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 two decades, 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 only 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. In order to cover a mayor's office or city council full-time, news organizations must hire a designated "beat reporter" whose primary job is to cover that local government. So, without an incredibly large reporting staff, most mayors' offices and city or town councils in a region cannot possibly be covered full-time (Kaniss 1991). The recent declines in the industry make this reality more stark; 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 public goods provision in the cities and towns in local newspapers' coverage areas. The bulk of policy decisions in local governments are fundamentally questions of resource allocation: when and how should the government spend money (Trounstine 2016)? For this reason and following a long tradition of scholarship in local political economy (e.g., Alesina, Baqir and Easterly 1999; Gerber and Hopkins 2011; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016; Trounstine 2018), I study the effects of more frequent news coverage on local budgets. I find that cities and towns that are more frequently covered by local news spend more on public goods in their communities. They are especially likely to increase spending on highly visible public goods such as policing, fire protection, roads, and parks. However, these more-frequently covered communities do not spend more on less visible goods such as financial administration or sewers, nor do they spend on unpopular goods such as welfare.

In order to observe the relationships between news coverage and government spending, I use text analysis 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 location of news organizations' headquarters 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 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 (Kaniss 1991). 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.

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 and beat reporting within media markets. I use this method to show descriptively, in Section 4 the demographic and economic characteristics of cities that are more likely to be covered by beat reporters. 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 2022+).

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 are more responsive to constituent preferences (Auslen 2025+).

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).

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.

At the same time, 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.

[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.

2.2 Policy Effects of Watchdog News

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. There are several reasons to expect this. 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 2017, 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).

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

Measuring news coverage of local politics is not a trivial task. Some newspapers may not cover local politics at all, or do so infrequently. As reporting staffs decline, some news outlets have become shells of what they once were, what Abernathy (2020) calls "ghost newspapers." On the other hand, newspapers with more resources may invest in robust coverage of local politics in many municipalities across their coverage areas. For example, a newspaper in a large metropolitan area may cover the central city of their market, as well as certain suburbs.

One common approach in the literature to measuring the presence of the news media is to identify the city or county in which news outlets are headquartered and to assume that this city or the local governments in the county are covered routinely by journalists at that news outlet (e.g., Gentzkow, Shapiro and Sinkinson 2011; Darr, Hitt and Dunaway 2018; Gao, Lee and Murphy 2020). In some cases, scholars may augment this with data on the number of stories published (Hayes and Lawless 2021) or counts of stories mentioning particular offices (Hopkins 2018). This approach is generally reasonable in many cases; it is commonly used because it allows for estimating sharp effects from the exist or entry of newspapers in a market. However, it may lead to under- or over-estimation of which local governments are covered by the press.

In this paper, I seek to identify not only those cities and towns where newspapers are present, but rather those where coverage of local politics is extremely frequent, as in the case of a beat reporter being assigned to cover city hall. To do so, I turn to the text of newspapers to identify the frequency of coverage of individual municipalities over time. I obtained a corpus of newspaper texts from a vendor that includes 129 million news stories from 464 newspapers over the period from 1992-2021. Because the copyrights of newspaper texts are generally owned by their publishers and simply licensed to vendors, no corpus of newspaper texts on the market includes 100% of local newspapers. As a result, my analyses focus only on those areas of the country in which I can obtain a text archive of a local

newspaper.[2]

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 (for example, the *Austin American-Statesman* is headquartered in Austin, Texas). In some cases, I turn to metadata made available by the vendor or other outside sources to confirm these locations, 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 a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), which serve as the rough boundary of a newspaper's coverage area in my analyses. 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—which are constructed by the Office of Management and Budget based on commuting patterns and economic ties—provide useful but imperfect boundaries for the areas where newspapers circulate. While TV stations exist in defined and generally mutually exclusive media markets (called Designated Market Areas) based on the geographic reach of television signals (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 my text data extend. By using MSAs, cast a wide net for searching that corresponds to the economic and social 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

[2]Some newspapers enter or leave the dataset at some point in the 30-year window due to changes in these licensing agreements. Where a newspaper leaves, I also stop analyzing its coverage area. Appendix A reports the geographic and temporal distribution of the newspapers in the dataset.

