

Title of Dissertation: FOLLOW THE LEADERS: POLICY
PRESENTATION IN THE U.S. CONGRESS

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This dissertation presents a theory of policy presentation in the U.S. Congress. I define policy presentation as the strategic development and distribution of partisan information to explain major legislative decisions by congressional leaders. Today, rank-and-file members, increasingly removed from the legislative process, rely on guidance from congressional leaders to discuss major legislative decisions with their constituents. As a result, preparing constituent communication materials has become an institutionalized responsibility for party and committee leaders, particularly for House Republicans. I also argue that policy presentation is an undocumented source of partisan polarization, as it incentivizes a partisan presentation of legislative activity—even in cases of bipartisanship and compromise. Using interviews with members of Congress and staff, computational text analysis, and social network analysis, I demonstrate how congressional leaders develop and distribute partisan messages for constituent use. I also document the conditions under which policy presentation occurs, and the members most likely to rely on party and committee leaders for assistance with constituent communication.

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by

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Dedication

To Michael.

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Chapter 1: Defining and introducing policy presentation

Every four years, Congress reauthorizes the Farm Bill, a multibillion-dollar collection of distributive, redistributive, and regulatory policies that impact the entire country. The reauthorizing legislation is a careful combination of vying ideological priorities, including regional-specific crop subsidies, trade adjustments, and SNAP benefits. Every title of the expansive legislation is complicated, and bill writing occurs over the course of several years in the Agriculture Committee of both chambers of Congress. However, given the national impact of the legislation, in recent years, final passage is reliant on the management of party leaders. In the 113th Congress, floor consideration even brought threats of government shutdown until party leaders took over to iron out ideological differences.¹ Four years later, passage of the 2018 Farm Bill came down to the wire, with negotiations continuing into the final weeks—a dynamic Politico referred to as “Farm Bill crunch time.”² But despite the legislative complexity and partisan turmoil, the outcome is often the same: a large, omnibus bill that passes with overwhelming bipartisan support.

This process is par for the course for most major legislation in the modern U.S. Congress. Members are increasingly reliant on party and committee leaders to negotiate, write, and coordinate the passage of major legislation (Curry 2015, Cox and McCubbins 2005, Sinclair 1997, etc.). But despite critiques, this unorthodox and leader-led approach is effective; today, much of Congress’ most impactful legislation is passed by large, bipartisan majorities (Curry and Lee 2020). However, the public’s view of Congress is not one of a bipartisan lawmaking

¹ Weisman, Jonathan. December 2, 2013. *New York Times*. “Underachieving Congress Appears in No Hurry to Change Things Now.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/03/us/politics/least-productive-congress-on-record-appears-in-no-hurry-to-produce.html>

² McCrimmon, Ryan. September 13, 2018. POLITICO. Newsletter: “Weekly Agriculture.” <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/morning-agriculture/2018/09/13/farm-bill-crunch-time-339333>

institution. The overwhelming majority of Americans disapprove of Congress, often citing partisanship and gridlock as the reason for their disdain (Desilver 2016, Flynn and Harbridge 2016).

Why does the American public believe that Congress is passing more partisan bills every year, despite actions that demonstrate otherwise? It is often attributed to a variety of external factors such as gerrymandering, excess money in politics, polarized interest groups, and ideological sorting. But this dissertation introduces an additional explanation of congressional polarization: constituent communication. Although bill passage of major legislation is often bipartisan, I find that the discussion of legislation is highly polarized. When communicating with their constituents, members emphasize partisan votes over bipartisan legislation, and when they do discuss successful bipartisan endeavors, they do so using polarizing terms that give the impression of partisanship. Furthermore, this partisan approach to congressional communication is not random, but is rather encouraged and facilitated by congressional leaders. Leaders craft and distribute partisan messages that tout their party's accomplishments without disclosing the bipartisan cooperation that makes legislative success possible, and encourage members to share party-specific messaging through newsletters and press releases.

For example, after the Farm Bill passed in the 113th Congress, members sent hundreds of press releases and newsletters to their constituents explaining their vote and touting the positive benefits their districts would receive. However, these messages differed greatly across party lines. Democratic members emphasized the assistance this bill would bring "seniors" and "low-income families." They discussed "conservation efforts" in the bill and "nutrition" and "hunger" concerns. Republicans focused on the benefits for "farmers" and "ranchers," as well as how it

would positively affect the “agriculture industry” and the “economy.”³ Neither party prioritized discussing the bipartisan nature of the bill—despite the fact that it was sponsored by a Republican chairman, passed by a Republican House and Democratic Senate with bipartisan support, and was signed into law by a Democratic president.

Just as unorthodox lawmaking has become common, these communication choices are typical in Congress, particularly when discussing major legislation. This dissertation explores how party leaders and committee chairs assist rank-and-file members with polarized constituent communication. This process, which I call “policy presentation” has become an institutionalized responsibility of congressional leaders, necessitated by centralized legislative processes and political polarization. Congressional leaders encourage members to discuss polarized partisan goals or, as in the case of the Farm Bill, present bipartisan legislation through a partisan lens. These communication materials are provided by party and committee leaders and distributed via an institutionalized network of staff and resources, particularly in the House of Representatives. This leader-led education effort occurs alongside the passage of major legislation, preparing members of Congress to explain their voting record to constituents.

Policy presentation is an important yet understudied stage of the policymaking process. Research has documented how a centralized Congress has limited rank-and-file legislators’ opportunities in the legislative process. I argue that a similar dynamic is found in how members communicate with their constituents: Today, party leaders hold immense informational advantages and resources, while rank-and-file congressional offices suffer from declining resources and expertise, despite facing increasingly complex legislation and constant demands for constituent communication (Curry 2015, LaPira et al. 2020, Pearson 2005). This dissertation

³ Party breakdown of terms discussing the 113th Farm Bill in the Appendix, Figure 1.1.

documents that just as rank-and-file members have become reliant on parties and committees to understand legislation, they are now reliant on these centralized sources to communicate with constituents.

Policy presentation provides numerous advantages for legislatures. For party leader, policy presentation provides institutional and electoral advantages by encouraging party unity and clarifying interparty differences for voters. Majority party leaders, eager to retain their leadership status, will undoubtedly endeavor to amplify messages of legislative successes, while minority party leaders are eager to show efforts of obstruction and majority inefficiency. Rank-and-file members, under immense pressure to keep up with growing constituencies and near-constant messaging, need help conveying party wins to voters. But complex policies, unorthodox rules and procedures, and a vast polycscape can be overwhelming. Congressional leaders present a clear, party-approved messaging alternative. This research finds that party and committee leaders help members communicate legislative decisions by providing party-specific narratives on major legislation—assuaging leaders’ desires for party unity and rank-and-file members’ need for constituent communication.

This research also considers policy presentation as an understudied source of partisanship among voters. How elites present policies to constituents impacts how policies are viewed, accepted, and polarized (Hill and Tausanovitch 2018, Berelson et al. 1986). While improvements in technology have made it possible for members of Congress to quickly and frequently communicate legislative actions—a boon for transparency and constituent relations—the information provided to constituents is increasingly partisan and biased. Of course, members are certainly partisan in their own right, but the rise of policy presentation advances leader-provided partisan information over district and state-specific narratives. This communication shortcut has

serious implications at the constituency level: When legislators themselves present a partisan view of the policymaking process, constituents develop a biased and inaccurate perception of Congress, thus maintaining and encouraging polarization.

Both constituent demand and the source of the message (party and committee leaders) encourage the kind of partisan messaging that I identify as policy presentation. The result of this type of communication is that rank-and-file members have become more unified and polarized in their constituent communications. This dissertation details how policy presentation has become an integral stage in the passage of major legislation, which members of Congress are most likely to use these messages, and how policy presentation incites a polarized view of lawmaking. Furthermore, this research indicates that the use of polarized messaging via official party resources has increased over time—offering timely insight into the partisan polarization that permeates Congress and the electorate today.

Policy presentation in the U.S. Congress

Defining policy presentation

I define policy presentation as the internal development and distribution of communication guidance to accompany a legislative vote. Much of this process occurs behind the scenes, taking the form of talking points, sample press releases, or committee hearing materials. Party and committee leaders work together to develop and distribute these messages to rank-and-file members using an extensive network of staff, member meetings, and email and phone correspondence. These materials are developed with constituents in mind, and the overarching goal is to help members discuss legislative decisions in a simple, clear, and partisan way. Whereas Mayhew (1974) famously documented the form these messages can take (e.g., credit claiming, blaming, or position-taking), here I focus on the *process* by which the message is

developed, distributed, and ultimately adopted by legislators. Thus, this dissertation focuses on the internal mechanisms of policy presentation—when, why, and how party and committee leaders create and distribute a party-specific message, and the subsequent rank-and-file response.

This research does not assume that members only receive information and assistance from party leaders, but rather it seeks to understand how leaders decide which information to amplify and share with the entire chamber. Of course, external resources, particularly interest groups, the media, and think tanks, can and do play a role in how legislation is framed and understood by members and constituents (Furnas et al. 2022, Miler 2010, Esterling 2007, Entman 2003). However, while outside groups are undoubtedly a source of information, party and committee leaders alone know what's in the legislation and can shape the processes by which it comes to the floor. Thus, their accompanying narrative has a unique advantage for rank-and-file members: It's crafted specifically for the legislation at hand, party-specific, and approved by party leadership.

Of course, not every member engages in policy presentation equally, and the theory of policy presentation recognizes differences by chamber, party, type of legislation, and legislator needs. Legislators may be more (or less) likely to use leader-provided messaging given personal resources, expertise, or ideological preferences. It's also the case that not every bill is equally important to every legislator, so there are times when a member may not discuss a vote at all. In short, every legislator does not rely on leader-led messaging for every single vote; rather, the adoption of policy presentation varies from bill to bill, legislator to legislator. The goal of this research is to document policy presentation and understand general trends of message development, distribution, and adoption throughout the U.S. Congress. This dissertation does so by looking at how policy presentation differs by legislation and legislator. I expect that party

leaders are selective in preparing materials for policy presentation, and the first half of this project seeks to understand which bills are most susceptible to leader-led messaging. I also expect there to be widespread differences across chambers and parties due to variation in resources and internal organizations. Lastly, I consider how legislator-level variables such as electoral vulnerability and seniority impact the likelihood of message adoption. Understanding how legislative differences and legislator needs intertwine in constituent communication provides a full picture of the policy presentation process in Congress.

Measuring policy presentation

This dissertation is guided by five specific questions to understand policy presentation: When does policy presentation occur? Which legislation is most susceptible to policy presentation? How is policy presentation implemented by congressional leaders, and what does it look like? And lastly, who is most likely to rely on and absorb policy presentation within Congress? I answer these questions over the course of five substantive chapters and consider Congress as a whole, as well as differences between the chambers and the parties. The analysis includes a mixed-methods approach of elite interviews with current and former members and staff, computational text analysis of major legislation and constituent communication from the 113th to 116th Congress (2013-2020), and social network analysis of members of Congress.

First, building on existing literature on the modern Congress, I explain how today's legislative process has allowed policy presentation to flourish. I argue that an environment of rising political polarization in Congress and among constituents has not only institutionalized "unorthodox lawmaking" processes (Sinclair 1997, 2016, Cox and McCubbins 2005, Curry and Lee 2020, etc.), but also centralized congressional resources to party and committee leaders and strained the limits of congressional capacity. Today, rank-and-file members have less

experienced staff, less well-paid staff, and fewer staff than congressional leaders (Reynolds 2020, Burgat 2019). Yet they face more complex policy challenges and greater constituent demands than at any prior moment in congressional history. Technology has ushered in an era of colossal constituent communication, particularly through email correspondence and social media. As a result, members of Congress are forced to communicate with their constituents at a near-constant pace.

The backdrop of rising polarization permeates all of these challenges. Political problems are harder to solve, which increases reliance on congressional leaders to negotiate outcomes. Districts and states are increasingly polarized (Gimpel and Hui 2017, Fiorina et al. 2005, Tam Cho et al. 2012), which leads rank-and-file members to send communications aligned with the most attentive constituents (Arnold 1990, Abramowitz 2010, Abramowitz et al. 2008). As a result, polarized constituencies, the centralization of resources, and the demands of constituent communication coalesce into a need for policy presentation. Rank-and-file members are not only left in the dark about what is in major legislation (Curry 2015), but because they are expected to communicate frequently and along ideological lines, they also need assistance with communication. Party and committee leaders have met this demand with outsized communication resources: communication-specific staff, resources such as recording studios and graphic designers, and events such as press conferences and internal meetings. Overtime, these resources and responsibilities have been institutionalized through leadership offices, budgets, staff, and rank-and-file expectations. Today, rank-and-file members not only demand, but expect party leaders to provide them with the materials necessary to explain legislative decisions along party lines.

In the face of immensely complicated policy challenges and a lack of personal resources, these resources are appreciated by rank-and-file members. However, I expect there to be variation in the types of legislation that party leaders dedicate policy presentation efforts toward. Chapter 3 asks *when* policy presentation occurs and documents the type of legislation congressional leaders are most likely to focus on. There are hundreds, sometimes thousands, of votes every congressional session; members of Congress do not communicate about all of them, and congressional leaders do not prepare communication materials for the majority of them. District-specific issues should not require the assistance of party or committee leaders and would likely not be worth the endeavors of an entire leadership office; for these issues, I expect rank-and-file offices to rely on their own internal resources. Rather, I argue that congressional leaders focus on issues that are important to a majority of their constituencies—major legislation that is either a party priority or will impact a majority of the U.S. population. Thus, I use the Congressional Quarterly’s Key Vote designation to catalogue the major legislation that should be subjected to policy presentation.

Among major legislation, I expect great variation in the materials leaders will (or will not) prepare. Chapter 3 analyzes major legislation along two planes: the polarization of the vote and the complexity of the legislative text. In a polarized environment like the present Congress, I expect members of Congress to be more likely to discuss partisan priorities, emphasizing partisan divisions and “wins.” Party leaders should be more likely to encourage members to discuss polarized votes and provide internal resources to facilitate this messaging push. Additionally, in an era of unorthodox lawmaking, major, impactful legislation is increasingly complex. These omnibus policies—and the leader-led negotiations required to write them—leave rank-and-file members out of the bill development and education process. Thus, I expect rank-

and-file members to be more reliant on party leaders when discussing complex legislation. To catalog polarization and complexity, I create two original measures: I measure polarization by considering the vote difference between the two parties. To measure bill complexity, I use dictionary-based computational text analysis to catalogue the familiarity of legislative texts and topics. This computational text measure is easily applicable for other questions of social science, as detailed in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 4, I detail *how* policy presentation of major legislation occurs in the U.S. Congress. I provide a behind-the-scenes look at the development and distribution of policy presentation that draws on 31 anonymous, open-ended interviews with members of Congress and their staff. The findings from this chapter clarify the varying roles of committee chairs and party leaders throughout the policy presentation process. I find that committees are the starting point for policy presentation. Institutional opportunities and advantages, such as committee hearings and expert staff, allow chairs and ranking members to define the policy problem and collect data on behalf of the chamber. Party leaders then use this information from committee chairs to create and distribute party-specific messages. One of Chapter 4's primary contributions is the detailed look at how policy presentation is distributed via party levers—a process previously unaccounted for in the political science literature.

Chapter 4 also uncovers important variation by chamber, party, and member needs. As expected, members' staff and resources play a significant role in the likelihood of policy presentation. House members are much more reliant on congressional leaders for messaging assistance—their smaller, less experienced staff is a comparative disadvantage. Conversely, senators were more likely to report relying on their larger, more experienced staff over that of congressional leaders when crafting constituent communication. However, even Senate offices

shared a reliance on the resources and messaging of party leadership, albeit to a lesser extent. Respondents also revealed differences in policy presentation among the two parties. Republicans detailed an expansive, professionalized, and institutionalized network of staff and resources to facilitate policy presentation. Weekly meetings, daily emails, and specific messaging directives define the Republican approach, while Democratic respondents detailed decentralized and haphazard tactics of member preparation. Lastly, and also as expected, there was variation in individual member adoption of policy positioning messages even between chambers and parties. More senior members and senators were less likely to adopt party messages, while freshman members and House members were more reliant on party leaders. Taken together, this chapter provides new insights that help us understand when members turn to congressional leaders for assistance and when they are more likely to go it alone with personal messaging.

Chapter 5 considers *what* policy presentation looks like by evaluating the frequency and content of constituent communication, and how this differs by legislative polarization and complexity. I expect that members will engage in policy presentation in two ways: emphasizing polarizing votes and party priorities and speaking about bipartisan legislation in partisan terms. As discussed above, constituent communication has the broad goal of party maintenance for the majority or party opposition for the minority (Mayhew 1974). Thus, members are likely to prioritize party positions. The easiest way to do this is by discussing polarizing votes or “messaging” legislation (Lee 2016). However, members also feel obliged to discuss major legislation, which often passes with bipartisan support, as discussed above. To discuss this within a partisan framework, however, requires selective framing. As the key negotiators for these large, complex pieces of legislation, congressional leaders can more easily prepare constituent

materials that highlight partisan wins even in these bipartisan bills, as was illustrated by the discussion surrounding the 2013 Farm Bill discussed earlier.

To capture what policy presentation looks like in constituent communication, I use computational text analysis to evaluate the frequency and content of over 43,000 congressional press releases and constituent newsletters on all major legislation from the 113th Congress (2013) to the first session of the 116th Congress (2019). Using frequency counts of constituent communication for each Key Vote, I find that members are more likely to discuss polarizing legislation when they are in the majority—i.e., when their party has succeeded in passing a party goal. I then score the ideological variation in constituent communications for each Key Vote and find that across all issues—polarizing and complex—members are divergent in the way they discuss major legislation. Members are more likely to discuss polarizing legislation and complex, bipartisan legislation in a polarizing way. I also find notable differences in communication type: Press releases are the preferred vehicle for polarizing discussion, while the longer form of constituent newsletters provides more opportunity for members to discuss complex legislation.

Lastly, Chapter 6 considers *who* is most likely to adopt policy presentation narratives, given personal and district-level variables of rank-and-file members. I expect that freshmen offices, being less experienced at both the member and staff level, will be more likely to emulate congressional leaders. However, members facing competitive reelection races will likely be eager to distance themselves from the party; electorally vulnerable members and senators are often deemed such because of a dissonance between their district's partisan lean and their own ideology. Thus, in an endeavor to position themselves as independent or separate from the party, they should be less likely to follow the leaders' messages. I also expect members that are the most loyal in their voting record will also be the most loyal in party messaging. Lastly, as

discussed above, I expect there to be differences in the likelihood of message adoption by chamber (House members being more reliant on congressional leaders) and by party (the centralized and organized communication network of the Republican Party having a positive effect on the likelihood of message adoption).

To evaluate the likelihood of policy presentation adoption, I use computational text analysis to measure linguistic similarity of every Key Vote press release from the 113th through 116th Congress. This analysis generates a list of member-to-member similarity, connecting each individual member with the other member of Congress that their press release is most similar to. I use this list to generate a social network analysis of each congressional session and apply Exponential Random Graph Models (ERGM) to evaluate the likelihood of member-to-member connections. I find that members do copy the linguistic choices of congressional leaders, particularly party leaders. These results are especially strong for freshman members, those aligned with the party's average vote record, and House Republicans. In contrast, electorally vulnerable legislators and senators more generally are far less likely to share a connection with party leaders. Still, across all sessions, chambers, and parties, intraparty relationships are strong. Even when members do not turn to leaders for messaging guidance, they are relying on party peers—likely maintaining the partisan messaging findings of Chapter 5. The results also indicate relationships between leaders and the rank-and-file increase over time and under Republican majorities. These findings indicate that policy presentation in Congress is here to stay—and perhaps just beginning.

Chapter 7 concludes the project by considering the future of policy presentation in Congress, particularly given record levels of polarization and misinformation. I consider how recent events that occurred during the development of this dissertation indicate a sinister use of

policy presentation to spread dangerous conspiracy theories about the legitimacy of American democracy.

Conclusion

This project introduces the theory of policy presentation, a previously undocumented step in the policymaking process and a compelling source of political polarization. In addition to this theoretical contribution, this dissertation provides a comprehensive examination of how it is used in the U.S. Congress: I document why policy presentation occurs, when congressional leaders are most likely to dedicate resources to party-wide constituent messaging, and how they develop messages and distribute them throughout the chamber. I also consider what policy presentation outputs look like, and how they encourage partisanship by prioritizing partisan communications and selectively framing bipartisan votes. Lastly, I predict who is most likely to rely on party and committee leaders for assistance, and find that individual and chamber-level factors play an important role in the likelihood of leader-led, partisan communication.

I find that members of Congress follow the leaders. Party and committee leaders provide more than legislative information and vote recommendations to rank-and-file members—they also instruct them on how to discuss major legislation with their constituents. The centralization of information and resources gives party and committee leaders incredible advantages in communication efforts. As a result, congressional leaders now have an institutionalized responsibility to provide communication guidance to rank-and-file members, particularly in the House. Moreover, given the political realities of a majoritarian institution, these materials are overwhelmingly partisan. For their part, rank-and-file members have few alternatives—shut out from the legislative process and pressed for time, resources, and expertise, keeping up with constituent communication demands is overwhelming, if not impossible. Policy presentation

from congressional leaders presents a helpful shortcut: ideologically aligned information on major legislation, packaged and delivered directly to their inboxes.

The findings of this dissertation have tragically relevant implications for both congressional scholars and advocates of congressional reform. Partisan polarization has permeated both the institution and the electorate, and this research presents a compelling link between congressional actions and the sustained view of a partisan Congress. Relying on congressional leaders for constituent communication means relying on partisan narratives to discuss congressional activity. For constituents, this perpetuates a polarized view of what is actually a relatively bipartisan lawmaking institution. Not only does this polarizing language impact how constituents view Congress, but these divisive efforts are also felt within the halls of Congress. Policy presentation further institutionalizes the distribution and maintenance of biased information. As members continue to rely on party leaders for information and communication assistance, the common ground between rank-and-file members will continue to shrink. In an endeavor to fully understand the disease that plagues Congress, this research provides a novel source that is sustaining partisan polarization among lawmakers and their constituents.

Chapter 2: Why policy presentation occurs

Constituent representation in the U.S. Congress faces constant challenges, including a growing electorate, an expanding polycyscape, and ideological shifts. Scholars have documented how these changes have tested Congress' capacity for lawmaking and representation (LaPira et al. 2020), as well as areas where Congress has successfully adapted internal processes to meet constituent demands (Curry and Lee 2020). Yet the most impactful change in the constituency is political polarization. Partisanship and ideological sorting have impacted how legislators pass legislation and vote (Sinclair 1997, Minozzi and Volden 2013, Bafumi and Herron 2010, Abromowitz 2010), prioritize their time (Gelman 2021, Reynolds 2019, Hall 1987), and—relevant to this research—communicate with constituents (Grimmer 2013, Cormack 2016, Mayhew 1974).

