

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 and television news 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 affect 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.

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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 of information 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 cover 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 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). Taken together, these seemingly contradictory findings raise an important question about the nature of political accountability: Why are representatives so responsive to public opinion when the public is evidently not attentive enough to hold them accountable in elections?

To reconcile these perspectives, this paper considers the role of local newspapers and television news broadcasts in strengthening dyadic representation on substantive policy in America's state legislatures. Previous scholarship has not, to my knowledge, explored the media's role in dyadic representation—the extent to which legislators' roll-call votes on policy are correlated with constituent preferences. Existing research has instead emphasized inputs to the policymaking process (e.g., elections), aggregate measures of legislative behavior (e.g.,

committee participation, DW-NOMINATE scores, and votes against party leadership), and success in securing spending for their districts (Arnold 2004; 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 either on 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 a useful context in which to test theories about the media’s role in accountability more generally. Although states are crucial actors in an array of high-profile policy areas—including social issues, economic inequality, and the nature of democracy itself—Americans generally have very little interest in the actions taken by state legislatures (Delli Carpini, Keeter and Kennamer 1994; Rogers 2023). And, as politics has nationalized in recent decades, the electorate is even less focused on state politics (Hopkins 2018). As a result, state legislatures present particular challenges that make the media’s role in accountability more difficult versus more frequently studied domains, such as Congress.

In this paper, 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 collect a text corpus of articles published in 290 local newspapers and aired on 239 local TV stations over a 10-year period to show that there is considerable coverage of state legislative politics, but that the intensity of this coverage varies by legislator. In particular, news outlets are more likely to cover legislators who represent a greater share of their audience. Using a manual content analysis, I also show that the majority of news coverage of state politics is substantive and policy-focused, and that a considerable share of it is consistent with “watchdog” reporting.

Next, I construct a national dataset of media activity, state legislative roll-call votes, and

¹Two notable exceptions are Rogers (2023), who in part considers how state capitol press corps at the aggregate level contribute to accountability, and Myers (2025), who argues that news coverage produces electoral returns to moderation by state legislators.

district-level public opinion on five issues to test whether the association between roll-call voting and the preferences of the electorate is strengthened by the news media. The data include bills filed in all state legislatures from 2011-2022 on abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, police body cameras, and the minimum wage—policies on which states have considerable authority and are actively engaged in policymaking. 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, but is especially strong for newspapers.

Finally, after establishing that the media play a role in policy responsiveness, I test the informational and electoral effects of the media on the general public. Contrary to canonical expectations, 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

Elected representatives are routinely found to be responsive to public opinion at all levels of American government; when more constituents support a given policy, politicians 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 elections, sanctioning politicians for taking unpopular stances on issues and replacing them with more favorable representatives. As a result, reelection-minded incumbents face an incentive to support popular policies, or risk being voted out of office (Downs 1957; Mayhew 1974).

1.1 Accountability with Inattentive Publics?

In a typical model of political accountability, the media observe politicians and report information to readers and viewers, who in turn use this information to decide whether and how to vote (Besley and Burgess 2001; Strömberg 2015). Such electorate-focused explanations depend on two crucial linkages: First, the public must consume and learn from news coverage of politics. Second, voters must use this information either to select representatives who share their preferences, or force incumbents to support policies in line with their wishes.

There is considerable evidence of this first linkage in the United States, though mostly focused on the national government. Substantive news coverage can improve mass knowledge of politics and policy (e.g., Jerit, Barabas and Bolsen 2006; Soroka and Wlezien 2022). Downstream from knowledge, local news is associated with voter turnout in congressional

elections (Gentzkow 2006; Gentzkow, Shapiro and Sinkinson 2011), voters' preferences over candidates (Druckman 2005), and reductions in split-ticket voting (Darr, Hitt and Dunaway 2018; 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).

The second linkage is also supported by existing evidence from 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. Because local news coverage of Congress typically emphasizes local delegations, the public is generally able to learn about congressional behavior if they so choose (Arnold 2004). Constituents who are aware that their member of Congress cast specific roll-call votes that they support also evaluate incumbents more favorably (Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki 2022).

However, the degree to which the public is attentive to political news and informed about politics is a longstanding source of debate. Key results in political behavior 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 actions 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).

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 out-of-step

positions?

1.2 Electoral Accountability in the States

Electoral accountability proves particularly difficult in state legislatures, where especially low levels of engagement mean the public is rarely well informed (Treadway 1985). Consistently, scholars have found that fewer than 30% of Americans can identify their state representative (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Patterson, Ripley and Quinlan 1992), with some recent estimates as low as 11% (Rogers 2023). As American politics has nationalized and national partisan identities have overtaken bespoke local and regional preferences, this interest has likely waned further (Hopkins 2018).

In a systematic study of the quality of accountability in state legislatures, Rogers (2023) found that elections are generally not effective at producing accountability in state legislative politics, even when legislators support policies that voters do not. Like earlier scholars, Rogers argues that this is largely due to the public's lack of interest in and knowledge of state politics, coupled with considerable advantages to incumbency. Indeed, to the extent that accountability involves removing out-of-step incumbents, incumbent legislators are extremely well protected, especially in the most professionalized legislatures (Berry, Berkman and Schneiderman 2000).

