

All the Tweets Fit to Print: The Connection Between Congressional Twitter Use and Media Coverage

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Abstract

Members of Congress are spending more of their finite resources on communicating than ever before, often at the expense of legislative staff (Lee 2016). While existing research has considered what members get for this investment, one relationship remains under-explored: does tweeting lead to greater coverage in local media? Even as the nation remains polarized and public attention shifts to national politics, local news coverage remains theoretically vital for members' goals and for democratic representation. To investigate this relationship, we collected the universe of Congressional tweets (~1.5 million tweets) from May 2021 through July 2023, as well as 1.4 million news articles at the local and national level that mention sitting members of Congress. Using a member-week panel, with member and week-level fixed effects, we test whether Twitter activity is associated with contemporaneous news coverage at multiple levels. We find that Twitter activity is strongly, robustly, and positively correlated with national news coverage, indicating a large return for low-cost communication. At the local level, tweeting is positively correlated with local news coverage, but not after you control for national coverage. Legislative effectiveness is not rewarded with news coverage at either level. These findings have important implications for representation, the decline in local news, and the role platforms play in our politics.

Keywords: Congress, Twitter, local news, nationalization, media coverage

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Introduction

Communication is central to serving as a legislator (Lipinski, 2004). Canonical theories in political science have tied congressional communication to the quest for reelection (Mayhew, 1974) and the cultivation of a supportive constituency at home (Fenno, 1978). Communicative activities have traditionally been associated with campaigns, but contemporary work has shown that campaigning is now endless. Members now develop an extensive digital communication strategy, often at the expense of legislative staff (Lee, 2016; Crosson et al., 2021). Twitter² in particular has been core to congressional communication since its widespread adoption (Russell, 2021). The assumption from this behavior is that members must receive material benefit in exchange for their digital communication. Existing work has found this to be true in regard to certain outcomes such as campaign contributions (Davis & Russell, 2026). Here we explore whether tweeting is associated with coverage in local and national news outlets.

Media attention, particularly at the local level, is critical to members of Congress because of the role it plays in helping voters learn of and reward their actions (Arnold, 2004; Hunt and Miler, 2025). But very few Americans actually follow their member of Congress on Twitter (Burnley, 2025). This means the payoff from tweeting must be indirect, at least for the vast majority of constituents. A long-explored mechanism stems from the networks of journalists and politicians on the platform, indicating a mutually dependent relationship for critical information (Verweij, 2012). However, it is unclear whether this information exchange reliably leaves the platform.

Local coverage, in particular, is theoretically the most valuable to members because it puts stories in front of their constituents. There are two factors that might call into question whether digital communication and local coverage are linked. First, local newsrooms are being hollowed out, with fewer and fewer staff to cover local issues (Abernathy, 2020; Peterson, 2021; Peterson and Dunaway, 2023). Second, public attention has shifted from local to national politics (Hopkins, 2018). In this environment, is it still possible for members of Congress to reliably attract local news coverage?

In this article, we explore whether national and local news media are responsive to members of Congress who are active online. Based on how frequently a member tweets, we consider whether contemporaneous news coverage increases alongside digital communication output. We also ask whether this relationship at the local level is independent of the national news coverage a member receives.

To investigate this question, we collected a novel dataset of 1.4 million news articles from over 4,000 news outlets that mention sitting members of Congress. We code all outlets based on their scope of coverage, either national or local, and create a weekly measure of news

² We refer to the platform as Twitter throughout, even though it has been renamed, for two reasons. First, the platform was operated as Twitter during the period we study. Second, the academic literature on Twitter examines the platform as it was governed under a certain set of policies and content moderation practices. The rebranding as X came with meaningful changes to both that may alter dynamics established in existing research.observational

coverage for all members of Congress from May 2021 through July 2023. This is paired with the universe of tweets from all sitting members which we use to create weekly counts of Twitter output by member. Using a panel dataset at the member-week level, we test the relationship of interest using member and week level fixed-effects, as well as lagged measures of news coverage. While this design is not causal, it allows us to control for a large amount of unmodelled heterogeneity, giving strong observational evidence of a relationship.

