography. It has been shown to improve estimates of opinion, even when there are very few respondents in a given area, and has been used to measure opinion in states, cities, and legislative districts (Park, Gelman and Bafumi 2004; Lax and Phillips 2009; Warshaw and Rodden 2012).

I summarize district opinion on each issue using questions from the CES listed in the third row of Table 2. For opinion on the issue of abortion, I use a composite of several other CES questions; specifically, I produce an indicator for whether each respondent is in favor of restricting abortion. I consider respondents as supportive of restricting abortion if they express support for making abortion illegal outright, except in cases where "need is established," or if the life and health of the mother is at risk. These policies are all more restrictive than the status quo prior to the Supreme Court's overturning of the *Roe v. Wade* decision in June 2022. I use this approach because it better maps onto the complexity of abortion opinion and captures nuance that is not well represented by more extreme positions

is more predictive of a "yea" vote than a "nay" vote, I code the bill as liberal; otherwise, I code the bill as conservative. While crude, this method produces the correct ideological classification 92% of the time, compared to a hand-coded sample of 100 abortion bills.

(e.g., supporting or opposing abortion in all circumstances). That said, the main results presented below are robust to this decision (see Appendix F). For the other policy domains, I use more direct questions related to the policy.

For each CES question in each survey year, I fit a "deep" MRP model with random effects for individual respondents' race, sex, education, state, region, and the interactions among the demographic variables and state. Deep models can improve estimation in MRP with limited risk of over-fitting (Goplerud 2023). I also include a number of contextual covariates at the district level—median income, percent urban, and Republican presidential vote share—as well as other issue-specific variables also measured at the district level using flexible splines. I poststratify this model by producing the joint distributions of demographics in each state legislative district from block-level American Community Survey data and the shapefiles of state legislative districts. I use this method to separately estimate opinion on each issue in all upper- and lower-chamber districts in 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020. Details about the MRP models and their constituent parts are discussed in Appendix C.

A final wrinkle to my opinion estimation approach is that MRP models typically include a random effect for the target geography—in this case, state legislative districts, which are not included in the CES. To address this problem, I use geographic information included in the survey—ZIP code and county—to determine the probability that each respondent lives in each possible legislative district.[9] I use these probabilities as weights when fitting the first-stage predictive model for MRP.

3.3   Congruence as a Measure of Media Monitoring

To measure how local news outlets prioritize coverage of legislators, I use data on news outlets' audiences. Local news outlets are more likely to cover legislators who represent more of their audience, as I showed in Table 1 above. In practice, though, there are often multiple newspapers covering overlapping regions. For example, some larger cities have multiple daily

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[9]This procedure uses the intersection of respondents' ZIP code and county. It is described in detail in Appendix D.

newspapers, and smaller cities are often covered by their own local newspaper as well as a nearby regional paper. I account for this by computing the Congruence$_d$ of legislative districts and media markets. This is a common empirical strategy in the literature on the political economy of media (e.g., Snyder and Strömberg 2010).

Congruence is measured at the district level and can be thought of as the overlap between a given legislator's constituency and the audience of local newspapers in the area. Specifically, Congruence$_d$ weights the ReaderShare$_{md}$ of all newspapers m circulating in a district by their share of total newspaper circulations in district d (MarketShare$_{md}$). Formally, the congruence of a district is computed using the formula

$$\text{Congruence}_d = \sum_{m=1}^{M} \text{ReaderShare}_{md}\text{MarketShare}_{md}, \tag{2}$$

where ReaderShare$_{md}$ is described in Equation (1) and

$$\text{MarketShare}_{md} = \frac{\text{Circulation}_{md}}{\text{Circulation}_d}. \tag{3}$$

Congruence ranges from 0 to 1, with legislators representing districts with higher values when their constituencies better align with newspaper circulation in their area. Appendix B describes the computation of congruence in greater detail.

As an illustration, Figure 3 shows the distribution of congruence for upper-chamber legislative districts in the contiguous United States in 2016. While there is considerable variation in the measure, the geography of some states' districts and locations of newspapers means that congruence is on average higher in some states than others. In my regression analyses, I address this by controlling for district urbanness using a series of variables discussed in the section that follows.