This dissertation introduces another institutional change in response to political polarization: leader-led policy presentation. Just as centralization in the legislative process has become institutionalized, so too has the development and distribution of constituent communication. We know that party leaders and committee chairs are more polarized in how they communicate (Gelman et al. 2021), and this research shows that their political messages are emulated by rank-and-file members.

Scholars have robustly documented how parties and committees determine which issues warrant legislative attention and how that legislation is ultimately developed and passed (Jones et al. 2014, Jones and Baumgartner 2004, 2005, Curry 2015, Cox and McCubbins 2005, Sinclair 1997, etc.). And, following bill passage, researchers have examined how members communicate those legislative decisions (Mayhew 1974, Zaller 1992, Abernathy et al. 2019, Grimmer 2013, etc.). Members of Congress spend a great deal of time and resources on constituent

communication. As Grimmer (2013) notes, “communicating with constituents is *the* electoral connection, an activity inherent in the process of representation” (emphasis in original). Yet scholars fail to consider *how* rank-and-file members develop constituent communication. Individual members have personal incentives to communicate, but they often lack substantial information about major legislation. In a Congress where few rank-and-file members take part in the development of complex legislation and negotiations, how do members fill the information gap to explain their legislative decisions to constituents?

This research documents an additional and previously unexamined step in the policymaking and representation process: After legislation is developed, but before members discuss policy details and outcomes with constituents, members of Congress must be educated on the details within legislation. Today, this education largely comes from those who were involved in bill creation: party and committee leaders (Figure 2.1). Policy presentation is the development and distribution of centralized constituent communication by congressional leaders, and can take the form of talking points, policy briefings, or leading by example in the media. Unlike other work that considers the content or motivation of congressional communication (Grimmer 2013, Mayhew 1974), this research considers the behind-the-scenes process of how party leaders form and distribute these messages, and which members follow leaders’ messaging tactics.



Figure 2.1: Modern legislative process, incorporating policy presentation

Like other institutional changes, policy presentation perpetuates polarization among constituents. When citizens learn of legislation through a partisan lens, they become more polarized on the issue, particularly if they were previously unknowledgeable about the policy or process (Lauderdale 2013). How a policy is originally framed by politicians is also adapted by the media and constituents (Entman 2003). Thus, the choice to selectively frame even bipartisan wins as a partisan outcome presents a polarized view of lawmaking. As a result, Congress’ response to a polarized electorate has become self-reinforcing: Members of Congress respond to a perception of polarized constituencies by engaging in polarizing policy presentation, and constituents reward these partisan messages at the ballot box (Hetherington et al. 2016, Hansen 2015). The cyclical nature of policy presentation offers a new explanation of polarization within the electorate, despite increasingly bipartisan (albeit unorthodox) policy outcomes (Figure 2.2).

This research presents policy presentation as both an undocumented step in modern lawmaking and a missing link in the perpetuation of polarization in Congress and among constituents. The internal dynamics in Congress that result in a centralized and complex

legislative process lead to the development and use of policy presentation, which results in polarized messages being conveyed to constituents. Furthermore, to the extent that polarized policy presentation contributes to a more polarized public, members of Congress will respond to that increased polarization with even more polarized messages. As scholars grapple with the demands and implications of increased polarization in Congress, it's essential to know how it manifests in Congress. How policies are presented to rank-and-file members and then constituents is an essential piece of the polarization puzzle.

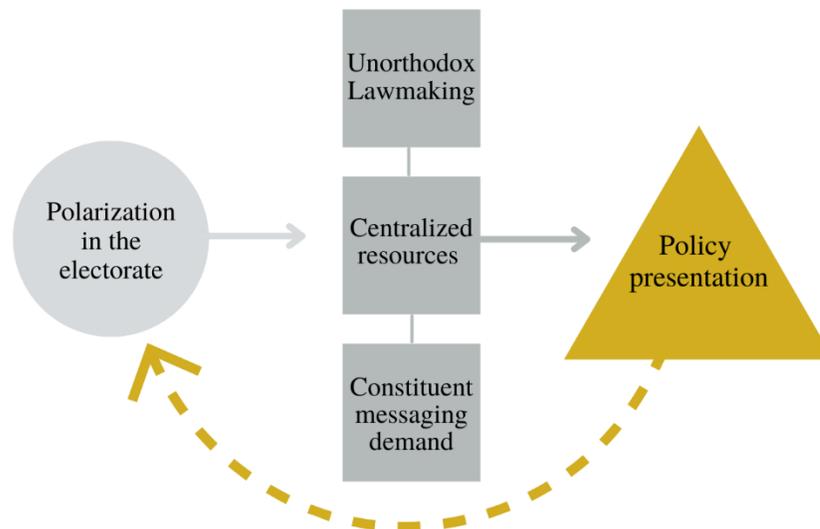


Figure 2.2: The role of policy presentation in constituent and institutional polarization

This chapter presents the literature that motivates this dissertation, considering the rise in polarization among the electorate and how Congress as an institution has responded and evolved. I then turn to how I expect policy presentation to perform in the modern Congress, taking into consideration policy differences, chamber differences, and constituent demands. This chapter explains *why* policy presentation occurs so we can further understand *when* and *how* policy

presentation is utilized, *what* it looks like in practice, and finally, *which* members are most likely to adopt preordained policy presentation in constituent communications.

External and internal influences

Partisan polarization

Members view their congressional responsibilities through a “delegate-style” lens of representation (Pitkin 1972). As such, legislators are more inclined to behave in a polarized way when they perceive their district as demanding such an ideology, and constituent communication has shifted to meet that demand. Polarization has encouraged members of Congress to communicate legislative goals and responsibilities in a partisan way. Members today highlight party “wins” and “losses,” show support (or disdain) for the president depending on the inter-party relationship, and emphasize (or avoid) topics that motivate (or dissuade) supporters in their district or state (Grimmer 2013).

Polarization at the constituent level has been attributed to redistricting (Theriault 2008, Carson et al. 2006, Carson et al. 2007, Abramowitz et al. 2008), geographic and ideological sorting (Gimple and Hui 2017, Fiorina and Abrams 2008, Tam Cho et al. 2012), and activist involvement in the electoral process (Kujala 2020, Theriault 2008, Layman et al. 2005, Fiorina et al. 2005). While likely none of these factors individually caused the rise of polarization in America, the collective trends have had a deleterious impact on American politics. Today, Americans are deeply embedded in their political affiliation and more likely to show not only a strong connection to one of the two major political parties, but distrust or anger toward members of the opposing party (Iyengar et al. 2019, Mason 2015). Recent surveys have found that this partisan distrust expands to the media (Jurkowitz et al. 2020) and has even been used by one-third of Americans to justify violence toward the government (Kornfield and Alfaro 2022).

While the causal relationship between polarization among citizens and polarization in Congress is a source of scholarly debate (Theriault 2008, McCarty et al. 2009), this research builds off evidence that Congress' polarized behavior is in response to the perceived (and very real) preferences of the people they represent (Sinclair 1997, Curry and Lee 2020). Today, rank-and-file members and party leaders alike are motivated to behave in a partisan way. Redistricting and ideological sorting have led to increasingly polarized congressional districts (Abramowitz 2010, 2008). Each election cycle sees fewer cases of "split-ticket voting"; in the most recent electoral cycle, only two Senate seats were won by candidates from a different party than the presidential winner of their state—a historical low (Desilver 2016). As a result, party identification has asserted itself as the deciding factor for most voters, making party loyalty a litmus test for candidates. Today, the biggest electoral threat that most members face is a primary challenger from their own party (Kujala 2020, Grose 2020, Hill and Tausanovitch 2018). In fact, as my interviews revealed, respondents cited fear of a more ideologically extreme candidate in the primary stage as a justification for more partisan behavior in Congress.

In Congress, parties behave like "teams" with the goal of winning elections, maintaining (or obstructing) legislative goals and congressional power, and vying for constituent support through interest group and campaign finance (Aldrich 1995, Bawn et al. 2012, Downs 1957, Gimpel et al. 2014). This reframing of party responsibility has impacted how constituents and members of Congress view political responsibilities (and each other). The clean sorting of the two parties into ideological camps has also challenged the approach of traditional lawmaking built on compromise and bipartisanship. Congress has subsequently tailored its legislative processes to address the representational challenges of an increasingly polarized electorate. Centralized party leader control and unorthodox lawmaking offer a policymaking solution to

bypass the gridlock and collective action problems that a polarized electorate and their representatives present (Cox and McCubbins 2005, Curry and Lee 2020, Sinclair 1997).

Unorthodox lawmaking

The institution of Congress has shifted to meet the realities of a polarized constituency. What Barbara Sinclair (1997) referred to as “unorthodox lawmaking” has cemented itself as the norm. Today, party leaders rely on procedural maneuvers to bring legislation to the floor and to centralize policy development. Each step of the policymaking process, starting with issue definition and information gathering, is largely dictated by party leaders and committees. In both chambers, majority party leaders have immense power in their ability to set the legislative agenda—determining which bills and issues are brought to the floor, the committee jurisdiction of legislation, and the rules that impact legislative malleability (Cox and McCubbins 2005, Sinclair 1997, Talbert et al. 1995, Aldrich and Rohde 2000, Cooper and Brady 1981, Curry and Lee 2020).

Committee leaders, too, are powerful agenda-setters who possess procedural advantages within their domain that directly impact legislation. Like party leaders determining the floor schedule, committee leaders alone choose which legislation receives a committee hearing or markup. While the entire committee determines the actual vote outcome, only chairs can make the first move. Expertise, large staff, and the hearing process grant them powerful gatekeeping abilities to define policy problems from the outset (Jones and Baumgartner 2004, DeGregorio 1992, Hinkley 1971). Committee chairs strategically hold hearings and bring forward witnesses that establish a compelling narrative for policy or legislative goals (Jones et al. 2019, O’Bryan et al. 2014). Witnesses are used to the majority advantage, providing narratives in support of the majority policy position. The ranking member (minority chair) is unmatched in these advantages,

often limited to bringing forward a single witness and having little to no say in hearing topics and even time.

Leaders also know that they can turn to an expansive network of news media (Prior 2013, Entman 2003), think tanks (Esterling 2007, Bertelli and Wenger 2009), and interest groups (Bawn et al. 2012, Grumbach 2020) for expertise and information that fits a preferred ideology—as well as an echo chamber of congressional output. This is particularly true for complex policy concepts that are malleable to ideological goals (Esterling 2007). Committees are often the first step for this type of information gathering, and they work closely with party leaders to coordinate hearing topics and policy goals.

The proclivity to legislate via omnibus and unorthodox policies introduces challenges for committee leaders. Rank-and-file members even within the same party have contradictory interests. Individual legislators may juggle vying motivations, ranging from district-level interests and industries to ideological and partisan preferences to national constituency goals. When crafting legislation, majority and minority party leaders step in to solve the chamber's collective action problem, negotiating major legislation on behalf of rank-and-file members to create a final product that will pass the chamber (Aldrich and Rhode 2000, Cox and McCubbins 2005, Schickler and Rich 1997). The logistical challenges of policymaking, particularly for major legislation effecting a large population, inherently require party and committee leaders to strategically share limited information with rank-and-file members (Curry 2015). Leaders are wary of opening the negotiation process, which can quickly become an exercise in herding cats. The more people granted decision-making power, the more difficult it is to reach a conclusive decision.

Increasing political polarization between the two parties has made negotiation even more difficult (Sinclair 1997), further necessitating congressional leaders to hold their policy preferences close to the vest. Members of Congress—representing an increasingly polarized constituency (Hansen 2016, Klandermans 2014) and being increasingly extreme themselves (Bafumi and Herron 2010)—have deep-seated ideological beliefs that make compromise unappealing and often unattainable (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, Mason 2015). Legislative compromise is often a delicate balance that can be easily upended if proposals are released prior to ensuring congressional support. Extensive whip teams work to assuage various intraparty groups, caucuses, and members to sign on to legislation prior to introducing it on the floor. As such, leaders will often wait until the last possible minute to release legislative text and information in order to give potential opponents less time to coordinate obstruction (Pearson 2005). However, because of ideological divisions within their own party and the 60-vote threshold in the Senate, leaders will work together to cobble together a bipartisan majority for bill passage. Referred to as “four corners” negotiations, party or committee leaders from each party and each chamber will come together to iron out agreements. The result of leader-led negotiations is often large, multifaceted legislation that contains provisions appealing to members and leaders on both sides of the aisle (Curry and Lee 2020).

These leader-led bills are often accompanied by rules packages that limit debate or additional amendments—further maintaining carefully constructed legislative packages (Meinke 2021, Reynolds 2019). For rank-and-file members, opportunities for legislative involvement are limited. This is particularly felt in in the House of Representatives. As one of 435, having an impact in the legislative process relies on assistance from party or committee leaders or the backing of like-minded colleagues. Individual senators possess greater autonomy, particularly as

majorities consistently rely on narrow control of the chamber, but in both settings, legislation cannot—and will not—move forward in the legislative process without the blessing of party leaders. And if the intention is serious legislation that will pass both chambers, leaders often take over the negotiation and bill-writing process entirely. Thus, both the process and substance of the unorthodox legislative process leave rank-and-file members in the dark (Curry 2015); not only is the opportunity for direct bill writing largely out of reach, but the process to floor passage is swift and convoluted. Most members do not have time to read legislation in full. Thus, when it comes time to learn about policy issues or legislation, members are reliant on guidance from those that developed it: party leaders and committees.

Centralized resources and the decline of congressional capacity

Rank-and-file members are left in the dark at multiple stages of the policy development process, and the distribution of institutional resources and staff presents few alternatives. While trends of centralization have long been studied at the member level, more recent scholarship has considered similar patterns at the staff level. As Molly Reynolds documents in “Congress Overwhelmed,” (2020), leadership office and committee staff have grown exponentially. From 1977 to 2016, House party leaders’ staff grew by 285 percent, and Senate leaders’ staff grew 263%, while rank-and-file member offices remained relatively stagnant (p. 36-37). And as Miler (2020) finds in the same volume, not only are these staff larger (allowing them to perform more duties generally), they are also more knowledgeable, particularly about congressional procedure. This is an unequivocal advantage in the policymaking process.

Similarly, committees in Congress have a powerful advantage in staff expertise. Prior work has found long-serving senior staffers to be one of the most impactful attributes of effective lawmaking (Crosson et al. 2018, Volden and Wiseman 2021). Congressional committees are

home to many of the most senior and expert staff, particularly in comparison to rank-and-file offices (Burgat 2019). Committees allow staff to develop expertise in a specific portfolio—something not awarded to staff in many rank-and-file offices, particularly in the House. This expertise and position come with opportunities to shape the policy debate: Committee staff are responsible for setting hearing topics and witness selection, writing legislation, and publishing committee reports (Burgat and Hunt 2020). Throughout both chambers, committee staff are seen as a resource for rank-and-file offices. When members and staff are looking for information on legislation, they turn to committee members. Committee staff have incredible yet covert abilities to shape how policy is perceived among members, staff, and constituents.

Rank-and-file members have few options when counteracting the centralization of resources and high-quality staff. Congressional caucuses, once an opportunity for rank-and-file education and policy development, rarely have a formal role in the policymaking process today (Bloch Rubin 2017, Miler 2011). Individual member offices' hiring practices are constrained by a stagnant Members' Representation Allowance (MRA), and in the House, a ceiling on the number of staff they are allowed to employ. These two fixed variables force members to prioritize certain positions and weigh the cost of high-quality, expert staff (Crosson et al. 2019, Burgat and Hunt 2020). While turnover is common across Capitol Hill, it's particularly rampant for rank-and-file offices (Burgat 2019). Members are unable to compete with the higher pay and prestige of leadership and committee offices, and staff only stay two years on average (Peterson and Eckman 2016). This is both a substantial and procedural loss for rank-and-file member offices, further weakening them in the policymaking process against powerful leaders.

This imbalance of staff expertise and resources is particularly felt in the House of Representatives. In the Senate, staff are more experienced, have longer tenures, and hold more

advanced degrees than their House counterparts. The larger staff sizes of Senate offices (in relation to the larger constituency they serve at a statewide level) gives senators more autonomy in hiring decisions as well. As such, Senate legislative staff often have a single portfolio and a dedicated legislative assistant; press offices are multi-staff teams; and various administrators relieve chiefs of staff from human resource responsibilities. However, in the House, staff wear many hats—a legislative staffer is often assigned several different policy jurisdictions, and communications can be limited to a single person. Chiefs of staff serve as hiring directors and even campaign coordinators. These staffing differences mean that House staff have more responsibilities but less time—making resources provided by committee and party leaders all the more appealing.

Yet one trend is consistent across all offices and in both chambers: Members of Congress are increasingly prioritizing and hiring staffers dedicated to constituent communication and public relations. In party leadership offices, communications staff now make up nearly half of these large teams—an occupation that didn't even exist prior to 1977 (Reynolds 2020). Among committee staff, communication staff grew by 30 percent in both chambers from 2001 to 2017 (Burgat 2019). And even though committee offices' responsibilities rely on policy experts and administrative positions, the responsibilities of these policy positions are increasingly focused on public relations such as committee hearings and briefings (Lewallen 2020). Lastly, rank-and-file offices have overwhelmingly prioritized their public relations over legislative responsibilities. A 2021 survey by Furnas et al. (2022) found that rank-and-file offices in the House are twice as likely to prioritize communication staffers over other positions.

These trends—particularly the stagnant pay and diversion of resources to constituent communication—are in direct response to members' increasingly polarized electoral connection.

While raising the MRA or increasing staff pay is a much-needed investment for Congress, the optics of voting for a pay raise is a campaign ad that writes itself. Likewise, increasing resources for constituent communication illustrates how members view image presentation—a strong communicator popular with constituents and the party base can overcome an otherwise weak legislative record.

But while these choices are understandable—and as discussed below, somewhat unavoidable—the decline of congressional resources and expertise for rank-and-file offices leaves members reliant on party leaders. Furthermore, the centralization of expertise, the prioritization of communications staff, and limited resources to improve working conditions on Capitol Hill have resulted in a crisis of congressional capacity. Ultimately, without long-serving policy experts in member offices, deliberation falters and problem-solving is punted to party leaders and outside experts. As communication is prioritized among all positions, development of the presentation has the potential to supersede the development of the policy it's trying to sell.

Changes in constituent communication

Members of Congress have always been cognizant of the image and message they're sending back to constituents. The desire for a popular perception has influenced how members behave on committees (Hall 1987, Fenno 1973), vote on the floor (Ansolabeher and Edwards 2010, Miller and Stokes 1963), and possibly even which legislation to introduce as a form of issue activation (Lodge and Stroh 1993, Entman 2003). Members also allocate resources and time to constituent services, in large part for the positive image they invoke (Grimmer 2013, Mayhew 1974, Miler 2018). At home and on the campaign trail, positive communication with constituents takes priority. Members spend a great deal of time and money on cultivating a likeable and constituent-centered image (Jacobson and Carson 2015).

While these pressures have been constant throughout history, today’s Congress is grappling with an explosive demand in constituent communication. The rise in internet accessibility has fundamentally changed the time, energy, and resources dedicated to member-to-constituent messaging. Email has replaced letters to Congress, and the ease of sending an electronic request or complaint has led to exponential growth in the number of messages an individual member receives (Congressional Management Foundation 2011). For their part, members have evolved in a few ways; newsletters are a popular option for members to communicate directly with constituents and have largely overtaken the prior franking process that relied on snail mail. For example, in a span of under six months in 2019, House members sent over 10,000 newsletters discussing COVID-19—an average of 23 email newsletters per office (Cormack and Meidlinger 2021, p. 10). Despite the advent of social media being only a decade ago, every member of Congress today has a dedicated Facebook page for communication; 99 percent run an official Twitter account; and 86 percent of Senators (and 79 percent of House members) have an official Instagram account (Quorum Analytics 2020). Members use Twitter to showcase their personality and interact directly with constituents—what Gervais and Morris (2018) call a “digital homestyle.” Members also use electronic press releases as a way to quickly communicate with constituents and the media. Newspapers will pull quotes from emailed press releases, and in smaller media markets will even run press releases verbatim. Press releases are particularly popular following a vote because they allow members to quickly and proactively send reporters information to use when discussing legislation. Members also submit op-eds or distribute videos and photos for media outlets to repurpose.

The amount and method of communication differ across offices. All of these possibilities—e-newsletters, social media, or more traditional methods of communication—

depend on state and district constituencies, member preferences, and policy topic. Grimmer (2013) estimates that senators issue four additional press releases per year for every additional 1 million constituents in their state. Media markets fluctuate across congressional districts and states—a member from a borough of New York City will face a far different press relations process than a member from rural Kansas. Regardless, for every member, the quickly evolving media landscape has presented technological and representational challenges for members. The aforementioned rise in communications staff can in large part be attributed to the inherent need for members of Congress to keep up with these new forms of communication. But it also reflects the increase in partisan communication driven by members' perception of their constituents' preferences and the pursuit of party goals. The development of social media, widespread email correspondence, and explosion in online news have been driving factors of change in member and staff behavior over the past 20 years (Congressional Management Foundation 2011).

While the increase in communication demand is universal, *what* members choose to discuss varies widely and is reflective of their constituency, their own policy interests, and the salience of policy issues. As Mayhew (1974) famously observed, legislator communication often takes the form of either credit claiming, blaming, or advertising. These different styles depend on the member's electoral position, their relationship with the White House or majority/minority status, responsibilities within the chamber, and how they view their constituents (Grimmer 2013, Ballard et al. 2022). Some members emphasize party loyalty over policy issues (Gelman et al. 2021), others signal their expertise by discussing repeat topics, and others still will focus on credit-claiming or pork (Grimmer 2013). Even when members don't have personal progress to report, they will strategically use constituent communication to generate a belief that they are accomplishing wins on behalf of their district (Grimmer et al. 2014, Cormack 2021). The issues

discussed will also depend on the legislator's personal knowledge on the issue. Fenno (1977) observed how members often avoided unfamiliar policy issues, focusing instead on campaigning against Washington. Members also use constituent communication to take a position on salient issues that are not on the legislative calendar. While votes are a common shorthand for policy positions and are used by interest groups, constituents, and researchers, they aren't the only way members communicate their positions. In fact, they're quite limited because they're binary (allowing only a yes or no vote) and not all issues even come to a vote. Constituent communication allows members to take positions on issues not on the legislative calendar, or outside of the chamber's jurisdiction—such as a member of the House discussing a judicial nominee. For issues that do receive a roll call vote, strategic communications allow members to further explain or emphasize their position (Rocca and Gordon 2010).