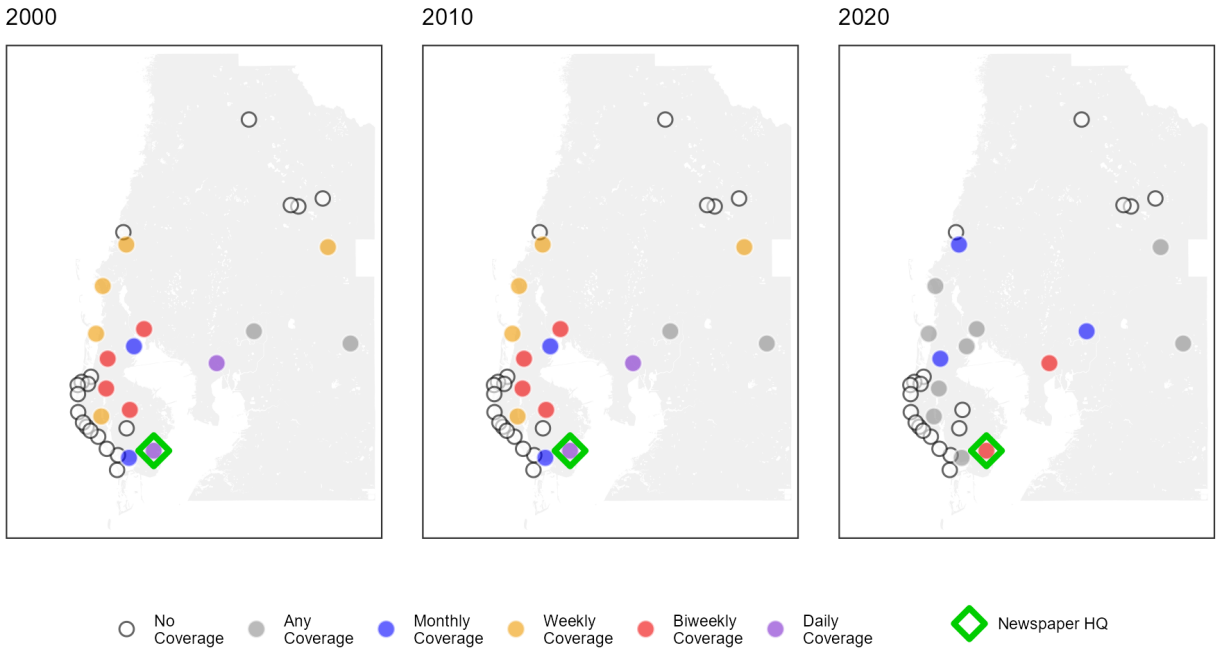
create a dictionary of municipalities that could possibly be covered. City and town names may appear in news coverage for reasons having nothing to do with local politics, so I construct a more complex search term that combines the name of the city or town with phrases associated with local politics. Specifically, I search for the municipality name in close proximity (within 30 characters) to the phrases `mayor`, `city` (or `town` or `village`) `manager`, `council`, `commission`, `board`, `trustee`, or `alder[man/woman/person]`.

These searches yield, for all 129 million news stories an indicator of whether the story concerns local government in a particular state or city. From this, I can aggregate to the newspaper-municipality-year level and observe patterns of news coverage frequency. I then transform this data to determine whether cities and towns are covered frequently enough to suggest a beat reporter has been assigned to them. Specifically, I identify cities and towns with daily (365+ stories per year), biweekly (104+ stories), weekly (52+ stories), and monthly (12+ stories).

Figure 1 presents an example of the text-based procedure for identifying beat reporting, using news coverage from the *Tampa Bay Times* (formerly the *St. Petersburg Times*) in 2000, 2010, and 2020. The maps show the Tampa–St. Petersburg–Clearwater MSA, which includes four counties on Florida's west coast. The points correspond to cities and towns with incorporated governments, with the color corresponding to the frequency of coverage. The most frequently covered cities are in red (biweekly coverage) and purple (daily coverage).

First, note the city identified by the green diamond. This is St. Petersburg, the location of the *Times* headquarters and main newsroom. A location-based study might make the assumption that the *Times* covers St. Petersburg's government and consider only this city as treated. Alternatively, one might make other assumptions, such as that the city of Tampa (the region's largest city, located across the bay to the northeast of St. Petersburg) is also covered routinely. In any case, we can see that these assumptions do not match up to the reality of news coverage, as identified by the text. While it is clearly true that the *Times* covers St. Petersburg and Tampa—daily in 2000 and 2010, and biweekly in 2020—other

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*.