I compute congruence using data from the AAM, which reports county-level newspaper circulation for 644 U.S. newspapers from 2011-2022. The Standard Rate and Data Service (SRDS) publishes an alternate source of circulation data, which has been digitized for 2008,

Figure 3: Newspaper Congruence by State Senate Districts, 2016

Congruence
0.25 0.50 0.75
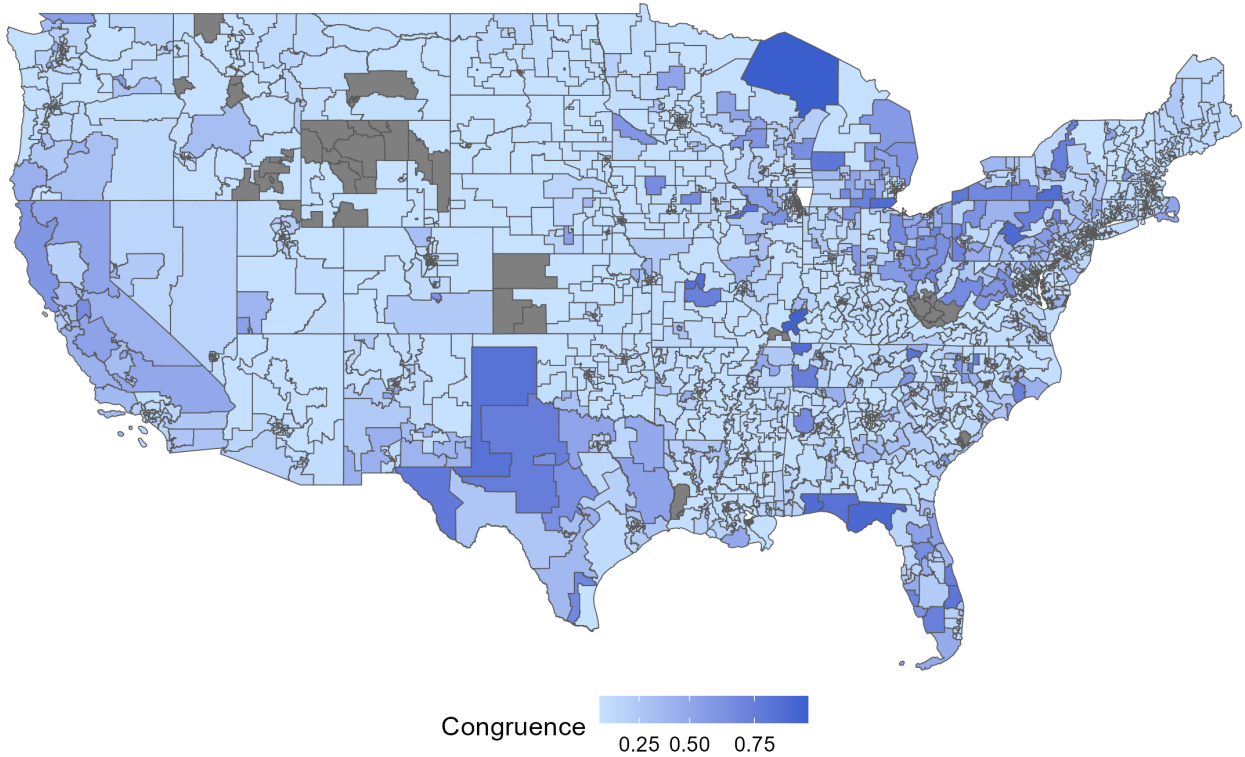
Note: District-level newspaper congruence for all upper-chamber districts in 2016.

2014, and 2018. Some other scholars (e.g., Peterson 2019) prefer this source as it includes a larger number of small newspapers who do not participate in AAM.[10] However, SRDS covers a more limited period of time, and the additional newspapers for which it provides data are often smaller and may lack the resources necessary to staff state capitol bureaus. In Appendices F and H, I show that my results are robust to this data sourcing decision.

For analyses of local TV, I similarly compute TVCongruence$_d$. I do so using Designated Market Areas (DMAs) defined by the Nielsen Company, which correspond to the reach of broadcast television stations in a given market (Moskowitz 2021). Most DMAs cover multiple counties, and all are non-overlapping, unlike newspaper circulation areas. As a result, most

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[10]The average circulation of AAM newspapers in my data is 37,744, while the average circulation of non-AAM newspapers in the SRDS data is 25,223.

legislative districts exist within a single DMA, and congruence is equal to

$$\text{ViewerShare}_{md} = \frac{\text{Population}_{md}}{\text{Population}_m}, \tag{4}$$

where Population_{md} is the population of district d inside market m, and Population_m is the population of a media market m. I use population, rather than viewership, as I do not have access to viewership below the DMA level. In the rare cases where a district crosses media market boundaries, I compute TVCongruence by substituting ViewerShare_{md} for ReaderShare_{md} in Equation (2), calculated using DMA populations.