We find that tweeting is robustly and positively correlated with contemporaneous news coverage at the national level. Members who tweet more frequently are covered more frequently in national news outlets. Tweeting more frequently is also correlated with coverage at the local level, but this relationship does not hold once you account for national news coverage, indicating local news outlets may follow national news outlets in choosing to cover their members of Congress. Additionally, legislative effectiveness is negatively correlated with news coverage at the national level.

These findings indicate that there is genuine upside for members who are active on digital platforms like Twitter. A strong positive relationship between tweets and national news coverage means there is a real incentive to actively participate in digital communication online. That this relationship does not hold at the local level calls into question the linkage between digital communication strategy and the cultivation of local support with important implications for the nationalization of politics. The lack of relationship in local coverage, once national news coverage is accounted for, speaks to research on declining capacity in local news across the country. Finally, the relationship between actually legislating, here measured by legislative effectiveness, speaks to incentives that are normatively undesirable for our democracy. As Congress passes fewer and fewer bills each session and yields to the executive branch on a number of issues, many members may feel they are getting the attention they desire without having to legislate.

Congressional Goals and Media Attention

Mapping the incentives of members of Congress has structured the study of legislative politics for decades (e.g., Arnold (1990), Fenno (1978), and Mayhew (1974), among others). Key to these studies is the idea that reelection is central to structuring MC behavior. Mayhew's (1974) framing of MCs as "single-minded seekers of reelection" in particular explains why legislators desire media attention.

Fenno (1973) argues that, in addition to reelection, members also care about influence within Congress and about shaping public policy. To achieve these multiple goals, members construct a persona that speaks to multifaceted constituencies (Fenno, 1978). This line of literature implies that communication is a core competency for MCs and that explaining your actions in office is critical to achieving success in Congress (Lipinski, 2004). How could constituents become aware of their representative's activities and reward them commensurately at the ballot box without some efforts at communication by members (Hunt and Miler 2025)?

Congressional scholars have long placed MCs into different typologies of representational style, whether a simple dichotomy of “show horse vs. work horse” (Payne, 1980) or a more complex one (see Bernhard & Sulkin, 2018). Some of this differentiation is influenced by the underlying political conditions each MC faces, such as the competitiveness of their district, which incentivize different kinds of representation. We draw on Arnold’s (2004) examination of local press and congressional behavior, which shows that MC coverage varies widely across local media markets. In particular, media coverage is often conditioned on the competitiveness of the seat, leading to greater horse-race-style coverage as opposed to substantive reporting on what members have accomplished for constituents. Grimmer (2013) further shows that the competitiveness of the district also structures whether MCs take credit for their actions or engage in partisan position-taking. Members who face stronger electoral challenges are more likely to communicate what they’ve done for constituents, while MCs in less competitive districts are free to take partisan positions.

There are several reasons to believe that the current era of Congressional politics is different from past eras, necessitating our inquiry. First, as control of Congress has become more competitive between the parties, MCs have adjusted their priorities toward communication (Lee, 2016). Communication now serves the “perpetual campaign”, often at the expense of policy staff (Crosson et al., 2021; Lee, 2016). Second, digital communication has opened new ways for members to communicate directly with constituents. Studies of Twitter (Gainous & Wagner, 2014; Russell, 2021) and email newsletters (Blum et al., 2023; Cormack, 2016) demonstrate that MCs emphasize direct communication with constituents, and that the medium matters for how and what MCs choose to communicate.