But at the most basic level, legislators have a responsibility to inform voters about their work in Washington. In a country where only a slim majority votes in congressional elections, members know it's up to them to communicate what they're doing on Capitol Hill. As Douglas Arnold (1990) noted, only a minority of the American public are attentive to the policymaking process. "Attentive publics are those citizens who are aware that a specific issue is on the congressional agenda, know what alternatives are under consideration, and have relatively firm preferences about what Congress should do" (Arnold 1990, p. 65). Members will write home to inform members about votes they've taken, bills they've introduced or cosponsored, upcoming congressional hearings, floor speeches, and constituent services. Following the passage of the CARES Act, several members consistently highlighted how to apply for the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) (Cormack and Meidlinger 2021).

The need for policy presentation lies within this congressional responsibility. Yet because most constituents lack policy acumen, members have a great deal of leeway in how they choose to present legislative actions. And in a polarized environment, members are eager to present legislative decisions in a way that appeals to their constituents—or at least, the ones that ensure their reelection. Grimmer (2013) documents that when members are politically aligned with their constituents, they are more likely to take partisan policy stances and attack the opposing party. Members who are at odds with their constituents still behave in partisan way by evading popular topics they know their district won't unanimously agree on.

Yet while members eagerly communicate with their constituents—sending thousands of press releases, letters, and Tweets every congressional session—they lack legislative information to develop this messaging on their own. Parties make this easy; not only do they have weekly caucus meetings to provide background information for the legislative week to come, but both parties in both chambers have entire leadership offices dedicated to developing party messaging: the House and Senate GOP Conference and the House and Senate Democratic Policy and Communications Committee (DPCC), which have large staff whose sole purpose is to prepare messaging materials for rank-and-file members. And these offices are delivering a partisan product; research on Twitter polarization has found these party-led accounts are more partisan and polarized than individual members of Congress (Gelman et al. 2021). And as this dissertation documents, they play a pivotal role in policy presentation, alongside committees and party leaders.

However, members of Congress often overestimate their constituents' policy knowledge and partisanship (Hill and Tausanovitch 2015). Overemphasizing partisan outcomes likely has a negative effect on how constituents view Congress. Although constituents are not eager to hear

news on negotiation or compromise (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), when citizens are informed about policy issues by members of Congress in a partisan way, they become more polarized in how they view the issue. This trend of elite-encouraged polarization is even more impactful when members of Congress are talking about congressional procedure (Lauderdale 2013)—a common feature of constituent communication in an era of unorthodox lawmaking. But regardless of the negative implications of overly partisan communication, the resources of party and committee leaders have clear appeal. In an unorthodox and centralized environment, congressional leaders hold both the policy information and resources that rank-and-file members are reliant on to not only make legislative decisions but to communicate efficiently and along party lines.

Policy presentation in the modern Congress

The diversifying growth of the U.S. population, seismic shifts in technology, and the expansion of the executive branch have put immense pressure on Congress to respond and evolve. To avoid constant gridlock, Congress has turned to a centralized style of lawmaking, ceding negotiating power to party leaders and committee chairs and invoking creative procedural maneuvers to attract and retain bipartisan majorities. Despite oft-cited polarization in roll call votes, this approach is working fairly well—the majority of major legislation Congress passes is bipartisan (Curry and Lee 2020). However, the tradeoff for efficiency is limited rank-and-file involvement. Members rely on party and committee leaders for information about the policy landscape and legislation they're voting on. This imbalance perpetuates to the staff level as well, where the most experienced (and best-paid) staff are found in party and committee offices. These developments have facilitated a modern responsibility for congressional leaders: guidance on constituent communication.

Of course, rank-and-file members do have a say in how, when, and what they communicate with their constituents. Changes in technology have made it easier for constituents to communicate with their representatives, and constituents have come to expect a response. Rank-and-file offices have adapted by investing in communications staff and new modes of communication. However, the combination of increased pressure to communicate and lack of information about legislation in Congress means that members face a mismatch: They need to discuss policy with their constituents but don't have the information to do so. As a result, they are often reliant on party and committee leaders for messaging guidance. But party and committee leaders have their own interests—namely, to be in the majority. The information they provide is crafted with that goal in mind, and consequently, is often partisan.

Members appreciate the assistance, but they're at the mercy of leaders' message, which tends to be overly partisan and polarizing, given the party's overarching goals and members' expectations for constituents. Rank-and-file members have few resources to counter this information provided to them. External sources of expertise cannot offer an accurate assessment of the legislative process, and rank-and-file staff are boxed out from the legislative development stage. Yet because policy presentation allows members of Congress to feed the partisan desires they perceive in their constituents; this process further embeds polarization in the institution and among voters. Although the rise in polarization among constituents established the desire for polarized policy presentation, congressional changes in response to this desire have institutionalized its role in the policymaking and constituent communication process.

But even for relatively resource-rich party leaders, this type of coordinated information and messaging is costly, and not all legislation receives this effort. In the next section, I discuss

the conditions in which party leaders employ policy positioning tactics and when rank-and-file members are left to their own devices.

Legislation type

First, not every piece of legislation will warrant or require leader-led education. Legislation that is not moving forward or is relatively minor (such as renaming a post office) will not be communicated on by the entire chamber. Likewise, rank-and-file members should be knowledgeable about legislation they introduce and bills that are specific to their district. The overwhelming majority of introduced bills never see any legislative movement beyond initial introduction. In the 116th Congress for example, out of 16,601 bills introduced, only 11.8 percent were introduced in committee, 11.4 percent received a floor vote, and 2.1 percent were signed into law. Unless these bills see legislative activity, they are likely not relevant to the rest of the chamber. If a member is going to communicate on their own introduced bills, they will (and should) rely on the personal staff that helped them craft it. Members should also be able to discuss district-specific legislation or amendments, which should be an easy communication lift. As Grimmer (2013) found, referencing district-level awards and grants is one of if not the most common topics of congressional communication.

However, major bills and impactful votes receive outsized attention from constituents and members of Congress. These bills affect every member due to the policy impact at the district and constituent level, or because they affect the party as a whole. Party leaders will assist rank-and-file members with major legislation, particularly when they are large, multi-provision pieces of legislation or when they present a partisan messaging opportunity. Complex, expansive policy bills have serious legislative impacts that need to be communicated with constituents. And partisan legislation, even if serving a messaging purpose, provides its own type of

communicative constituent service. However, I expect the complexity and polarization of these votes to impact how leaders engage in policy presentation.

Omnibus legislation, appropriations bills, or large bills such as the Farm Bill contain several hundred pages and cover a wide range of policy jurisdictions. These bills are also the most likely to be negotiated by party leaders due to their size and policy impact. Members will need more help deciphering these large leader-led pieces of legislation due to their size, the limited time they have to read and process legislation, and the complexity introduced by multi-jurisdictional provisions. However, given the expansive size of these bills—and the bipartisan majorities they often pass with as a result—leaders will selectively highlight portions of the bill that complement their party’s policy goals or preferred outcomes. This means for some bills, parties will highlight different provisions, reflective of the party priorities. Rank-and-file members will be more reliant on leaders’ communication guidance for these types of bills compared to regional-specific or single-issue bills. *Thus, I expect large, complex policy issues to result in polarized policy presentation.*

Conversely, single-issue bills, messaging bills (Lee 2016), or current policy events will be easier for members to discuss, but not void of leader-led messaging. These bills serve a purpose: to inform constituents where a party stands on a given issue. For partisan constituents, these types of votes are important—they want to see their representatives acting on their behalf, even if the vote does not lead to substantive policy change. If party and committee leaders are taking the time to vote on this legislation (likely generating constituent and media attention in the process), they will also engage in policy presentation. Party and committee leaders will encourage members to follow partisan messaging and provide materials such as talking points, sample graphics and tweets, or agreeable committee witnesses to guide members on the issue.

Even if rank-and-file members are less reliant on leadership for background education on the issue compared to complex policies, they will still turn to them for guidance on how to frame and message these policies to their constituents. However, using Grimmer (2013) as guidance, these partisan issues are more likely to be discussed by members who represented ideologically aligned areas, rather than “toss-up” or marginal areas. *I expect highly partisan issues to result in frequent policy presentation, more likely to be used by party-loyal members.*

Congressional session and chamber

I also expect there to be differences in the prevalence of policy presentation over time and across chambers. One, *I expect policy presentation efforts to increase with each congressional session.* Political polarization in the electorate has increased in the past decade, as have changes in constituent communication—particularly given the widespread use of email and social media. This means that demand for party messages has been increasing over the period examined here (113th to 116th Congress), and also that the ability to deliver this message from leaders to rank-and-file and then to constituents has become easier over time.

Across chambers, *I expect policy presentation to be more prevalent in the House than the Senate.* Compared to the House, Senate offices have larger, more experienced staff. So, while senators and their staff are still reliant on congressional leaders for legislative development and information, they are not as imbalanced when it comes to internal resources. Each senator has a multi-person communications team and subject matter experts in their office, while House members rely on a smaller, often less experienced team to cover the same amount of legislative activity. Furthermore, the constituency considerations of the two chambers require senators to be more moderating than most House members; representing an entire state population has different

representational considerations than an individual (and likely more homogeneous) congressional district.

Party differences

I also expect policy presentation differences by majority and minority status. Eager to emphasize policy wins and successful leadership, majority parties should engage in issue ownership. Party and committee chairs have both an informational and procedural advantage in the policymaking process that theoretically should translate to the communication sphere, leading to cohesive and prepared policy presentation. Furthermore, governing—particularly in a complex and polarized policy space—is challenging. When members are in the majority party, their communication goals will be to explain policy positions and lobby for policy change. These can be difficult things to communicate, and members will likely need assistance from leaders when passing major legislation. *I expect majority parties to communicate more frequently on all major legislation.*

Conversely, the minority party has an easier task: obstruction and maintaining the status quo. However, when bipartisan bills are passed with minority party assistance, it may not be in their best interest to highlight the successful leadership of the majority party. Rather, minority party leadership should be more likely to encourage constituent communication on party-line votes, which allows members to more clearly differentiate themselves from the current majority party. *Thus, when a party is in the minority, I expect them to communicate on partisan messaging votes.*

Party messaging will also differ based on the party's relationship with the White House, particularly when the legislation is in direct response to the president's actions. The congressional sessions researched in this dissertation include majorities that had tumultuous

relationships with two different presidents: Senate and House Republicans versus President Barack Obama, and the 116th Congress of Democratic majorities versus President Donald Trump. As then-Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell famously said, “The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president.”⁴ This is reflective of an increasingly common relationship between Congress and out-party presidents (Lee 2016) as well as the hyper-partisan environment of American politics. In an effort to communicate their disdain or differentiation from the White House, I expect majority parties opposite the president to be more likely to communicate on legislation that reflects a conflicting White House position.

Differences in constituencies

Lastly, partisan needs will differ by constituencies and individual districts. While there are diverse districts and “toss-up” seats in the House, these are increasingly rare. House members represent, on average, 750,000 people that are increasingly homogeneous in demographic and partisan identities (Tam Cho et al. 2012). However, Senators represent entire states. While some are more politically “safe” than others, the larger population introduces greater diversity of thought and policy interests. Members and staff noted that they took these considerations of constituent differences into effect when choosing how, and what, to communicate to their constituents about. Per Grimmer (2013), members from ideologically aligned districts and states are more likely to communicate policy positions and blame the opposing party. One senior Senate staffer captured this consideration well:

⁴ Kessler, G. Sept. 25, 2012. “When did Mitch McConnell say he wanted to make Obama a one-term president”, *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/when-did-mcconnell-say-he-wanted-to-make-obama-a-one-term-president/2012/09/24/79fd5cd8-0696-11e2-aff-d6c7f20a83bf_blog.html.

“Congressional members, House members—for better or worse, probably for the worse—but the way their districts are drawn they’re becoming more and more partisan, so their audiences are going to be pretty monolithic.

“But senators run the ideological gambit, and those states are pretty diverse, and you want to appeal to not just one or two audiences. There’s a lot more leeway with their content to fit our individual states or audiences. We also have more comms staff, more resources, we’re able to do that because it’s kind of out of necessity. Whereas the House and congressional districts have small, more monolithic audiences. It’s really kind of out of necessity, and we have to adapt and change messaging constantly.”⁵

I expect to see notable differences in message adoption given electoral safety. Members from electorally safe districts will be more likely to use party-led policy presentation, *while members from moderate districts or represent unaligned constituencies will be less likely to repeat their party’s policy presentation.*

Conclusion

Polarization among constituents and subsequent institutional changes in Congress have institutionalized leader responsibilities of educating members and developing materials for constituent communication. Rank-and-file members face unprecedented pressure to constantly communicate with constituents, emphasizing partisan goals. But as congressional leaders continue to facilitate the issue definition, development, and passage of legislation, rank-and-file members will become increasingly reliant on them for education and information to pass along to their constituents. Furthermore, in an era where large, impactful legislation is introduced covertly and quickly, members have few options other than to trust their leadership about the contents and impact of proposed policies. Members are expected to explain their votes to their constituents, yet often, they have limited knowledge prior to voting. These competing pressures have ultimately institutionalized an additional step in the policymaking process: policy presentation.

⁵ Interview 16

Chapter 3: When policy presentation occurs

Members of Congress take hundreds, sometimes thousands, of roll call votes every congressional session. But only a handful of votes and policy issues warrant the attention of policy presentation. Members are aware that their constituents' attention span and interests are limited, and it's in their best interest to be strategic on what they choose to message. One senior staffer discussed their office's constituent communication strategy in terms of media coverage: "Because these days there are so much media saturation and fewer reporters, and more and more news, newspapers have to pick and choose what they're going to cover. I try to be cognizant of that... We've been, I think, most successful in getting coverage on our agenda and committee work when we tailor our approach, rather than blasting reporters with every speech."⁶

Furthermore, not every piece of legislation is relevant to every constituent. Reflective of the fundamental paradox of "the two congresses" (Fenno 1978), members discuss two types of policies with their constituents: those that are specific to their district or personal office and those that receive national attention for their policy impact or newsworthiness. As one member said, "We do a lot of suspension bills, and not all of them are super interesting to my constituents. Where you *do* have to communicate with your constituents is about important bills. When there is a lot of national media attention paid to a bill, it's important to us to let constituents know how and why I voted."⁷ A former chief of staff echoed this sentiment, "Some issues that were so big that [the member] felt he needed to show every constituent that he was willing to defend his vote and be accountable to his vote. And these were issues of great national importance, versus an

⁶ Interview 16

⁷ Interview 12

issue or bill that Congress happened to take on. You can count on one hand the issues you will never forget how you voted on.”⁸

Individual members can rely on their internal offices to communicate on district-specific or personal interest legislation—after all, they (should) know their district and legislation best. Legislation relevant to the entire chamber or party entails a different approach. Legislation that is nationally relevant, either for political reasons or policy impact, receives outsized attention from party leaders, rank-and-file members, and constituents. Members of Congress are aware of the implications this legislative presentation has for not only themselves but also their party at large. But the presentation of salient legislation requires strategy and guidance that many rank-and-file members are unable to provide. The lack of information about the legislation’s specifics and limited resources of staff, time, and expertise creates a gap between the bill’s passage and meaningful discussion. Thus, members of Congress turn to party and committee leaders for guidance on major legislation and salient policy issues. When party leaders step in to guide their members’ policy presentation, it’s because the stakes are much higher.

To understand how members of Congress engage in policy presentation, we need to first understand which policy issues they decide to message on in the first place, and how variations within this subset of important legislation impact the policy presentation process. There are disparities between party polarization and legislative complexity among these major votes, and these variations impact how the policy is ultimately presented to members and constituents. This chapter introduces and evaluates the key policy issues from the 113th to 116th Congress (2013 to 2019). These issues illustrate *when* policy presentation occurs, forming the basis for the rest of

⁸ Interview 2

this project's analyses: *how* leaders facilitate this centralized messaging, *what* policy presentation looks like in practice, and *which* members are most likely to adapt leader-led messaging.

This chapter focuses on the substantive variation in major policies to fully understand strategies of policy presentation and introduces two measures that factor into how members present policies: partisan polarization and language complexity. As discussed in the prior chapter, member reliance on party and committee leaders for information will vary by legislation along these two planes. Partisan votes—often in response to messaging bills or clear ideological divisions—present more messaging for party-aligned members. However, this does not preclude leader-led messaging efforts; if party leaders are taking the time to bring these bills to the floor for a vote, they will also likely encourage members to discuss the vote along specific party lines. Complex legislation, particularly omnibus legislation that encompasses several different topics or policy jurisdictions, is increasingly common in Congress. Committee and party leadership often take the lead on negotiations, presenting members with completed text rather than a working document. As such, members will need guidance on how to discuss these bills due to the wide-ranging and unfamiliar subject matter. Bills can also be both complex *and* partisan, providing additional fodder for party leaders to provide policy messaging. Regardless, across all major legislation, party and committee leaders have an informational advantage that rank-and-file members simply cannot compete with. As lead negotiators, bill writers, and coordinators, congressional leaders have outsized access to the information necessary to craft meaningful and timely constituent communication.

The partisan divide of a given vote has obvious insight to how members will present a legislative decision. Votes with a polarized vote count indicate that the policy, nominee, or procedural question has ideological implications. Strongly divided votes also indicate that party

leaders have made their preferred position clear, either by formally whipping the vote or publicizing their own vote preferences. Still, bipartisan votes are not indicative of a lack of policy presentation. Because most major bills Congress passes are bipartisan, understanding the policy positioning process for this type of legislation is particularly important. A bipartisan vote can easily result in divergent messaging, both to highlight partisan wins and avoid the image of partisan concession (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). As one representative described when discussing large, bipartisan omnibus spending bills, “The goal is communicating what’s in the bill and emphasizing when things are consistent with our values...Democrats will communicate their wins, and Republicans are communicating another.”⁹ Focusing on the party provisions within a bipartisan bill will be a wholly different messaging strategy than discussion of a highly partisan vote. The interparty divide unearthed during the voting process will impact how the policy is presented.

Legislative complexity also plays a factor in presentation. As illustrated by the representative’s above comment on spending legislation, bills that are complex introduce an opportunity for selective policy presentation. Furthermore, complex bills will likely increase rank-and-file member reliance on policy presentation techniques. When bills use unfamiliar language, have unknown policy implications, or span several jurisdictions, fewer members will have a strong grasp on how to discuss their vote with constituents. For example, one committee staffer observed that economic issues, in particular, require handholding: “There is a lot of reliance on the committee materials, because so many members fundamentally misunderstand the economy.”¹⁰ When legislation is complex, members are more likely to turn to committee

⁹ Interview 12

¹⁰ Interview 18

materials or party leaders to help them decipher bill text. Furthermore, in an era of centralization, when party leaders are likely to hold bill text close to the chest for as long as possible (Curry 2015), reading the actual legislative text of large, complex legislation is nearly impossible. Understanding how major legislation varies along these two planes is an essential first step to capturing the policy presentation process.

Key votes of the modern Congress

I rely on the Congressional Quarterly (CQ) Almanac’s Key Votes from 2013 to 2019 to create a dataset of important legislation. Every year since 1945 (twice per congressional session), CQ has released “key votes” in Congress that capture “major issues of the year.” Criteria include bills of major controversy within the chamber, votes that represent presidential or political power (such as internal rules changes), or bills that have a “potentially great impact on the nation and lives of Americans” (CQ Roll Call Group). This dataset captures important variation in congressional and executive party control that I expect to impact how policy is presented.

The votes recorded include cloture votes, amendments, motions to recommit, and final passage. They are selected because they “best reflected the views of individual lawmakers on that issue” (CQ-Roll Call Group). The result is 172 votes that capture the top political issues in a congressional session. This expanse of time (2013 to 2019) offers variation in congressional majority and party control, as well as two presidential administrations (President Barack Obama and President Donald Trump), as seen in Table 1. The differences in partisanship in the chambers and White House also impact the total number of “White House Focus Key Votes.” These are votes that are directly targeting an action of the executive: a nomination, impeachment, veto override, or response to an executive order (e.g., use of the Congressional Review Act,

treaty review, or resolution of disapproval). Table 3.1 below presents the cross tabs of the descriptive information for each year in our dataset.

Table 3.1: Descriptive information for each year in the Key Vote dataset, 110th Congress – 116th

Year	House Control	Senate Control	President	Total Key Votes	Total WH Focus Key Votes
2013	Republican	Democratic	Obama	25	2
2014	Republican	Democratic	Obama	28	8
2015	Republican	Republican	Obama	27	5
2016	Republican	Republican	Obama	23	11
2017	Republican	Republican	Trump	25	6
2018	Republican	Republican	Trump	22	7
2019	Democratic	Democratic	Trump	21	13

Note: Total WH Focus Key Votes indicates a vote that was directed at executive actions.

The votes vary in size and content, ranging from hyper-specific messaging bills (Lee 2016) to thousand-page omnibus appropriations bills. Controversial nominations and internal rules changes are also included. They also vary in legislative jurisdiction. Figure 3.1 illustrates the distribution of bill topics in both the House and Senate from 2013 to 2019. National security and foreign policy, health care, and economic and financial reform bills consistently receive multiple Key Vote denotations, per year.

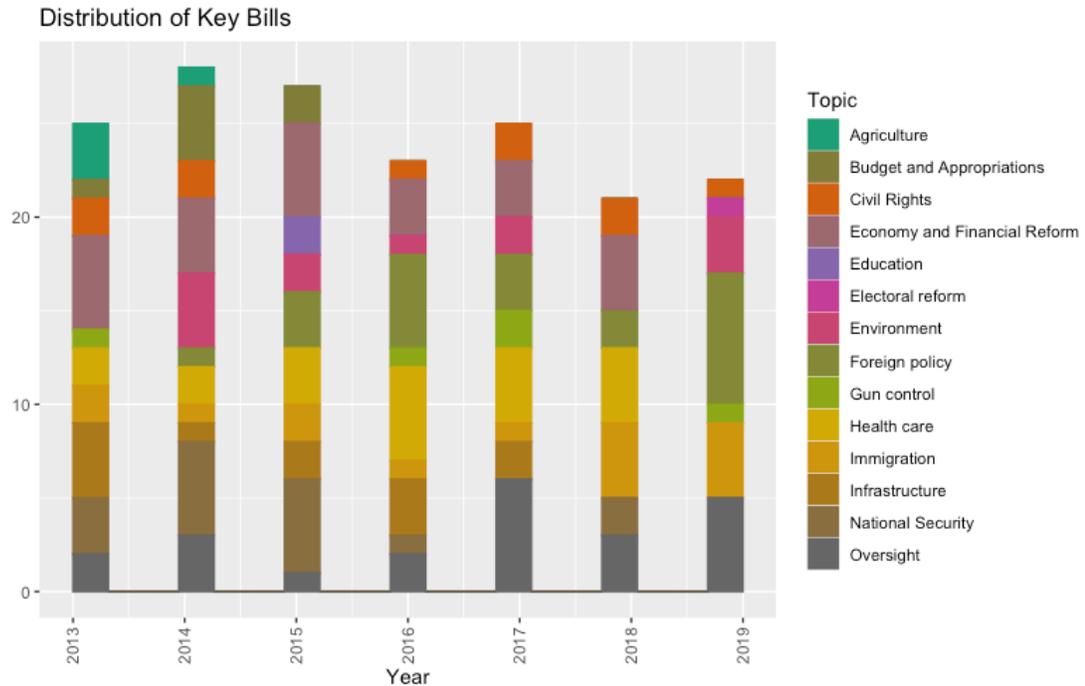


Figure 3.1: Bill Topics, CQ Key Votes, 113th-116th Congress

Although policy topic can impact how an individual member discusses legislation—particularly if the bill falls under a member’s committee of jurisdiction, personal interest, or constituent priorities—complexity and partisanship of a bill will have a stronger influence on policy presentation. For one, in the current era of omnibus lawmaking, a bill that falls squarely under a specific topic will often fold in several provisions across committee jurisdictions and offices. For instance, while the 2015 highway infrastructure bill (Fixing America’s Surface Transportation Act, or the “FAST Act”) was undoubtedly an infrastructure bill, it contained provisions on financial services, health care, and regulatory oversight. Conversely, a messaging bill limiting abortion rights—while technically health care legislation—has little to do with policy interests or committee expertise, and instead the ideological positioning of the two parties. Thus, it is important for scholars to look beyond policy topic when analyzing how members of Congress will discuss and interpret legislation.