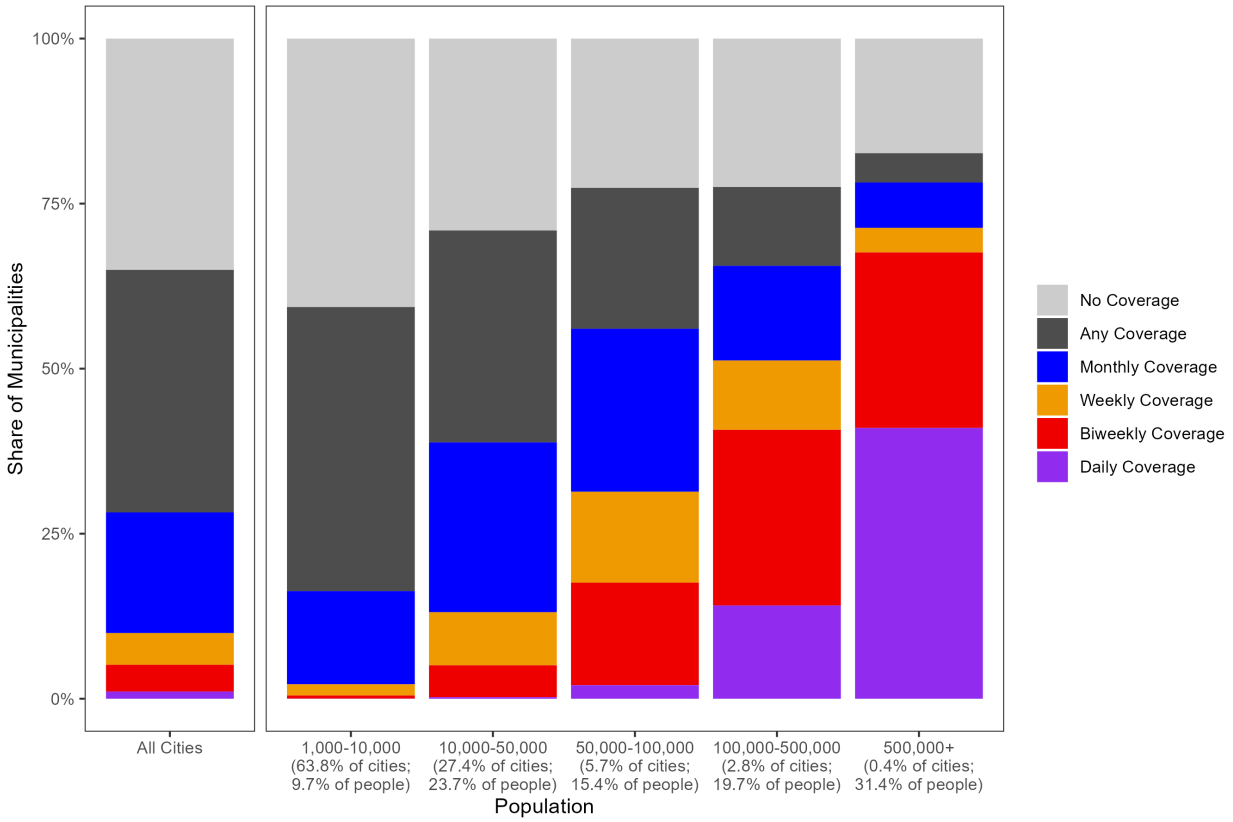
municipalities are also covered quite frequently, especially in the early years of the time series when four cities are covered biweekly and another five are covered weekly. Yet it would also be incorrect to assume that all municipalities in the MSA or even Pinellas County, where St. Petersburg is located, are covered routinely. Most cities' and towns' governments are covered not at all, or if so, only rarely.

The text-based measurement approach reveals greater nuance than location-based assumptions can provide. Appendix B discusses these differences in more detail, making a national comparison. Because the text-based method reveals the frequency of coverage by city, it can also be used as a measure of beat coverage. Other work on beats has used newspaper directories to identify the topical focus of reporters (most notably Peterson 2021). However, these directories often do not note which specific governments are covered by a local politics reporter's beat. Likewise, text archives are inconsistent in whether and how they report the bylines on news stories. By employing the substance of the text, patterns of coverage can reveal newsroom priorities without relying on the accuracy of additional external sources.