3.4   Additional Covariates

Because media market congruence is a function of geography, the spatial distribution of the population may confound results. Urban districts often have lower congruence because they pack large numbers of people in to small areas, allowing a single newspaper to be distributed widely at a low cost. While rural districts may be more likely to have high congruence in some areas, there are also fewer newspapers operating. I include controls for logged district population density and urban percent of each district. To allow for the possibility that the relationship between urbanism and the main variables of interest is nonlinear, I also control for a dummy variable of each district's quintile of population density and percent urban, following Snyder and Strömberg (2010). Because of the reasonably high (negative) correlation between urbanism and congruence, these controls are essential to identify the effect of congruence independent of other factors related to urban areas.

Race and education affect political behavior in myriad ways. I therefore include controls from the Census Bureau for the racial demographics and education level of each district. Because older people are more likely to read newspapers than younger people, I include a control for the share of adults in each district who are 65 or older.

In legislatures, behavior is often mediated by seniority and leadership. Party leaders

have a direct hand in setting the agenda and deciding which bills have a vote. Legislators who have been in office longer may have more autonomy; likewise, longer-serving legislators may be more likely to serve as committee chairs. To account for legislator characteristics, I collected data on party leadership from the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL). I include a dummy variable for party leadership that includes chamber presiding officers, presiding officers *pro tempore*, and majority and minority leaders.[11] I also control for the number of years each legislator has served consecutively and dummy variables for legislators in their first two years and those serving for 10 or more years.[12]

Finally, not all newspapers are of equal quality. Legislators representing areas served by news outlets with more resources may be more likely to be covered in the news in a way that is not captured by congruence. To address this in the newspaper analyses, I control for the logged sum of district-level circulation from all newspapers as a proxy for the resources and quality of the papers.

4   How Media Shapes Responsiveness in State Politics

Are politicians in districts with higher levels of media market congruence more sensitive to the preferences of their constituents? I extend a common design to uncover dyadic representation—the correlation between individual legislators' roll-call votes and their constituents' preferences on the same issues. First, I find a high baseline level of policy responsiveness, consistent with other studies. Across all five issues I consider, district opinion is both a substantively and statistically significant predictor of legislators' roll-call voting (full results are reported in Appendix E).

To assess the effect of media coverage on responsiveness, I fit the linear probability model below, which regresses legislators' roll-call votes on the interaction of constituent opinion and

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[11] In New Hampshire, I also include the deputy speaker of the House.

[12] These data come from Klarner (2018) before 2016 and were produced from LegiScan and MIT Election Lab data after 2016.

media market congruence:

$$\text{RollCall}_{iv} = \beta_1 \text{Opinion}_i + \beta_2 \text{Congruence}_i + \beta_3 \text{Opinion}_i \times \text{Congruence}_i + \delta \mathbf{X}_i + \gamma_v + \varepsilon_i. \quad (5)$$

RollCall_{iv} is legislator i's roll-call vote on bill v; Congruence_i is the media market congruence for i's district; and Opinion_i is district-level support for a policy. Using each bill's coding as conservative or liberal, I rescale RollCall_{iv} so that votes always agree ideologically with Opinion_i. So, legislators are *more responsive* to opinion when the coefficient is *higher*. I also include demographic, geographic, and legislator characteristic controls ($\mathbf{X}_i$) and bill fixed effects (γ_v) to account for unobserved differences in proposed legislation, such as the extremity of the policy. Because votes are nested in state-chamber-years, bill fixed effects also account for unobserved variation across states (e.g., institutional features and the propensity of some legislative district maps to produce higher congruence than others). The regression includes all bills for which I observe legislator votes and congruence.[13]

4.1 Effect of Newspaper Congruence

Table 3 reports the effect of newspaper congruence on responsiveness, separately for each of five policy domains. For gun control and minimum wage, I report separate regressions for two time periods because of changes in question wording on the CES.

The coefficients on the interaction of opinion and congruence show how the correlation between public opinion and legislator roll-call voting changes as congruence increases. Consistently across all five issues, I find that the high baseline level of responsiveness is considerably strengthened when there is greater congruence between newspaper coverage areas and districts—when the press faces a higher incentive to cover politicians.