The news media's ability to encourage accountability in state politics is less well-studied. While Rogers (2023) found that the survey respondents know more about their state legislatures in general when there are more reporters covering the statehouse, he also showed that more coverage of individual legislators in Tennessee did not improve their constituents' knowledge of them.²

One likely explanation is that few members of the public consume news about state

²Although the conditions of state legislative politics differs from local elections, especially as relates to information, research on media effects in local governments is also informative to this effort. There is evidence that a higher volume of news coverage increases participation in local elections and engagement with local politics (Hayes and Lawless 2021), and that robust local opinion pages can reduce polarization and focus attention on local issues (Darr, Hitt and Dunaway 2021). It is as yet unclear the degree to which these findings port to the state legislative context.

politics. Over the past quarter-century, the media environment has changed dramatically, with local newspapers and TV stations—often the only sources of information about the actions of state governments (Mahone et al. 2019)—being particularly hard-hit by closures, shrinking news staffs, and declining audiences. Experimental evidence has even found that an incredibly small number of people will take up a free subscription to a local news outlet when offered (Hopkins and Gorton 2024). Earlier research found that when participants did take up a free newspaper subscription, it had no effect on gubernatorial vote choice (Gerber, Karlan and Bergan 2009). If voters do not use the media to become informed, or are unable to reliably convert this information to political action, then they may not be able to hold politicians accountable in elections.

1.3 Assessing Media’s Role in Accountability

The standard explanation of the media’s role in political accountability can generally be 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 low-information, low-engagement context of state legislatures. I find evidence supporting the first two, but fail to do so for the third. At the end of the paper, I reconcile my results by considering an alternative “watchdog” theory of the media’s role in accountability in which the press strengthen the connection between public opinion and policymaking through their frequent interactions with elected politicians they cover and the costs these interactions create for legislators who vote out-of-step with their constituents.

2 Local News in State Politics

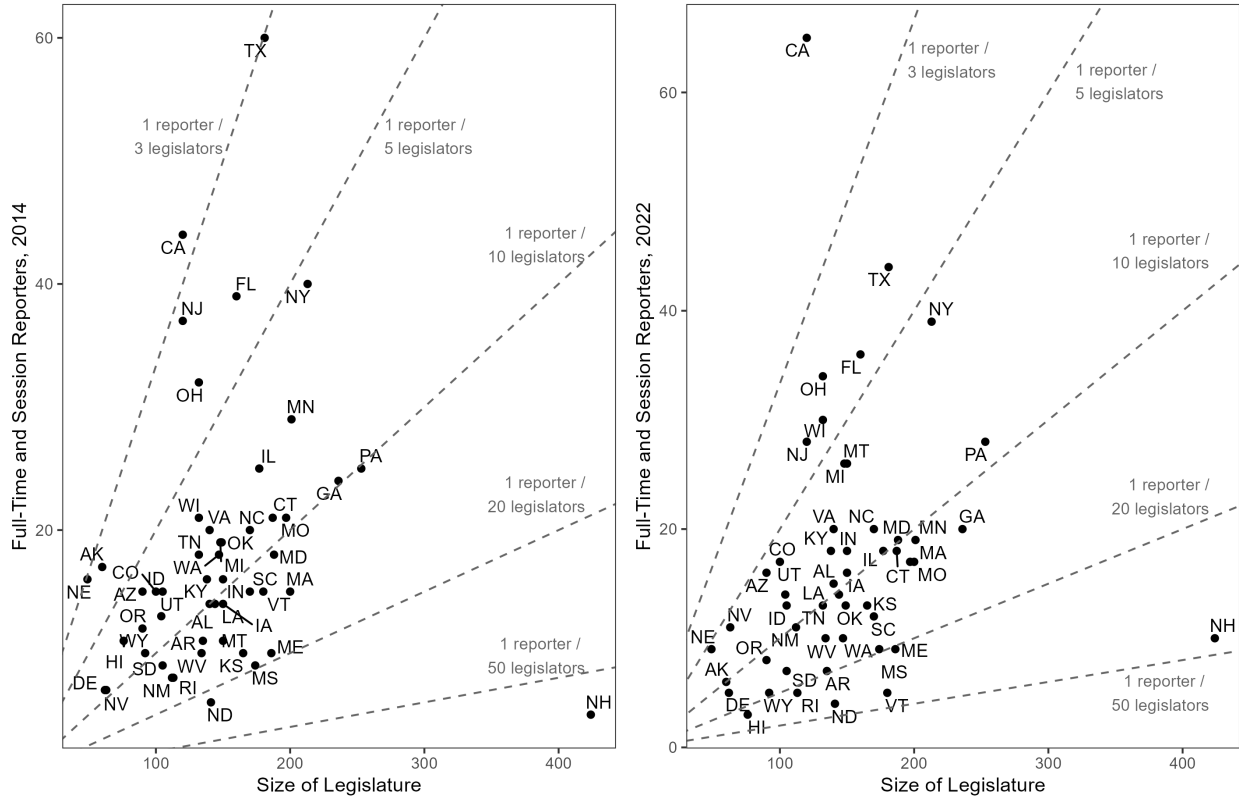
In order for the news media to have any effect on state legislative politics, they must first produce coverage of state capitols. In this section, I show that local newspapers and television stations actively cover state legislatures. I do so by focusing on three pieces of evidence: the size of state capitol reporting staffs, the number of stories published about state legislators, and an analysis of the content of that coverage.

2.1 State Capitol Press Corps

In 2022, 850 reporters covered state capitols full-time, of which 753 work for what might be thought of as “mainstream” news organizations—excluding ideological, government insider, and trade publications—(Shearer et al. 2022). Because U.S. newsrooms are generally organized around a beat structure, in which journalists specialize on narrower coverage areas (Boydston 2013), the number of reporters assigned to the state capitol is a reasonable proxy for the extent to which state governments are covered at all.