The patterns of coverage in the Tampa Bay region suggest that most municipalities are not covered very frequently. Those that are covered daily or biweekly generally seem to be larger cities. Figure 2 reports the distribution of coverage frequency over the full national dataset. Specifically, it shows the frequency with which cities are covered by *any* local newspaper in the text corpus. Each observation is a city-year. The figure excludes municipalities that are not in an MSA (or grouping of counties for more rural areas) 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

Figure 2: 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.

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 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.

4 Patterns of Local Politics Coverage

The previous section showed that most local governments are never covered by their local newspapers in any given year. However, among medium and large cities, we see much more frequent coverage. This section explores more systematically the patterns of coverage of local politics. Specifically, I show that in addition to larger cities, newspapers are more likely to cover cities and towns that are physically closer to their headquarters. They are also more likely to cover cities with more white residents and wealthier residents, compared to those with more residents of color or lower-income households.

Table 1: Predictors of Local Politics Coverage

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Population (log)	0.44**			0.28**
	(0.01)			(0.01)
Distance (miles)		−0.03**		−0.02**
		(0.001)		(0.001)
Paper HQ City			2.01**	1.06**
			(0.02)	(0.03)
Paper-Year FEs	X	X	X	X
Observations	140,189	140,004	140,004	140,004
Adjusted R^2	0.61	0.61	0.61	0.66

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

4.1 Population and Distance

In order to understand how characteristics of communities shape decisions of where to cover local politics, I match the coverage dataset described above, at the municipality-newspaper-year level, with census data from IPUMS-NHGIS (Manson et al. 2021) and geographic information. This gives me information about news coverage and municipality characteristics for cities and towns with at least 1,000 residents over the full time series, from 1992-2021.

I first consider two key expectations of profit-maximizing newspapers: that they should focus their coverage on larger cities and towns and those nearer to their headquarters. Table 1 presents results that confirm this intuition. The results are simple least-squares regressions where the outcome is the logged number of stories about a municipality's government, published in a particular newspaper in a given year.[3] In addition to the relevant population

[3]Because many municipalities are never covered, I transform logged coverage such that never-covered municipalities have a value of zero.

and distance predictors, I include newspaper-year fixed effects. These allow for a within-newspaper-year comparison that accounts for the unobservable total pool of reporting resources available to each newspaper in each year, as well as other relevant features of the newspaper and MSA (e.g., timing of local elections, economic pressures, chain ownership).

In the first column of Table 1, I find the expected effects of population. Newspapers are more likely to cover larger cities in their local areas than less-populous ones, consistent with the results in Figure 2 above. In fact, a 1% increase in population is associated with a 0.4% increase in the number of stories published about local government. Columns 2 and 3 report results using two measures of the distance between newspapers' headquarters and cities being covered. In column 2, I show that governments in municipalities that are farther from the city where a newspaper is headquartered (measured as the distance, in miles, from the centroid of the headquarters city) are covered less frequently. Similarly, column 3 shows that the local government in a newspaper's headquarters city can be expected to be covered considerably more frequently than those outlying cities in the coverage area.

Because newspapers are likely to be headquartered in the central cities of their coverage areas, the effects of population, distance, and newsroom hometowns may result from the same process. In column 4, I include all three predictors in the regression and find statistically significant coefficients for all four variables, though the magnitude of each is diminished from the first three models. Even accounting for the location of the newspaper, larger cities are covered more frequently; likewise, cities and town nearer to the newsroom are covered more frequently, even accounting for population differences.

4.2 Demographic and Economic Predictors

Next, I turn to how newsrooms decide where to cover local politics beyond the straightforward economic logic of covering larger, nearby communities. To do so, I first fit a series of regressions that model the number of stories published about each local government as a

function of demographic characteristics. Specifically, I fit the model:

$$\ln \text{Stories}_{itm} = \boldsymbol{\beta}\mathbf{X}_{it} + \boldsymbol{\delta}\mathbf{Z}_{it} + \alpha_{im} + \gamma_{it} + \varepsilon_m, \tag{1}$$

where $\ln \text{Stories}_{itm}$ is the logged number of stories about municipality i published in newspaper m in year t.[4] $\mathbf{X}_{it}$ is a series of demographic variables describing municipality i in year t—% Black, % Hispanic, % of the population earning over $150,000 per year, and logged median income (in 2012 dollars). These are the primary variables of interest.