This effect is present for both social and economic issues. It is also evident on more

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[13]In the newspaper results, I do not include districts where I lack circulation data. It is impossible to determine whether these districts truly have no newspapers (and thus a congruence of zero), or whether they are missing from the AAM data. Despite this, the results include 91% of all district-years.

Table 3: Newspaper Congruence and Responsiveness across Issues

	Restrict Abortion (2011–2022)	Same-Sex Marriage (2011–2016)	Gun Control (2011–2014)	Gun Control (2015–2022)	Expand Medicaid (2015–2016)	Min. Wage (2017–2020)	Min. Wage (2021–2022)
Opinion × Congruence	1.35** (0.29)	2.07** (0.52)	2.69** (0.42)	1.48** (0.31)	1.84* (0.75)	3.47** (0.51)	3.18** (0.85)
Opinion	2.33** (0.11)	2.02** (0.18)	1.74** (0.11)	3.07** (0.10)	4.87** (0.24)	4.57** (0.16)	4.17** (0.27)
Congruence	-0.98** (0.17)	-0.87** (0.27)	-0.96** (0.15)	-0.80** (0.18)	-0.85** (0.30)	-2.36** (0.34)	-2.15** (0.54)
District Ctrls.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Legislator Ctrls.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
N	87,350	10,563	53,689	123,825	13,093	27,322	16,184
Adj. R^2	0.48	0.39	0.51	0.54	0.44	0.51	0.47

Note: Results are from OLS regressions where the dependent variable is legislator roll-call votes on the named policy area. All models include bill fixed effects. Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered by district. Full results including covariates are in Appendix J. $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

technical domains such as Medicaid expansion which, though salient during the period from 2015-2016, is fundamentally about changes to complex health care funding policies.

A number of specific cases are emblematic of this dynamic. For example, in 2019, the Nevada Legislature passed SB 179, a sweeping bill to liberalize the state's abortion laws. Of 21 Republicans in the legislature, just one (Sen. Ben Kieckhefer) voted in favor of the bill, although I estimate that opinion majorities in all but four of Nevada's State Senate districts oppose restrictions on abortion. Kieckhefer's district was much higher congruence than other members of the Senate (0.31, compared to 0.09 on average for other senators), and this congruence is further reflected in 26 news stories published about him by local newspapers.

Similarly, in 2014, the Ohio General Assembly passed legislation (HB 234) that made several changes to gun laws, including honoring concealed carry permits from other states. In the House of Representatives, 17 Democrats joined Republicans in supporting the legislation. The pattern of their votes is instructive; 10 of these Democrats represented districts where

the majority of constituents did not support stricter gun laws. Those representatives were particularly likely to be in higher-congruence districts (six of their districts had newspaper congruence above 0.2). Conversely, the seven Democrats who voted for the bill despite high levels of support for stricter gun laws all represented districts with very low levels of congruence.

These policies represent a hard test for the media's role in shaping responsiveness. Much of the policy enacted by state legislatures is arcane and not particularly salient to much of the public: regulatory action affecting particular industries, appropriations for infrastructure improvements, minor amendments to criminal codes, etc. Conversely, the kinds of state-relevant policy for which public opinion data are available tend to be high-salience. As a result, we might expect legislators' preferences to be "baked in" and difficult to change. Even still, the degree to which their votes correlate with constituent preferences significantly increases as local newspapers are incentivized to cover them more.

In Appendix F, I report results from several alternative specifications, including models fit separately on upper and lower chambers, alternative measures of public opinion on abortion, and a version adding a control for legislator partisanship. I also show in Appendix G that these results are largely driven by more professionalized (full-time and hybrid) legislatures.

4.2   Effect of TV Market Congruence

Next, I turn to local TV news broadcasts. Table 4 reports results from regressions using TVCongruence. For nearly all issues, we see similar results to those using Congruence with newspaper circulation areas. Notably, the coefficient for Medicaid expansion is not statistically significantly different from zero, though the positive sign is consistent with other results. One possible explanation for this is that local newspapers produce more stories that is original, relevant to the local community, and focused on a "critical information need," including stories about government (Mahone et al. 2019). Issues such as Medicaid expansion may be somewhat technical and may not make for exciting television. Nevertheless, across issues,