Although this is a large number of reporters, particularly given staffing declines in the local news industry, the size of state press corps vary widely from state to state. Figure 1 shows the number of state capitol reporters by state in 2014 and 2022, and how the sizes of the press corps vary with the sizes of the legislatures. Dashed diagonal lines correspond to ratios between reporters and legislators. 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 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.

Figure 1: State Capitol Reporters by State



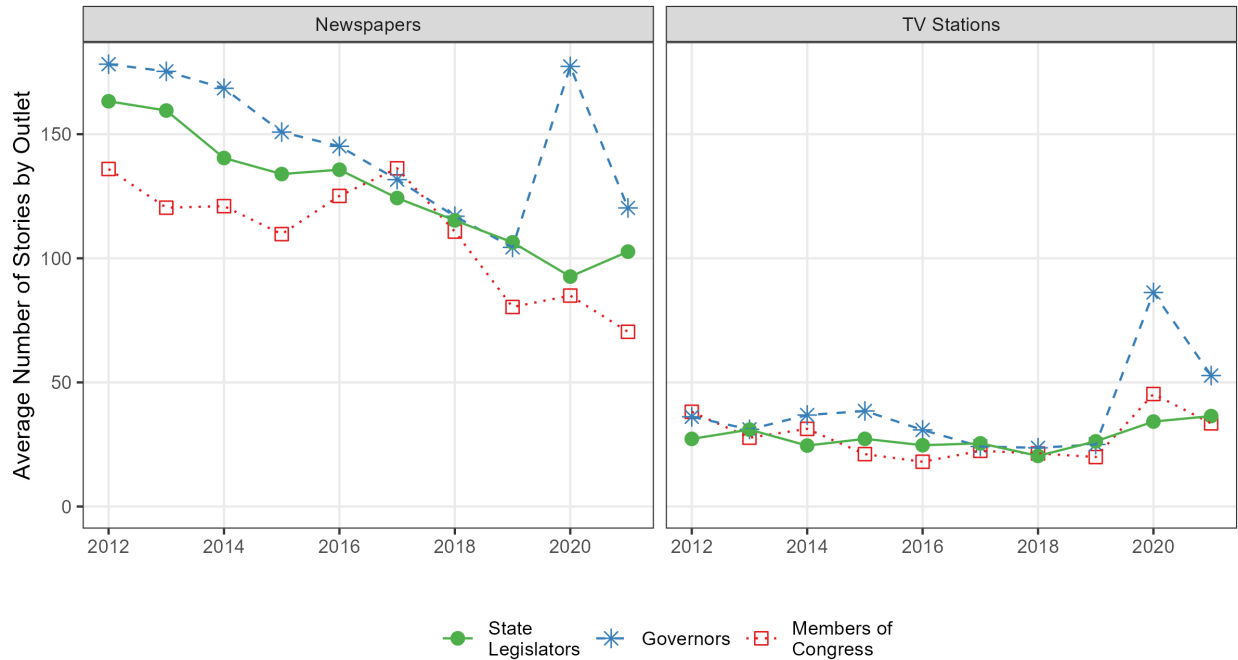
Note: Press corps data from Shearer et al. (2022). Dashed lines show ratios between the numbers of reporters and legislators.

2.2 News Coverage of State Legislators

I next examine the coverage that results from these journalists' newsgathering efforts using a corpus consisting of the full text of all articles published in 290 newspapers and coverage from 239 local television stations from 2012-2021. In total, the corpus comprises more than 45 million articles and transcripts.

I begin by asking how much news coverage is published about state legislators. To do so, I construct a dictionary of search terms for each paper containing the names of all sitting legislators in states where a newspaper circulates at least 1,000 copies, or where a television market includes at least one county. Then, I search the articles and transcripts for mentions of individual legislators (see Appendix A.1 for more detail about the corpus and search

Figure 2: News Coverage of Legislators and Governors



Note: Number of stories or broadcasts that mention individual politicians by name.

procedure). This yields for each news outlet, in each year, the number of stories or broadcasts referencing each state legislator by name.

Figure 2 shows the number of stories in the average news outlet in the sample that mention state legislators by name, compared to members of Congress and governors. These data reveal, first and foremost, that the average local newspaper publishes a considerable number of stories about state legislators, despite limited resources and relatively low public interest. They also affirm that local newspapers, much more than TV stations, routinely cover state capitols. However, the quantity of newspaper coverage of both state legislators and members of Congress has declined rapidly alongside contraction in the industry. Stories naming governors tracked legislators, before peaking in 2020, when governors became central figures in the response to Covid-19. In TV news coverage, the trend is relatively stable throughout the timeseries, though at a lower baseline (except for governors during the Covid-19 response).

Given scarce 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 2017; Strömberg 2015). To do so, they may focus on party leadership and other powerful legislators (Ban et al. 2019), those who take more extreme positions (Padgett, Dunaway and Darr 2019), and those mired in scandal (Puglisi and Snyder 2011). News outlets have an economic incentive cover politicians who represent their audience (Campbell, Alford and Henry 1984; Arnold 2004). I test whether this expectation holds in state legislatures by regressing the likelihood and frequency of legislators being covered on the share of newspaper subscribers and the anticipated local TV audience living in their district.

