A SIMPLE MODEL OF LEGISLATOR AND NEWS MEDIA INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the effect of a strategic news media on legislators' interactions with their constituencies. Specifically, legislators can only be constrained by constituency preferences over policies when voters have the information to hold legislators accountable for their actions. A strategic news media can provide such information in a constant and continuous manner unlike, say, challengers. This article addresses this scenario with several models. First, a signaling model is introduced with constituency preferences and journalist investigating and reporting strategies serving as constraints on a legislator's voting preferences. Results of the baseline model include a pooling equilibrium where legislators vote with the district and are always re-elected. Second, a basic ultimatum bargaining model is introduced to allow for collusion between journalists and legislators in the output of the news product. This extension highlights a pure strategy separating equilibrium where an out-of-step legislator is able to secure silence from the journalist and win re-election. Finally, the role of multiple journalists covering a legislator is considered. Results illustrate that as the number of media outlets increases within a district, the quality of representation also increases.

KEY WORDS • congress • journalists • news media • political communication • signaling model

1. Introduction and Motivation
Citizens rely on the news media on a daily basis for information concerning politics and current events. This is particularly true regarding political transactions that occur in relative quiet, away from the pomp and grandstanding of politicians’ press conferences, press releases, and district visits. The news media are in the unique position of being able to provide privileged information to voters about their representatives on a daily basis. Unlike challengers, who are effective in publicizing incumbents’ records over a few select months, the media can do so on a regular basis. The strategic incentives for the media to actively monitor incumbents’ records and actions surely exist, though these incentives may be
more prevalent in certain cases. For instance, we can expect the media to closely follow out-of-step freshmen legislators as compared to perfect-fitting, senior incumbents. While the common belief is that the media are often pawns for political officials, these officials rely as much on the media as the media rely on them (Bagdikian, 1974; Cook, 1998). More likely, the observed dearth of news coverage of House members, particularly from the local media, may be more of a strategic decision than most researchers have previously considered. This article shows how the strategic nature of the news media can constrain legislators and how this coverage affects representation.

Until quite recently little thought had been placed in modeling the strategies of the media in creating the news product. Recent theoretical efforts have focused on strategies for news bias to maximize readership and reputation (Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2005; Baron, 2006; Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2006), media capture (Besley and Prat, 2006), and political campaign reporting (Stromberg, 2004). Less attention has been placed on news strategies for covering legislators – specifically, members of Congress – and what the apparent effect may be on voters. Further work, such as this article, enhances our ability to understand congressional politics, campaigns, and elections from both a theoretical and empirical level.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 discusses pertinent literature and background. Section 3 introduces the baseline model, initial results, and comparative statics illustrating differences in media investigation levels and subsequent news coverage between in-step and out-of-step legislators. Section 4 extends the model by including a bargaining stage where a legislator can silence a reporter through trades in access. Section 5 considers the role of multiple journalists and shows that increasing news outlet concentration can lead to increased legislative accountability. And, finally, Section 6 concludes.

2. Background

Many have asserted the possibility that the news media act to promote political representation, but we know little about the conditions under which the news media are more or less likely to take a monitorial role over the actions of members of Congress. A significant portion of congressional scholarship has ignored the effect of the media in the daily workings Congress and on individual legislators. Instead, emphasis, both formally and empirically, has been placed on interactions between individual legislators, the three branches, and secondary political institutions such as political parties and interest groups (e.g. Mayhew, 1974; Fenno, 1978; Kingdon, 1981). This literature has not asked, how do journalists mediate messages from legislators to their constituencies? What role may the news media have on legislative actions and representation? What role do the media play as a secondary institution interacting with government? Or,
whether the media can affect congressional election outcomes and what relative function they play vis-à-vis challengers.

If one considers the news media as a strategic actor, the media should be able to lower voters’ information costs, allowing easier evaluations of members by voters thus limiting legislative shirking. The media can restrict the types of messages that members send to their district about issue positions and credit claiming. Another positive consequence of lowering voters’ information costs is to increase information quality about legislators’ records, actions, and words. The media, then, should also help increase the efficiency of political representation for citizens. Therefore, the introduction of the media as a strategic actor should create a different informational environment than is currently understood and utilized in models of legislator–constituency relationships.

Within the political communication field, researchers have spent more time considering the role of the news media in congressional activities. A basic agreement exists that strategic interaction between legislators and journalists accounts for the final news product, but that interaction has not been fully explored (e.g. Vermeer, 1982; Cook, 1988; Larson, 1992; Ansolabehere et al., 1993; Zaller, 1999; Graber, 2005). A common train of thought in the political communication literature is that since the national media tend to focus only on party leaders in the House, backbenchers must actively seek out the local media who are more inclined to be attentive to their words and actions (Schaffner and Sellers, 2003). In turn, the local media push members to discuss constituency service and issue positions salient to district interests and news consumers. Important in this transaction is that legislators view the local media as ‘lapdogs’, waiting for any informational scraps to be thrown their way (Bagdikian, 1974; Cook, 1989, 1998). As Cook (1998) points out, newly elected members of Congress particularly tend to focus on the local media in order to build a credible image with their districts, thus allowing greater freedom in future legislative activity.