Measuring Key Vote partisanship and complexity

I develop two original measurements to capture a vote's partisanship and complexity. These scores (detailed below) allow me to catalogue all 172 Key Votes along these two measurements, setting the stage to understand how the policy type influences the policy presentation process.

Polarization

First, the partisanship polarization measure captures the distance between the two parties' support for the bill, nomination, or rule. I use the equation below, squaring the difference between party supporters. The higher the number, the more polarized the vote score.

$$polarization = (GOP\ yeas - Dem\ yeas)^2$$

The result is a score for each chamber, ranging from zero (equal number of both parties voting "yea") to over 6,000 in the House and 3,600 in the Senate.¹¹ Each chamber's scores are then scaled, creating a normal distribution based on mean and standard deviation, to make the two chambers comparable. Given how majority control of the chamber in the modern U.S. Congress determines agenda setting power, a high polarization score indicates the party in control of the chamber is largely driving the vote outcome.

In the House, the most bipartisan bill in our dataset is approval of the U.S.-Mexico trade agreement negotiated under President Trump (HR 5430); in the Senate, the trade agreement with Russia negotiated under President Obama (HR 6156) takes the most bipartisan spot. The most polarized votes are the economic stimulus plan under President Obama in the House (HR 1), and passage of the Affordable Care Act (HR 3590) in the Senate. Figure 3.2 presents the distribution

¹¹ HR 1, 111th Congress (Economic Stimulus) had 246 Democratic members voting yea, zero Republicans voting yea; HR 3590, 111th Congress (Affordable Care Act) had 60 Democratic Senators voting yea, Zero Republicans voting yea.

of vote polarization in Congress (2013 to 2019). While perhaps surprising to congressional skeptics, both the House and the Senate distribution have a bipartisan bias. Despite the partisan rhetoric scholars and constituents have come to expect from the modern legislature, bipartisanship is not unusual, particularly for large, impactful bills such as appropriations bills or reauthorizations.

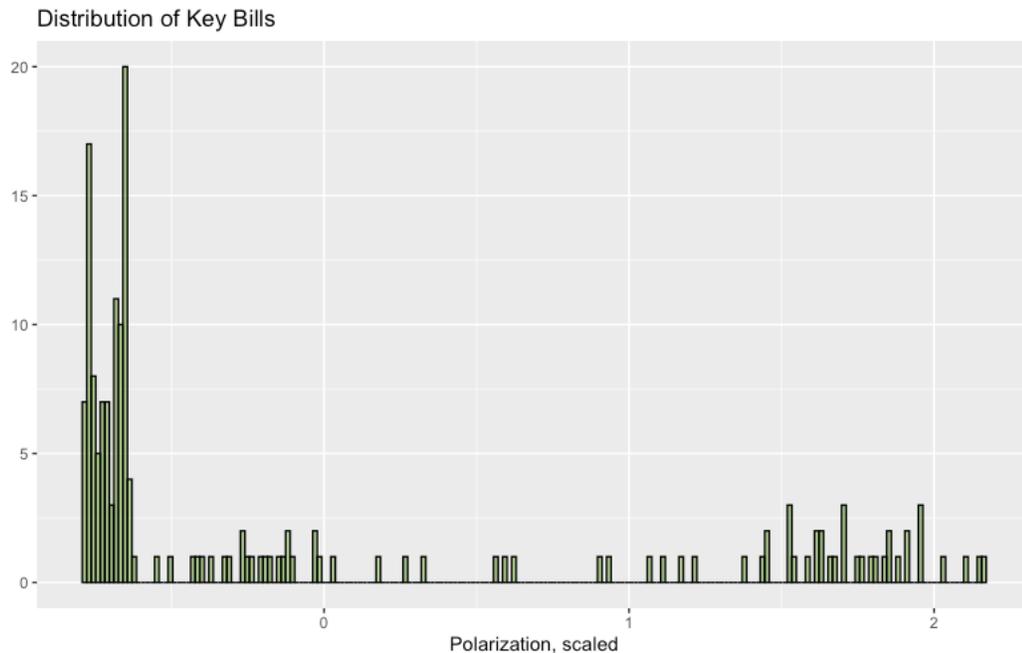


Figure 3.2: Distribution of vote polarization measure for Key Votes, 113th to 116th Congress
Complexity

A common criticism of the modern Congress from scholars, pundits, and even members themselves is that important bills are often too large to be read in their entirety. Furthermore, as Curry (2015) has documented, congressional leaders, particularly in the House, often keep legislative language secret for as long as possible. One senior congressional staffer noted, “While you will always have some staffers who will read text and you will always have some members who read text, or someone who wants to do your own research, a lot of times in the House you don’t have that opportunity. You have to rely on what the committee tells you and then decide

whether you're going to trust them.”¹² Because of this, existing work often uses word count or page numbers as shorthand for bill complexity, as high page numbers can often indicate when a bill contains multiple provisions and expansive details.

While word count is a helpful signal of bills that will require additional guidance from congressional leaders, complexity should not only be associated with length. Member interpretation of legislation also relies on familiarity with the topic, language, and terms used. Some bill topics are constant in every year of our dataset. Other bills, such as reauthorization bills or continuing resolutions, often reuse the same language that members have already voted on in previous years. Conversely, members will need guidance on bills that broach unfamiliar or complex topics. In addition, from a methodological standpoint, word count does not introduce enough variation to serve as a meaningful measurement of complexity. Figure 3.3 illustrates the distribution of word count for all Key Votes in Congress from 2013 to 2019. The majority of bills in our dataset—nearly one-third of them—only have one page. A measurement that relies on outliers will be too inconsistent for meaningful interpretation.

¹² Interview 18

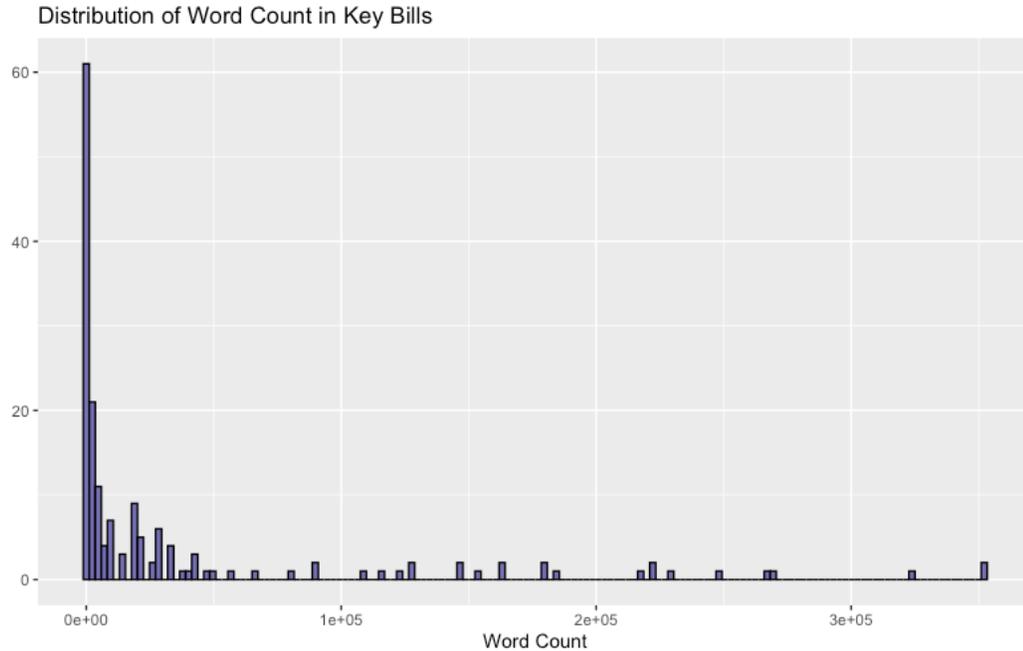


Figure 3.3: Distribution of word count in Key Votes, 113th to 116th Congress

Thus, to gauge the complexity of each vote, I rely on computational text analysis to develop an original measure of text complexity that captures legislator familiarity with the text of the bill. In measuring complexity, computational text analysis has provided robust insight into the linguistic choices of political leaders and parties, making it easier for political scientists to systematically analyze variation between speakers. Past work has used computational text analysis to evaluate Supreme Court opinions (Owens and Wedeking 2011), how voters respond to party platforms based on their readability (Bischof and Senninger 2018), and how the professionalization of the State of the Union Address has changed over time (Benoit et al. 2019).

Many of these applications rely on supervised models or human input (Benoit et al. 2009, Grimmer and Stewart 2013, Benoit et al. 2019). These approaches are robust but time-consuming and resource-heavy. Alternatively, developing dictionaries based on word frequency presents an opportunity to bypass these more complex analytical approaches. The use of applied dictionaries has proven successful for detailed sentiment analysis (Muddiman et al. 2019, Rice and Zorn

2021, Haselmayer and Jenny 2017), but has not been applied to legislative texts or measures of complexity. Given that measures of complexity rely heavily on word familiarity, word frequency can be used to develop an understanding of familiarity while being replicable and flexible. The more often a word or term appears in a congressional session, we should assume the readers (members of Congress) will have increased familiarity. When these topic-specific dictionaries are further applied to existing measures of complexity, researchers can tailor complexity analysis to a given research question.

To develop a new, easily applied measure of complexity, I build off the Dale-Chall measurement of text readability. Chall and Dale (1995) established a list of approximately 3,000 words familiar to 80 percent of fourth-grade students and removed them from a numerator of “difficult words” based on syllable count. In policy arenas, words that are commonly used (such as “committee” or “subsidy”) are incorrectly measured as difficult and unfamiliar given their length or otherwise rare usage in the English language. Furthermore, bill text does not pair well with the conversational dictionaries that Dale-Chall and other measures of complexity rely upon.

I amend this by creating a topic dictionary of the top words from legislative texts. I collect the texts for every legislation that members of the House and Senate voted on, perform standard text pre-processing (Grimmer and Stewart 2013), and pull out the top 20 percent of words for each congressional session.¹³ Creating topic dictionaries per congressional session is essential given the change in membership from session to session. I then apply these topic dictionaries to the complexity measure below, removing the familiar words from the “difficult

¹³ This breaks the document into a collection of individual words and removes “stop words.” However, unlike common approaches to computational text analysis, I do not stem the words. (Stemming reduces all words to their base word. For example, “running,” “runner,” and “runs” would all be converted to “run.”) Since I am forming dictionaries based on most commonly written words, I believe it’s important to fully capture the actual word. Stemming the words in this dataset introduces unnecessary and arguably detrimental ambiguity.

word” numerator. I multiply complexity scores by -1 to make the interpretation more intuitive.¹⁴

The below formula also accounts for the length of the document words per sentences, controlling for bias toward longer legislative texts. The bolded text shows the two main additions to the existing Dale-Chall readability score.

$$\left\{ 64 - \left[0.95 \times 100 \times \left(\frac{\text{total words} - \text{topic dictionary}}{\text{total words}} \right) \right] - 0.69 \times \left(\frac{\text{words}}{\text{sentences}} \right) \right\} * -1$$

Using this measure, I analyze the relative complexity of each Key Vote bill. By using a topic dictionary specific to each congressional session, this formula provides a measurable understanding of how familiar members are with the topics, words, and provisions of each Key Vote in each session. The result is a score for each Key Vote, ranging from the least complex (33, the reconfirmation of Ben Bernanke to be Fed Chair¹⁵) to most complex (108, an amendment to a Defense Bill authorizing the training of Syrian rebels¹⁶). Figure 3.4 displays the distribution of text complexity for each Key Vote in the dataset across the House and Senate. There is a normal distribution of complexity across the two chambers.

¹⁴ Without this final step, the higher the measure, the lower the document complexity. This alteration makes it easier to interpret.

¹⁵ PN 959, 111th Congress

¹⁶ House amendment to HJ Res 24, 113th Congress

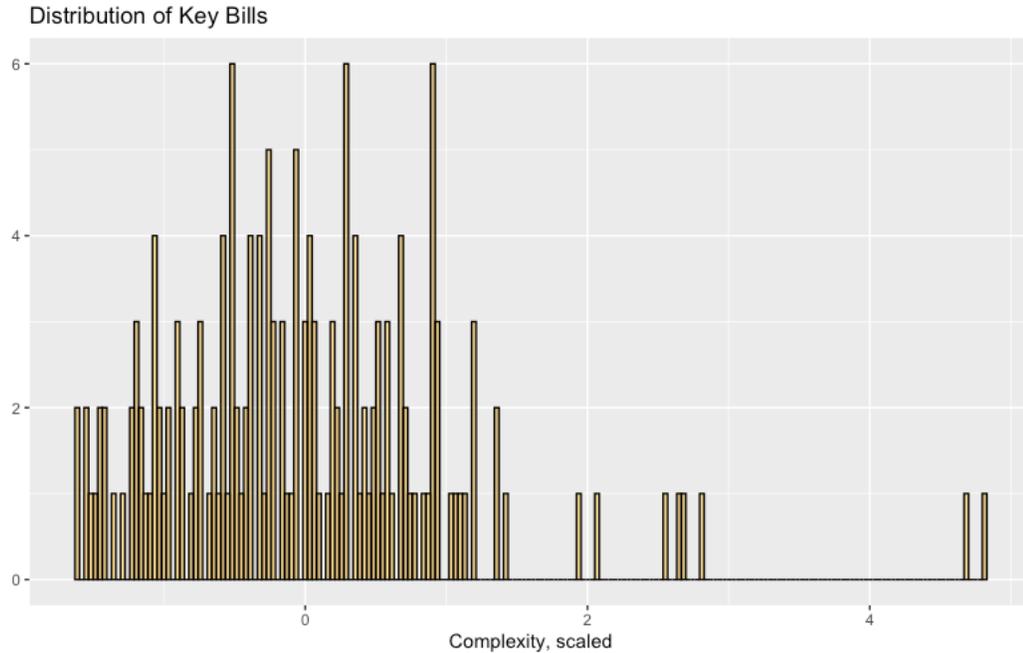


Figure 3.4: Dictionary-complexity score for each Key Vote, 113th to 116th Congress

This provides greater depth than topic or word count alone. The more often a familiar word occurs in legislation, the more familiar members of Congress should be with the associated provisions and policies—and the more familiar members are with the legislation at hand, then the less likely they are to be reliant on party leaders for how to discuss the policy. To verify this new measure is actually capturing legislator familiarity and legislative complexity, I divide my dataset into three tiers of complexity—most complex, moderate complexity, and low complexity—and randomly select a document from each section. The document representing the most complex measurement is H.R. 2048 of the 114th Congress, the bill authorizing an extension of the Patriot Act. The mid-tier complexity score is represented by H.R. 1215, 115th Congress, a bill intended to curb medical malpractice lawsuits. The bill representing the simplest tier is H.J. Res 46 from the 116th Congress, a bill disapproving of then-President Trump’s national emergency authorization on border security. This sampling of three bills indicates that the complexity measure is capturing not only legislator familiarity, but the complexity of topics and

legislative language. Text reauthorizing the Patriot Act contains details on national security, technology, and the complicated—and controversial—marriage of these two policy arenas. The legislation curbing medical malpractice lawsuits, while complex given its nature in relation to medical administration and judicial affairs, is a more familiar topic for not only most legislators, but most Americans. The least complex text is merely disapproving of a public-facing policy position of then-President Trump, and a party platform for the Republican Party. This topic is undoubtedly familiar and highly partisan, and the bill text is simple, given its lack of legal implication.¹⁷

This simple verification indicates that this measure is capturing legislator familiarity and text complexity. Understanding congressional familiarity with documents could—and arguably should—be applied to other questions of congressional behavior. How do members' votes or attendance change in response to complex hearing topics or floor speech debates? Do certain members use more complex words than others? How is this a reflection of expertise, seniority, or other factors? And for more general scholars, the use of topic-specific dictionaries to develop an understanding of familiarity could easily be applied to questions beyond Congress.

Interaction of complexity and ideology

The Key Votes in this analysis range from highly polarized to perfectly bipartisan and from common to immensely unfamiliar. How these two measures interact with each other will dictate the policy presentation process. While the end goal for policy presentation (i.e., constituent communication that justifies the actions of an individual legislator or political party) is simple, the process and source of the political messaging will differ. Complex legislation will

¹⁷ Full text of these bills can be found online at <https://github.com/sorellew/data>.

require greater assistance (likely from committees) to explain the vote to members. Conversely, partisan votes and legislation will likely receive outsized attention from party leaders. Yet because these measures are considering two different elements of the same legislation, it's important to consider how polarization and complexity interact, particularly given our question of rank-and-file reliance on congressional leaders. Bills can be both highly partisan and highly complex, or highly partisan and simple (or, not partisan and complex; not partisan and simple).

I expect that the use of policy presentation will rely on where legislation falls across these two measures. Highly complex *and* highly polarized legislation will likely provide congressional leaders with a messaging advantage—not only do rank-and-file members need clarity on the substance of the bill, but there is also a desire to discuss these bills in a partisan way. An example of this in our data is S. J. Res. 8, the Senate resolution containing the text of the “Green New Deal” in the 116th Congress. The complexities of energy and environmental policy interact with the deep-seated ideological divisions on regulatory policies. High complexity, low polarization bills will present different challenges—members will likely need assistance discussing the substance and partisan benefits of the legislation. Congressional leaders have a choice to highlight party priorities or the bipartisan aspects of the vote. Highly partisan votes with low complexity legislation are likely where most “messaging bills” fall. Focusing on ideological issues that have preconceived lines means that party leaders will not need to spend a great deal of time explaining the details of the legislation, but will provide partisan messaging to accompany the partisan vote. An example of this type of bill in the dataset is H.R. 3134, a bill from the 114th Congress that cut funding for Planned Parenthood in a response to the abortion services they provide. Low complexity legislation that receives a bipartisan vote, such as H.R. 2577, a bill to provide additional funds to fight the Zika disease (114th Congress) or the

equally complex but a highly partisan vote such as H. R. 695, the 2018 Continuing Resolution that contained funding for President Trump’s border wall (115th Congress). In the case of the Defense Reauthorization, members will rely on committee expertise to highlight party and personal wins throughout the legislation and may even note the bipartisan nature of the legislation. But for the contentious CR, Democrats and Republicans will likely turn to the Appropriations Committee and party leaders for guidance on the border wall provisions, potentially attacking their opponents for their policy stance or obstruction.

For each of these issues, party and committee leaders are aware of members’ own personal knowledge, which issues are most important to their base, and what materials they’re expected to provide. As one senior committee staffer observed, while the end goal is always “to translate these highly contentious, deeply emotional issues, into just a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ vote with some bullet points they can give the reporter on the way to the vote...and then something to say when they go back home, you just justify a tech vote with like, ‘screw the Chinese.’” The process differs given the substance of the policy. “The hard issues warrant more substantial [internal] conversation, versus something like a nomination, which quickly devolves into politics.”¹⁹ By cataloging the polarization of the vote and complexity of the related text, we have an important base to understand not only when, but how policy presentation manifests in Congress.

Institutional considerations

Party majority versus minority status

¹⁹ Interview 8

This dataset of Key Votes also allows us to consider how other legislative factors will impact the adaptation of policy presentation. In addition to variation in topic, polarization, and complexity as detailed above, the span of the 113th Congress through the first session of the 116th Congress (2013 to 2019) contains variation across chamber control and presidencies (Table 1). The task of a minority legislator is far different than one of a majority legislator. Where a minority member's primary goal, particularly in the House, is obstruction, the majority party carries the responsibility of developing and passing legislation. As one former House Republican member reflected, the legislative strategy and subsequent message differed, particularly in relation to the president:

“We got pretty good in the minority at staying on theme. The president had his bully pulpit, and Democrats would follow his messaging, but we didn't have that bully pulpit. So, what we tried to do is get a consolidated message that we could take to our constituents. We would go home and talk to local tv, radio, and spread our message out so that it was a bottom-up approach instead of top down. It worked pretty well.

“We were good at that in the minority. We were much worse in the majority. When you're in the majority, you have a responsibility to govern, and the divisions come out, which made it harder...In the minority, it's a lot easier to operate. You can vote no, and it's easy to explain in most cases. And you can have your three bullet points and that's it. In the majority, it's harder because you have to actually explain what you're passing.”²⁰

Furthermore, and as indicative of the representative's perspective above, votes that directly respond to the president or a presidential priority (e.g., the Affordable Care Act under President Obama; the border wall under President Trump) will receive outsized political attention from members (Lee 2009, Lee 2008). Party leaders will play an important role in policy presentation that responds to, or supports, the president.

House versus Senate

²⁰ Interview 9

The chambers rules and institutional norms will also impact policy presentation and the role of party leaders and committees in rank-and-file offices. Given the smaller and less experienced staff in House member offices, representatives are more reliant on party leaders for guidance on how to discuss legislation. In the House, staff are expected to cover several different portfolios, and press teams are often a one-person affair. Conversely, in the Senate, each member has a dedicated staffer (sometimes more) for each policy portfolio. Staff are more experienced and press teams are larger, allowing members to focus on regional and national outlets and different types of press with greater ease. This difference in staffing resources was a common theme among interview subjects.