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

$$\text{ReaderShare}_{md} = \frac{\text{Circulation}_{md}}{\text{Circulation}_m}. \quad (1)$$

Circulation_{md} is the number of newspaper m 's subscribers who live in district d , and Circulation_m is the total subscribers to newspaper m 's across all districts.³ I compute this separately upper- and lower-chamber districts. For TV stations, I compute the analogous ViewerShare_{md} measure using populations of Designated Market Areas (DMAs, commonly called media markets) defined by the Nielsen Company, which correspond to the reach of broadcast television stations in a given market (Moskowitz 2021).⁴

Table 1 reports results. The leftmost section, reports that that legislators in districts with higher ReaderShare_{md} or ViewerShare_{md} are more *likely* to be covered at least one time per year by newspapers and TV stations in their districts. The rightmost columns, show that news outlets also cover legislators *more frequently* when they represent a higher

³I use AAM data rather than alternative sources, such as the Standard Rate and Data Service (SRDS), because of better availability over the time series and because the small papers excluded from AAM likely lack the resources necessary to routinely cover state politics. I discuss this decision in the Data section below, as well as in Appendix F.3; my results are generally robust to the alternative data.

⁴Not all residents of a DMA may watch local TV news. Because TV viewership data is prohibitively expensive, I use population as a proxy for viewership, following Snyder and Strömberg (2010).

Table 1: ReaderShare and Coverage of State Legislators

	Any Coverage (Likelihood)				Num. Stories (Frequency)			
	Newspapers		TV Stations		Newspapers		TV Stations	
ReaderShare	0.80** (0.09)	0.28** (0.05)			30.98** (2.97)	29.51** (3.07)		
ViewerShare			0.77** (0.13)	0.37** (0.06)			3.77** (0.77)	2.81** (0.55)
Chamber	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
District Ctrls.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Legislator Ctrls.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
N	305,188	127,517	692,923	244,072	305,188	127,517	692,923	244,072
Adj. R ²	0.24	0.30	0.09	0.14	0.10	0.15	0.03	0.05

Note: Results are from OLS regressions. The dependent variable is coverage of individual legislators in newspaper- or station-years. All models include state-year fixed effects and controls for characteristics of legislators (leadership and tenure in office) and districts (race, age, education, income, and urbanness). Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered by outlet. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

share of the outlet’s audience. In fact, increasing ReaderShare_{md} from 0 to 1 increases the likelihood of coverage for a state house member by 80% and for a state senate member by 28%, and increases the expected number of stories by approximately 30 per year. Increasing Viewershare_{md} from 0 to 1 corresponds to a similar increase in probability of coverage, though the expected number of reports only increases by about 3. This suggests that television coverage of state legislative politics may have less depth and detail compared to newspapers.

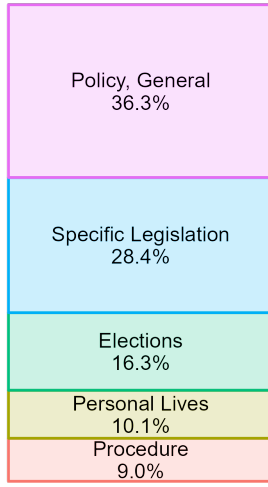
2.3 Content Analysis of Legislative Coverage

Is news coverage of state legislators sufficiently substantive and high-quality that reporters act as a watchdog of elite behavior? To understand the nature of legislative coverage, a team of research assistants read and hand-coded variables describing a sample of 494 newspaper stories that mention state legislators.

Figure 3 reports the results of the content analysis (additional details are in Appendix A.2). First, in Panel (a), we consider whether news coverage is focused on policy, elections, or other

Figure 3: Content Analysis of State Politics News Stories

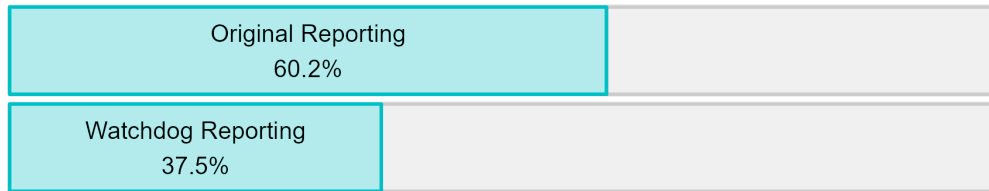
(a) General Focus



(b) Top 10 Topics of Policy Stories

Policy Topic	Pct. Stories
Education	14.1%
Health Care	12.0%
Crime & Criminal Justice	11.7%
Budget	11.4%
Civil Rights & Liberties	9.5%
Taxes	9.3%
Environment, Energy & Public Lands	6.8%
Labor & Employment	6.2%
Government Operations	6.0%
Transportation	4.8%

(c) Newsgathering Style



topics of political coverage. We find that nearly 65% of stories focus primarily on policy, either taking a broad look at an area of state policymaking or focusing on particular pieces of legislation. Each of these categories garners considerably more press attention than elections (16%), the personal lives of legislators (10%), or process stories (9%). In light of the large quantity of stories published relating to policy, we next identified the topics these stories focus on. Stories were coded according to a list of potential policy topics, and each could be assigned to multiple topics if applicable. Panel (b) reports these results. We find that the largest topical category was education (14%), followed by health care (12%), criminal justice (12%), and budgets (11%). Civil rights and liberties, taxes, the environment, labor, government operations, and transportation round out the top 10.