Scholars also debate whether an active news media can provide meaningful information on legislators to voters (Bennett, 1990; Althaus, 2003). Arnold (2004), in his expansive study of local news Coverage, establishes that local newspapers provide sufficient volume of coverage for voters; though there is wide variation between individual papers. But even the substantive coverage tends to focus on distributive benefits for the district rather than policy stances and specific work in Congress (Tidmarch et al., 1984). This division in news coverage serves as a reinforcing mechanism to keep incumbents in office, thus potentially limiting policy responsiveness.

Other work in political communication argues that the news media have remarkable potential to monitor and oversee legislators, thus engaging in ‘watchdog’ journalism (e.g. Ansolabehere et al., 1993; Cook, 1998). Though mostly exploratory in nature, Ansolabehere et al. (1993) argue that through highly intensive investigation, journalists should be able to constrain the range of possible messages a legislator can send to his or her district. Cook (1998)
makes a similar argument, advising that when assuming high-risk aversion, representatives should play it safe on certain issues and minimize any potentially damaging coverage. Vinson (2003), in a content analysis study of local media coverage of various representatives throughout the US, found that when representatives do get covered often they get cast in a negative or ambiguous manner. Vinson’s results call into question the traditional belief that the local media are willing partners in propaganda or simply lapdogs, and adds some empirical backbone to earlier speculation on watchdog journalism.

3. The Baseline Model

The baseline signaling model provides a simple framework to provide core results and build later modeling extensions (Gibbons, 1992). The first hurdle to clear in modeling the media’s activities is to decide what organizational and institutional factors are germane. Here, I present a simple model that considers the news media as a unitary actor in the form of a journalist.¹

3.1 Structure and Players

The signaling game is composed of two players: a legislator (L) and a journalist (J). There are two types of legislator L, where θ denotes the type of legislator and θ ∈ {θ, θ̄}, with Pr(θ = θ̄) = ρ and ρ ∈ [0, 1]. θ̄ denotes an in-step legislator who has the same preferences as the district and θ represents an out-of-step legislator who has divergent preferences with the district. The legislator votes for either the status quo (SQ) or a new proposal (NP), v ∈ {SQ, NP}. I make the simplifying assumption that the out-of-step legislator always prefers to vote against the district’s preference. The legislator receives r ≥ 0 if re-elected and 0 if not. In this model, the legislator is not re-elected if the journalist reports he or she is out-of-step. The legislator receives p for voting sincerely and −p for voting against his or her preference. Further, I assume r > 2p, in order that the incumbent will prefer to be re-elected and vote against his or her preference over losing re-election and voting his or her preference.

In this model, there is a single journalist who is faced with the decision over whether to investigate the legislator or not, I ∈ {i, ni}. Investigation incurs a cost k > 0, yet yields perfect revelation of the legislator’s type. The journalist has audience-related revenue a from reporting his or her findings, where a = 0 if the legislator is a perfect match to the district and a ≥ 0 is increasing with legislator deviation in both type and vote. Audience-related revenue can take the

¹. So, for instance, I do not consider such factors as the hierarchy of a news organization – for example, the interplay between reporters, editors, and owners. See Bovitz et al. (2002) for a discussion of how these internal actors influence newsmaking decisions.
form of sales, subscriptions, advertising, and so on. Let $s$ denote the story the journalist writes, where $s \in \{\emptyset, \theta, \overline{\theta}\}$. I make two assumptions at this stage. First, the legislator knows whether he or she has been investigated. Second, the journalist cannot fabricate news. Specifically, the journalist is constrained to either reporting what he or she finds ($\theta, \overline{\theta}$) or not ($\emptyset$), but cannot produce ‘fake’ news.

The legislator’s utility function is then defined as:

$$u_L(v; I, s) = \begin{cases} r + p & \text{if re-elected & vote preference} \\ r - p & \text{if re-elected & vote against preference} \\ p & \text{if not re-elected & vote preference} \\ -p & \text{if not re-elected & vote against preference} \end{cases}$$

And the journalist’s utility function is defined as:

$$u_J(I, s; \theta) = \begin{cases} a - k & \text{if } I = i \\ 0 & \text{if } I = ni \end{cases}$$

### 3.2 Game Sequence

A concise description of the game sequence follows.

1. Nature selects the type of legislator $\theta$ with $Pr(\theta = \theta) = \rho$.

2. The legislator decides whether to vote for the new proposal or the status quo, $v \in \{SQ, NP\}$.

3. The journalist decides whether to investigate the legislator, $I \in \{i, ni\}$. If he or she investigates then $s \in \{\emptyset, \theta, \overline{\theta}\}$.

4. An election occurs where the district selects either the incumbent or a challenger of unknown type.

This final stage provides a specific mechanism to hold the legislator accountable for his or her vote. Here, the district is a non-strategic player who simply chooses the incumbent or the challenger based on $s$. If $s = \emptyset$ or $s = \overline{\theta}$, the district re-elects the incumbent. If $s = \theta$, the district selects the challenger. Clearly, this is a simplified notion of how legislative activity affects election outcomes. Yet, it parallels a commonly understood aspect of voting and elections: perform poorly and you will be kicked out of office.

### 3.3 Equilibrium

The equilibrium concept to this news-making game is perfect Bayesian equilibrium (PBE). The legislator votes for $SQ$ with probability $\alpha(\theta)$, and the journalist investigates the vote with probability $\gamma(v)$. Let $\mu(v)$ be the journalist’s posterior belief about $\overline{\theta}$, which is determined by Bayes’ Rule upon observing $v$. 


and \( \rho \). With certainty, the journalist’s updated belief upon observing an out-of-equilibrium action is that the legislator is type \( \theta \).