The model includes additional controls at the municipality-year level ($\mathbf{Z}_{it}$),[5] as well as newspaper-municipality and newspaper-year fixed effects. These fixed effects allow me to identify the effect of changes in municipal demographics and allow for a within-newspaper-year comparison that accounts for the local politics reporting resources that a newspaper has to spread across all municipalities in a given year. Finally, I report standard errors clustered at the newspaper-year level.

Table 2 reports the results of these analyses. In the first model, I show that local politics is covered less frequently in cities with more Black residents. Column 2 shows that there is no statistically distinguishable effect from a larger Hispanic population. Columns 3 and 4 turn to economic predictors. I find that cities with more wealthy residents—where a greater share of households earns $150,000—are much more likely to be covered, as are those with a higher median income.

Column 5 reports results that includes racial and economic predictors in a single model. I find that the results generally hold. Even holding economic factors constant, local news outlets produce less coverage of local politics in communities with more Black residents. And holding race constant, communities with higher median incomes are more likely to be

[4] As before, I transform the logged number of stories so that never-covered municipalities have a value of zero.

[5] I control for the percent of adult residents who are over 65 years of age, the share of residents with a college degree, logged population, and the percent of residents living in urban areas. I also control for the quintiles of population and percent urban to account for nonlinearity in the trends.

Table 2: Income and Race and Local Politics Coverage

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
% Black	-0.07^{**}				-0.35^{**}
	(0.01)				(0.08)
% Hispanic		-0.02			-0.04
		(0.02)			(0.09)
% Over $150k			0.78^{**}		
			(0.24)		
Median Income (log)				0.35^{**}	0.29^{**}
				(0.05)	(0.05)
Population (log)	0.08^{**}	0.08^{**}	0.07^{**}	0.05	0.05^{*}
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
% College	0.43^{**}	0.49^{**}	0.22	-0.03	-0.03
	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.17)	(0.15)	(0.16)
% 65+	-0.56^{**}	-0.51^{**}	-0.59^{**}	-0.18	-0.31^{*}
	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.14)
% Urban	0.33	0.30	0.26	0.34	0.37
	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.22)
Paper-City FEs	X	X	X	X	X
Paper-Year FEs	X	X	X	X	X
Observations	136,821	136,821	136,821	136,821	136,821
Adjusted R^2	0.84	0.84	0.84	0.84	0.84

Note: Table reports coefficients from least-squares regressions. All models include newspaper-year and newspaper-city fixed effects, as well as dummy variables for quantiles of Population and % Urban. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the newspaper level. $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

covered.[6]

The results thus far have shown that the amount of local politics coverage is a function of the racial and economic makeup of communities. But how does this translate into the extent to which local governments are covered as a beat? I next analyzed this using a series of models of the form:

$$\text{BeatReporter}_{itm} = \boldsymbol{\beta}\mathbf{X}_{it} + \boldsymbol{\delta}\mathbf{Z}_{it} + \alpha_{im} + \gamma_{it} + \varepsilon_m, \tag{2}$$