In Panel (c) of Figure 3, we consider the nature of the coverage itself. First, we look

for evidence of *Original Reporting*. That is, whether the coverage includes interviews with politicians or other relevant sources, or on-the-ground reporting in state capitols or at other events. We find that reporters are engaging in obviously original reporting in at least 60% of stories.⁵

Next, we look for evidence of *Watchdog Reporting*—scrutinizing the behavior of officials with the goal of “documenting, questioning, and investigating” (Bennett and Serrin 2005). To do so, we code whether stories use or request public documents or outside data, fact-check statements by politicians, raise tough questions about their actions or votes, add important context about policy effects, or raise new issues through investigative reporting. We find that 38% of stories exhibit at least one of these traits. This sort of watchdog journalism may be especially useful in informing the public, and is consistent with a “burglar alarm” standard of monitoring by the press (Zaller 2003). It also requires more time on the part of reporters and creates opportunities for meaningful interaction between the press and politicians.

3 Data

In order to understand how the media moderate the relationship between public opinion and legislative activity, I construct a dataset describing legislators’ roll-call votes, constituents’ policy preferences, and the coverage incentives of the media at the state legislative district level for the period from 2011-2022 (descriptive statistics can be found in Appendix E). I also collect electoral data to test hypotheses about whether the media’s role in responsiveness is due to strengthening electoral accountability.

3.1 Roll-Call Votes

First, as a measure of legislators’ actions on substantive policy, I collected roll-call votes from LegiScan related to the five policy areas described in Table 2 (see Appendix C for

⁵This figure is likely an underestimate, as we exclude stories that cover public meetings and press releases without evidence of interviews or in-person reporting.

Table 2: Policy Issues and Data Sources

	Restrict Abortion	Stricter Gun Laws	Same-sex Marriage	Police Body Cameras	Minimum Wage
Years	2011-2022	2011-2022	2011-2016	2017-2018, 2021-2022	2017-2022
Bills	5,061	16,821	622	729	769
Floor Votes	1,278	2,944	44	71	100
Liberal	31.3%	42.5%	68.2%	76.1%	80.0%
Passed	96.6%	96.1%	100.0%	95.8%	94.0%

details about data collection). The years for which policies are included are limited by the availability of opinion data, described below. Overall, I identify 23,913 bills related to at least one policy area (some matched and are included in multiple issues). Of these, 3,098 received a final passage roll-call vote on the floor of at least one legislative chamber. I focus on these bills in the analyses that follow. I also code whether bills describe conservative or liberal policy using legislators’ votes.⁶ Substantively, the proposed legislation is wide-ranging and ideologically diverse.

3.2 District Public Opinion

Second, I collect issue-specific public opinion measures at the legislative district level using Multilevel Regression and Poststratification (MRP) (Park, Gelman and Bafumi 2004). To do so, I leverage large sample sizes and detailed geographic data in the Cooperative Election Study (CES; formerly CCES). MRP estimates constituency opinion from national polls 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 (Lax and Phillips 2009; Warshaw and Rodden 2012).

I summarize district opinion on each issue using individual responses to questions on

⁶Specifically, I predicted legislators’ votes by their partisanship using logistic regression. If being a Democrat is more predictive of a “yea” vote than a “nay” vote, I code the bill as liberal; otherwise, I code the bill as conservative. This method is accurate for 91% of non-neutral bills in a sample of 352 bills across issues; see Appendix C.

the CES. For each question, I fit a “deep” MRP model with random effects for individual respondents’ race, sex, education, district, 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 (e.g., Republican vote share, percent urban, and issue-specific variables such as percent evangelical in estimating social issue opinion). A final wrinkle to my opinion estimation approach is matching respondents to state legislative districts, which are not included in CES data but are necessary to fit a district random intercept. I do so using Zip codes and counties included in the survey to estimate the probability that respondents live in each of a set of possible districts.⁷