### 3.4 Results

Proposition 1 characterizes a pure-strategy pooling equilibrium.

**Proposition 1.** When there is a high probability that the legislator has similar preferences as the constituency on a given issue, both legislator types vote for the district’s preferred policy, the journalist does not investigate, and the legislator wins re-election.

*Proof.* See Appendix.\(^2\)

There are a number of important observations one can draw from this simple result. First, the presence of the media can induce legislators to vote ‘correctly’. Without an organization or institution auditing actions and communicating with constituents, legislators may be able to vote against district interests and survive electorally. Again, challengers serve as effective constraints on incumbents but their efforts are typically limited to election season. Active and strategic media can continually constrain legislators’ actions, play a watchdog role, and act as a fourth branch of government in terms of checks and balances. If legislators know that the media are waiting for any incriminating evidence to launch an investigation, they may try to limit that probability by voting with the district.

Second, this result suggests one should find empirical evidence of minimal news coverage of legislators who appear to ideologically fit their district. As political conflict and negative information dominates what is typically considered newsworthy, the media have little incentive to report scores of positive stories about in-step legislators. The nature of the media as a commercial enterprise makes journalists concerned with public attention, which motivates simplified story lines, accessible news stories, as well as sensational content (Tuchman, 1978; Hamilton, 2004). Politically newsworthy stories often are generated from scandals, shirking in office, issues where there is wide and vocal elite disagreements, and when visible actions are being taken by political actors (Cook, 1989; Graber, 2005). Hence, to the extent in-step members do receive news coverage, the focus will primarily concern newsworthy district events like rallies and appearances rather than actual policy and legislative activity. Rather than acting as lapdogs pushing a member’s policy talking points, local media will act more like rational economic actors who do not wish to use limited time, space, and resources on minimally newsworthy legislators.

\(^2\) The Appendix also provides a formal statement of Proposition 1.
A partially separating mixed strategy equilibrium also exists for this model.

**Proposition 2.** When there is a low probability the legislator has similar preferences as the constituency on a given issue, the out-of-step legislator and the journalist mix between strategies, while the in-step legislator always votes with the district. The in-step legislator always wins re-election and the out-of-step legislator wins with some probability.

*Proof.* See Appendix.

It is clear from Proposition 1 that the in-step legislator always votes with the district regardless of the journalist’s investigation probability. For the out-of-step legislator, if the journalist is investigating with some probability, the worst case scenario is to vote with the district, get investigated, and lose re-election. The legislator will instead want to vote his or her preference, get investigated, and lose re-election. Yet, if the vote is against the district’s preference then the journalist always investigates. Therefore, the out-of-step legislator mixes between voting with the district and against, and the journalist mixes between investigating and not.

This partially separating equilibrium is likely how out-of-step House members often deal with voting in office. Clearly, if a legislator is ideologically out-of-step with the district and always votes against district preferences then he or she will be voted out of office. At the same time, such a legislator cannot always vote with the district due to a variety of factors including logrolling and party discipline. Therefore, an out-of-step legislator would vote with the district at times and at other times follow his or her own preferences; and thus, mix between voting strategies. At minimum, one expects legislators to vote with their district on salient district issues (Kingdon, 1981). It is certainly not always the case that under the conditions of the pooling equilibrium, journalists never investigate and news is never or rarely made. This result empirically suggests that journalists will cover certain legislators more than others with respect to district congruence.

Even allowing for all the particulars of legislators’ homestyles, if the media are considered independent information sources (Schaffner, 2006), scores of pieces of mail and district visits may do little to assure re-election. If the legislator is known as a poor fit for the district, one should expect a short time in office, though this will be conditioned by the legislator’s own actions while in office and the quality of challengers. Ideologically out-of-step legislators may be able to extend their legislative careers by appearing in-step. This occurs with frequency, particularly on salient district issues. For example, three Texas Democratic House members (Max Sandlin (1st District), Martin Frost (24th) and Charles Stenholm (17th)) voted during the summer of 2004 for a Republican-sponsored bill (HR 4520) that provided approximately $140 billion in new corporate taxes which would
increase the deficit. Although such tax cuts were antithetical to the Democratic 2004 campaign platform, these three representatives faced difficult re-election probabilities due to redistricting in Texas (Barshay, 2004). Actions such as these serve to try to extend these members’ electoral careers by illustrating they were more ‘Blue Dog’ than ‘dyed-in-the-wool’ Democrats to their more conservative constituents.

3.5 Comparative Statics

Both results provide us with a number of applicable comparative statics to examine. I begin by looking at the journalist and then consider the out-of-step legislator. First, the journalist investigates more as the benefit from re-election increases. Certainly, as the benefit from re-election increases, we expect the journalist to investigate more as the out-of-step legislator has more of an incentive to vote with the district. Even though the model assumes that \( r > p \), as \( r \) increases the relative benefit of \( p \) goes to 0. Therefore, the legislator increasingly favors re-election over voting for his or her preference. Essentially this creates a scenario where the legislator only cares about re-election, preferences do not matter, and the journalist is increasingly active.