When asked where they looked for policy information, a senior senate communications director said of their own office, “We are fortunate that we have very good and experienced policy staff, so we can rely on our own policy staff, and we can rely on them for data, statistics, for anything—information on upcoming votes, ideas for speeches, anything.”²¹ Conversely, House members and staff often cited their reliance on party leaders, committees, or other members, particularly due to staff disparities. As one House staffer said, “The [personal] staff is not as sophisticated and the chairman holds more power and more staff, so the chairman staff almost spoon-feeds the minority members directly.”²² One former member said that in an attempt to do research outside of party-provided talking points, they found their staff were unable to provide consistent, high-quality, original research: “I wanted to know what sources they were using, and they’d say, ‘Wikipedia’ and I’d say, ‘That’s not good enough!’ But I was more of a

²¹ Interview 16

²² Interview 8

stickler on this I think than some other members. In the end though, staff would get on to me and tell me, ‘We just don’t have time to do all this research.’”²³

Beyond inconsistencies in resources, the differences in individual political power and institutional norms shape policy presentation in the two chambers. The House, as a majoritarian institution, is less reliant on the whims of individual members—power comes from voting blocs, caucuses, and a unified party front. The cloture threshold and tight majorities of the Senate provide individual members with greater autonomy and negotiating power. Several members and staff noted how this shaped the expectations of bipartisanship and collaboration in the Senate compared to the House. One senior staffer who served in both chambers said:

“In the Senate, the culture is very different. When I was in the Senate, planning a hearing, they tried to tell me about it with very little notice, but that was partly because the staff was from the House. The House is very ‘go fuck yourself’ if you’re in the majority. I almost lost my mind, because in the Senate, culturally, you don’t do that...There is an expectation of participation in the Senate that does not exist in the House. It may exist with some members, but that’s not how the House is designed.

“In the House, you either have to take down the majority or you have to assert your dominance, but you’re punching either way. In the Senate, you have to be more measured. If you punch one of your colleagues in the face, you need that person! In the Senate, people care because they know a disgruntled person can screw you over with a blue slip or a hold. In the House, you don’t care because you just have to get the majority party, or really just the speaker, on board.”²⁴

Conclusion

Members and staff focus their communication efforts on legislation that is important to their district and state or bills that receive outsized national attention. It’s this latter category that receives the policy presentation treatment from party leaders and committees that this dissertation focuses on. The CQ Key Votes provide an accepted and thorough way to capture these nationalized issues. However, within this subset of policy issues there are key

²³ Interview 9

²⁴ Interview 18

differentiations in polarization and topic complexity. In an era of modern lawmaking in which bipartisanship is often the reality but polarization is the perception, vote disparity and complexity play an important role in understanding the policy presentation process. Furthermore, this dataset provides helpful variation across chamber, a party's majority and minority status, and presidential terms.

Policy presentation occurs at the hands of the committee and party leaders, but an issue's ideological polarization and perceived complexity will impact individual members' reliance on communication assistance, which institutional entity takes the lead, and how the message is distributed and absorbed. This will vary by chamber and member autonomy. This chapter has presented a way to measure national policy issues by polarization and complexity, forming the foundation for exploring how policy presentation manifests itself in Congress today. The following chapters will use this dataset and these new measures to evaluate differences in message development and member adoption.

Chapter 4: How policy presentation is developed and distributed

Because much of policy presentation occurs behind the scenes—in member-only meetings, through email distribution, and over phone calls between congressional staffers—interviews with members of Congress and their staff are key to understanding the process of message development and distribution. This chapter will present data from 31 open-ended, anonymous interviews with current and former members of Congress and staff. These interviews proved incredibly fruitful to understanding *how* policy presentation occurs in Congress. Respondents detailed an extensive network of behind-the-scenes message development involving committee chairs and party leaders, as well as outside interest groups and the electoral concerns of rank-and-file members.

Respondents shared which bills leadership prioritized, how party and committee leaders developed messages, and the types of materials distributed to members. Rank-and-file offices also discussed variation in their own reliance on leaders, external sources, and personal staff for constituent communication. The results present common themes and experiences about developing constituent communication and the role of party and committee leaders in the process. Respondents cited committees as a primary resource for message development. Their experienced staff and institutional advantages—namely, committee hearings—grant them access to external resources and helpful data. Party leaders then use this committee expertise, reported testimony, and internal materials to craft caucus-wide communications messages.

These interviews also unveiled notable differences in policy presentation between political parties and the two chambers of Congress. Republican party leaders and rank-and-file members discussed and organized and centralized messaging process, while Democratic respondents shared an occasional, and often decentralized, message development process. The

use of party leader materials differed by chamber, with senators preferring personal resources (namely, their own staff) and committees in developing constituent communications, while House respondents report a dependence on party leaders, particularly for major legislation. Respondents also shared individual-level differences in messaging given constituent concerns, seniority, and electoral vulnerability. Overall, respondents emphasized a shared goal of crafting and sending easy-to-understand information to constituents—one that party leaders and committees often directed, encouraged, and assisted. The data from this chapter also informed the remaining quantitative analysis of this dissertation. Variation between parties, chambers, legislation, committees, and individual offices provided helpful guidance in developing quantitative analysis of the external-facing outputs of constituent communication.

This chapter will first detail the data collection process and provide an overview of the sources that inform this research (Beckman and Hall 2013, Bleich and Pekkanen 2013). I then turn to the results, discussing how policy presentation begins with committees and is fine-tuned and distributed by party leaders. I will then turn to the considerations made by rank-and-file offices on when and what to communicate and how leaders encourage members to adopt these messages. Throughout this chapter, I will detail the actual mechanics of policy presentation as well as notable differences between party and chamber. Lastly, I will conclude with general takeaways and areas for future interview research.

Data and methods: Overview of data collection

The interviews for this dissertation project took place over the course of several months, from fall 2021 through spring 2022.²⁵ Interviews were anonymous, and any identifying

²⁵ Institutional Review Board, University of Maryland, #1508784

information has been removed from this chapter. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was initially granted for in-person interviews, but following the COVID-19 pandemic, was expanded to include remote and telephone interviews. The majority of the interviews were performed over video chat software, while the remainder occurred over the phone and in person in Washington, D.C. Interviews were open-ended, ranging from 30 minutes to two hours, with the median interview being one hour long.

Respondents were recruited through cold-call email requests and snowball sampling, in which sources either provided me with contact information or passed along my contact information to potential subjects. The response rate was around 70%, with a higher success rate of those that were referred from fellow subjects. In total, I interviewed 31 respondents, capturing a representative sample of the population in question: members and staff on Capitol Hill. The partisan breakdown was nearly split even (16 Republicans and 15 Democrats), and respondents represented both chambers, with a slight bias toward the House (17 House respondents, 11 Senate respondents, and four who served in both chambers).

Respondents also varied in important factors such as expertise and electoral vulnerability. Representative of the population (Congress), the majority of respondents represented relatively safe districts, but several were from “toss-up” districts. Studying both chambers presents helpful variation in electoral costs and tenures, as senators face higher electoral stakes and more expensive elections. Respondents also varied in their committee of jurisdiction or personal expertise. The most well-represented area of expertise was Judiciary Committee proceedings, but

these references might have been prompted by an ongoing Supreme Court vacancy and nomination.²⁶

The respondents collectively spanned the entire course of the dataset. Given the high turnover rate of congressional staff, currently serving staff members did not have insight to the earlier years in the dataset. However, I sought out long-serving former staff that could speak to the earlier years of the quantitative dataset. Among members, my sample was representative of junior serving members and more senior members. Given the long tenure of most congressional members, member insight was reflective of several decades of collective experience.

The majority (27) of interview respondents were current and former congressional staffers. Given the high turnover rate between congressional offices (LaPira et al. 2020, Burgat 2019), the majority of staff respondents served in several positions over their tenure, with several serving on committees (10), with party leadership (four), and rank-and-file offices. The majority of respondents were in senior positions (chief of staff, communications director, chief counsel, etc.), but mid-level staffers (press secretary, committee clerk) were also interviewed. Given the focus of the research, the majority of staff respondents worked in press and communications, but member services, legislative staff, and senior advisors are also represented.

Current and former members (four) were interviewed as well, however these respondents all served in positions of leadership, either as committee chairs or party leadership. Yet, because all members regardless of leadership status are also representatives of individual districts, they were able to provide insight on both personal office communications as well as party and committee leadership operations. The variation and number of respondents allowed me to safely

²⁶ As interviews were ongoing, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer announced his retirement and incoming Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson was confirmed by the Senate.

consider their insight as generalizable (Raychaudhuri 2018). One of these interviews was on background only.

Respondents were provided a brief overview of the project: “I’m interested in understanding how members/you educate themselves/yourself about bill contents in order for constituent communication,” and then asked to describe their experiences on Capitol Hill. Beyond these initial introductions, interview questions were adapted to their experience given their position or office, as well as information revealed during the interview. Questions about resources (e.g., “What materials do you use when crafting constituent communication?”), relationships with other offices and party leadership (e.g., “At what stage of the process do party leaders get involved?”), or strategy (e.g., “When do you decide to craft party-wide messaging?”) were standard.

Per Beckman and Hall (2013) I avoided questions about vague motivations behind their work, asking respondents to instead reflect on actions and lived experiences. Of course, several respondents were eager to theorize about congressional actions or differences between parties and chambers—these responses were always appreciated but not explicitly prompted (Kingdon 1981). However, I did conclude every interview with an open-ended question that allowed respondents some opportunity to speculate based on lived experiences: “What observations do you find interesting about how information flows through Congress, from leaders to rank-and-file members?”

Findings: Policy presentation development and distribution

Deciding when to communicate

Topic and format of constituent communication

Constituent communication generally falls into three “buckets”: 1) reacting to local or national news of the day that’s otherwise unrelated to congressional activity; 2) introduction of personal-interest legislation; and 3) discussion of something happening in the House or Senate—usually a floor vote or committee proceeding. This research focuses on the last category: constituent communications discussing chamber activity.

The most common types of constituent communication are press releases, newsletters, and social media posts. Press releases are sent to local and national media outlets, while newsletters are sent directly to constituents via email. When preparing constituent communication, the process is similar across all offices of both chambers and both parties: Press teams (press secretaries, communications directors) will gather relevant policy information and prepare a statement on the issue or legislation. Because members cannot speak on record about every issue (although some certainly try), statements are written in a way that emulates the member’s own words and preferences, with the primary goal being simplicity and relatability. Several respondents said that during the writing and development process, they always consider the hypothetical question, “Why should someone from my state [or district] care?”

Rank-and-file resources for message development

Once a member decides to send a press release or newsletter, they turn to four main sources for message development: resources within their personal office (rank-and-file staff), interest groups, committees, and party leaders. Senators are much more likely to rely on personal office resources than House members. The larger staff size of Senate offices provides each

senator with a multi-member press team and often a legislative staffer dedicated to a single policy portfolio. Two (or more) schedulers and several legislative assistants relieve constituent pressure from more senior staffers. As a result, rank-and-file Senate respondents overwhelmingly cited their own legislative staff as their first source for message development, and they rely heavily on legislative staff to help them with policy details or follow-up questions. As one Senate press secretary said: “I’m not an expert—press people really know the inch of a lake, several lakes—but the [legislative] staff knows the whole lake.”²⁷

In the House, staff sizes are much smaller. Press teams are often limited to a single communications director or press secretary (sometimes with the assistance of a junior press assistant), and legislative staffers cover several policy portfolios at once, as well as constituent communication. As a result, House staffers are often unable to develop the depth of policy expertise that their Senate counterparts can. This makes them more reliant on committee staff and party leaders. As one staffer who served in both chambers said, “In the House, it’s much more a team sport, there are fewer staff and fewer resources.”²⁸

In addition to disparities in policy expertise, respondents also cited how the pace of chamber impacted office workload. In the Senate, while several bills may be voted on within the week, the bills are slow to develop, move through the chamber, and ultimately receive a vote. This additional time allows individual staffers, particularly press staff, to become experts in specific policy proposals. In the House, fast-moving floor votes and numerous committee assignments require staff (and members) to pivot between issues several times within the week. One Senate staffer said of the difference in pace, “Things are more slow here, so there’s a lot

²⁷ Interview 11

²⁸ Interview 30

going on at the same time. Versus the House, it's one thing at a time, but it's very quick, so I think there's more reliance on leadership over there."²⁹

In both chambers, committees were cited as a top resource for developing constituent communication. As one Senate communications director said, committee staff were their second reference point, citing their experience and high-quality work: "I know that they are also a reliable source on data, statistics, and how a bill impacts our state, and I can trust what they put out."³⁰ In the Senate, committees are seen as a reference point, but not a content mill; rank-and-file offices proactively reach out to committees, rather than waiting for committee staff to send them materials. Similarly, party leadership in the Senate was not cited as a proactive source of messaging materials, but rather a covert reference point for rank-and-file members. Rather than providing explicit directions, Senate respondents found leadership was seen as a helpful source of reference and inspiration. "It is helpful to hear what the leader is interested in, so at the least we can point reporters to that."³¹ Conversely, in the House, respondents described a process where committees and leadership worked together to proactively provide materials to coincide with legislative passage. As one communications director who served in both the House and Senate said:

"Communicating from committee, on the Senate side is more like, 'If you would like to help, here is how you can be helpful.' On the Senate side, [rank-and-file offices] have a whole press team. So, we're not doing any draft tweets for you, not doing any draft statements for you, because they have the ability to do that. Versus on the House side, we would say, here's a whole package ready to go for you to use."³²

²⁹ Interview 11

³⁰ Interview 8

³¹ Interview 11

³² Interview 7

No House respondents discussed a purely in-office process to generate materials for constituent communication. Rather, House members described a deluge of information from committee and party leaders. Committee hearings are accompanied by one-pagers, recommended questions for witnesses, and background materials. Party conferences and caucuses send out daily emails and messaging guidance, accompanying graphics for legislation, and “recess packets” for the August work period. Rank-and-file House members rely on committee and party leaders for resources, both written and logistical, to help them create constituent communication. One representative described developing a constituent message as a threefold process that begins with committees and ends with district-level considerations:

“Most of the policy development and communication is initially driven at the committee level, and then it gets enhanced and pushed out at the caucus level, and then individuals take it and use it how best fits at for their office and their district.”³³

Finally, for both chambers, lobbyists and interest groups are also a helpful source of information for message development. While the relationship between interest groups and members of Congress is often discussed through the lens of the staff “revolving door,” interviews revealed a revolving door of *communication* strategy. Respondents described both utilizing existing information from outside groups for constituent communication as well as turning to these groups to help with their own engagement efforts. One House senior staffer said, “We would promote content with outside groups and third parties and ask them to do the same, so there was a feedback loop with the stuff you were reaching out to.”³⁴ However, much of outside group messaging is facilitated by party and committee leaders. Leadership offices in the House and Senate have dedicated coalitions directors who works closely with the party’s

³³ Interview 12

³⁴ Interview 13

relevant interest groups for bill development and communication efforts. The goal of these positions is to manage relationships with outside organizations and strategically provide them with information to maintain support—and receive helpful information in return.

Overall, legislators have several resources when crafting constituent communication, but themes of centralized messaging were present in both chambers, particularly when discussing major legislation and party priorities. As discussed in prior chapters, not all legislation warrants a full-scale, party-wide messaging strategy, and members often communicate on issues beyond those congressional leaders provide materials for. But for votes that attract national attention or introduce significant (often complex) policy changes, respondents discussed a hands-on approach from leaders and committees. Rank-and-file members reported turning to leaders for messaging to communicate on major legislation, particularly when it was complex or had a large policy impact. This commonly took the form of coordinating materials such as talking points, logistical assistance, and media support. For example, one Democratic staffer shared how Senate Democratic leadership made a concerted messaging effort to coincide with passage of the bipartisan infrastructure bill in the 117th Congress, including videos, press conferences, and talking points: “We got a coordinated push from them to have senators talk about why it’s important for the state, and they had each senator come in individually and record something... They will send suggested talking points, or draft Twitter copy, some graphics you can use.”³⁵

Yet while major legislation received outsized attention from party leaders, there were notable differences in the strategy of development and distribution between the two chambers and two parties. The remainder of this chapter details the message development and distribution

³⁵ Interview 30

process for major legislation in the Senate and House, and concludes by evaluating when members actually use these leader-led resources.

Developing the message: Committees

Hearings and witnesses

All respondents considered committees as a first step in party-wide message development given the many tools committees have at their disposal for messaging purposes. The first, and likely most apparent to scholars of political communication, is the committee hearing.

Committee chairs have a great deal of leeway in deciding the topic, time, and witnesses of a hearing. As research has noted extensively, selecting a hearing topic is a powerful form of agenda setting (Jones and Baumgartner 2015). Even the logistical selection of time and place—and when a committee chair wants to share that information with their minority counterparts—is an advantage in policy presentation. The initial step of scheduling and announcing a hearing topic varies by the partisanship and civility in the committees: Committees with bipartisan rapport, particularly in the Senate, coordinate topics and logistics between majority and minority parties. Unfortunately, respondents from both chambers and parties shared that the proclivity for civility in the committee hearing process is declining.

After a hearing topic and time are determined, the selection of topics and witnesses provides the majority party with a powerful communication advantage. Respondents on both sides of the aisle and in both chambers regarded the witness-selection process as an important opportunity to frame policy problems and solutions in a partisan lens, simultaneously creating evidence for party-wide messaging. As such, committee staff spend a great deal of time finding, vetting, and preparing witnesses for hearings. Witnesses are interviewed prior to a formal invitation to ensure their viewpoints support the party's perspective. After selection, witnesses

are further coached to make sure their delivery is clear and effective. They are provided expected questions and opening statements are sometimes edited.

This coaching and preparation are examples of policy presentation. The witness selection process allows committee chairs and staff to distribute a (partisan) message in a formal, recorded committee setting. And not only is the transcript from committee hearings part of the congressional record, but compelling testimony (and questioning) can draw attention beyond the committee hearing room. One Senate committee staffer compared this to a trial: “I view preparing for hearings and selecting witnesses as building a case. The hearing is set, the trial is set, so you want to pick which witnesses to you want to build your case. Who is going to be the most compelling witness?”³⁶

This strategic messaging opportunity has become an institutionalized advantage for the majority party. The committee chair (and their staff) selects most of the hearing witnesses—a ratio of three or four majority witnesses to one minority witness. Because the majority party and committee chair have several seats to fill, they can select a variety of witnesses, from academic experts to administrative officials to personal-interest stories—all of whom can reflect a preferred ideological appeal and unique messaging perspective. Committee staff who serve in minority positions described the necessity of a more strategic approach. Because the minority party has less time to find a witness (in highly partisan committees they can receive as little as two days’ notice), and often only one slot to fill, witness selection is a tactical response to the majority’s slate. Respondents discussed choosing between witnesses who could “throw cold water”³⁷ on the majority’s point of view.

³⁶ Interview 22

³⁷ Interview 18

In addition to selecting witnesses that are flattering to the majority's policy goals, respondents also discussed the coordination efforts among party members prior to a committee hearing. Staff prepare extensive materials for committee members, including one-pagers and policy overviews, information about the witnesses, and even suggested questions for members to ask witnesses. Respondents noted that the use of committee-prepared questions varied by member and chamber. Senators are less likely to use questions prepared by committee staff, preferring to rely on their own staff to tailor questions for their personal interests. House members, junior members, or those not present for the entirety of the hearing are more likely to use committee-provided materials. One House committee clerk observed that the use of prepared questions rose with the onset of virtual hearings in response to COVID-19:

“There is a very specific strategy to their questions, and it is a partisan strategy...It’s a lot more transparent when a member is using a canned question that was given to them. If they were in the room, they would read the room, and realize what was just being talked about. Questions can come out of left field and be talked about again and again. It becomes very obvious they aren’t paying attention.”³⁸

However, even senators oblige with party efforts for high-profile hearings. Several respondents cited nomination proceedings in the Senate as an “all-hands-on-deck” process. Respondents of both parties described meeting at the staff and member level several times before a hearing to coordinate who would ask which questions. “We would literally sit around a table and figure out who would ask what, because you want to make sure things get covered.”³⁹ Overall, respondents reflected a belief that committee hearings were a prime opportunity for policy presentation, and used witness selection, opening statements, and coordinated Q&As to frame policies and solutions through a partisan lens.

³⁸ Interview 4

³⁹ Interview 3

Staff expertise

Beyond hearing materials, committees provide a great deal of written evidence for committee members and party leaders. Materials such as reports, letters, fact sheets on policy issues, and press releases in response to current events are common products from committees, with the goals being brevity and clarity. Committee chairs and ranking members take the lead on many of these public-facing documents, and as such, they are largely prepared separately by party for their own members. Some documents are created on a bipartisan basis (e.g., press advisories), but overwhelmingly, one-pagers, bill overviews, and other supporting documents are developed with party goals in mind.

Committee staff themselves are also a resource, and respondents in both chambers discussed using their expertise or prepared documents to create press statements. Picking up the phone and calling staff for clarity on a given policy point is common. Not only do committees retain more experienced policy staff, but they have their own communication teams as well. These committee communicators work closely with policy staff to develop digestible materials, and several respondents said the development of these press materials was a committee priority. One House committee staffer discussed the importance of their communication staff, particularly given the complex subject matter of the committee's jurisdiction:

“With the frantic pace of things, the limitations of resources, the lack of experience among a lot of personal office staff, or people back in the district offices who are able to communicate about what an important piece of legislation might be, because of all those factors, there is an understanding that the committees are best equipped to provide information about those bills. But there is a communication disconnect between the expertise of the committees and the understanding of constituents.

“At our committee, the majority of our waking hours are spent distilling information for general consumption—we create emails, talking points, press releases... The goal is always

to speak as plain language as possible. We are very forward-leaning on eviscerating any jargon that comes our way.”⁴⁰

Deciding when to engage in policy presentation

When asked which policy issues and bills committee staff decide to hold hearings and prepare materials on, the answers varied by chamber and committee jurisdiction. As prior research has found, committee focus and oversight hearings often depend on the chamber’s relationship with the White House, as well as the jurisdiction of the committee (Kriner and Schickler 2016, Talbert et al. 1995, Baumgartner and Jones 2010). However, this research considers the source of constituent communication: Who makes the decision on hearing topic and timing? Who directs staff to prepare a one-pager or op-ed? The answer differed by chamber.

One long-serving committee staffer said:

“I found that Senate committees have autonomy over hearing topics, with little input from party leaders. In the Senate, the committee chairmen are more powerful, they’re less beholden to the majority leaders, and those committee chairmen really do feel like they’re in control of the policy agenda in their committee of jurisdiction space. So, the role of the chairman for setting up the advance or demise of legislation is important.”⁴¹

Comparatively, in the House, while committee chairs do have the decision-making power to have a hearing (one House committee chair, when asked “When do you decide to hold a hearing?” answered “Whenever and on whatever I want!”⁴²), respondents did indicate more centralized, party-led directives for hearing topics. This could take the form of gatekeeping or proactive requests. One former committee chair said:

“I remember when I first got the gavel I made a long list of hearings I wanted to hold...They [committee staff] looked at that list and say, ‘We don’t have time to do all of this!’ I had discretion about what I wanted to do, but I still had to clear it with leadership.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Interview 6

⁴¹ Interview 8

⁴² Interview 23

⁴³ Interview 9

Another House committee staffer said, when deciding committee topics:

“We will talk to leadership staff and give them a copy of the topics on the table and get a sense of where they are on things, or if there’s anything they’re like, ‘Absolutely not.’ They get first right of refusal.”⁴⁴

Sometimes, House committees are even encouraged to hold hearings on certain topics. Using a hypothetical, one respondent said, “If Nancy Pelosi decides she wants to highlight climate change she will tell the chairmen of House committees that she wants to have hearings in January or February on climate change. And she wants to have committee hearings across all jurisdictions that climate change can apply to—Energy and Commerce, Ways and Means—across various angles.”⁴⁵ House members from both parties shared that party leaders directed committee hearing topics on occasion.