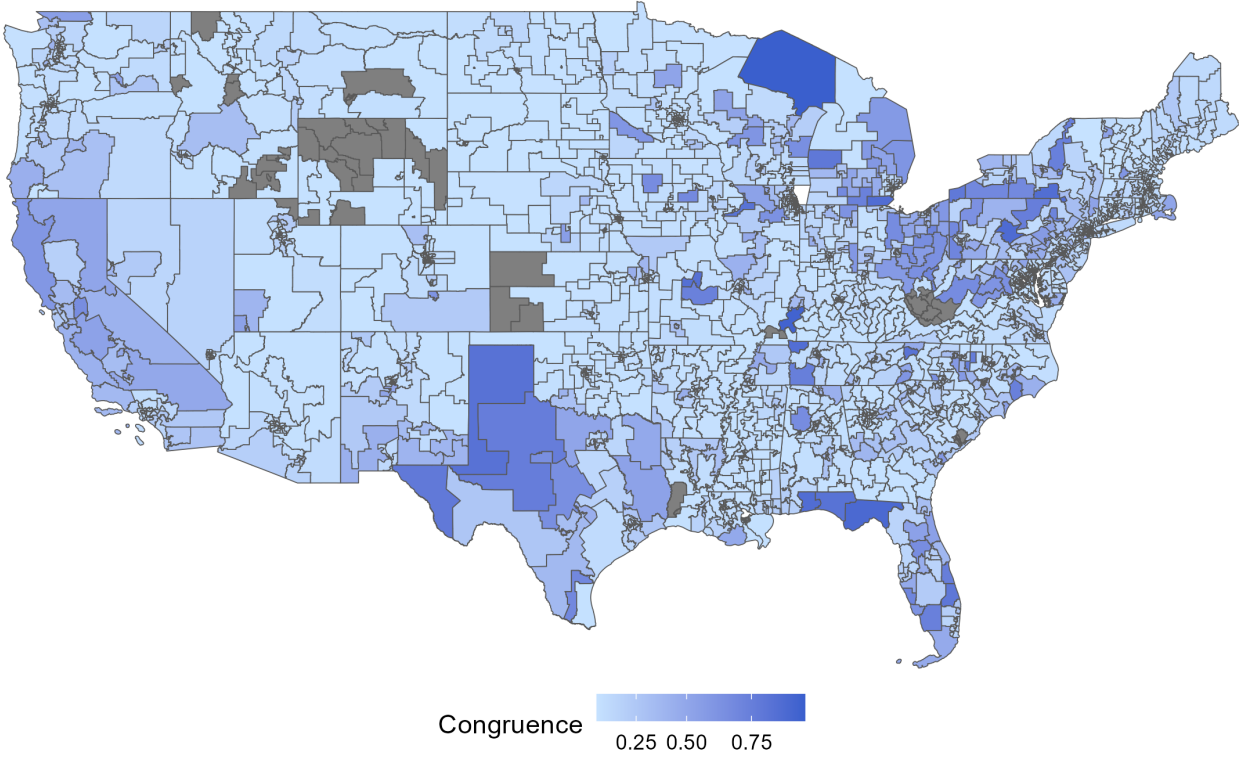
I then poststratify predictions from the model to produce opinion estimates using the joint distributions of demographics in each state legislative district, constructed from block-level American Community Survey data. I use this method to estimate opinion on each issue in all districts in election years from 2010-2020, taking care to ensure that opinion is measured prior to the roll-call vote on each bill.

3.3 Congruence as a Measure of Media Monitoring

Next, to measure how local news outlets prioritize coverage of legislators, I build on the intuition from Table 1 that local news outlets more frequently cover legislators who represent a larger share of their audience. Employing the empirical strategy from Snyder and Strömberg (2010), I compute the *congruence* of media markets and legislative districts, which corresponds to the overlap between a legislator’s constituency and the audience of local news outlets 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}).

⁷Specific question wording, model details, and an explanation of the matching procedure are available in Appendix D.

Figure 4: Newspaper Congruence by State Senate Districts, 2016



Formally, the congruence of a district is computed using the formula

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

where ReaderShare_{md} is described in Equation (1) and

$$\text{MarketShare}_{md} = \frac{\text{Circulation}_{md}}{\text{Circulation}_d}. \quad (3)$$

Congruence ranges from 0 to 1; if congruence equals 1 for a district, news outlets are extremely likely to focus coverage on that legislator, who represents all of their readers. Appendix B describes the computation of congruence in greater detail. As an illustration, Figure 4 shows the distribution of congruence for upper-chamber legislative districts in the contiguous United States in 2016.

I compute congruence using data from the AAM, which reports annual county-level newspaper circulation for 644 U.S. newspapers from 2011-2022.⁸ For analyses of local TV, I similarly compute TVCongruence_d using Nielsen DMAs. Most DMAs cover multiple counties, and all are non-overlapping, unlike newspaper circulation areas, so TVCongruence_d is usually equivalent to ViewerShare_{md} , discussed above.

3.4 Election Data

Finally, for the tests of media’s role in the electoral connection, I collect results and incumbency data for legislative elections from 2012-2020. From 2012-2016, both sets of data come from Klarner (2018); from 2018-2020, results are from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab and incumbency data is added manually. I also compute district-level results for president and other top-of-ticket races to estimate effects on roll-off using areal interpolation and precinct-level results from Voting And Election Science Team (2022), Daily Kos Elections (2013), and Ansolabehere, Palmer and Lee (2014).

4 How Media Shape 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.⁹ To assess the effect of media coverage on responsiveness, I fit a linear probability model of the effect that the interaction between constituent opinion and media

⁸AAM data exclude some smaller newspapers; however, these outlets may lack resources necessary to staff state capitol bureaus and cover legislators. In Appendix F, I show that my results are robust to alternative sources that include more newspapers but lack annual granularity.

⁹In Appendix F.1, I report baseline responsiveness results without the inclusion of media data, finding the expected strong association between opinion and roll-call votes.

market congruence has on legislators’ policy votes:

$$\text{RollCall}_{iv} = \beta_1 \text{Opinion}_i + \beta_2 \text{Congruence}_i + \beta_3 \text{Opinion}_i \times \text{Congruence}_i + \delta \mathbf{X}_i + \gamma_v + \varepsilon_i. \quad (4)$$

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 measured prior to the roll-call vote. Using each bill’s coding as conservative or liberal, I rescale RollCall_{iv} so that votes always agree ideologically with Opinion_i . This allows the interaction coefficient to be interpreted as strengthening or weakening responsiveness. I include a number of demographic, geographic, and legislator characteristic controls (\mathbf{X}_i) for district demographics (age, race, and education); legislator characteristics (leadership, seniority); and, in newspaper models, the total newspaper circulation of papers in the district to account for variation in resources and quality. Importantly, because the spatial distribution of population may confound the relationship between congruence and geography, I control for logged population density and percent urban for each district, as well as a dummy variable for the quintile of these variables to allow for nonlinearity (Snyder and Strömberg 2010).

The models also include 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).