Table 4: Local TV Media Market Congruence and Responsiveness

	Restrict Abortion (2011–2022)	Same-Sex Marriage (2011–2016)	Gun Control (2011–2014)	Gun Control (2015–2022)	Expand Medicaid (2015–2016)	Min. Wage (2017–2020)	Min. Wage (2021–2022)
Opinion × TVCongruence	0.99** (0.38)	2.51** (0.78)	3.22** (0.53)	1.25** (0.38)	2.47* (1.16)	1.53* (0.75)	4.28** (0.92)
Opinion	2.30** (0.10)	1.90** (0.18)	1.73** (0.11)	3.00** (0.10)	4.78** (0.23)	4.72** (0.16)	3.99** (0.25)
TVCongruence	-0.77** (0.24)	-1.12** (0.40)	-1.06** (0.19)	-0.67** (0.21)	-1.22** (0.46)	-1.12* (0.50)	-2.96** (0.60)
District Ctrls.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Legislator Ctrls.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
N	91,645	10,643	56,294	128,577	13,432	28,709	17,032
Adj. R^2	0.48	0.38	0.50	0.53	0.44	0.51	0.46

Note: Results are from OLS regressions where the dependent variable is legislator roll-call votes on the named policy area. All models include bill fixed effects. Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered by district. Full results including covariates are in Appendix J. $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

a similar pattern emerges for local TV congruence: where legislators are more likely to be covered by TV reporters, they also are more responsive to their constituents.

5 Mechanism: Testing the Electoral Connection

The typical explanation for the results in the previous section would emphasize an electoral connection, in which news coverage informs the public and shapes whether and how they vote in elections. In this section, I test the electoral connection mechanism, specifically whether news coverage affects what the public knows about state legislative politics and how they behave in elections. I show that congruence does not increase the public's ability to name their state legislator or the party that controls state legislative chambers. Nor does it increase participation in state legislative elections, affect incumbency advantage, or reduce nationalization in voting. This suggests that the key first linkage necessary for the electoral

connection (discussed in Section 1 above) may not occur in the low-information context of state legislative politics.

5.1 Information

Baseline knowledge about state politics is generally low. However, members of the public may learn about state politics by consuming local news. When people live in higher-congruence districts, their representative is more likely to be discussed in the news. But this increase in relevant information may not correspond to greater public knowledge about state politics.

I test this using a module from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), which asked 1,000 respondents to name their state representative. I matched respondents to districts and hand-checked their responses.[14] I then regressed the indicator for whether the respondents correctly identified their legislator on congruence, adding the district controls from the responsiveness regressions and controls for individual respondent demographics. I also include state fixed effects.

The results in Column 1 of Table 5 suggest that media market congruence does not increase the public's knowledge of their state legislator. Although the coefficient on congruence is positive, it is not statistically significantly different from 0. I then asked whether congruence corresponds to more knowledge about the state legislature in general. Here, the outcome is whether people correctly identified which party controls each legislative chamber in their state. This question was asked of all CCES respondents in 2016 and 2018. Columns 2 and 3 again suggest that congruence does not increase public knowledge about state politics. With the exception of TVCongruence in the lower chamber, which is negative, the coefficients on

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[14]The matching procedure is discussed in Appendix D. In many cases, respondents were matched to multiple state legislative districts. In these cases, if they correctly identified a state legislator, I coded their response as correct only in the district which the named legislator represents. The regression is weighted by the probability that respondents live in each district, obtained from the matching procedure. This better accounts for uncertainty as to the district in which each CCES respondent resides. In general, I attempted to produce a conservative upper bound of public knowledge about state politics. I coded answers as correct if they were similar to the right answer (e.g., identifying only the first or last name of a representative, or writing a name very similar in spelling or pronunciation to the correct one). The results are also robust to an alternative coding in which respondents are marked as correct if they can name any of the legislators for a district in which they have a nonzero probability of living.

Table 5: Congruence and Knowledge about State Politics

	Name State Representative		Lower Chamber Control		Upper Chamber Control	
Congruence	0.02 (0.07)		0.02 (0.01)		0.00 (0.01)	
TVCongruence		0.06 (0.12)		-0.05* (0.02)		-0.02 (0.02)
Resp. Controls	X	X	X	X	X	X
District Controls	X	X	X	X	X	X
N	981	981	121,605	121,605	121,990	121,990
Adj. R^2	0.07	0.07	0.15	0.15	0.18	0.17

Note: Results from OLS regressions where the dependent variable is whether respondents correctly identified their state representative (columns 1-2) or the party controlling the legislative chamber (columns 3-6). All models include state fixed effects. Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered by district. Full results including covariates are in Appendix J. $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

congruence lack statistical significance. This negative coefficient would also be inconsistent with the theory that the public learns about state politics from news coverage.