Staff and members also recognize that hearings and committee research ranged from serious legislation to messaging efforts, and many respondents felt the topics and substance of hearings differed by jurisdiction. One Senate committee staffer said, “I think people talk about the financial sector, like the Finance and the Banking Committee on the Senate side, and maybe the Commerce Committee, as a more serious issues, versus the Judiciary Committee, which often devolves into politics.” In the House, respondents felt all committees trended more toward news of the day and oversight. One former member said that while this varied somewhat by committee chairs, all committees were eager to tie their committee into current events.

Despite recognition that policy outcomes differ in sincerity and substance, staff spend a great deal of time and resources preparing hearings and materials for committee members, regardless of whether the bill serves a substantive or messaging purpose. High-profile issues

⁴⁴ Interview 5

⁴⁵ Interview 8

attract greater media attention, and thus messaging efforts. As one respondent said, “If it has come down to the committee in the first place, then it’s treated no differently. If we’re expending our resources on a messaging bill, well, then we need to get the message right.”⁴⁶ On the flip side, bipartisan and complex issues allow committee staff to drive the narrative. As one Democratic Senate staffer said, “I think that the issues that fly under the radar that are prominent enough that they’re bipartisan, but not high-profile enough that they become a political football are the things that have the best chance to get done.”⁴⁷

A major goal of this content preparation is future, wider distribution. One committee staffer responsible for writing the chair’s opening statements said, “I’m usually looking for an interesting data point that would stand out, because that’s what our comms team is pulling to put in a press release.”⁴⁸ Staff of the committee often pull video clips or quotes from committee hearings and put them in a press release. Members then share these video clips in press releases, newsletters, and on social media. Within the chamber, a major goal of hearings—and witness selection in particular—is to provide a record for non-committee members to refer to and cite in their own constituent communication. As one committee communications director said:

“While we would like to think and expect all of our members are doing their homework, we like to make it as easy as possible and lead by example. One of the reasons we do so many press releases is that, ideally, we want them to copy, paste, and send them out to their own districts, maybe just retailoring for their own constituency.”⁴⁹

While they are initially prepared for members of the committee, committee documents also serve as helpful reference documents as issues make their way through the chamber. In the Senate, as discussed earlier, committee staff and resources are seen as an optional reference

⁴⁶ Interview 6

⁴⁷ Interview 30

⁴⁸ Interview 5

⁴⁹ Interview 6

point—helpful assistance to an already professional personal office. Non-committee member offices feel comfortable reaching out to committee staff for guidance and assistance. Thus, in the Senate, the distribution process of committee materials is largely driven by rank-and-file needs. However, in the House, committee materials are prepared with the expectation that they will be used by the entire caucus. While the message begins with committee members, who are directly emailed (or provided print copies, pre-COVID-19) materials, members are expected to then share committee work or hearings with other members. A House committee staff discussed how the audience for materials went far beyond the committee room: “There are several levers by which we communicate this stuff. We use the members themselves, the press of course, and organizations outside of Congress will use our products, too.”⁵⁰

But when it comes to widespread caucus messaging, committee leaders rely on party leaders. The decision to highlight committee materials is driven by party leaders—not every product is shared. Rather, leaders will turn to committees when they need something for an upcoming vote or response to a current event and will work closely with committee staff to create materials and educate members. As one former chair recounted, “Conference staff would take [our materials] and put their own stuff together, putting their own spin on it. Then at weekly conference meetings, we would make a presentation, you know, ‘what’s in the bill.’ We would answer questions and field concerns.”⁵¹

Distributing the message: Party leaders

Focusing the party

⁵⁰ Interview 6

⁵¹ Interview 9

Party leaders in both chambers and both parties rarely—if ever—generate messaging materials from scratch. Their main responsibility is streamlining the party’s focus on a set of issues every week, and then taking existing materials and “dumbing it down” for general consumption. The first step is scheduling and planning. One Republican House leadership staffer said the planning process began on the Friday, for the following week. And rather than being driven solely by policy, the decision on what members should discuss was entirely a messaging strategy:

“On Friday morning the whip’s office would send around a potential tentative schedule for the following week...There would be an idea at least of what we were going to tackle. So, then Friday afternoons, the leadership team would discuss what we would like to message for the week and pick out the topics that we thought were most relatable or most important for the majority.

“We then set the topics for what we’re going to do for the week. Then we’d communicate that to the rest of the communicators on our Monday meeting, and then that would then be communicated on Tuesday mornings to members, and then a press conference would follow. The topic and materials were decided by the leadership staff, mostly leadership comms, but some policy staff would attend to help us with the policy.”⁵²

For minority parties, the task is somewhat easier: defense. Like their legislative counterparts, the goal for minority communicators is to obstruct and prevent a successful, credit-claiming message from taking hold. A Senate communications director commented how materials from party leaders are more political when they were in the minority: “It’s always easier to be in the minority. Much easier to point fingers than accept reasonability.”⁵³

Crafting the message

After topics are selected, party leadership begins the process of simplifying existing work. One party leadership communications staffer described the process as taking all the

⁵² Interview 7

⁵³ Interview 7

materials from committees, think tanks, or interest groups, and then reframing it for common absorption: “It’s just a matter of having people in place who are grounded enough in how the world works outside the Beltway...How people are thinking about things. The general rule was if you can explain it to your mother then you can explain it to anybody else.”⁵⁴

For high-profile issues, these offices coordinate messaging efforts and helpful materials for conference-wide distribution. For complex issues, these materials can be particularly beneficial for non-committee members. One committee staffer admitted that sometimes, committee staff did a poor job of preparing constituent-ready materials. Leadership stepped in when there was a conference-wide need for messaging guidance:

“They performed a pretty significant job of translating the nerdy committee work into the floor land...I was kind of a subject matter nerd, but that’s [talking points] much more what most of the non-committee senators care about. They don’t really give a hoot about the policy...They need the comms help to translate these highly contentious, deeply emotional issues, into just a yes or no vote and something they can tell the reporter on the way to the vote and give them something to say when they go back home.”⁵⁵

Another respondent recalled the Republican discussion of the 2009 Affordable Care Act: “John [Boehner] told us, we need everyone speaking on this. But then he realized members didn’t know how to speak about health care at all. It was like, Health Care 101. So, we would have meetings just going over how to talk about it.”⁵⁶

In addition to reading comprehension, communicators focus on catchy phrases and specific wording. Social media campaigns in particular generate brainstorming sessions for party leaders. One senior staffer bemoaned the obsession with social media messaging: “There’s an obsession with hashtags. People love hashtags now, but I’m not sure how that matters with the

⁵⁴ Interview 17

⁵⁵ Interview 8

⁵⁶ Interview 9

voters. My parents have no clue what a hashtag is, but the number of conversations people have about hashtags is shocking. But I guess it makes you feel better.”⁵⁷ In some cases, parties turn to polling for message cultivation. One committee staffer said, “I am really diving into what the actual cross tabs say, where the independents are, what are the Democrats thinking, what’s the question being asked, what wording is being used.”⁵⁸ Communications consultants such as Frank Luntz are brought in for major endeavors (i.e., health care repeal). Only Republican respondents reported using these resources, although Democratic respondents did discuss paying attention to relevant interest groups.

Distributing materials

After committees and party leaders develop a message, talking points, sample graphics, press releases, and other materials are mostly distributed via email and at in-person member and staff-level meetings. Party leaders also coordinate press conferences, district events, and interviews. Both parties have communication arms in their respective chambers, but the actual distribution and logistics are handled by different entities, depending on the chamber and party.

In the Senate, the majority and minority leaders keep members apprised of overarching messaging goals. The leadership communication offices, the Democratic Policy and Communications Committee (DPCC) and the Republican Policy Committee (RPC) and Senate Republican Conference, are viewed as a helpful resource, but not necessarily an integral part of constituent communication. These offices mainly provide two types of services: logistics and communication resources, or in the case of complex legislation and policy topics, simplified messaging materials. Respondents cited the research materials distributed by the Republican

⁵⁷ Interview 18

⁵⁸ Interview 6

Policy Committee as a resource occasionally used. Rather, the greatest resource party leaders provide Senate rank-and-file offices is tangible resources for communication. “Not every office can have a multi-million-dollar TV studio,” one Senate press secretary said. “That’s probably the thing we use conference for the most.”⁵⁹ In addition to video recording equipment, these offices have graphic design teams, radio studios, and television bookers to provide helpful components to constituent messaging. This can be particularly helpful for freshman members, or offices without a dedicated digital director. One Senate staffer observed: “For offices without a digital director, they make videos highlighting district work, which is nice. They also set aside floor time for people to speak on certain issues. That’s really helpful for freshman offices.”⁶⁰

Additionally, Senate Republicans have weekly press meetings at the staff level. This staff-level meeting instilled a sentiment of comradery and unity that respondents felt gave them an advantage over their Democratic counterparts. One Republican staffer observed Democrats’ oversight as “quite a rookie operation. I don’t see a ton of coordination. It seems there are just a lot of cooks in the kitchen. Compared to Republicans, it’s very clear the leader’s point of view. But Democrats, what’s the predominate message here?”⁶¹

For Democratic senators, respondents described a more decentralized, informal process, but not absent serious coordination for large party priorities. One Democratic communications staffer said that they received a lot of suggested guidance from the current majority leader: “I get a bunch of emails from Schumer’s office, and they’ll say, ‘Hey this is what Schumer is talking about on the floor,’ or, ‘This is suggested talking points for Dem agenda.’ Sometimes they will send suggested talking points, or the committee will send...draft Twitter copy, some graphics

⁵⁹ Interview 11

⁶⁰ Interview 11

⁶¹ Interview 11

you can use.” But the staffer emphasized that use of party materials was up to the discretion of each office.⁶²

In the House, party leaders are much more aggressive with policy presentation and their communication output. Once a policy issue is determined relevant, either due to current events or an upcoming vote, party leaders begin to compile resources. Party leaders also have large, experienced staff, including their own research and communications offices—the Democratic Caucus and the House Republican Conference—whose sole purpose is to develop and distribute party-wide messaging. Although the leadership structure on paper is largely the same, respondents again revealed notable differences by party.

House Republicans were far more proactive and centralized, and message development began as soon as a policy was on the short list for floor consideration. The communication staff of Republican leadership offices will prepare several materials to distribute at the staff and member level. Email distribution lists contain talking points, sample tweets and graphics, and opportunities to speak on the House floor in support of the Republican policy position. Republican leaders also direct their members in strategic communication more than their Senate counterparts. Republican respondents detailed a painstaking process of finding the best “voices” to discuss legislation, and often sought out relevant members for press conferences or videos—i.e., a doctor to discuss health care, or a veteran to discuss military issues. One House leadership communications director said that the search also considered who was a skilled communicator, and who could stay on message: “Because there are hundreds of members who want to talk at all times, so, who do we think can best speak on leadership priorities? We were looking for people who could communicate effectively but would then help the leadership team overall explain why

⁶² Interview 30

this is a good bill.”⁶³ Even the person selected to introduce the legislation is a strategic messaging decision for Republican leadership. As a former House leadership staffer said:

*“Often when talking about larger pieces of legislation, the leader would decide who would be the best person to introduce the bill...It was often a point to have someone on theme introduce the bill. And the GOP, lacking in women, if it was a bill related to ‘women’s issues’ the leader would point at the women in the room and say, ‘This is a child tax bill, one of you do it.’ They would have a long, strategic discussion on who was going to lead some of the major legislation.”*⁶⁴

House Republican respondents emphasized the importance of weekly member and staff meetings to cultivate a strong, unified message. Communication staff of every House Republican office meet every week that Congress is in session, and the time is used to explain upcoming legislation and share leadership’s messaging strategy. Committee communications staffers are on hand to answer questions, and the meetings are followed up with emailed handouts containing sample graphics and talking points. For major legislation, this effort began weeks in advance of a vote. One leadership communications director said, “We would send out a weekly message, and we’d give everyone a good heads up. If we’re going to vote on infrastructure in a few weeks, then every week leading up to it we would receive talking points, graphics, videos.”⁶⁵

House Democratic leadership described a slightly different approach. While Speaker Pelosi was described as being “hands on” in the bill development process, respondents did not see her as central to constituent communication. One long-serving Democratic staffer said, “I don’t think she cares what people talk about. She has less involvement in how people talk to their constituents. Once her office shares materials, that’s it, there’s not much follow up.”⁶⁶ One leadership staffer, when asked to describe caucus-wide communication efforts, described a

⁶³ Interview 7

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Interview 25

decentralized, somewhat haphazard process: “Honestly the jurisdictions are so clear, there are so many members, that people will just know what’s going to the floor by looking at the calendar. People just find out about what’s being voted on by looking at the calendar.”⁶⁷

Compared to Republican caucus meetings, which were described as a top-down directive of communicative marching orders, a Democratic committee chairman said their meetings were more akin to a “family meeting.” One chairman said, “The caucus is the forum for people to talk about what they’re concerned about. The chairs are there to answer questions. That’s where rank-and-file members have an opportunity to talk about any concerns.” A Democratic leadership staffer described their approach as “more herding sheep than micro-managing. So, a lot of times, if we were communicating something out to the whole party, nothing really needed to get out, the relevant policy staff would set up meetings with the relevant policy staff and communicate that way.” Materials were more arbitrarily distributed through email, phone calls, and one-on-one meetings. As one senior staffer said, committees take the lead, with the speaker applying a light touch when necessary:

“If you take something like NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act], yes, the speaker cares, but this is HASC’s [House Armed Services Committee] big job. They tend to do all that. The leadership staff, they’re involved, but the committees are really driving it. When something is the speaker’s move—Build Back Better, COVID relief—the committees aren’t just kicking up their heels. The committees are very involved, the committees are driving, but now they’re getting a lot of coaching, a lot of direction, compared to other bills.”⁶⁸

Message adoption

Across the variation in the centralization of committee and party messaging efforts, the goal is the same: simple, clear, and compelling constituent communication. For committee and

⁶⁷ Interview 10

⁶⁸ Interview 18

party leaders, the ideal outcome is message emulation in press releases or direct constituent communication. As one committee comms director said, committee materials should provide a helpful base for responding to constituent emails and letters: “We send all these emails so that LCs [Legislative Correspondents] can copy, paste, and put them into letters, and so then it goes out [to constituents]. We’re trying to provide the ammunition for those issues.”⁶⁹ But at the end of the day, the decision to use a party message will depend on the needs of the rank-and-file members. Declining resources for individual offices have increased reliance on party resources and communications, but there is variation in adoption.

There is no shortage of things to talk about—the hard part, respondents said, is deciding what is useful for their constituents and themselves. One House member said, “There’s no excuse for members not to have access to information. The challenge for that member is to figure out what’s important and what’s not. Going through the materials, it’s like cramming at the end of the semester.”⁷⁰ While rank-and-file respondents noted that party and committee leaders certainly impacted their likelihood of sending a constituent communication, the decision to develop a press release or newsletter hinged largely on two things: the impact of policy on their district, and the partisan balance of their district or state.

Respondents discussed feeling obliged to send updates on major legislation. The Iraq War, Obamacare, Supreme Court nominations, and the Trump tax cuts were cited as major legislation that members felt necessary to communicate on. Many emphasized a responsibility to keep constituents apprised of what they viewed as important and impactful legislation. However, for many respondents, the direct impact on the district was a primary point to highlight in

⁶⁹ Interview 6

⁷⁰ Interview 23

communication. One Democratic member discussed the importance of tailoring communication for large votes and multi-provision bills. Using the Farm Bill as an example they said, “We have a lot of small- and medium-sized farms, so I’m not going to spend so much time on the big-ticket things like sugar subsidies. I’m going to talk about how the Farm Bill might mean something to the small- and medium-sized farmers I represent. I think on these bigger bills, you need to communicate from the vantage points of what is relevant to your district. Otherwise, you’re out of touch.”⁷¹

Constituent considerations

The partisanship of constituents was commonly cited by respondents as a deciding factor on whether or not to send a news update on major legislation, or how to frame a vote when sending a message. For major legislation where members voted differently than district or state public opinion, some respondents said these situations required more explanation. These difficult votes were also important to explain in detail for the sake of subsequent media coverage, particularly from local reporters. One Senate Republican press secretary said that for the electoral certification of President Biden, they sent a lengthy explanation of the senator’s vote, both for their Republican constituents as well as reporters: “It was really long, we wanted to explain our vote and why. We were getting all these questions, ‘Does he think Biden is the duly elected president?’ or, ‘Are we going to vote for the certification?’ And we had the newsletter to point to.”⁷²

In some cases where the vote was only important to a subset of the population or politically controversial, respondents discussed using targeted messaging. The use of targeted

⁷¹ Interview 23

⁷² Interview 11

emails, both to specific press lists and constituent newsletters, is a relatively new phenomenon in response to the widespread use of email and more sophisticated congressional websites. Under House and Senate rules, members cannot send unsolicited email directly to constituents.⁷³ Thus, members rely heavily on constituents either signing up for newsletters, sending them an initial correspondence, or distribution from a third-party source, such as the media or an interest group. Signing up for a newsletter or directly contacting a member office gives legislators helpful information about the interests and ideology of their constituents. These targeted lists are used for smaller, district-specific legislation, or votes that would affect an outsized portion of their constituency but may not attract the attention of national press. These issues included veterans' issues, decisions on agriculture and economic industries in their district, and district grants or projects within larger appropriations bills.

Partisanship in the electorate serves as a primary impetus for targeted constituent messaging. One long-serving chief of staff who had worked for several House members said that in swing districts, members were more inclined to send targeted emails over mass, district-wide (or statewide) communication: "We would send an email every time there was a vote on that issue that the individual had been coded as being interested in, or [a constituent] had contacted us about. Another strategy of course is you can also send to everyone, but that's riskier because you don't know their political leaning, and you can get a lot of blowback for a small issue."⁷⁴

The challenges of partisanship in communication efforts also differ by chamber. Senators, representing an entire state, are communicating to a larger, more diverse constituency,

⁷³ This is a byproduct of the "499 rule" for franked mail. Prior to the widespread use of email correspondence, members used franked "snail mail." Following cost-cutting reforms, members were only allowed to send 499 of the same communication materials in the same day. Today, that rule applies to unsolicited correspondence—thus, members often make newsletters "opt-in" only.

⁷⁴ Interview 2

while House offices are worried about a smaller and increasingly politically homogeneous district. One Democratic senior staffer who served in both the House and Senate said:

“When you have a whole state to navigate, it is just a different set of principles. And you will routinely hear senators talk about ‘top-notch constituent services work so that I can then take tough votes. I’ll have to answer those questions.’ And in a lot of these states, Dems don’t win with just Democratic voters. You can’t just only talk to a Democratic audience, versus in the House you can ignore the other party.”⁷⁵

The degree of partisan content also depends on whether a member is currently running for office. Senate respondents did note that materials were more partisan when a member was up for reelection. However, Senate and House respondents alike noted that the House was more partisan in their communication, due to the ideological extremity in the institution, the increase in safe districts, and the near constant electioneering required of a two-year cycle.

Respondents also shared strategical differences depending on the media market of their state or district. Rural areas require more direct-to-constituent and targeted messaging, while legislators from large states and media markets can rely on their extensive press relations. A communications director who served in the House and Senate said targeted press releases and newsletters have been particularly helpful in rural states and districts, where local newspapers rarely publish and regional coverage continues to decline: “We have to be much more targeted in the way we’re reaching people, because relying on the Topeka Capitol Journal? They write like an article a month. They just don’t have the bandwidth to cover us. So, we send stuff to the Kansas Hospital Association or the Kansas Farm Bureau. We send more stuff to them directly than I ever have in my career.”⁷⁶

Chamber and party pressures

⁷⁵ Interview 18

⁷⁶ Interview 7

Of course, all of these district-level considerations are against a backdrop of party pressure. One member, when asked if district-specific messaging emphasized the policy or the partisan, they responded:

“I don’t think you can be either/or in this day and age... We [personal office] generally view it through two lenses. First, the parochial lens. We say, ‘Here are things that are uniquely valuable to the district.’ And second, we talk about it as significant party policy that has a national component that’s also important to our constituents.”⁷⁷

Senate respondents shared that leadership rarely directed members on specific policy messaging, but when they did, members took note. As one communications director said, “McConnell sends something out rarely, and when he does it’s like, ‘Oh shit.’”⁷⁸ Several respondents cited turning to leadership on Supreme Court Justice messaging; however this may have been a byproduct of the timing of the interviews.⁷⁹ Mostly though, senators of both parties viewed party materials as a reference point or an indicator of leadership priorities and inspiration, rather than explicit directives. Senate respondents felt they had room to use their own words and take their own positions. One Senate press secretary said of leadership talking points, “I’m still just going to use the senator’s own words. I’ll look at it from a member management standpoint—looking to see what they say, but not to learn anything new our own purposes.”⁸⁰

In the House, Republican leaders are explicit in their request for members to stay on message. A long-serving Republican chief of staff reflected that this focus on party-centered communication intensified, alongside institutional trends of centralization:

“That’s something that really developed after the speakership was centralized. I mean, the House Republican Conference used to be a nothing burger. But now it’s a really robust communication machine that puts up draft tweets, draft Instagram posts. They send out

⁷⁷ Interview 12

⁷⁸ Interview 7

⁷⁹ As interviews were ongoing, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer announced his retirement and incoming Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson was confirmed by the Senate.

⁸⁰ Interview 11

messages, you know, ‘Here’s the message of the day, here’s some draft talking points.’ And they’re sending these emails out nearly every day.

“Conference, I know, took stock at who was pushing out the message and who did not, and they highlighted that. And that was part of being on the team. And you know the more you’re on the team, the more you’re a team player, the more you get—the more members are going to raise money for you and help you get what you want.”⁸¹

In the current Congress (117th), Republican members even have an ongoing baseball-themed competition evaluating which members discuss the “party theme of the week” in constituent communication such as floor speeches, social media, and newsletters. The House Republican Conference sends out weekly themes each Sunday evening, and members can win prizes such as leadership shout-outs and baseball memorabilia for frequently discussing party priorities. A sample of the competition guidelines is below.