Finally, I take special care to account for measurement error in the estimation of district opinion. Because opinion is estimated using MRP, rather than being directly observed, it may bias both the point estimate and standard error. I account for this using the “method of composition” or “propagated uncertainty” (e.g., Treier and Jackman 2008; Knox, Lucas and Cho 2022). This has the effect of attenuating the main effects compared to a single model using clustered standard errors (see Appendix F.2 for results).

Table 3: Newspaper Congruence and Responsiveness across Issues

	Restrict Abortion	Same-sex Marriage	Stricter Gun Laws	Police Body Cameras	Minimum Wage
Opinion \times Congruence	0.87** (0.28)	2.31* (1.13)	0.15** (0.02)	4.77** (1.68)	0.38** (0.13)
Opinion	1.22** (0.08)	1.43** (0.20)	0.02** (0.01)	0.30 (0.45)	0.16** (0.02)
Congruence	-0.60** (0.17)	-0.96 (0.68)	0.12** (0.02)	-4.19** (1.51)	0.10 (0.10)
District Ctrls.	X	X	X	X	X
Legislator Ctrls.	X	X	X	X	X
N	87,269	3,749	215,788	4,896	6,388
Adj. R ²	0.48	0.41	0.52	0.56	0.44

Note: Results are from OLS regressions where the dependent variable is legislator roll-call votes. Models include bill fixed effects. Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered by district and account for measurement error in Opinion. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

4.1 Effect of Newspaper Congruence

Table 3 reports the effect of newspaper congruence on responsiveness, separately for each of five policy domains. 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 and statistically significant for both social and economic issues.

The results are robust to the decision to use AAM data for newspaper circulation, rather than SRDS, as well as a number of other alternative specifications reported in Appendix F. In the appendix, I also consider the role that legislative professionalization plays in shaping these results and find that effects are largest in more professionalized legislatures (see Appendix H.1).

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: regulations of particular industries, appropriations for infrastructure, minor amendments to criminal codes, etc. Conversely, these policies are high-salience, as evidenced by their inclusion in opinion surveys. As a result, legislators’ preferences are likely 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.

4.2 Effect of TV Market Congruence

Next, I turn to local TV news. Table 4 reports results from regressions using TVCongruence. Positive coefficients across all five issues are consistent with TV news attention strengthening responsiveness, and in most cases are of a similar magnitude to the newspaper results above. However, the results are not statistically significant at the 5% level for three of five policy areas.

Table 4: Local TV Media Market Congruence and Responsiveness

	Restrict Abortion	Same-sex Marriage	Stricter Gun Laws	Police Body Cameras	Minimum Wage
Opinion \times TVCongruence	0.54 (0.38)	2.12 (1.24)	0.17** (0.03)	0.70 (6.56)	0.35* (0.17)
Opinion	1.27** (0.08)	1.44** (0.20)	0.02** (0.01)	0.81 (0.46)	0.18** (0.02)
TVCongruence	-0.44 (0.24)	-1.13 (0.71)	0.13** (0.04)	-0.52 (5.92)	0.06 (0.14)
District Ctrls.	X	X	X	X	X
Legislator Ctrls.	X	X	X	X	X
N	92,633	3,810	224,694	5,029	6,657
Adj. R ²	0.48	0.40	0.52	0.56	0.44

Note: Results are from OLS regressions where the dependent variable is legislator roll-call votes. Models include bill fixed effects. Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered by district and account for measurement error in Opinion. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

There are two likely explanations for why these TV results differ from newspapers. First, local newspapers produce more coverage focused on state politics compared to TV broadcasts, as I showed in Figure 2. The resulting effects of this coverage, or of the behaviors of journalists working for newspapers on legislators, may be stronger. A second explanation is that using population, rather than direct television viewership, to estimate TVCongruence introduces measurement error that contributes to inflated standard errors. Nevertheless, across issues, a similar pattern emerges for the effect of local TV market congruence: Where legislators are more likely to be covered by broadcast reporters, they are also more responsive to their constituents.

5 Mechanism: Testing the Electoral Connection

The typical explanation for the media’s effect on responsiveness emphasizes an electoral connection, in which news coverage informs the public and shapes whether and how they vote. In this section, I test this mechanism, specifically whether news coverage affects *what*

the public knows about state legislative politics and *how the public behaves in elections*.

I show that, contrary to expectation, 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.

My results here diverge from those found in congressional elections, where public engagement is considerably higher than in the states. They also differ from Myers (2025), who uses a regression discontinuity design (RDD) to argue that newspapers have effects on state legislative elections. RDDs limit the analysis to a small minority of districts where races are very close (about 20% of races during the 2012-2020 period in my data, which are whiter, better educated, and more suburban than excluded districts; see Appendix G.1). Contrary to my findings, Myers also argues that voters are more knowledgeable about legislators in higher-congruence districts. In Appendix G.2, I show that my null results are robust to a variety of model specifications and alternative data sources.

5.1 Information

Baseline knowledge about state politics is generally low. When people live in higher-congruence districts, their representative is more likely to be discussed in the news; however, this increase in available information may not correspond to greater public knowledge. I test this using a module from the 2018 CES, which asked approximately 1,000 respondents to name their state representative. I matched respondents to districts using their Zip code, and hand-checked their responses.¹⁰ I then regressed the indicator for whether the respondents correctly identified their legislator on congruence, adding the district controls from the responsiveness regressions,

¹⁰In many cases, respondents matched to multiple districts. In these cases, to account for uncertainty, I consider each district separately, weighting their responses by the probability that they reside in each district (see Appendix G.2). The results are robust to an alternative scheme in which respondents are correct if they can name any legislator representing a district where they have a positive 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	0.08	0.08	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 legislative chambers (columns 3-6). All models include state fixed effects. Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered by district. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

controls for respondent demographics, and 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. 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 negatively associated with knowledge, the effect of congruence lacks statistical significance across models.