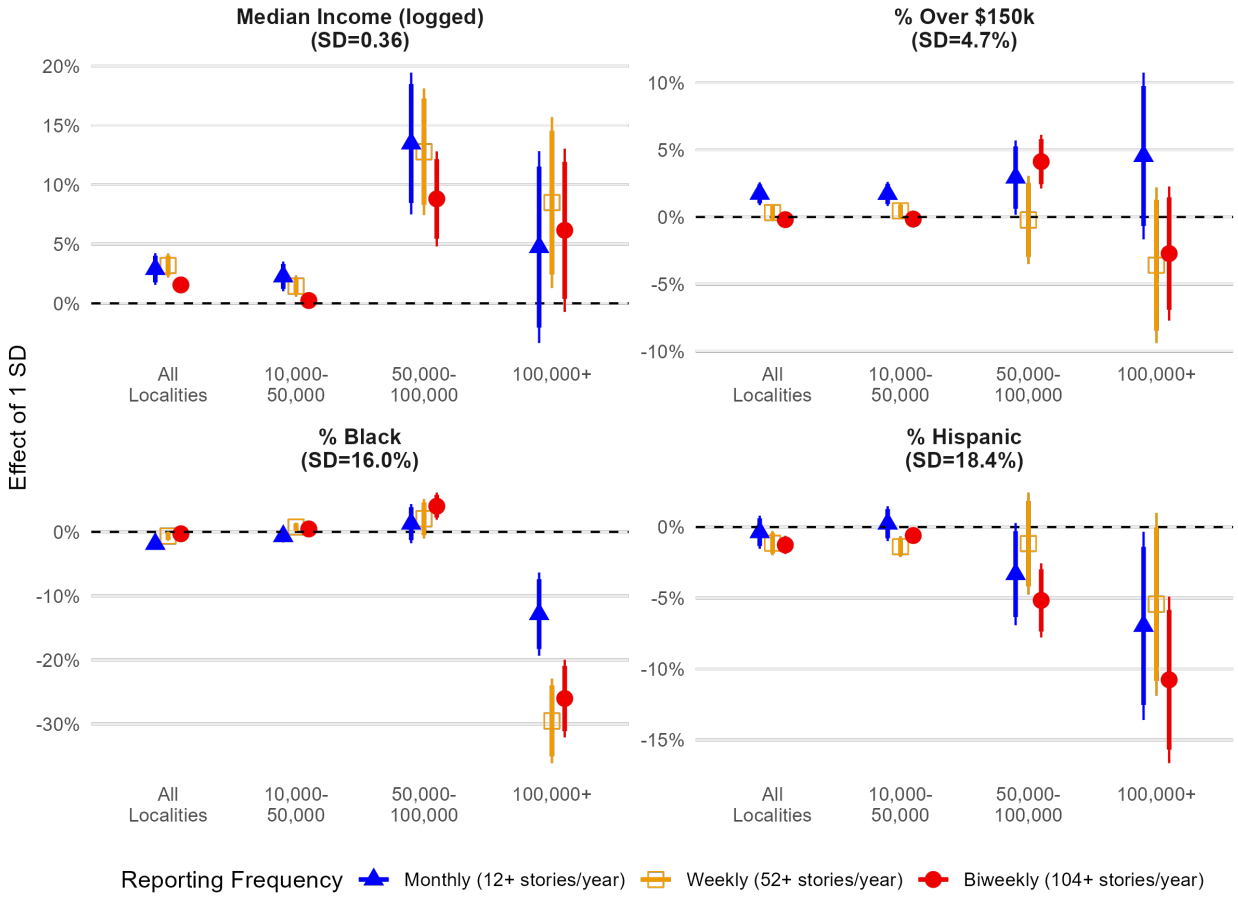
where $\text{BeatReporter}_{itm}$ is an indicator variable for whether there is a beat reporter from newspaper m covering municipality i in year t, varying the threshold according to biweekly, weekly, and monthly frequency. For example, a city covered 60 times in a given year by a given newspaper would be coded as having a beat reporter at the monthly or weekly thresholds, but not the biweekly threshold. $\mathbf{X}_{it}$ corresponds to the relevant demographic and economic predictors. As in the models above, $\mathbf{Z}_{it}$ is a vector of controls at the municipality-year level, and the model includes newspaper-year and newspaper-municipality fixed effects.

In Figure 3, I report the effect that changes in economic and demographic variables have on beat reporting. To ease interpretation across categories, all results are expressed as a 1 standard deviation increase in the independent variable. Because coverage patterns vary significantly by population, I also break down the results into population buckets for municipalities of 10,000-49,999 residents, 50,000-99,999 residents, and 100,000 or more residents.

The top row of Figure 3 shows the effects of communities' economic characteristics. I find that a 1 standard deviation increase in median income is associated with statistically significant increases in beat reporting across all three frequency thresholds. This effect is especially large among cities whose populations range from 50,000-99,999, the size of many suburban communities. The effects of the share of wealthy residents are less clear. There

[6] I do not present results with both Median Income and % Over $150k included in a single model because the correlational structure between these variables makes for results that are difficult to interpret (i.e., it would not make sense to examine the effect of increasing the share of the public earning high wages but hold the median income constant).

Figure 3: Beat Reporting by City Characteristics



Note:

is no connection between an increase in the share of households earning $150,000 per year and biweekly beat reporting, though there are effects on both monthly and weekly coverage. Again, however, the mid-sized cities and towns exhibit a unique pattern with biweekly beat reporting increasing as the share of wealthy residents does.