How are "Floor Message of the Week" points scored?

HOMERUN	4pts	Deliver an on-message speech during the weekly Wednesday Special Order Hour hosted by the Vice Chairman
TRIPLE	3pts	Deliver an on-message speech during five minute speeches
DOUBLE	2pts	Deliver an on-message speech during one minute speeches
SINGLE	1pt	Shares of any of the above on-message floor speeches on social media platforms including: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Parler, Rumble, and Gettr. 1 point per share.
WALK	1pt	Send a press release promoting any of the above on-message floor speeches. Score an additional point for each resulting pickup of on-message speeches by local news stations.
GRAND SLAM BONUS	5pts	Convert any of the above on-message floor speeches into an op-ed and have it placed in any local or national newspaper.

The Vice Chairman’s office will keep track of the Wednesday Special Order Hour, one minute, and five minute speeches—but offices should flag all other point submissions on a weekly basis by 12pm on Fridays to GOP.ViceChair@mail.house.gov to ensure the Member receives proper credit.

How do Members know what topics qualify as “on-message”?

Topics qualifying as “on-message” for the week are sent out on Sunday evenings by the Republican Conference via the “Conference Cannon” email, and on Monday mornings by the Vice Chairman’s office via the “Floor Message of the Week” email. The Vice Chairman’s office promptly clips all qualifying on-message floor speeches and delivers them by e-mail to Member offices to assist with promotional efforts.



Figure 4.1: Internal email communication, Vice Chair Mike Johnson (R-La.), March 14, 2022

⁸¹ Interview 2

Democratic respondents expressed there was more leeway from party leaders. While some House Democratic messaging was often facilitated by Speaker Pelosi—such as recess packets or press conferences—respondents felt less pressure to adopt centralized messaging. This is likely in part because of the message development process, which relies more heavily on committees, as well as the ideological and demographic heterogeneity of the Democratic Party compared to Republicans. More so than Republicans, Democratic rank-and-file members in both chambers found the caucus materials generally unhelpful. One member said, “I don’t use everything. I would say 70 percent of the caucus emails I hit delete on. That’s not to say that I don’t find it useful, it’s just not going to work for my district all the time.”⁸² Respondents did find the speaker’s own press releases and speeches useful, and often looked to them for an idea on not only what to say, but how to evaluate an ongoing policy debate. One Democratic communications director said, “A lot of times we would be looking for our position—we’d look around and say, okay Pelosi says this, other senior Dems say this, so we should be in that sandbox.”⁸³

Among both parties, there was a noted disdain for members who frequently and publicly went against the party. Republican outliers in particular were presented as a thorn in leadership’s side. One Republican leadership communications director said, “The people you see on the big channels, on CNN and Fox are going to be the ones that are most entertaining—your Jim Jordans of the world, your Tim Huelskamps of the world, Mark Meadows of the world. They’re the ones who are shaking things up and making it interesting but are not necessarily helping leadership’s overall message. So that that’s why we would counter that and find other members and try to

⁸² Interview 14

⁸³ Interview 30

pitch our story.”⁸⁴ One Democratic committee staffer likened the process of message development to a fluid campaign, responsive to coalition building—and dealing with progressive members was a difficult part of that strategy: “We come up talking points for getting the private sectors on board, nonprofit sector on board, talking points to get congressional coalitions on board. The fringe groups, the progressives, you really go to them last, because sometimes they take the most time and the transaction costs are high.”⁸⁵

Committee and party respondents described a concerted effort to create communication materials for rank-and-file members to use in their constituent communication, but some important differences did emerge. The House is more centralized and aggressive in message development and distribution than the Senate, and Republicans are more centralized than Democrats. However, both chambers and both parties have allocated significant resources to cultivating constituent communication and encouraging members use these materials. Rank-and-file use of these materials depends on district factors, party preferences, and office resources, as well as the timing and content. Across the variation in messaging motivation and resources, rank-and-file members reported using materials to frame district (or state) wins as a larger, national party gain. While the degree of partisan emphasis differed by member (and their electoral vulnerabilities), respondents saw the local and national goals as going hand in hand.

Conclusion

Interview evidence reveals a network of party-led communication efforts, especially among House Republicans. Both chambers turn to committees for messaging assistance, and party leaders take the lead for complex, high-profile issues. Respondents from both chambers

⁸⁴ Interview 7

⁸⁵ Interview 25

and both parties believed the committee process is the starting point of policy presentation, given their expertise and committee hearing opportunities, and House Democratic members rely heavily on committee leaders in the absence of centralized party leader involvement.

Party leaders in both chambers retain the responsibility of setting the weekly agenda, usually in response to floor votes or current events. While this has been studied from a policymaking perspective, these interviews reveal that this is the case for constituent communication as well. For high-profile issues in particular, party leaders in both parties and chambers make their preferred messaging position known. To create caucus-wide messages for key votes, party leaders selectively use committee materials as well as the large staff and resources of their communication offices (the House and Senate Republican Conferences, and the Senate DPCC and House Democratic Caucus). In the Senate, committees also serve as a source of independent message development. Rank-and-file members often reach out directly to committees when they need messaging assistance, and committee leaders have autonomy in the topics they want to discuss or focus on.

The policy presentation process does differ slightly by chamber. In the House, party leaders facilitate the committee connection by directly providing rank-and-file members with materials and often encourage committee leaders to focus on certain issues under their jurisdiction. This approach varies still by party. House Republican leaders are very direct in their messaging materials and utilize internal meetings among members and staff and weekly email distribution of talking points and key themes to keep members on message. Conversely, House Democrats see Speaker Pelosi and other members of leadership as leading by example, but not dictating a clear message for key legislation. Democratic leadership funnels their messaging preferences through committee chairs, choosing to *respond* to internal needs rather than

proactively provide talking points on a weekly basis. However, for high-profile issues and complex legislation, Democratic leaders work closely with committees to develop materials and strategies for rank-and-file members.

Senators' preference to rely on their own staff rather than party leaders is a byproduct of their larger staff size and resources. However, they were not exempt from party-wide messaging goals. Respondents from both parties took cues from the majority and minority leader, and they did not find the conference-prepared materials helpful. However, they did rely on the actual resources of party leaders—radio studios, video recording equipment, and press conference coordination. This juxtaposition between the chambers could merely reflect staff resources or even the policymaking process in the Senate—a single senator can demand a policy change, while a single representative may not. This lack of interest in Senate conference messaging may also be reflective of the quality of content the conference puts out, or merely a belief that personal staff know the intricacies of their own state best. However, like the House, when dealing with high-profile issues (such as Supreme Court nominations), centralized messaging is a priority for both parties. The uncovered partisan difference in message development and distribution in both chambers is also an area for future research. The ideological differences throughout the Democratic Party did not seem to be a source of conflict, with party leadership extending flexibility to members' message adoption. House Republicans presented a more stringent approach, including competitions and explicit directives on weekly themes.

This behind-the-scenes look at message development and distribution provides an important background to understand how members of Congress develop constituent communications. The following chapters build off of this interview evidence and analyze the external outputs of members of Congress: press releases, newsletters, and social media.

Chapter 5: What are members communicating?

This chapter turns to external outputs of congressional press releases and constituent newsletters to evaluate *what* members of Congress communicate when discussing major legislation. I find variation in both the quantity and content of congressional communication. First, members are more likely to discuss polarizing votes over bipartisan votes. Second, across all issues—including bipartisan ones—there is significant ideological variation in how legislation is discussed. These findings indicate that policy presentation occurs in two ways: emphasizing partisan goals and speaking in a partisan way about bipartisan legislation.

I use computational text analysis to evaluate the frequency and content of congressional press releases and constituent newsletters on all major legislation from the 113th Congress (2013) to the first session of the 116th Congress (2019). The result is over 43,000 documents across both parties, providing an unprecedented look into the messaging choices of members of Congress. Using frequency counts of these messages by topic, I estimate the likelihood of sending a message, based on the vote's polarization, legislative complexity, and other external factors such as White House involvement and chamber majorities. I also score each press statement's ideology to which issues the parties are the most divided on. I find that across all issues, members are divergent in the way they discuss major legislation.

The remainder of this chapter will first discuss the expectations for what members of Congress will communicate, based on the theory outlined in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. I will then discuss the data and methods and present my results, first considering the frequency of topics discussed and then the ideological variation among communications. Although message adoption will differ by an individual legislator's needs (a dynamic I discuss in subsequent

chapters), the first step to documenting policy presentation is considering the trends throughout the chamber at large.

Theory and expectations

The intention of policy presentation is to provide rank-and-file members with communication assistance on major legislation. The result is often a biased view of congressional lawmaking that overemphasizes ideological division. If policy presentation is occurring, I expect it to take two forms: encouraging members to discuss (or not discuss) partisan votes, or developing divergent, party-specific narratives on bipartisan legislation.

First, leaders should encourage members to discuss partisan votes. These votes are often easier to message, representing messaging bills or party platforms. Members should be eager to highlight these votes with their constituents, particularly if they are from “safe” districts (as many members increasingly are) or if they provide an opportunity to campaign against (or with) the president. Members will use votes that are in direct response to the White House (e.g., nominations, veto overrides, or impeachments) as a way to show support for their own president or criticize the opposing party’s leader (Lee 2008). As discussed earlier, there is a demand for congressional conflict—partisan votes are also more likely to be covered by the media and attract the attention of voters, particularly party supporters. The self-reinforcing cycle of policy presentation—providing partisan materials to appease a partisan constituency—is well suited for high-profile, polarizing votes. Thus, *I expect members to send more constituent communication on partisan votes.*

Policy accomplishments by the majority party should also come into play. Members of the majority party will be more likely to discuss legislation passed under their control, while minority parties—eager to convince constituents of the current leader’s ineffectiveness—should

be less likely to discuss passed legislation. A successful bill passage, regardless of a bipartisan or partisan coalition, indicates successful leadership by the majority party. Conversely, minority party leaders should be less likely to discuss legislation passed, even if they voted in support of the legislation. Amplifying a successful vote at the hands of the other party potentially cedes any argument that existing leadership is inefficient or unrepresentative. If the goal for party leaders is to maintain an existing majority or convince voters that the current majority party is ineffective (Arnold 1990, Schickler and Rich 1997), the messaging strategy should depend on whether a party is in the majority or minority. Thus, *I expect members of the majority party to send more constituent communication.*

Leaders can also direct members to discuss legislation in certain ways by emphasizing party goals. Although that the majority of legislation Congress passes is bipartisan, highlighting compromise and shared goals is unlikely to be popular with constituents or partisans (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). I expect divergent messaging by party to be a common strategy, particularly for complex legislation. Because bills are increasingly passed as omnibus legislation using unorthodox measures, party leaders have opportunities to selectively message on passed legislation. These bills include multiple provisions in an endeavor to appeal to a bipartisan coalition—so although the legislation is likely to be bipartisan in final vote, there are inherently Republican priorities and Democratic priorities within. If policy presentation is occurring, leaders should guide their members to discuss their party's preferred provisions. Thus, *I expect the two parties to be divergent in how they discuss all legislation, particularly for complex and bipartisan legislation.*

Data

To test these hypotheses, I address two sets of questions: First, what is the frequency of constituent communication given legislative and chamber variables and how do members choose to discuss legislation? Second, how divergent are the two parties in their discussion of major legislation?

As discussed in Chapter 3, this analysis considers the constituent communication of all CQ Roll Call's Key Votes in the 113th Congress through the first session of the 116th Congress (2013 to 2019): 171 votes, 64 which occur exclusively in the House, 49 which occur exclusively in the Senate, and 29 which occur in both chambers. Interview data, detailed in Chapter 4, found that these were the votes most likely to be subject to policy presentation by party and committee leaders, and are more likely to be discussed in constituent communication broadly throughout Congress. To evaluate vote polarization and legislative complexity, I rely on the two original measures detailed in Chapter 3: vote polarization and bill complexity. Both polarization and complexity measures have been scaled for comparison—the lower the score, the lower the polarization of the vote and the lower the complexity of the legislation. A higher score indicates a polarized vote or complex text.

To evaluate the frequency and content of constituent communication of major legislation, I scraped congressional press releases using the ProPublica Congress API and gathered constituent newsletters from the DC Inbox database (Cormack 2022).⁸⁶ Both of these collection processes were performed for every vote in the dataset in both the House and Senate. The analyses are conducted on both pooled data and for each chamber separately. I pool the data for several reasons. One, the two chambers do not exist in a vacuum; members of Congress subscribe to one another's press release and newsletter distributions, particularly members of the

⁸⁶ ProPublica API data access: <https://projects.propublica.org/api-docs/congress-api/>

same state, region, or committee jurisdiction. It is reasonable to expect that members will refer to cross-chamber materials. This is particularly true for discussions of votes that only occur in one chamber, but still have implications for the other (or, are only considered a Key Vote for one chamber but also occurred in another). Chamber-specific analyses, however, allow one to see the impact of differences in the power of party leaders and scope of party messaging operations.

Analyzing congressional communications is notoriously difficult, given the time-consuming collection process and the limited accessibility of prior congressional sessions. However, using a combination of press releases and newsletters, all but one Key Vote in our dataset has some constituent communication collected for it.⁸⁷ Press releases are retrieved by their associated bill number, but not all members use the bill number in their press releases (although many do). Bill numbers are also not used for chamber-issues such as the election for speaker or presidential impeachments. Although these are assigned a bill number, members of Congress do not refer to it when writing a press release. As a result, there are fewer press releases than constituent newsletters. Despite this challenge, I was able to account for every instance and title of a press release being sent, capturing the title and other qualifying information such as date and sender. Unfortunately, the full text of the press release was not available in cases where URLs are no longer accessible. Newsletters fortunately supplement press releases because they are retrievable by both bill number and key terms, and the DC Inbox data collection hosts newsletter text (thus not relying on an individual member of Congress to maintain a possibly defunct website).

Some newsletters are sent in direct response to a specific vote, but the majority of them are used as a weekly or monthly overview of congressional activity that the member finds

⁸⁷ The only vote without constituent communication is the vote to “order Elizabeth Warren to sit down,” 2/7/17.

relevant to their voters. So, when collecting this data, I captured newsletters sent within two months of the vote containing the bill number or key term (the month prior and the month following the vote). This also allows me to capture legislative discussion leading up to the vote date, such as the negotiation process, committee hearings, or votes on earlier iterations of the legislation. Combined, these two sources provide a robust and novel dataset of congressional communications.

As detailed in the prior chapter, there are different expectations of audience across the two electrotonic communications. Press releases have an indirect path to voters. Members (staff) send press releases following a vote to media (print reporters, television bookers, local bloggers, etc.). Media sources then use the information and quotes provided in press releases in their reporting. Press releases are often brief (one to three paragraphs) and feature background and a quote on a single issue. Conversely, e-newsletters are directly sent to constituents' inboxes. The language in newsletters is more colloquial—they often begin with a salutation and have a subject line with the intent to spur curiosity to raise open rates, a common strategy in political emails (Gaynor and Gimpel 2021). Thus, although I pool Senate and House materials together, because of these expected differences in rhetoric, I analyze the press releases and newsletters separately.⁸⁸ However, there are similarities across the two message types, which leads to parallel expectations about certain dynamics and relationships. Members use both press releases and newsletters to highlight relevant floor speeches and committee hearings as well as district events and social media highlights. These sources provide an all-encompassing picture of what members feel is important to proactively share with their constituents—the votes, actions, and issues members want to amplify.

⁸⁸ This approach also allows the two models to serve as robustness checks on each other.

Overall, the result of this data collection process is tens of thousands of documents: over 13,000 press releases and over 30,000 newsletters from the House and Senate from 2013 to 2019. This is an expansive and unprecedented amount of constituent communication data, particularly given the timeframe of the analysis (Grimmer 2013). These two forms of communication provide insight into what members choose to discuss with their constituents, both in subject and content. This data also serves as the base for the following chapter's analysis. By collecting all constituent communication for all Key Votes across several congressional sessions, I am able to meaningfully analyze patterns and likelihoods of policy presentation.

Methods and analysis

Frequency of communication

The first analysis considers the likelihood of members sending constituent communications given the polarization and complexity of the vote as well as other factors likely to affect whether or not a member sends a constituent communication, such as party status and their relationship with the White House. This chapter focuses on chamber-wide trends; thus, the dependent variable for this initial analysis is the count of press releases or newsletters sent by all members of Congress. The following chapter considers the likelihood of an individual legislator sending a press release based on individual factors and party leadership.

Figure 5.1 displays the frequency of press releases for Key Votes in the 113th through 116th Congress. There are a few trends that are slightly visible. First, there are more press releases per issue overtime, but fewer votes being discussed overall. In the 113th Congress, there are 53 Key Votes and an average of 46 press releases per vote. In the 114th Congress, there are 50 Key Votes but an average of 96.8 press releases per vote, and in the 115th Congress, there are 46 Key Votes with an average of 88 press releases per vote. The 116th Congress continues the

upward trend—for the 22 Key Votes in the first session of the 116th Congress, there are 112 press releases per vote, on average. This is likely reflective of the increasing accessibility and importance of internet communication. At the start of the dataset (2013), email communication was prevalent, but as interview respondents shared, mailed newsletters and personal relationships with local newspapers were common. Over time, as use of “mailers” declined and national reporting supplanted local reporting, emailed press releases have become more common. The decreasing number of Key Votes being discussed is potentially reflective of the increased reliance on omnibus lawmaking. While there are fewer Key Votes to discuss, they cover more topics than prior sessions.

Also visible is the dominance of press releases by the majority party of the House (Table 1). Only in the 116th Congress are Democrats in the majority in both the House and Senate. Members speak about issues their party introduced and voted for. For Republicans, the votes with the greatest number of press releases by party are S1094 (a bill holding the Department of Veterans Affairs accountable for mismanagement) and the H.R. 1 (the Trump tax cuts), both in the 115th Congress. For Democrats, H.R. 1 in the 116th Congress (The For the People Act, calling for reforms in campaign finance and voter access) was the vote with the greatest number of associated press releases.

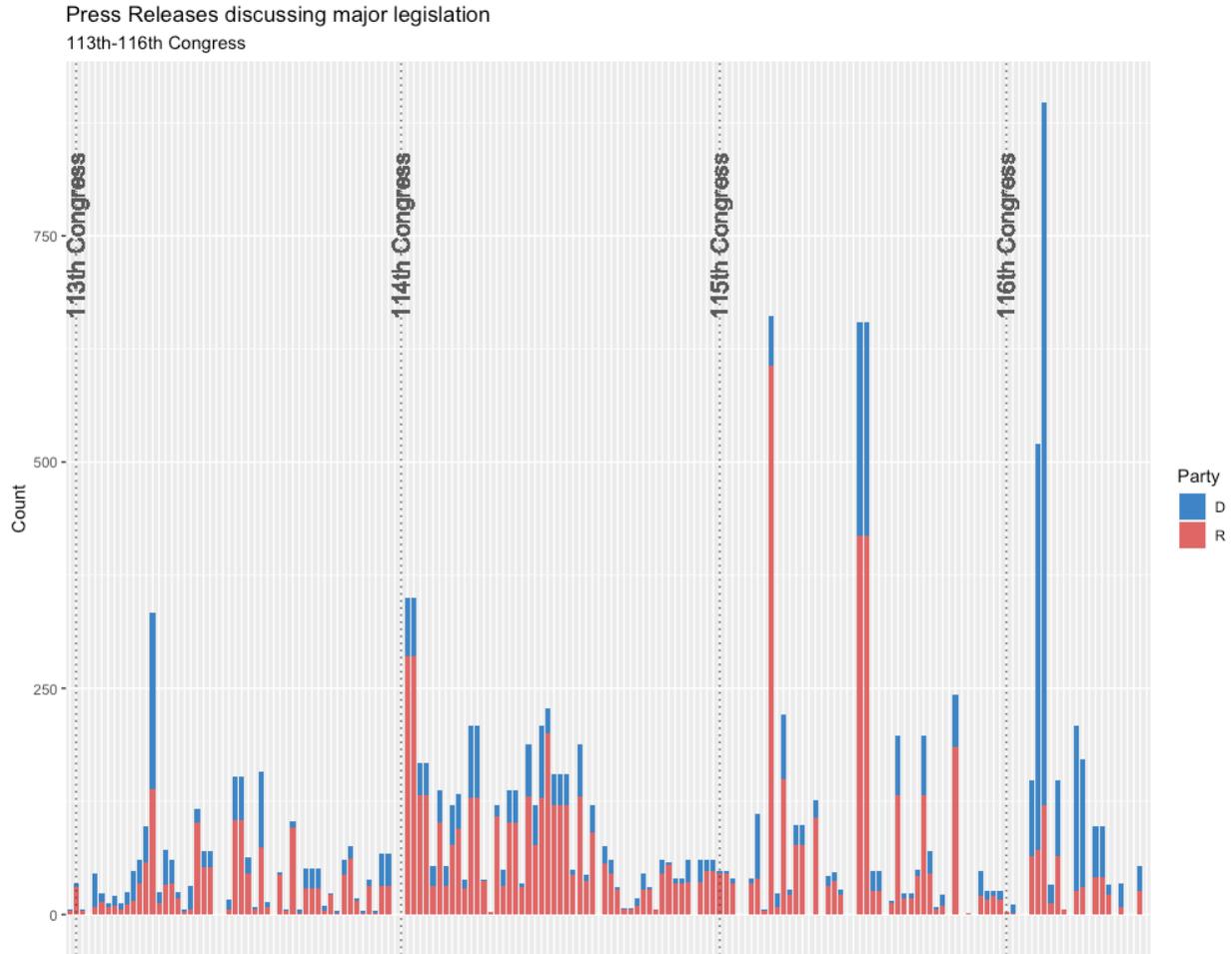


Figure 5.1: Press releases discussing Key Votes, 113th to 116th Congress

Note: Press releases collected by author, via ProPublica API and R software

Table 5.1: Majority party of each chamber for all Key Votes, 113th to 116th Congress

Congress	House Control	Senate Control	President
113 th	Republican	Democratic	Obama
114 th	Republican	Republican	Obama
115 th	Republican	Republican	Trump
116 th	Democratic	Democratic	Trump

Figure 5.2 presents the same data for constituent newsletters. As a result of the data collection process discussed above, there are more newsletters per vote than press releases. Unlike press releases, there are fewer overall newsletters sent over time, but again, the average number of newsletters sent per vote steadily increases. The most prominent datapoint is the 2014 Farm Bill—a vote that led to over 2,000 newsletters. This high number is reflective of the

content of the bill (a wide range of constituent services and opportunities for credit-claiming), and chance for members to communicate several times about the legislation: committee hearings, a vote in both chambers, conference negotiations, and a successful bill signed into law. Beyond this outlier, in the 114th Congress, there were 8,079 newsletters sent that discuss 50 Key Votes (161.5 newsletters per vote, on average), 7,518 newsletters for the 46 votes of the 115th Congress (163.4, on average), and 5,075 newsletters for the 22 votes of the first session of the 116th Congress (230.7, on average).