Second, the journalist investigates less as it becomes more costly for the legislator to vote away from preferences. Naturally, this is the other side of the argument from the first comparison. If the legislator increasingly benefits from voting his or her preference, then there is more separation between types. As such, the journalist becomes less likely to investigate a vote that is in line with the district’s preference. Another way of seeing this is as ideological preferences become more salient, legislators increasingly vote sincerely and the journalist investigates less.

Now consider comparative statics for the out-of-step legislator. First, the out-of-step legislator increasingly votes with the district as the probability of being in-step increases. This implies as \( \rho \to 1 - \frac{1}{\delta} \) the out-of-step legislator increasingly votes with the district. When \( \rho = 1 - \frac{1}{\delta} \), this type always votes with the district and we have the pooling equilibrium described in proposition 1. As \( \rho \) increases, the journalist’s probability of investigation decreases if the vote is with the district.

Second, the out-of-step legislator increasingly votes with the district as the cost of investigation increases for the journalist. It is clear that as the cost for investigation increases, the journalist will decrease his or her probability of investigating. The effect of increasing investigation cost is to decrease the cutoff for where the pooling equilibrium exists. Hence, the out-of-step legislator is able to vote with the district and win re-election more often when the cost of investigation is high.

3. Apparently the strategy failed as all three lost re-election bids in 2004.
4. Comparative statics are illustrated in the Appendix.
One of the interesting implications is that high investigation costs may actually increase the quality of representation for voters. While the legislator may not fit the district ideologically, he or she can stay in office easier by voting with the district more of the time. So, voters have their preferences sufficiently represented through legislative actions even if not a priori from the legislator’s ideology.

Third, the out-of-step legislator increasingly votes his or her preference when the journalist’s benefit for showing ideological divergence increases. When the journalist’s incentive to show divergence increases, then he or she is more likely to investigate a vote for the district, holding all else constant. Since, again, the worst scenario for the out-of-step legislator is to vote with the district and lose election, this type of legislator is increasingly willing to vote his or her preference and lose election as the journalist becomes more active. One implication is that with high-potential revenue available, an active media may actually hurt short-term legislative representation, but increase long-term representation by possibly allowing an in-step legislator to be elected in the next election.

4. Bargaining Over Content

In the baseline model, the journalist makes a simple decision on whether to report his or her findings to the district or not. Yet, this simplification may ignore a substantial aspect in the creation of the news product; specifically, the interaction between the media, legislators, government officials, and sources in crafting the story (Cook, 1998).

Literature in political communication suggests the media rely as much on government officials as those officials rely on the news media (e.g. Linsky, 1986; Cook, 1998). For instance, government officials enable journalists to know when and where news events will happen and provide source material to journalists. In turn, the media serve as a vehicle for the government to communicate with relevant constituencies and amongst themselves. This relationship between the media and government officials is deemed a ‘negotiation of newsworthiness’ (Cook, 1998). The trade-off is that officials can dictate the information and level of access for the media, while the media determine the final content of the news product.

There are interesting dynamics in this relationship with regard to House members and local news print media. House members, particularly early term members, seek out the local print media to get their names in the paper and hopefully preferentially positive coverage (Cook, 1988, 1989). This allows members to establish themselves in districts, develop homestyles, and increase their incumbency advantage. This all combines to create a general perception that the news media mindlessly report information provided by House members. Yet, the reasons behind this empirical observation have been less thought out. I argue that the empirical regularity of ‘lapdog’ journalism may come from the dominant position of House members in the bargaining process over the
news product. Since most local news media organizations have limited resources, particularly for general political matters, they rely to a large degree on House members for access and easy source material for news stories (McManus, 1994; Vinson, 2003). In return, the stories crafted may appear more accommodating and less adversarial.

4.1 Structure and Players

The structure and intuition in this extension are the same as in the baseline model. Except, here, I allow the legislator to ‘ manipulate’ the news by introducing a bargaining stage between the journalist’s investigation and reporting decisions. In this stage, the legislator can make an offer to the journalist – for instance, future access which lowers future investigation costs – in return for the journalist not publishing his or her findings. This scenario is often encountered by newsbeat reporters who constantly fret over the access to officials and legislators when developing their news stories (Gans, 1980; Cook, 1998). If they rely on a source for privileged information, they will not write stories harmful about the source if the source will provide future information. This inclusion, then, is a one-sided ultimatum bargaining stage. This also is a bargaining stage with commitment by both sides. So, the journalist can either choose to accept the legislator’s offer and not publish his or her findings or reject the offer and publish his or her findings in whole, but the journalist cannot partially reveal findings or renege on the agreement.

The legislator offers a transfer \( t \geq 0 \) to the journalist and costs the legislator \( t \). The cost to the legislator should be interpreted broadly to include effort, reputation, future legislative constraints, etc. The legislator’s offer serves as a present period gain of \( t \) for the journalist.

The legislator’s payoffs are the same as in the baseline model except with the subtraction of \( t \) if the legislator’s offer is accepted. The journalist payoff is \( a - k \) if the journalist rejects the legislator’s offer and reports his or her findings. If the journalist is bought off by the legislator, then he or she receives \( t - k \).

4.2 Sequence

The game sequence is identical to the baseline model except the addition of the bargaining stage:

1. Nature selects the type of legislator \( \theta \) with \( Pr(\theta = \bar{\theta}) = \rho \).

2. The legislator decides whether to vote for the new proposal or the status quo, \( v \in \{ SQ, NP \} \).

3. The journalist decides whether to investigate the legislator, \( I \in \{ i, ni \} \).
4. If \( l = i \), then the legislator makes an offer \( t \) to the journalist. If the journalist accepts then \( s = \emptyset \). If the journalist rejects then \( s \neq \emptyset \).