Twitter, in particular, has proven important for MCs' communication strategies. Russell (2021) argues that senators use Twitter to create a “rhetorical agenda”, whether it is centered around policy or partisan fighting. The second reason is that other elites, whether journalists (Verweij, 2012) or interest groups (Macdonald et al., 2024), are active on the platform and use it to track members' behavior. The affordances of the platform allow for an open debate with a large audience, making it particularly useful for elites to monitor each other’s behaviors and attempt to influence public impressions of political events (Burnley, 2025).

Despite this connection between Twitter and elites, particularly journalists, being well documented, we have less evidence regarding what MCs actually get from this bargain. If members desire reelection above all else (Mayhew, 1974), and if public recognition is perceived as important by members (Hunt and Miler, 2025), then it stands to reason that members would engage in behaviors that they believe will generate public awareness (i.e, media coverage). Indeed, it is critical that members receive press coverage, especially coverage consumed by their constituents, if they are going to reach their core audience (Arnold, 2004). Yet perhaps this strategy is misguided: relatively few Americans use Twitter, and even fewer use it to follow their members of Congress (Burnley, 2025). Thus, while members might believe social media posting benefits them in some, it is far from obvious that these posts actually achieve meaningful ends for them. However, given that journalists themselves pay attention to the platform (Verweij,

2012), it stands to reason that the Twitter activity by legislators may spur an easy source of content for overstretched local journalists (Peterson, 2021).

Local Attention

Attention is a scarce resource, and politicians need attention from their constituents, from their peers, and from the media in order to achieve their goals (Hunt and Miler 2025). Absent the institutional and political constraints of traditional media, congressional communication has been transformed by social media, with Twitter playing a critical role (Russell, 2021). Social media posting costs members little other than staff time. From the volume of Twitter posting by members, we can infer that they perceive some relative value to this activity.

Political advertising, credit claiming, position taking, and blame avoidance are all forms of attention seeking. Much of this activity is driven by the need to be reelected (Mayhew 1974) or, as Lee (2016) details at the institutional level, by the effort to maintain control of congressional majorities. Past research identified specific traits that predicted adoption of Twitter by members: Republicans, members at the ideological extremes, and younger legislators (Straus et al., 2013). More recent work has focused on how MCs without positions of institutional power use Twitter as a means of gaining power through attention and increased campaign contributions (Burnley, 2025). Twitter therefore serves a number of interrelated needs for members – benefits that would accrue all the more if Twitter posting were to be associated with subsequent media attention.

Work from Grimmer (2013) and Russell (2021) detail how representational style, on and offline, is a strategic choice, shaped by political factors that MCs face. Part of a member's communicative strategy is choosing which issues to focus on and respond to. Barberá et al. (2019) find that in their digital communication, MCs are more likely to follow the public, especially their supporters, than to be leaders on public priorities. One way to view this is that MCs go where the attention already is, rather than attempting to create attention in a place where there is little demand for it.

A central question we have is whether active digital communication, a proxy for attention seeking, is associated with greater attention at home. Theoretically, this is the attention that *should* matter the most to MCs. Recent research suggests that there is good reason to believe that it does. Ban & Kaslovsky (2025) document heterogeneity in how frequently members orient their communication to local issues, but find that local orientation is responsive to electoral factors. Davis & Russell (2026) find that over a 13-year stretch, tweeting about local issues is associated with greater campaign donations, creating financial incentive to keep attention local. This finding creates an interesting tension with work from Kaslovsky (2022), which finds that senators face serious tradeoffs when physically visiting constituents at home (Fenno 1978). It is possible that communicating about local issues, without being physically present, can strike a worthwhile and efficient balance for MCs.

While the research above gives some credence to the idea that MCs can increase their attention at home through digital communication, there are still barriers. News creation, at the

national and local level, is driven by market pressure, with news outlets publishing what is most profitable (Hamilton, 2004). “Congressmember does good for their constituents” is not always the most attention-grabbing headline. Hayes & Lawless (2015, 2018) document not only the decline of coverage MCs receive in local news outlets, but a diminishing ability to make assessments around performance and lower civic engagement as a result. Analyzing what kind of coverage MCs receive on cable and network news, Padgett et al. (2019) find that conflict is a strong predictor of who gets air time. The same dynamic may be true at the local level as well. In the next section, we explore the research on the decline of local news in the United States and how this impacts MCs' ability to capture local news coverage.