5.2 Electoral Behavior

Although media market congruence does not correspond to political knowledge, it could still change voter behavior. Routine exposure to information about state legislators may increase the salience of state politics, the familiarity of incumbents’ names and positions, or better distinguish state and national elections. I conduct three tests of how congruence may affect

Table 6: Congruence and Voting Behavior

	Rolloff		Incumbency		Nationalization	
	Newspaper	TV	Newspaper	TV	Newspaper	TV
Congruence	0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.05)
Congruence× Incumbent			-0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)		
Incumbent (w/ Party)			0.01** (0.00)	0.01** (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. Models include district and year fixed effects. Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered by district. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

participation and behavior in elections using data collected for all state legislative elections from 2012-2020.

First, does congruence reduce participation in state legislative elections? In most states, legislative elections occur simultaneously with federal or gubernatorial elections. As a result, state legislators never occupy the “top of the ticket.” Rather than studying turnout in the legislative election, I instead measure *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, incumbency, and district characteristics. I include district and year fixed effects to allow a within-district design; the results tell us how electoral behavior changes as congruence increases or decreases within a district, holding the district itself constant. Column 1 of Table 6 shows 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. 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 null results 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

$$\text{Nationalization}_d = -|\text{DemVotePres}_d - \text{DemVoteLeg}_d|, \quad (5)$$

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 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.

Taken together, these results suggest that local newspapers and TV do not shape voter behavior in state legislative elections, contrary to dominant theoretical expectations.¹¹ Voters in more congruent districts are no more likely to participate in state legislative elections

¹¹Appendix G reports robustness tests for the electoral results.

than those in less congruent districts. Likewise, they do not seem to select different types of politicians, defined either by incumbency or partisanship.

6 Discussion: Alternative Mechanisms

The results presented in this paper have affirmed two of the claims of the canonical theory of the media’s role in accountability: (1) news outlets cover state legislatures, and (2) 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 improve representation in state legislatures if not because of an electoral connection.

One set of explanations that has been under-explored by much of the existing scholarship is that the media affect political elites directly, through frequent interactions. Routine monitoring by a “watchdog” press may increase the costs that politicians perceive to taking policy positions that are unpopular among constituents. Additionally, the media can act as a conduit for public opinion to politicians, both through these direct interactions and because political elites are more likely to read news coverage than the general public.

6.1 The Watchdog Mechanism

The watchdog function of the press emphasizes scrutinizing and investigating the behavior of officials (Bennett and Serrin 2005). In Section 2.3, I showed that a considerable portion of news coverage of state legislatures exhibits evidence of watchdog reporting, such as investigating the actions of legislators, pushing back against false claims, and adding independent context to the effects of decisions. Indeed, the vast majority of American journalists view themselves as fulfilling this role; 85% of journalists say 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%).

The effect of watchdog monitoring is bolstered by the repeated nature of state capitol reporting, in which both reporters and journalists engage in repeated interactions, making it difficult for politicians to avoid questions from the press about their votes and behavior (Zaller 2017). 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 close monitoring by the press, politicians may perceive higher costs to casting unpopular roll-call votes, even in contexts where the public is inattentive. These may result from a number of sources. 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 H.2). The attentiveness of these groups may be sufficient to produce higher quality representation even without observing broader effects among the public (Arnold 2004). 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 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 find some suggestive evidence that supports a watchdog explanation: The effects of news congruence on representation are greatest in more professionalized legislatures (see Appendix H.1). Because these legislators are in session for more time, there is greater opportunity for close monitoring by the press. These legislatures also have more reporters covering them full-time. This allows for a greater degree of watchdog monitoring compared to part-time legislatures where the press is less likely to invest in year-round coverage and there are fewer opportunities for direct monitoring.

6.2 Media as Elite-Informers

A second non-electoral explanation of the effects presented here 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 perceive public support for policies (Miller and Stokes 1963; Broockman and Skovron 2018). These perceptions can be improved by informing politicians about public opinion (Butler and Nickerson 2011). Because politicians are more likely to consume news (see Appendix H.2), those in more congruent districts may see in this coverage a a better reflection of constituents preferences.

To be sure, news coverage generally does not include granular issue support at the district level. However, it does provide a sense of the interests of the public. For example, Wlezien (2024) found that the tone of news coverage of the 2016 presidential election followed (lagged) candidate support among the public, and that the framing of issues in coverage followed

changes in mass spending preferences.¹² As a result, the press may lead legislators toward public opinion, effectively acting as a mediator between elites and their constituents.

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, police body cameras, and the minimum wage. 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. Indeed, the results in this paper are further evidence in a growing literature demanding a more complicated view of political accountability in state politics (e.g., Hopkins 2018;

¹²This explanation is also consistent with the literature on the “agenda-setting” role of the press, which argues that attention from the news media has the effect of putting new issues on the political agenda (McCombs and Shaw 1972). There is some evidence that newspaper agendas in the 1980s and 1990s correlated with the agendas of state legislatures (Tan and Weaver 2009).

Grumbach 2022; Rogers 2023).

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 (2017), 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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