5. An election occurs where the district selects either the incumbent or a challenger of unknown type.

### 4.3 Results

Depending on parameter values, there are both pure strategy separating and pooling equilibria, as well as a mixed strategy partially separating equilibrium, to this game.

**Proposition 3.** Equilibrium may be of two kinds depending on the relative sizes of \( a \) and \( t \):

1. If \( t \geq a \), then each type of legislator votes his or her preference. The journalist investigates if the vote is against the district’s preference, accepts the out-of-step legislator’s offer, and does not report his or her findings. Both types of legislator are re-elected.

2. If \( t < a \), then the equilibria in proposition 1 and 2 hold.

**Proof.** See Appendix.

Since perfect type revelation is assumed when the journalist investigates, the legislator generally knows the relative size of \( a \) and \( t \) \textit{a priori} to voting. Therefore, as part 2 of Proposition 3 states, when the out-of-step legislator cannot offset the journalist’s payoff for reporting his or her findings then he or she votes for the district’s preference or mixes over actions. Given this strategy, the journalist has the same beliefs and follows the same strategies as in Propositions 1 and 2. By assuming \( t < a \), the relevance of the bargaining stage is negated.

The interesting part of Proposition 3, then, is the pure strategy separating equilibrium that occurs when \( t \geq a \). This transfer will specifically be \( t = a \), as the legislator only needs to make the journalist indifferent between reporting his or her findings and keeping silent – the journalist’s payoff is \( t - k = a - k \). Hence, keeping silent is a weakly dominant strategy for the journalist under this parametrization. Note that only an out-of-step legislator will resort to bargaining with the journalist, particularly since the fabrication of news by the journalist is not allowed. This implies that when the benefit from holding office, by being re-elected, is sufficiently high and we allow for bargaining between legislators and media, out-of-step members are increasingly willing to vote their preference and buy off the media.

A political consequence of this result is that there is no electoral turnover, or at least a very low probability, and voter welfare is diminished. If the legislator
is able to capture the media, then voters will lack the ability to discriminate between legislator types. With no signal from the media, voters have no new information on the incumbent to update on and then will at least weakly prefer the incumbent over a challenger of unknown type. Hence, media capture can have a significant effect on representation and the democratic process. While this model focuses on the American institutional setting, Besley and Prat (2006) illustrate similar consequences and connections of media freedom, media capture, corruption, and the democratic process in a cross-national context. Specifically, they argue that lower levels of media freedom go hand-in-hand with political corruption, regime longevity, and a breakdown in democracy.

While we may discount the existence of flat-out bribes between legislators and media in the US, there is certainly some give-and-take (Gans, 1980; Cook, 1998; Graber, 2005). Legislators can offer access and privileged information, while the media can offer preferential coverage. Empirically, one can test how the media cover legislators with varying levels of ideological fit with their districts by news outlet content analysis. Naturally, without some very intensive and ground-breaking case study work, it is impossible to precisely measure the degree of bargaining between legislators and the media. Though if one finds lax and accommodating coverage of out-of-step legislators, then we may have greater confidence that bargaining over the news product is taking place. If we find just the opposite, then the media may find reporting ideological incongruence to be more profitable than maintaining cordial relationships with out-of-step members.

Prescriptively, what can we say about reducing the level of media capture and thus increasing the integrity of the democratic process? Besley and Prat (2006) incorporate a transaction cost of \( \tau \in [0, \infty) \) limiting the benefit to the media from accepting the government’s offer.\(^5\) This cost is a modeling technique to incorporate the risk of judicial prosecution for the media. Another modeling technique is to make the media risk averse through their utility function. Clearly in political systems, the existence of a free press is invaluable. Yet, the level of press freedom is generally less of an issue within the US. Some have argued that the increasingly professional nature of the news media in the US. has both increased its legitimacy as a political institution and, thus, decreased the probability of being captured by political actors (e.g. Cook, 1998). On the individual outlet level, there is likely wide variance in how much political journalists rely on the legislators and government officials for information (Cook, 1998; Vinson, 2003; Arnold, 2004). For example, *The New York Times*’ political reporters probably have higher bargaining leverage than, say, reporters at the *Pottsville Republican and Evening Gazette* in Pennsylvania.

\(^5\) Specifically, this reduces the media’s payoff from \( t \) to \( \tau \).
5. Multiple Journalists

To this point, I have concentrated on a single journalist from a single news media organization monitoring a legislator – namely, a congressional district’s representative. Thanks to media consolidation, this is becoming more of the norm outside of major metropolitan areas, particularly with respect to newspapers. Yet, often voters have multiple news outlets in the same medium to attain their political information. This is certainly the case for newspapers in major metropolitan areas with large media markets. For instance, residents of New York City and surrounding areas have The New York Times, Newsday, The Daily News, and The New York Post to get their news from. Chicagoans have the Chicago Tribune, Chicago Daily Herald, and Chicago Sun Times. Residents of Seattle have the Seattle Times and Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

The existence of multiple news outlets is even stronger with regard to television news. With ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX news affiliates in every media market, there are vast opportunities for voters to be exposed to political information about their representatives. Therefore, voters often have the ability to attain local political news from a number of outlets in both print and television mediums, as well as radio and the Internet.