Turning to the effects of communities' racial makeup in the bottom two panels of Figure 3, I find that cities and towns with more Black residents are less lightly to be covered weekly or monthly, though there is no statistically significant effect on the highest frequency of coverage. Cities with more Hispanic residents are less likely to be covered weekly and biweekly. In both cases, these results are largely driven by the biggest cities, where the a one-standard deviation shift in Black or Hispanic population share has a large diminishing effect on the likelihood of beat reporting by local news..

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.

5 Research Design: Media and Public Goods Provision

My main results concern the effects of high-frequency beat reporting on the actions taken by local governments. Because the primary functions of local governments in the United States are largely about allocating resources (Trounstine 2016), I study these effects using municipal budgets.

To do so, I collected detailed data about cities' and towns' expenditures from the Census of Governments. These data include information about spending on various government functions, collected by the federal government every five years. I use local budgets from 1992, 1997, 2002, 2007, and 2017, which I match to municipal government beat reporting frequency in the prior year, measured from newspaper coverage data.

My main outcome is per-capita expenditures in city i in year t, Spending_{it}, normalized to 2012 dollars, which I regress on news coverage and relevant controls with the following linear model:

$$\text{Spending}_{i,t} = \beta_1 \text{Monthly}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Weekly}_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 \text{Biweekly}_{i,t-1} + \beta_4 \text{Spending}_{i,t-1} + \boldsymbol{\delta} \mathbf{Z}_{i,t} + \alpha_i + \epsilon_i. \tag{3}$$

I model a series of outcomes, which correspond to different categories of the budget. First, I identify effects on the Total Operating Budget for each municipality: spending from a city or town's general fund, excluding capital outlays. I then examine per-capita spending on a variety of specific categories: Policing, Fire Protection, Roads, Parks and Recreation, Libraries, Health Care, Welfare (including cash welfare and housing; see Trounstine 2016), Financial Administration of local government; Sewers; and Sanitation.

$\text{Monthly}_{i,t-1}$, $\text{Weekly}_{i,t-1}$, $\text{Biweekly}_{i,t-1}$ are indicator variables for beat reporting frequencies in year $t-1$. City-years are included only once in the dataset, so these correspond to whether any one local newspaper covers a city's government monthly, weekly, or biweekly in the year before Census of Government data collection, when the budgets are being passed.[7]

[7] I take the maximum amount of coverage across any newspapers in the dataset, so a city government

$\mathbf{Z}_{i,t}$ is a series of controls at the city-year level. These include population, demographic factors, and Democratic vote in the prior presidential election as a measure of partisanship.[8]

The models also include three features to account for typical municipal spending and isolate the effect of media coverage. First, I include lagged per-capita spending on the same budget category, $\text{Spending}_{i,t-1}$. Second, I include city fixed effects to account for time-invariant features of local governments. Third, I only model spending for municipalities with non-zero spending in a given category. For example, in some states, libraries are funded by counties or special districts; in those places, municipal library spending is zero and not included in my results. Finally, because I am unable to observe news coverage in areas where the text corpus lacks newspapers, I drop all city-years in MSAs where no newspapers are present.