The Hollowing Out of Local Newsrooms

Local newspapers continue to close their doors (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2018), and those that remain are stretched thinner than ever by cost-cutting layoffs (Peterson 2021). Abernathy (2020) documents this decline directly, finding that roughly a quarter of American newspapers have ceased operation since the early 2000s, leaving over 200 counties without any local news outlet at all. Her work shows that closures alone understate the extent of the problem. Many of the roughly 6,000 papers still in circulation have become what she terms “ghost newspapers,” retaining their name and their subscriber base while operating with a fraction of the reporting staff needed to cover local government, courts, and elections in any sustained way. Pickard (2020) locates the underlying cause in the collapse of the advertising-subsidized business model that once sustained local journalism, arguing that this is a structural economic failure rather than a temporary downturn, and one that market forces alone are unlikely to reverse.

Ownership consolidation has compounded the effect of these closures on the newsrooms that remain. Peterson and Dunaway (2023) find that newspapers acquired by hedge funds and other investment owners see measurable reductions in reporting capacity relative to papers that stay independently owned, suggesting that ownership structure itself, separate from closure, is driving down the volume of original local reporting. Sinclair Broadcast Group's expansion into local television offers a parallel illustration on the broadcast side. Martin and McCrain (2019) found that when Sinclair acquired a local station, its share of national political programming grew substantially and its coverage took on a noticeably more conservative slant, relative to other stations operating in the same media market. Airtime that might once have covered a city council meeting, a school board dispute, or a local member of Congress's district event increasingly carried syndicated national segments produced centrally and distributed across the entire chain.

Together, these findings point toward the same underlying pattern from two different angles of ownership. A newsroom or a station can remain open, fully staffed on paper, and broadcasting or publishing every day, while still producing steadily less coverage that is meaningfully local. National content is cheaper to produce once and distribute across many affiliated outlets than original local reporting is to fund in each individual market, and that incentive strengthens as more outlets pass into the hands of large ownership groups. Peterson's

(2021) broader work on reporting capacity reinforces this point at the level of individual newsrooms, showing that staff reductions translate directly into less political coverage overall. As newsrooms hollow out, whether through closure or through this quieter erosion of what remaining staff can cover, local outlets increasingly rely on national wire content, press releases, or coverage that larger outlets have already produced rather than original reporting generated from the district itself. Local journalists might well be grateful for easy heuristic cues like Twitter posts from the members of Congress they cover to ease the costs of news-gathering directly.

The Nationalization of American Politics

While “all politics is local” continues to be a favorite phrase of political pundits, research indicates that, in many ways, politics today is more nationalized than ever. This has important implications for our theory above and beyond what is happening to local news media. Hopkins (2018) shows that public attention has shifted primarily toward national politics, with downstream implications for whom donations go, which organizations lead public discourse, and how voters assess candidates. We see the effect of nationalization on Congress in the erosion of the incumbency advantage for House members (Carson et al., 2020; Jacobson, 2015). A similar dynamic is at play in the Senate, with the connection between Senate results and presidential results being tighter now than in decades past (Sievert & McKee, 2019). With this dynamic in mind, we examine the literature on how this impacts what MCs tweet, what local news covers in the wake of nationalization, and whether this changes our core theory that MCs desire local news coverage.