While there are obvious quality and professionalism differences between outlets in all mediums, journalists from these outlets nonetheless pool resources in certain circumstances. It is not happenstance that news affiliates cover nearly the same events and topics on an nightly basis. The question is why would journalists and editors desire to pool resources with their competitors? While there is competition to get the first scope, attain the exclusive interview, receive exclusive access, news outlets are also interested in reducing costs. By pooling resources with other outlets covering the same events and topics, journalists may not have to work as hard to produce daily news content. Through the use of newsbeats, journalists and editors make the job of news production a considerable more manageable task (Bennett, 1988). This allows them time and opportunity to work on other stories and other avenues of investigation.

This type of collusion among news outlets is known as ‘pack journalism’ and leads to the somewhat worrisome trend of news homogeneity (Graber, 2005). There are numerous anecdotes of editors comparing their journalists’ stories to competitive outlets’ stories to examine differences in content. If a journalist deviates too much from the rest, the journalist’s work may be questioned. Domestic examples include news stories generated from the White House press pool and Capitol Hill correspondents (Crouse, 1973; Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1980; Cook, 1998). Pack journalism is particularly prevalent in coverage of international news by American media outlets. There are many examples of this from Iraq. Nearly all of the western media are set up in a few locations in central Baghdad – for instance, the Palestine Hotel – working closely together and thus reporting on the
same events with similar content. Western reporters’ access and movement is routinely limited by the coalition and many rely on a few local or rogue reporters to find out what is actually happening in areas outside of central Baghdad (Reitman, 2004).

What to take away from this discussion is that journalists often do not work in isolation from one another. Therefore, there is a need to model how multiple journalists affect legislators’ actions and what are the electoral implications.

5.1 Structure and Players

The structure and timing of this model are the same as in Section 4.1, except now there are \( n \) journalists representing \( n \) news outlets. One clearly germane venue for this extension are newsbeat reporters covering local, state, and federal governments. For the purposes of this model, I assume all outlets are identical in terms of payoffs and costs. That is, all outlets are equal in terms of investigation resources and the revenue they attain from reporting news. Further, given the role of the pack journalism in the news media, the costs of investigation are reduced for each individual journalist, but so are the profits from reporting. Specifically, revenue is decreased from \( a \) to \( \frac{a}{\bar{n}} \), where \( \bar{n} \) are the number of journalists (or outlets) reporting. Likewise costs are reduced from \( k \) to \( \frac{k}{\bar{n}} \), where \( \bar{n} \) are the number of journalists investigating. To side-step internal dynamics among journalists, I assume a journalist is not able to report if he or she did not investigate – thereby eliminating any free rider problems. Finally, I slightly change the district’s voting rule, so that if the district receives a message from any single journalist that \( \theta = \bar{\theta} \), then the district votes for the challenger.

Again, the legislator is allowed to purchase silence from the media. But, now the cost of silence for the legislator may extend to \( - \sum_{i \in Z} t_i \). The actual payment is equal to this sum if the legislator makes offers to all the journalists who investigate and they all accept. To cover the case where all journalists may not accept, this cost is written as \( - \sum_{i \in Z} t_i \), where \( Z \in \bar{n} \) and \( Z \) is the set of journalists who accept the legislator’s offer.

5.2 Results

Proposition 4 is similar to Proposition 3.

**Proposition 4.** Equilibrium may be of two kinds:

1. \( \frac{r \cdot p}{a} \geq n \), then each legislator votes for his or her preferred policy. All journalists investigate if the vote is against the district’s preference, accept the out-of-step

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6. This model has been notably influenced by Besley and Prat (2006).
The legislator’s offer, and do not report their findings. Both types of legislator are re-elected.

2. \( \frac{r + p}{a} < n \), then the equilibria in proposition 1 and 2 hold.

Proof: See Appendix.

Again, part 1 of the proposition is where the action is centered. We see that \( n = \hat{n} = Z \). In equilibrium, all journalists investigate a vote against the district’s preference and all journalists accept the offer from the legislator. The legislator only makes positive offers to the journalists if he or she knows that all will accept. Given the district’s voting rule, if one journalist reports the truth, then the legislator will lose re-election. In equilibrium, the specific offer is \( t = a \) for each journalist; the offer must be what the journalist would receive if he or she was the only one reporting. Clearly if \( \sum_{i \in \hat{n}} t_i > r + p \), then the legislator does not make any offers to any journalists. Another way of seeing this is since the legislator has to offer \( a \) to all \( \hat{n} \) and since \( \hat{n} = n \), the cost to the legislator for buying silence is \( n \times a \). For a bargain to occur it must be that \( r + p \geq n \times a \); or \( \frac{r + p}{a} \geq n \). If this is the case, then a pure strategy separating equilibrium exists as in Proposition 3, part 1. Otherwise, the out-of-step legislator should either vote with the district and a pooling equilibrium occurs, or he or she should mix between strategies.

The conclusion to take from this result is that as an increasing number of media outlets cover a legislator, it has the effect of constraining legislative actions and increasing the quality of representation. The empirical implication for coverage of U.S. House members is that we should at minimum find representatives from urban districts voting closely with their district’s preferences. It should also be the case that representatives from urban districts are close ideological fits. While often there are wide ideological and socio-economic differences across districts in urban areas, their representatives should fit the district’s ideology if not the city’s in the aggregate.