My results differ from those reported by Myers (N.d.), who does find that the public is better able to name their legislator in higher-congruence districts. Appendix H discusses these results in greater detail and finds that the null effects of media on political information are robust to a variety of model specifications and alternative sources for circulation data.

5.2 Electoral Behavior

Even if media market congruence does not make people better able to answer political knowledge questions, it could change their behavior in elections. Routine exposure to information about state legislators may increase the salience of state politics, the familiarity of incumbents' names and policies, or better distinguish state elections from national ones. I conducted three tests of how congruence may affect participation and behavior in elections.

These analyses cover all state legislative elections from 2012–2020. Election results and

Table 6: Congruence and Voting Behavior

	Rolloff		Incumbency		Nationalization	
	Newspaper	TV	Newspaper	TV	Newspaper	TV
Congruence	0.00	-0.00	-0.02	-0.02	0.01	-0.02
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.05)	(0.02)	(0.05)
Congruence× Incumbent			-0.00	-0.01		
			(0.02)	(0.03)		
Incumbent (w/ Party)			0.01**	0.01**		
			(0.00)	(0.00)		
District Controls	X	X	X	X	X	X
N	18,289	18,187	22,318	22,221	14,198	14,136
Adj. R^2	0.67	0.67	0.88	0.88	0.46	0.46

Note: Results from OLS regressions. Dependent variables are rolloff in state legislative elections (columns 1-2); two-party Democratic vote share for state legislature (columns 3-4), and vote nationalization (columns 5-6). For Incumbency analysis, the effect of congruence is Congruence×Incumbent; for all others, it is Congruence. All models include district and year fixed effects. Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered by district. Full results including covariates are in Appendix J. $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

incumbency information through 2016 are from Klarner (2018). Other election results are from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab, to which I manually added incumbency data. I computed district-level results for president and other top-of-ticket races by projecting returns from precincts to legislative districts.[15]

First, does congruence reduce participation in state legislative elections? In most states, legislative elections occur simultaneously with federal elections or gubernatorial elections. As a result, state legislators never occupy the "top of the ticket" in general elections. Rather than studying turnout in the legislative election, I therefore focus on *rolloff*: the gap between the number of votes cast for the highest-turnout race and those for state legislature in each district. I regress rolloff on congruence, including controls for turnout in the top-of-ballot race and incumbency. I include district and year fixed effects to allow a within-district

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[15]Data for precinct-level results are from Voting And Election Science Team (2022), Daily Kos Elections (2013), and Ansolabehere, Palmer and Lee (2014). I use areal interpolation to project across geographies.

design;[16] the results here tell us how electoral behavior changes as congruence increases or decreases within a district, holding the district itself constant. I also include district-level controls. Column 1 of Table 6 reports null effects of newspaper congruence on rolloff. In higher-congruence districts, voters who turn out are no more likely to cast ballots in state legislative races. The second column reports results for TV media market congruence, which are similarly precisely estimated nulls.

Next, I consider whether newspaper market congruence affects incumbency advantage in elections. I use the model specification from Gelman and King (1990), which predicts Democratic two-party vote share in district d using lagged Democratic two-party vote and a variable indicating the party of the incumbent (1 for a Democratic incumbent, -1 for a Republican, and 0 otherwise). This allows for a straightforward interpretation of the incumbent variable as the overall incumbency advantage, regardless of party. Columns 3 and 4 of Table 6 report results. The coefficient of interest is the interaction between congruence and the incumbent variable. I again find results that are near-zero and not statistically significant for both newspapers and TV.

Finally, I ask whether nationalized voting behavior—the gap between presidential and state legislative vote choices at the district level—varies with media congruence. The literature on nationalization and politics has posited that local news can counteract nationalizing forces in elections, though the evidence has focused on statewide elections for governor and U.S. Senate (e.g., Moskowitz 2021). I compute nationalized voting using the formula

$$\text{Nationalization}_d = -|\text{DemVotePres}_d - \text{DemVoteLeg}_d|, \qquad (6)$$

which allows a positive regression coefficient to be interpreted as "more nationalization." I regress nationalization on congruence, incumbency, and district controls. Columns 5 and 6

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[16]Because redistricting often changes the numbering of state legislative districts, I define districts as a single set of geographic boundaries uninterrupted by redistricting. For most states, the same districts were used in every election from 2012-2021; however, in cases where a court overturned a state's district map (or the legislature chose to redistrict), I consider these new districts.

of Table 6 shows results of this analysis, which suggest no relationship between congruence and nationalization. This measure of voting behavior at the district level notably does not provide direct evidence of individual decisions to split tickets. However, it does suggest that, on average, congruence is not associated with the gap between Democratic vote share in presidential and state legislative elections. Appendix H shows that these electoral results are robust to a variety of model specifications and circulation data sources, as well as results fit separately on upper and lower chambers.