If the public is more interested in national politics than ever, does it make sense for MCs to prioritize national issues over local issues? Some research presents evidence that the answer is yes. Though not an explicit test of digital communication, Trussler (2022) leverages the rollout of broadband to examine how changes to the information environment impact legislative behavior, finding that MCs become more partisan when their constituents have more access to information. In a more direct test of partisan rhetoric, which can stand in as a proxy for national issues, Ballard et al. (2023) find that members from safer districts and from the opposition party to the president tweet more polarizing content, providing evidence that certain conditions may make national issues more attractive to MCs. Similarly, Russell (2021) finds that national polarization creates demand for a rhetorical agenda focused on partisan fights. Despite this, evidence remains that a focus on local issues persists in Congress’ digital communication. Examining over a decade of Facebook and Twitter posts, Heseltine (2026) finds that MCs, particularly those in the president's party or in the majority, focus on local communication even though few material benefits come as a result.

On the local media side of the equation, there is also evidence of a shifting focus to national issues. This could be driven by demand for more national coverage as the public’s preferences change (Trussler, 2021). Or it could come from the supply side, as Martin & McCrain (2019) suggest. This impacts not only the coverage of local issues, but also of the

politicians who are in a position to address them (Hayes & Lawless, 2015). Where robust in-state media remains, voters are able to make better assessments regarding their local issues, but this is, in part, a function of media market geography (Moskowitz, 2021). Similarly, Eshbaugh-Soha & Richards (2025) find that a mix of outlet, district, and member-level characteristics help explain the wide variety in newspaper coverage of representatives in Congress.

The resulting picture is mixed. On the one hand, increased national focus may provide incentives for MCs to seek national coverage. On the other, certain political, institutional, and geographic factors may increase the presence of local coverage. Based on the entirety of the research above, we take an agnostic approach to individual member motivation. Though we control for these factors, whether a member is purposely seeking local coverage is unobservable. Instead, we are simply interested in how media respond to members who are active in their digital communication, examining whether a more active presence can lead to greater coverage in the national press and at home.

Data

To investigate the relationship between MCs' digital communication and their coverage by local and national media, we rely on several datasets. The first dataset is a novel collection of news articles mentioning sitting members of Congress, compiled using the NewsAPI (NewsAPI, 2026), a programmatic tool for scraping over 150,000 news outlets, allowing us to query for MC names. The output of this query is article-level metadata – news outlet, date published, headline, and first 200 characters – for every article that mentions an MC. The tool limits queries to the preceding five years, meaning we could only pull data starting in 2021 and running through the data collection period in early 2026.

News articles are queried by a search term, in our case, the MC's name. This presents a bit of a methodological challenge given that many members do not go by their full name or use nicknames. To best identify the name most associated with MCs, we utilize their display name on Wikipedia as a proxy for the name most commonly associated with each member. While this sometimes differs from official sources, such as the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, it does more accurately identify members by their common name. For example, Representative Joe Neguse (D-CO), whose official Bioguide name is Joseph, goes by his nickname in campaign materials and on social media.

For each member, we queried for all articles that mentioned their name from May 2021 through July 2023, a period that overlaps with the data we have on their Twitter activity. We then took the raw collection of articles that mentioned each member and created weekly counts of total news mentions, national outlet news mentions, and local news mentions. We determined the scope, either national or local, of all 4,864 sources in the data by hand, verifying their location and focus. In total, we collected metadata for 1,397,110 articles over the time period of interest. The data was deduplicated to ensure that articles were not collected more than once per member.

For our measure of local news mentions, we use the identified state of each local news outlet and leverage that to create a measure of in-state local news coverage, by week, for each

member. This made the most theoretical sense to us, given that news outlets tend to be clustered geographically, but may have the responsibility of covering news for the entire state. Additionally, while senators certainly would be covered statewide, House members might be in a district with limited local news outlets. Our method captures spillover coverage from statewide outlets, which is valuable for an MC, even if it is not technically located within their district.

The second dataset is the publicly available congresstweets data (Litell, 2026), which includes the Twitter output for all sitting MCs from 2017 through 2023. As mentioned above, this limits our analysis to the overlap of this dataset and the five-year window the NewsAPI allows users to query. This leaves us with 1,548,222 tweets posted during our period of interest. As with the news articles above, we take the total tweets associated with all sitting MCs during our two-year window and aggregate them at the weekly level.