6 Results

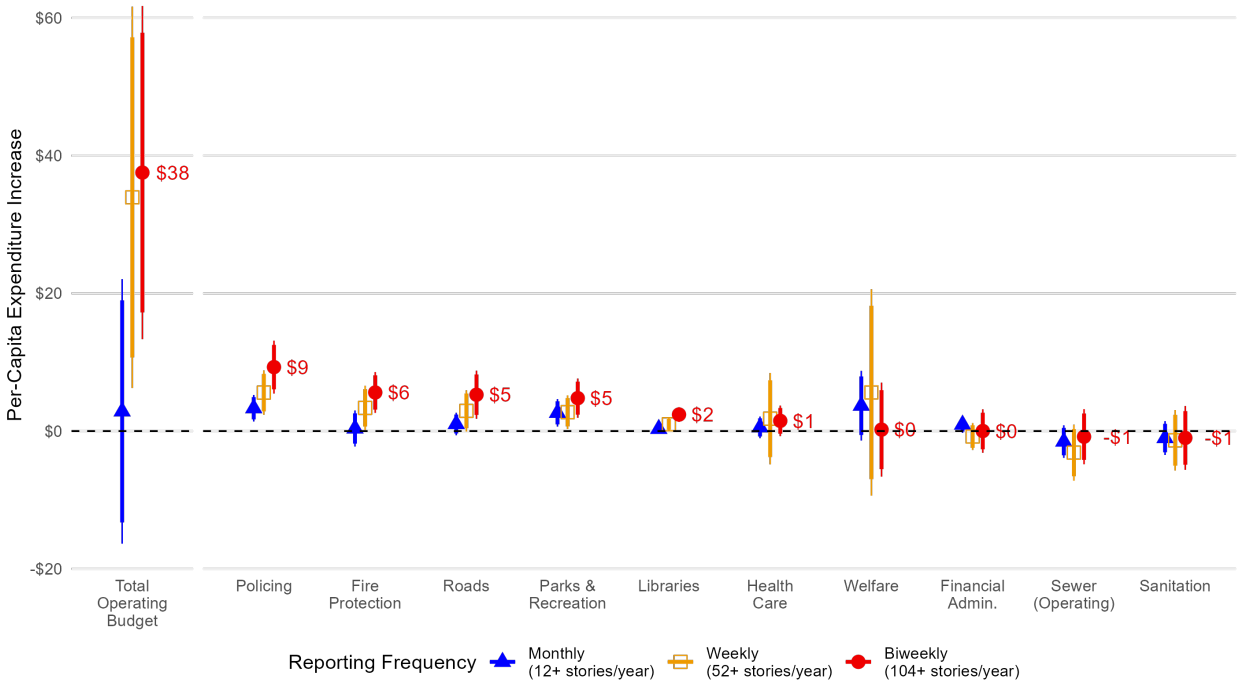
How does beat reporting on local politics affect the policy outputs of local governments? In this section, I report my main results from the regression models described above. Figure 4 reports these results as the total effect of being treated to monthly, weekly, or biweekly beat reporting on per-capita spending. I find that additional reporting, and especially biweekly beat reporting is associated with increased per-capita spending on local services in general, and especially on a number of highly visible public services.

Cities that are covered twice a week, on average, spend an additional $38 per capita on public services. The average city in the dataset spends $1,362.70 per capita, so the effect

covered 25 times by Newspaper A and 30 times by Newspaper B would take the value from Newspaper B and be coded as having monthly coverage. I do this rather than adding up the coverage as I am interested in the effect of beat reporting, not frequency of coverage. I also cannot observe all newspapers, so this avoids a measurement problem whereby some cities may appear to be covered more frequently simply because there are multiple newspapers with available data in their area.

[8]Specifically, I control for Population (logged) and % Urban, as governments in larger and more urban places are more likely to be covered by the press and may have governments that are more involved. I also control for quintiles of population and urbanness to account for nonlinear effects. I control for demographic factors: % Black, % Hispanic, % College, % 65 and Up, and Median Income (logged). And I control for Democratic vote measured at the county level in the prior presidential election, as more liberal places may have preferences for more government spending (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014).

Figure 4: Effects of Beat Reporting on Spending



Note: Points report the effect of monthly, weekly, or biweekly beat reportingon per-capita municipal spending. Error bars report 90% and 95% confidence intervals, with standard errors clustered by city.

of high-frequency coverage corresponds to approximately a 3% increase in spending. This is about one-third of the effect of electing a Democratic versus Republican mayor (though evidence on the effects of partisanship has been focused on larger cities; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016). The effect of weekly beat coverage is nearly as high. However, I find no effect of monthly reporting on per-capita municipal spending generally.

Turning to domain-specific expenditures, Figure 4 shows that there are considerable effects of spending on certain portions of local budgets that are especially highly visible to voters. Cities covered biweekly by a local newspaper spend and additional $9 on policing, $6 on fire, and $5 each on roads and parks. This is consistent with the informational and watchdog effects of local news coverage. As the press cover local governments more frequently, politicians face an incentive to take actions that help them shore up reelection (Snyder and Strömberg 2010; Mullin and Hansen 2023). Likewise, there is no effect on less popular spending categories (e.g., welfare and financial administration) or on those that the public would be unlikely to have good information about (e.g., sewers and sanitation).

In general, these results reflect that when cities are covered weekly by the press, they invest greater resources into public goods, especially highly visible ones. This is consistent more broadly with accounts of the media's role in political accountability at other levels of government. It suggests that press coverage—and especially the decision by news organizations of how to allocate scarce reporting time—plays a central role in shaping the ways that local governments invest in public good provision.

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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