Taken together, these results suggest that local newspapers and TV do not shape voter behavior in state legislative elections. Voters in more congruent districts are no more likely to participate in state legislative elections than those in less congruent districts. Likewise, contrary to expectations, they do not seem to select different types of politicians, defined either by incumbency or partisanship.

6   Discussion: Alternative Mechanisms

The results presented thus far have affirmed two of the claims of the canonical theory of the media's role in accountability: news outlets cover state legislatures, and the legislators they are more likely to cover are more responsive to public opinion. However, I found no evidence for the third claim; the public does not know more about their state legislators in higher-congruence districts, nor do voters behave differently in these elections. This presents a puzzle as to why the media improves representation in state legislatures if not because of an electoral connection.

One explanation that has been under-explored by existing scholarship is that the media affects political elites through more direct channels. In particular, frequent interactions with a "watchdog" press may increase the costs that politicians perceive to taking policy positions that are unpopular among constituents. By monitoring politicians—specifically, those being covered more frequently—journalists may increase the perceived costs of out-of-step voting.

Likewise, because politicians consume more news coverage than the general public, legislators may learn about public opinion in their districts from reading or watching the news.

In focusing attention on some politicians more than others, state capitol reporters and legislators enter in to "an iterated game where each side has repeated opportunities to deal with each other" (Cooper and Johnson 2006, p. 3). The nature of these interactions may vary, but they are generally in-person in state capitols, and reporters are very likely to engage in "watchdog" reporting: scrutinizing the behavior of officials with the goal of "documenting, questioning, and investigating those activities" (Bennett and Serrin 2005). Watchdog journalists may demand and focus attention on explanations for *why* politicians take particular actions.

Most American journalists view themselves as watchdogs. In a study of the attitudes of journalists, 85% of those surveyed said that investigating government claims is an extremely important part of their job, and 57% said analyzing complex problems is extremely important (Willnat, Weaver and Wilhoit 2022). These behaviors are consistent with watchdog journalism—and far outpace the share who said they prioritize publishing information quickly (44%) and reaching a large audience (7%).

For their part, politicians may find it difficult to avoid questions from the press about their votes and behavior. Journalists, politicians, and legislative staff all cite these frequent interactions when discussing the role of the press in state politics (e.g., Cooper and Johnson 2006; Shearer et al. 2022). For example, Christopher Baxter, editor-in-chief of Spotlight PA wrote, "The presence of a watchdog in the halls of power exerts a force that can bend the arc of accountability over time. At a minimum, there is someone there to report what's happening when lawmakers might otherwise prefer the cloak of darkness" (Baxter 2022). Likewise, Mat Bahl, the former chief of staff to the Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives told researchers at Pew that "The downside to having fewer reporters is , again, there's probably less effort and availability for reporters to build those relationships [with legislators]" (Shearer et al. 2022). In the face of this close watchdog monitoring, politicians may perceive higher

costs to casting unpopular roll-call votes. These costs may stem from the public becoming informed about the votes their representatives have taken.

In the face of this close watchdog monitoring, politicians may perceive higher costs to casting unpopular roll-call votes, even in contexts where the public is inattentive. First, influential subgroups of the public (e.g., potential donors, lobbyists, or campaign volunteers) tend to be more politically engaged and likely to consume local news (see Appendix I). Second, politicians are career-minded actors who often seek higher office. Negative press may make this harder and increase the long-term costs of unpopular votes when there is more attention being paid. Third, politicians may simply be prefer not to take on the risk of negative coverage of their votes and may overestimate the attentiveness of the public or behave in a risk-averse fashion consistent with being "unsafe at any margin" (Mann 1978). This reaction to the perceived threat of electoral accountability is consistent with experimental results that being reminded about upcoming elections made state legislators less likely to receive a negative rating from a fact-checking media organization (Nyhan and Reifler 2015). Finally, politicians may simply wish to protect their personal and professional reputations in their communities.