The result is a data set with panel structure at the member-week level, where each legislator has a count of total tweets and total news mentions, broken out at the national and local level. From here, we bring in covariates from the Legislative Effectiveness Dataset to use as controls in our models. Key control variables of interest include member ideology, as measured by their score on DW-NOMINATE's first dimension, whether they are a committee chair, in the majority, their seniority in Congress, their Legislative Effectiveness Score, and their vote share in the most recent election.

Method

The data we analyze form a panel – we observe members' social media activity at the weekly level, alongside the weekly aggregation of mentions of their names in national and local media coverage. Of course, many factors, not all of which are readily observable, contribute to members' social media activity as well as media coverage (Gelman and Hill 2007).

Fortunately, the power of a panel design enables us to account for these unmodelled sources of heterogeneity in several ways. Since we have two years of data, aggregated weekly, for members of the House, we analyze over 100 time points and over 500 units in our panel. As such, we include fixed effects at both the member and week levels in the models below (Clark and Linzer 2015). This strategy allows us to adjust for unmodelled heterogeneity that arises from differences between members, and differences in the incentives of both members and newsrooms over time without biasing our coefficient estimates.

One challenging question researchers must address in the analysis of panel data revolves around the inclusion (or not) of a lagged dependent variable (Beck and Katz 2011). Indeed, including a lagged dependent variable can, in some cases, bias coefficient estimates in panel data models (Nickell 1981). However, given that we have a reasonably long time horizon in our panel, Nickell bias should be quite minimal (Beck, Katz, and Mignozzetti 2014). Further, failing to include a lagged dependent variable in the models below induces serial correlation, a more pernicious form of bias that does not attenuate as the length of the panel grows (Beck and Katz 2011). As such, we include one or more lags of the dependent variable in all of our models below.

Our theory lacks sufficient specificity to identify precisely how many lags of the dependent (and key independent variables) to include in our models. This issue arises quite commonly in social science research. We follow Box-Steffensmeier et al. (2014), who advise analysts to let the data speak for itself on the issue of lag length selection. Here, we retain only the statistically significant lags of relevant variables.

Our theoretical variable of interest, number of Twitter posts per week, fails conventional tests of skewness. Indeed, members undoubtedly vary considerably in their usage of social media. Therefore, we analyze the natural log of a members' tweets (plus one to account for members who do not tweet at all in a given week), instead of the raw value.

Given the panel nature of our design, we cannot adjust for covariates that do not vary over time. As such, we do not control for demographic characteristics such as race or gender in the models below. We do, however, include a suite of control variables that *do* exhibit some variance over time that may also relate to a member of Congress's media coverage. These include member ideology, as measured by DW-NOMINATE (Poole and Rosenthal 2000), dummy variables for committee chair and majority party status, seniority in years, legislative effectiveness score (LES) as measured by Volden and Wiseman (2014), and the members' share of the two-party vote in their most recent reelection effort.

Finally, our theory is unclear as to whether national media coverage ought to also cause local media coverage of members of Congress, and vice versa. As such, we estimate two models each for both national and local media coverage. The first columns of Tables 1 and 2, respectively, do not include other forms of media coverage as control variables, while the second columns do.

Results

Table 2. Predictors of National Media Coverage

Dependent variable: National media mentions

	(1)	(2)
Log(tweets)	3.2875*** (0.3961)	3.1821*** (0.3938)
National, t-1	0.5417*** (0.0469)	0.5401*** (0.0466)
National, t-2	0.0652*** (0.0234)	0.0650*** (0.0225)
Log(tweets), t-1	-1.4314*** (0.4609)	-1.4186*** (0.4557)
Log(tweets), t-2	-0.8037*** (0.2338)	-0.8142*** (0.2327)
DW-NOMINATE	37.1676	33.7781