There are at least two reasons we should expect this. First, if there are a large collection of news outlets, representatives should realize that even if only some are actively following congressional matters, there is an increasing chance of being caught voting away from district’s interests. With more eyes watching there should be less shirking. Second, if elections truly correct for flaws and gaps in political representation, there should be a small divergence in preferences between representatives and districts. A representative who votes against his or her district and is shown as doing such should have a short congressional career. While challengers are a confounding factor on media influence, the media will undoubtedly play a substantial role in uncovering actions and policy stances of out-of-step representatives.
6. Conclusion

As argued in the opening of the article, introducing the news media as a strategic actor has a role in limiting legislators’ messages and actions in office and affecting political representation. The baseline model shows how the media can increase levels of political representation in legislative actions if not necessarily in an electoral context. We find legislators voting with the district regardless of type and winning re-election. One of the compelling empirical conclusions from the model is that we expect to find journalists not investigating in-step legislators. The vast majority of House members fit their districts well and thus the incentives for local media to aggressively monitor and report are minimal. This is a result the political communication literature has never fully considered and may explain low levels of legislator coverage by the local news media.

Allowing for bargaining between journalists and legislators begins a more analytical understanding of how the political news product is created. For journalists to be captured by legislators, the benefit has to be commensurate with any professional payoff. This may account for what some observers note as lapdog journalism in local news coverage. At the same time, the incentive structure allows journalists to do just the opposite and engage in watchdog journalism – as they gain from reporting vote differences. Empirically, these two types of journalism clearly rely on exogenous factors like media outlet resources, internal incentive structures, circulation, and the structure of media markets.

Finally, I model how the existence of multiple news media outlets can influence legislators’ actions in office, political representation, and elections. The main finding is that as the number of media outlets within a district increases, the quality of representation should increase. While legislators can still silence the media, such silence comes at a higher price. A clear implication is that the current wave of media consolidation may actually decrease the quality of political representation for many voters. While scholars need to assess empirical evidence to make a stronger argument, this is nonetheless an important result.

Connecting these models goes a long way towards explaining empirical realities about news coverage of House members. For instance, given prior information such as legislator partisan identification, district composition, and voting histories, one should be able to predict levels of coverage amongst House members, controlling for news outlet resources. While difficult to measure, the bargaining model at least provides a rationale for patterns and anomalies in coverage. For instance, why local news coverage of legislators tends not to be adversarial may rely on factors such as access and reputation. Analytical modeling of this sort begins to provide theoretical foundations for understanding the news media’s role in the American political system.
Appendix

Proof of Proposition 1. For ease of presentation, assume that the district’s preference is for the status quo (SQ). The formal statement of Proposition 1 is: When $\rho \geq 1 - \frac{k}{a}$,

$$\alpha^*(\theta) = 1 \forall \theta \quad \gamma^*(v) = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } v = SQ \\ 1 & \text{if } v = NP \end{cases}$$

$$\mu^*(v) = \begin{cases} \rho & \text{if } v = SQ \\ 0 & \text{if } v = NP \end{cases}$$

$J$’s updated belief based on $v = SQ$ using Bayes’ Rule is

$$\Pr\{v = SQ|\theta\} \Pr\{\theta\} = \frac{\rho}{\rho + (1 - \rho)} = \rho.$$ Thus, $\mu^*(SQ) = \rho$. $J$’s updated belief upon observing an out-of-equilibrium action is that $L$ is type $\bar{\theta}$ and thus $\mu^*(NP) = 0$.

Given $J$’s beliefs, $Eu_J(i; SQ) = -k \rho + (a - k)(1 - \rho)$ and $Eu_J(ni; SQ) = 0$. If $\rho \geq 1 - (k/a)$, $Eu_J(ni; SQ) \geq Eu_J(i; SQ)$ and $\gamma^*(SQ) = 0$. Provided out-of-equilibrium beliefs, $Eu_J(i; NP) = a - k$ and $Eu_J(ni; NP) = 0$, and clearly $\gamma^*(NP) = 1$. Considering $\gamma^*(v)$, $Eu_L(SQ; \bar{\theta}) = r + p$ and $Eu_L(NP; \bar{\theta}) = -p$. Likewise, $Eu_L(SQ; \bar{\theta}) = r - p$ and $Eu_L(NP; \bar{\theta}) = p$. Since $|r - p| \geq p$, $\alpha^*(\theta) = 1 \forall \theta$.

Since the in-step legislator always prefers to vote for $SQ$, a pure strategy pooling equilibrium will never exist where both types vote for $NP$ nor a pure strategy separating equilibrium where the in-step legislator votes for $NP$.

Proof of Proposition 2. Again, assume the district’s policy preference is for the status-quo over the new proposal. The formal statement of Proposition 2 is the following: When $\rho < 1 - \frac{k}{a}$,

$$\alpha^*(\theta) = \begin{cases} \frac{\rho}{\rho + a(1 - \rho)} & \text{if } \theta = \bar{\theta} \\ \frac{\rho}{\rho + a(1 - \rho)} & \text{if } \theta = \theta \end{cases}$$

$$\gamma^*(v) = \begin{cases} \frac{\rho}{\rho + a(1 - \rho)} & \text{if } v = SQ \\ 1 & \text{if } v = NP \end{cases}$$

$$\mu^*(v) = \begin{cases} \frac{\rho}{\rho + a(1 - \rho)} & \text{if } v = SQ \\ 0 & \text{if } v = NP \end{cases}$$

The journalist’s belief based on $v = SQ$ is

$$\Pr\{v = SQ|\theta\} \Pr\{\theta\} = \frac{\rho}{\rho + a(1 - \rho)}.$$ Thus $\mu^*(SQ) = \frac{\rho}{\rho + a(1 - \rho)}$. If $v = NP$, the journalist knows with certainty that the legislator is $\bar{\theta}$ and will always investigate. Therefore, $\mu^*(NP) = 0$ and $\gamma^*(NP) = 1$.