I do find some suggestive evidence that supports a watchdog explanation: The effects of news congruence on representation are greatest in more professionalized legislatures. Because these legislatures are in session for more time, there is greater opportunity for close monitoring of legislators by the press. These legislatures also have a greater number of reporters covering them full-time. This may allow for a greater degree of watchdog monitoring compared to less professionalized, part-time legislatures where the press is less likely to have invested in routine coverage and there are fewer opportunities for direct monitoring. These results can be found in Appendix G.

A second potential explanation is that news coverage acts as one conduit of public opinion for legislators and their staff. An important limitation in responsiveness is that politicians may incorrectly estimate public support for policies. As early as Miller and Stokes (1963),

scholars of representation have been aware that politicians do not always the positions their constituents hold. State legislators, too, are often misinformed about opinion in their districts, generally assuming it to be more conservative than it actually is (Broockman and Skovron 2018). Informing politicians about what the public prefers can improve responsiveness (Butler and Nickerson 2011). News consumption is low in the general public, but considerably higher among candidates for office. When politicians represent districts that are covered more frequently by local news outlets, they may also see a better reflection of their constituents— and their opinions—in that coverage. Although news coverage does not generally report granular issue support at the district level, it can provide a sense of the interests of the public and inform politicians about salient problems in their community.

7   Conclusion

Our understanding of democratic accountability is built on two core findings that are fundamentally at odds with each other: On the one hand, politicians are generally thought to represent the public well because informed voters may hold them to account for their actions at the next election. On the other hand, the public is not very informed about or even attentive to politics, especially at subnational levels.

This paper presented evidence that a key set of actors can help to explain politicians' responsiveness despite mass inattentiveness—the news media. In state legislatures, representatives who are more likely to be covered by their local newspapers and TV stations are more responsive to their constituents' preferences on the issues of abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, the minimum wage, and Medicaid expansion. Yet, there is no evidence consistent with an "electoral connection" explanation for this responsiveness; constituents in districts whose representatives are more likely to be covered are no more knowledgeable about state politics, do not vote at higher rates, and do not vote any differently in legislative races.

The null findings as to the informational and electoral effects of the media are not present

in national politics (Snyder and Strömberg 2010; Peterson 2019). What, then, sets state politics apart? One likely possibility is that the public is particularly uninformed about goings-on in state legislatures. As a result of this low baseline of knowledge and engagement, it is much harder for news coverage to break through sufficient to have an effect on electoral politics.

In this low-information context, the elite-driven "watchdog" explanation of the media's role in accountability seems particularly important, though it may also occur in Congress. Legislators may perceive higher costs to unpopular votes when they know that they are being monitored more frequently by journalists and may be forced to account for their votes. This could be due to concerns of highly attentive and influential members of the public learning about their votes, longer-term career concerns, or simply reputation protection. Legislators whose districts are covered more frequently may also learn more about public opinion from the news or from the reporters covering them.

Disentangling alternative mechanisms is incredibly challenging because they largely rely on difficult-to-observe interactions between two groups of elites (politicians and journalists). This should be the focus of future research on media and political accountability. Even so, the results presented here complicate and inform our understanding of political accountability in two important ways.

First, I show that the media strengthens responsiveness even among inattentive publics or when there is no directly observable electoral connection. This is perhaps optimistic news for the quality of political accountability and representation, particularly in the American states. It suggests that even if voters do not read and learn from the news, local media's active role in covering the statehouse enhances representation there. However, these results should also raise alarms that as the local news industry continues to experience dramatic contraction and decline, representation may be negatively affected.

Second, this paper challenges our typical understanding of the press's role in political accountability. One implication is that the media does not only act as an informational

conduit from elites to the public. Rather, they may play a more independent role that can contribute to democratic accountability directly. This independent role of the press was perhaps best explained by Zaller (N.d.), who argued that journalists, politicians, and citizens are all independent actors operating in constant tension with one another, as their goals—reelection for politicians, accountability for citizens, and expressing journalistic voice via investigations and scoops for journalists—are often misaligned.

Together, these implications raise important theoretical questions for scholars of representation. But they also present a critical challenge for those concerned with bolstering democratic accountability: In light of the public's apparent disinterest in state politics and declining fortunes of local news, it would seem that the quality of representation in the states may be at risk.

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