	(31.3121)	(30.1561)
Committee chair	3.4135**	3.4533**
	(1.5229)	(1.5199)
Majority party	1.7917**	1.7305**
	(0.8189)	(0.8152)
Seniority	0.0194	0.0212
	(0.2187)	(0.2082)
LES	-0.6408*	-0.6330*
	(0.3734)	(0.3716)
Vote share	-0.0272	-0.0274
	(0.0346)	(0.0336)
Local coverage		1.9019*
		(1.0442)
Local coverage, t-1		-0.6294**
		(0.2815)
Local coverage, t-2		-0.1256
		(0.1542)
Member and week fixed effects	Yes	Yes

Note: Clustered standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$

Table 2 presents our panel regression results for members' national media coverage. Across both specifications, social media activity is positively and statistically significantly correlated with contemporaneous national media coverage. A one-unit increase in a member's weekly Twitter activity (logged) is associated with over a 3-unit increase in subsequent media mentions, a sizable bump for a relatively low-cost activity. Further, the long-run coefficient (Pesaran, Shin, and Smith 1999) for Model 1 is approximately 7.17, implying that a permanent one-unit increase in tweeting ought to be associated with durable increases in national media coverage. We therefore reject the null hypothesis associated with national media coverage.

Interestingly, Table 2 also shows that members of the majority party and committee chairs are also statistically significantly associated with increased media coverage. Other factors, such as ideology, previous vote-share, and LES, have no statistically significant association with media coverage.

Table 2. Predictors of Local Media Coverage

Dependent variable: In-state local media mentions

	(1)	(2)
Log(tweets)	0.0536***	0.0274

	(0.0204)	(0.0239)
Local coverage, t-1	0.2373***	0.2348***
	(0.0248)	(0.0236)
Log(tweets), t-1	0.0028	0.0136
	(0.0144)	(0.0158)
DW-NOMINATE	2.2056*	1.7161*
	(1.1736)	(1.0320)
Committee chair	-0.0171	-0.0640
	(0.0365)	(0.0399)
Majority party	0.0473*	0.0212
	(0.0267)	(0.0269)
Seniority	-0.0016	-0.0018
	(0.0104)	(0.0084)
LES	-0.0073	0.0016
	(0.0142)	(0.0141)
Vote share	0.0002	0.0005
	(0.0016)	(0.0014)
National coverage		0.0085***
		(0.0024)
National coverage, t-1		-0.0031***
		(0.0010)
Member and week fixed effects	Yes	Yes

Note: Clustered standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$

Table 3 presents our complementary analyses of local media coverage. Model 3 (column 1 of Table 3) shows that social media activity is positively and statistically significantly associated with local media coverage. Yet Model 4 (column 2), which adjusts for national media coverage, shows the opposite – once we include national coverage in our model, there is no statistically significant association between a member’s social media activity and subsequent mentions in local news outlets.

Discussion & Conclusion

Members of Congress cultivate their geographic constituency (Mansbridge 2003) through a variety of activities (Fenno 1978). Local media coverage, in particular, remains an avenue by which members can build a brand name for themselves and highlight their effort and achievements related to the idiosyncratic needs of their districts (Hunt and Miler 2025). Moreover, coverage of members can perhaps imply renewed focus in their districts on local

issues, especially those without obvious national partisan valence. Such coverage may indirectly slow the growth of affective polarization in their districts by highlighting the cross-cutting nature of local geographic identity distinct from partisanship (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2021). The political fortunes of individual legislators, along (indirectly) with the health of democracy in America, are therefore implicated in the relationship between elite communications and subsequent local media coverage.

Today, members spend more and more of their limited resources on communication and campaign staff, to the detriment of the legislative budget (Crosson et al. 2021; Lee 2016). Some legislators even spend a great deal of their limited time and energy on their social media presence. Here, we investigate whether, and to what extent, social media activity translates into traditional media coverage at the national and local levels.