The in-step legislator always prefers to vote for $SQ$ and, thus, $\alpha^*(\bar{\theta}) = 1$. To find $\alpha^*(\theta)$, I examine the journalist’s expected utilities for investigating and not if $v = SQ$. $Eu_J(i; SQ) = a\left[\frac{\rho}{\rho + a(1 - \rho)}\right] - k$ and $Eu_J(ni; SQ) = 0$. Equating the two
expected utilities and solving for \( \alpha \) yields \( \alpha^*(\theta) = \frac{a - \rho}{1 - \rho} \). For the out-of-step legislator, 

\[
Eu_L(SQ; \theta) = -p\gamma + (r - p)(1 - \gamma) \quad \text{and} \quad Eu_L(NP; \theta) = p,
\]

since \( \gamma^*(NP) = 1 \). Equating the two expected utilities and solving for \( \gamma \) yields \( \gamma^*(SQ) = \frac{r - 2p}{r} \).

**Comparative Static Results**

All of the comparative static results are derived from taking the first derivatives of the relevant parameters in both the journalist’s and legislator’s mixing probabilities. The first two comparisons are from the journalist’s probability of investigating, \( \gamma = \frac{r - 2p}{r} \):

\[
\frac{\partial \gamma}{\partial r} = \frac{2p}{r^2} > 0.
\]

\[
\frac{\partial \gamma}{\partial p} = -\frac{2r}{r} < 0.
\]

The next three are derived from the out-of-step legislator’s probability of voting with the district, \( \alpha = \frac{a - \rho}{1 - \rho} \):

\[
\frac{\partial \alpha}{\partial \rho} = \frac{a - k}{k(\rho - 1)} > 0.
\]

\[
\frac{\partial \alpha}{\partial k} = \frac{a \rho}{k^2(\rho - 1)} > 0.
\]

\[
\frac{\partial \alpha}{\partial a} = \frac{\rho}{k(1 - \rho)} < 0.
\]

**Proof of Proposition 3.** Again, assume the district’s policy preference is for the status quo. Since part 2 of Proposition 3 is identical to Propositions 1 and 2, I only look at part 1. The formal statement of Proposition 3, part 1, the pure strategy separating equilibrium, is the following:

\[
\alpha^*(\theta) = \begin{cases} 
1 & \text{if } \theta = \overline{\theta} \\
0 & \text{if } \theta = \underline{\theta}
\end{cases}
\]

\[
\gamma^*(v) = \begin{cases} 
0 & \text{if } v = SQ \\
1 & \text{if } v = NP
\end{cases}
\]

\[
\mu^*(v) = \begin{cases} 
1 & \text{if } v = SQ \\
0 & \text{if } v = NP
\end{cases}
\]

J’s updated belief based on \( v = SQ \) and knowledge of \( \rho \) using Bayes’ Rule is

\[
Pr(\theta = \overline{\theta} | v = SQ) = \frac{Pr\{v = SQ | \overline{\theta}\} Pr\{\overline{\theta}\}}{Pr\{v = SQ | \overline{\theta}\} Pr\{\overline{\theta}\} + Pr\{v = SQ | \underline{\theta}\} Pr\{\underline{\theta}\}} = \frac{\rho}{\rho + 0} = 1.
\]

Thus, \( \mu^*(SQ) = 1 \) and \( \mu^*(NP) = 0 \). J’s updated belief upon receipt of an out-of-equilibrium action is that \( L \) is of type \( \theta \) and thus \( \mu^*(NP) = 0 \).

Given J’s beliefs, \( Eu_J(i; SQ) = a - k \), which equals \(-k\) given our assumption that \( a = 0 \) if \( s = \overline{\theta} \), and \( Eu_J(i; NP) = 0 \). Clearly, the journalist is better off not investigating when \( v = SQ \). \( Eu_J(i; NP) = a - k \) if he reports his findings \((s = \overline{\theta})\) and \( Eu_J(i; NP) = t - k \) if he accepts the legislator’s offer \((s = \underline{\theta})\). Since the
legislator simply needs to make the journalist indifferent between reporting and not, we know that \( a - k = t - k = 0 \). Then not reporting is weakly dominant over reporting.

Given \( J \)'s strategy and beliefs, for \( \theta \), \( \text{EuL}(SQ) = r + p \) and \( \text{EuL}(NP) = r - p - t \). Since I assume \( r + p \geq t \), \( \theta \) prefers \( v = SQ \). For \( \theta \), \( \text{EuL}(SQ) = r - p \) and \( \text{EuL}(NP) = r + p - t \). Using the same logic, \( \theta \) prefers \( v = NP \) over \( v = SQ \).

**Proof to Proposition 4.** The proof is identical in form as the proof for Proposition 3 except with \( n \) journalists. All differences are discussed in the text.

**REFERENCE**


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