We analyze the universe of Twitter posts by members of Congress between May 2021 and July 2023, along with local and national media mentions of members by name, during this time period. We apply a rigorous observational data analysis strategy, incorporating both member and date fixed effects, along with the lagged values of local and national media coverage of members and a standard set of control variables.

While we cannot, of course, randomly assign members of Congress to start tweeting or stop, this approach does allow us to adjust for a considerable amount of unmodelled heterogeneity at the member and week levels. Indeed, for this relationship to be invalidated, it would have to be the case that something contemporaneously confounds this relationship on the week of media coverage that is not already captured in the member's identity, the constant effect of the events in society on that particular week, and the levels of previous coverage of that member (Beck and Katz 2011). While not causal, we find this to be very strong evidence.

With this research design, we find that a member's social media activity is positively and statistically significantly correlated with their subsequent mentions in national news outlets. Further, members' social media activity is also positively correlated with subsequent mentions in local news outlets within the members' home state. This relationship, however, is not statistically significant once we adjust for contemporaneous national news coverage of that same member. We speculate that this dynamic is indicative of reduced news-gathering capacity at the local level (Peterson 2021); perhaps local outlets use national coverage as a heuristic, but this national coverage does seem to be at least in part a function of members' own efforts on social media.

Future work should explore this dynamic in other national contexts and different time periods. Qualitative work with local political journalists would also do much to better clarify the mechanisms behind the relationships we find. In particular, do local journalists view Twitter, or social media in general, as a source for stories about a lawmaker?

Regrettably, the Twitter API, which made this research possible, is now prohibitively expensive for most research cases. Human knowledge regarding social media and society will therefore remain that much the poorer so long as these data remain inaccessible to researchers. We urge policymakers and technology entrepreneurs to consider the negative externalities of keeping these data secret.

Perhaps worryingly, while social media activity is positively and statistically significantly associated with traditional media coverage, a member's actual skill at lawmaking (Hitt, Volden, and Wiseman 2017) seems to bear little relationship to mass media attention at either the local or national level. Indeed, a member's Legislative Effectiveness Score (Volden and Wiseman 2014) is negatively associated with their media coverage.

These two relationships, taken together, carry worrying implications for legislative politics—if members value media attention, and/or if media attention bears any relationship to fundraising success, reelection prospects, or advancement in the leadership of the chamber, then perverse incentives seem to rule today. Tweeting wins this valuable attention. Lawmaking, it seems, does not.

This dynamic, while regrettable, makes intuitive sense. Newsroom incentives prioritize partisan conflict and drama (Hitt and Searles 2018), not the dry and legalistic substance of ordinary legislation. Journalists can hardly be blamed for highlighting conflictual and inflammatory rhetoric from their local members of Congress. Such content seems far more likely to drive valuable clicks and engagement. Thus, journalists and legislators interact in a suboptimal equilibrium — the incentives of both sets of actors prioritize the generation and coverage of bombast in 280 characters or less. All of this at the expense of time and attention that could be spent on the problems of the country that might be addressed legislatively. Future work should explore the individual relationship between social media activities and legislative productivity in Congress.

To be sure, while we have done all we can to account for alternative explanations and unmodelled heterogeneity in these relationships, our research design lacks random assignment and/or natural experiments that might more cleanly identify the causal effect of social media activity on mass media coverage. While we are confident in these findings, future scholars should look for plausibly exogenous sources of variation in members' social media activity to further identify and understand this relationship.

Members of Congress are of course free to pursue whatever mix of communicative and legislative strategies they rationally believe to be in their interest. Yet jointly, the collective action problem implied here is clear: why should one member unilaterally disarm and cease their social media activity, losing out on the valuable resource of national media coverage that their fellow legislators are all too happy to receive in the meantime? Indeed, absent a change in the incentive structure for members and/or journalists, this relationship between social media activity and mass media coverage seems unlikely to abate.

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