Figure 5.2 also shows a Republican bias across our dataset due only in part to greater time as the majority party. While Democratic members are sending more newsletters on Key Votes when they are in the majority (116th Congress), newsletter data is consistently dominated by Republican offices. The reasons for this are unclear, but interview respondents indicate it may be due to the decline of local news and media accessibility for rural, often Republican-dominated areas. The decline of local newspapers, particularly in rural areas, has put the impetus on members of Congress to directly communicate about activities in Washington, D.C. This bias could also be reflective of the institutional differences between the two parties that were uncovered in Chapter 4; the stronger, more centralized policy presentation process of the Republican Party might lead to more coordinated newsletter messages or even logistical assistance in the software and technological guidance to actually send these messages.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Sending these newsletters, particularly to a large population, requires special software. Congressional offices rely on third-party vendors to help them build websites and newsletter messaging services. Given federal security concerns, there are only a select few vendors approved by the Senate and House Sergeant at Arms (SAA) that congressional offices may use. When selecting a vendor or building a website, offices will rely on recommendations and guidance from their peers; given the results in Chapter 4, it's likely that Republicans have a more professionalized system to recommend vendors and help peer offices set up their new messaging system or websites.

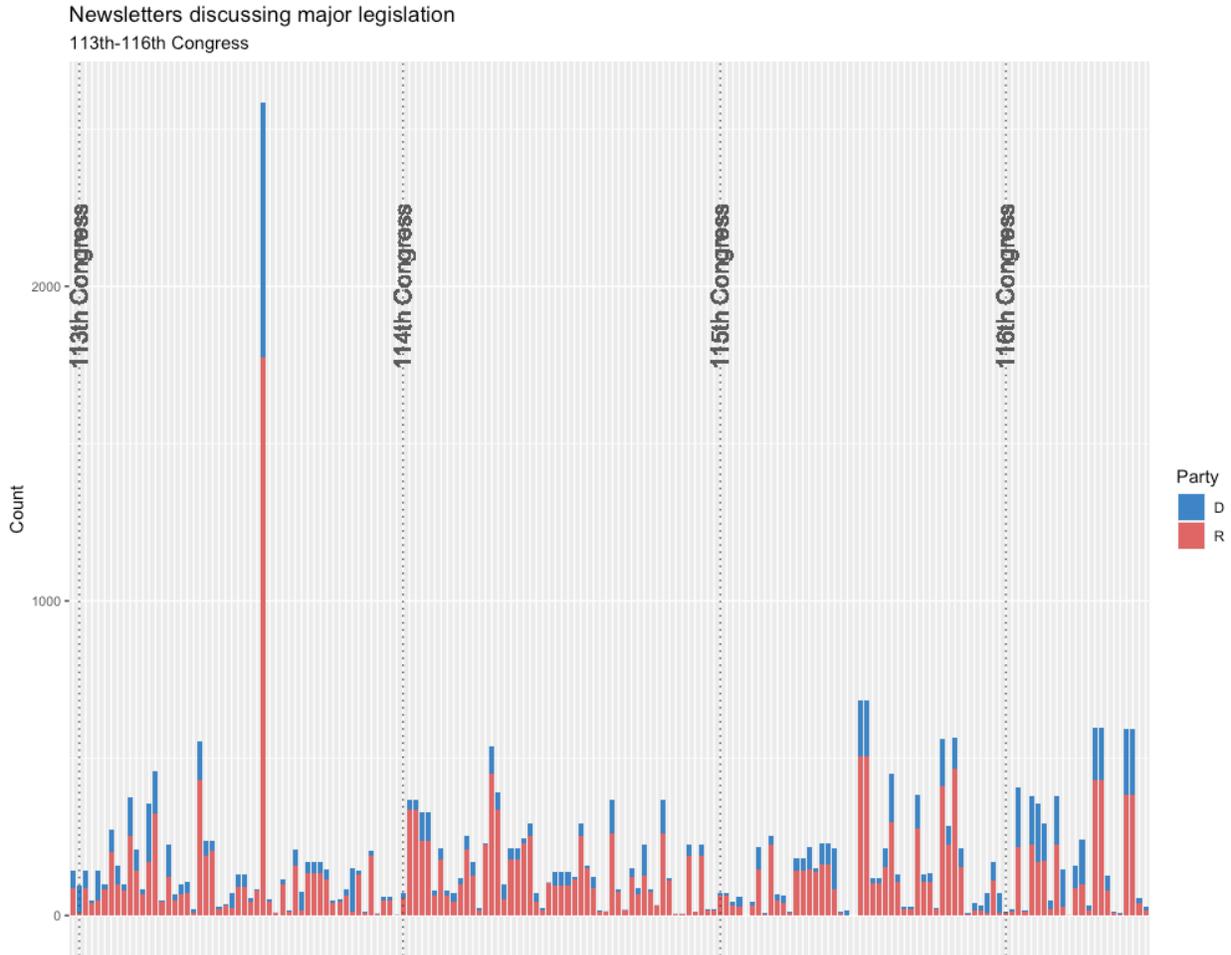


Figure 5.2: Newsletters discussing Key Votes, 113th to 116th Congress
Note: Newsletters collected by author, via D.C. Inbox (Cormack)

How does the frequency of constituent messages differ by legislation? Figures 5.3 and 5.4 present the frequency of these constituent communications considering the legislation’s complexity and the polarization of the vote. Complexity considers how familiar legislators are with the words in the legislative text; vote polarization is measured by the distance between the two party’s “yea” votes (Chapter 3). The larger the node, the more press releases or newsletters were sent on that issue. Given theoretical expectations outlined above, there should be a higher frequency of constituent communication for polarized votes (partisan issues). Bill complexity,

often correlated with large, omnibus legislation, should facilitate selective (partisan) messaging, but I do not expect complex bills to be discussed at a higher rate compared to partisan bills.

First, these figures illustrate the high volume of newsletters sent across all congresses, compared to press releases. Between the two message types, there are some visible differences in the frequency across polarization and complexity. As expected, press releases are more likely to emphasize partisan votes of average complexity votes over nonpartisan votes. Newsletters are more evenly distributed across the measure of partisanship, but discuss complex legislation at a higher frequency compared to press releases.

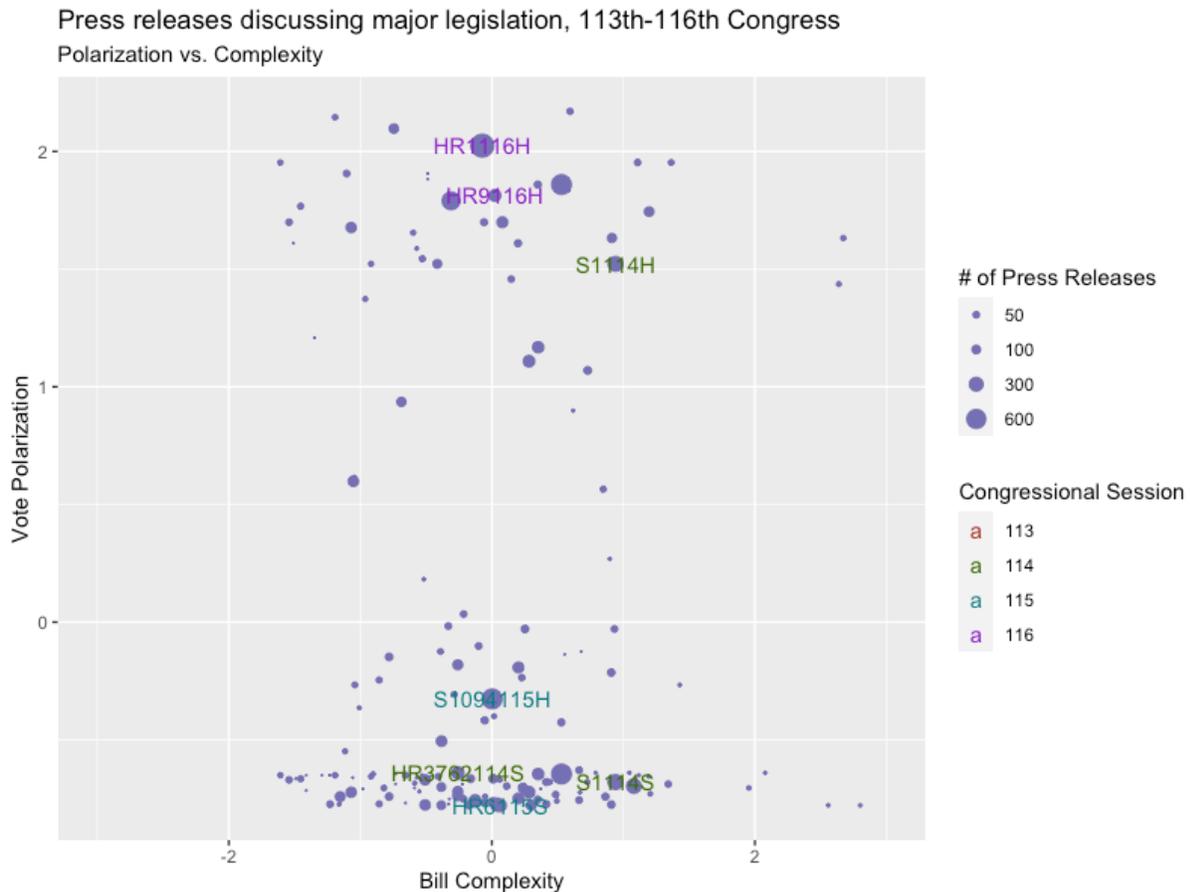


Figure 5.3: Press release frequency across polarization and complexity of Key Votes, 113th to 116th Congress

Note: Labels for congressional session occur on votes with over 200 press releases

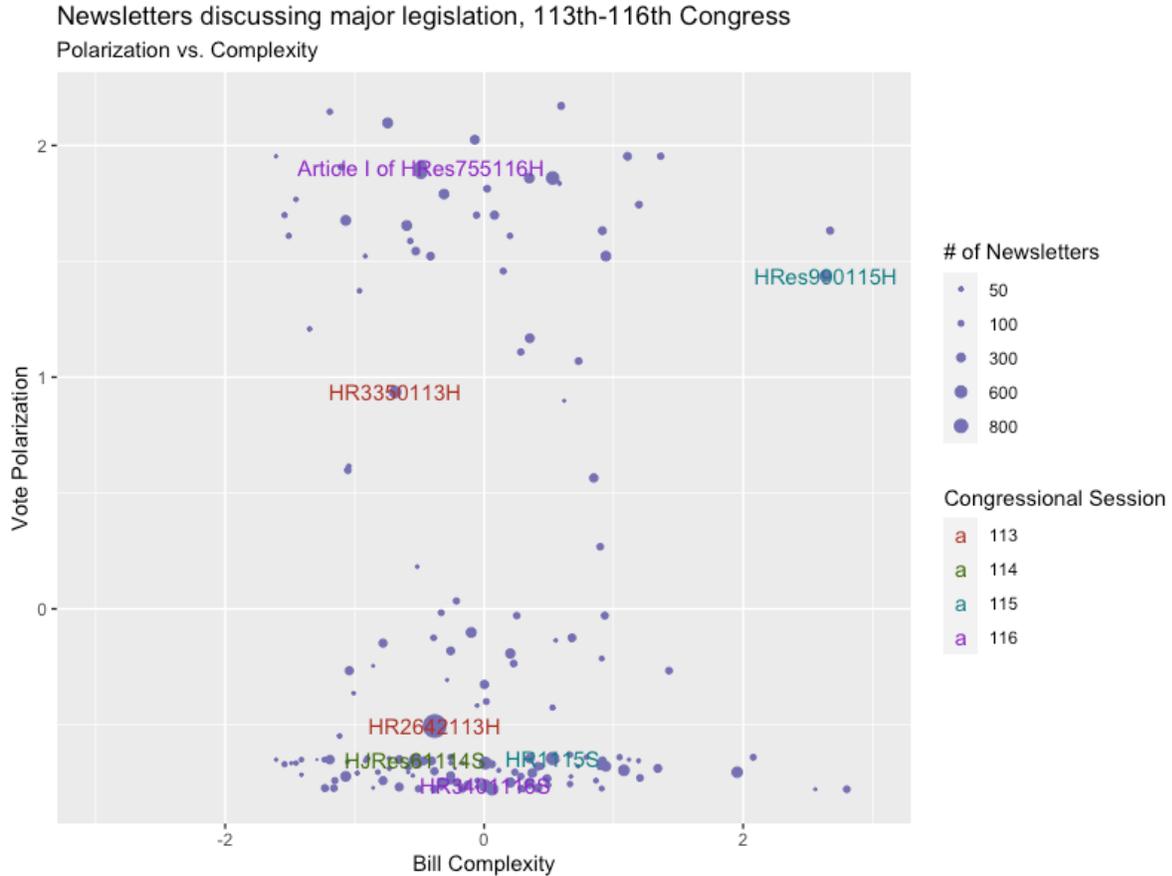


Figure 5.4: Newsletter frequency across polarization and complexity of Key Votes, 113th to 116th Congress

Note: Labels for congressional session occur on votes with over 500 newsletters

Tables 5.2 and 5.3 present this information in further detail, listing the top votes by press release and newsletter frequency and their corresponding polarization and complexity score, as well as what percentage of the communications were sent by Democratic members. As reflected in Figures 1 and 2, Republicans dominate constituent communication, sending on average 64.8 percent of press releases, and 71.4 percent of newsletters. However, when the Democratic Party is in the majority, they send 67.9 percent of press releases and around 50 percent of newsletters.

Table 5.2: Most messaged bills by press releases, 113th to 116th Congress

Press release count	Congressional session	Bill number	Topic	Polarization score	Complexity score	Percentage Democratic
898	116 th	HR1	Voting reform	2.025	-0.073	86.5% +
661	115 th	S1094	VA oversight	-0.327	0.002	8%
654	115 th	HR1	Trump tax cuts	1.859	0.529	33.4%
520	116 th	HR8	Firearm background checks	1.790	-0.310	86.2% +
350	114 th	S1	Keystone XL pipeline	1.522	0.940	18.3%
333	113 th	S744	Immigration overhaul	-0.677	1.079	58.2%
243	115 th	HR6	Opioid abuse support	-0.778	0.062	23.9%
228	114 th	HR3762	Obamacare repeal	-0.640	-0.259	11.8%
221	115 th	HR2810*	Transgender rights in military	1.458	0.002	32.6%
209	116 th	HR9	Emissions reduction	1.813	0.023	87.6% +

* = bill failed, + = Democratic Party in the majority

Note: High polarization and complexity scores indicate a high vote polarization and text complexity, respectively. Low polarization scores indicate a bipartisan vote, and low complexity scores indicate familiar language is used. Polarization and complexity scores closer to 0 are closer to the average complexity score for all Key Vote legislation (-0.037 is the average polarization score, and 0.003 is the average complexity score for all Key Votes, across all congressional sessions).

Table 5.3: Most messaged bills by newsletters, 113th to 116th Congress

Newsletter count	Congressional session	Bill number	Topic	Polarization score	Complexity score	Percentage Democratic
2,586	113 th	HR2542	Farm Bill	-0.506	-0.383	31.3%
654	115 th	HR1	Trump tax cuts	1.859	0.529	26.8%
595	116 th	HR3401	Supplemental border appropriations	-0.665	0.009	27.9%+
593	116 th	Articles of Impeachment	Trump impeachment	1.906	-0.488	35.1%+
567	115 th	HR6	Opioid Abuse relief	-0.778	0.062	17.8%
562	115 th	HRes990	Showing support for border law enforcement	1.436	2.637	26.9%
553	114 th	HR3350	“Grandfathered” health care plans	0.936	-0.688	22.2%

537	114 th	HJRes61*	Iran nuclear deal	-0.651	-0.532	16.4%
329	114 th	HR240	Homeland Security appropriations	-0.193	0.202	27.4%
294	116 th	HR1	Voting rights reform	2.025	-0.072	41.2%

* = bill failed, + = Democratic Party in the majority

Note: High polarization and complexity scores indicate a high vote polarization and text complexity, respectively. Low polarization scores indicate a bipartisan vote, and low complexity scores indicate familiar language is used. Polarization and complexity scores closer to 0 are closer to the average complexity score for all Key Vote legislation (-0.037 is the average polarization score, and 0.003 is the average complexity score for all Key Votes, across all congressional sessions).

Of interest is that messaging is dominated by the majority party, even when vote passage is bipartisan. As Tables 5.1 and 5.2 show, the most messaged bills are often the most polarizing (the higher the polarization score, the more partisan the vote), but even for bills such as H.R. 661 in the 115th Congress or H.R. 240 in the 114th Congress, the overwhelming majority of communication comes from the majority party (Republicans). Although respondents shared that it was “easier” to formulate minority messaging, when it comes to discussing votes, the majority party is eager to dominate the narrative and likely claim credit. This, combined with the higher rate of constituent communication on partisan votes, likely presents a biased view of congressional lawmaking.

To evaluate this relationship beyond observed patterns, I use generalized linear model (GLM) framework to estimate the count of congressional communications sent, given the vote’s polarization score and the legislation’s complexity as well as chamber factors discussed above. Table 5.4 considers the likelihood of sending a message across all members regardless of party identification. I also include a dichotomous variable if the vote was in direct response to the president (WH Focus). This includes veto overrides, executive nominations, resolutions disapproving of executive orders, or impeachments. I also include a dichotomous variable for whether the legislation passed (1) or not and a dichotomous variable of chamber control

(Republican majority = 1), interacted with the chamber the vote occurred in (House or Senate). The dependent variable is the number of press releases or newsletters sent.

For press releases, the results echo the descriptive analysis above. For polarized votes, the likelihood of sending a press release increases at a statistically significant level. For issues that are a full point more polarized (a difference of a fully bipartisan vote [same number of members of both parties voting for legislation] to a partially bipartisan vote [2:1 ratio of party support]), there is an average increase of 26.6 press releases sent. Also as expected, press releases are more likely to discuss legislation that successfully passed the chamber—bills that pass lead to an average increase of 58 press releases sent. Interestingly, when a vote is in direct response to the president's actions, members are less likely to send a press release—there is a decrease of 73 press releases on average, holding all else constant. Although Senate votes are less likely to be communicated, in the 114th and 115th Congress, when Republicans controlled both chambers, this number increases, with an estimated 182 more press releases per vote being sent. Legislative complexity does not significantly impact the likelihood of a press release being sent. For newsletters, although they are more likely to be sent than press releases overall, there are no statistically significant predictive factors to their messages.

Table 5.4: Constituent communication on Key Votes, 113th to 116th Congress

	Dependent variable:	
	Press release counts	Newsletter counts
Complexity	9.335 (9.279)	16.33 (18.83)
Polarization	26.587* (12.248)	16.38 (24.68)
WH Focus	-73.656*** (20.988)	-66.46 (42.59)
Outcome: Passed	58.063* (25.836)	57.41 (52.19)
Senate	-122.410* (52.403)	-159.17 (99.52)
Republican Senate	182.164** (56.269)	172.79 (100.65)
Constant	153.447** (49.495)	252.74*** 93.53
Observations	170	170
R ²	0.106	0.039
Adjusted R ²	0.084	0.015

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors reported in parenthesis.

Given the impact that chamber control and party relations likely have on constituent communication, I then consider the likelihood of sending a press release by party identification.⁹⁰ Table 5.5 presents the results of this count model. The press release count of each party is the dependent variable of each model. In addition to legislative complexity and polarization, White House focus, and vote outcome, I also consider which party controls the chamber and how the specific president impacts the likelihood of sending party communication. In this model, I

⁹⁰ Newsletters showed no statistically significant variation across these analyses. See the Appendix, Table 5.1.

include an interaction variable for White House focus and the president. The below results hold President Obama as the baseline, showing an interaction of White House involvement with President Trump.

Both parties are statistically more likely to send a press release about passed legislation. As reflected in the descriptive analysis above, there are on average nearly 35 more press releases per passed vote for Republican members and nearly 25 more press releases for passed legislation by Democratic members than for bills that are unsuccessful. However, when the chamber is under Republican control, Democratic members are far less likely to send a press release—there is a statistically significant decreased likelihood of nearly 50 press releases per vote when Democratic members are in the minority. This is expected, given that members are eager to highlight their policy accomplishments when in the majority, but hesitant to discuss the chamber’s successes when in the minority (and inadvertently advertising the success of their opponent’s leadership).

While the polarization of a vote has a positive effect on the likelihood of sending a press release for both parties, the effect is only statistically significant for Democratic members. Democratic members are more likely to send nearly 14 more press releases, on average, for votes that are highly polarized (receiving solely or near total Democratic votes), compared to bipartisan votes. These models also show that the effect of the White House is likely dependent on the party’s relationship with the president. This model shows that when the vote is in response to actions by President Trump, members are far less likely to send a press release. Even when removing impeachment votes (that had a low number of press releases, due to the nature of data collecting detailed above), this finding still holds.⁹¹ This finding is interesting given both the

⁹¹ See Appendix, Table 5.3.

outsized attention the media granted President Trump and the ire he invoked in congressional Democrats, who were in the House majority for the later part of this presidency. However, the tenuous relationship between President Trump and congressional Republicans, particularly in the Senate and at the start of his presidency, possibly explains this finding. Still, the lack of messaging against President Trump by Democratic members is notable. While this is partially a reflection of willingness to communicate on behalf of President Obama, it presents an alternative to the popular belief that Democratic members were uniformly eager to campaign against President Trump. This is likely a reflection of the variation in Trump's presidential vote share of Democratic districts. Although party leaders are overwhelmingly from majority-Democratic districts, there are several moderate members that remain concerned about reelection in Trump-leaning districts.

Table 5.5: Press releases on Key Votes by party, 113th to 116th Congress

Dependent variable:

Press release counts

	Republicans	Democrats
Complexity	5.590 (5.841)	3.279 (5.473)
Polarization	2.617 (6.179)	13.920** (5.789)
WH Focus	-4.550 (18.042)	-11.356 (16.904)
Interaction: WH Focus x Trump	-47.136* (26.455)	-45.552* (13.764)
Outcome: Passed	34.988** (15.761)	24.782* (24.782)
Chamber Control: GOP	22.987 (14.691)	-49.998*** (13.764)
Constant	4.614 (17.897)	44.938*** (16.768)
Observations	170	170
R ²	0.105	0.189
Adjusted R ²	0.065	0.153

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors reported in parenthesis.

Overall, these models solidify findings that members of Congress are more likely to communicate about polarizing votes than bipartisan legislation. This is particularly the case for Democratic members, in part because they had more polarizing votes when they were in the majority. Members are also more likely to communicate about passed legislation, particularly when they are in the majority, indicating that members are highlighting their policy accomplishments only when their party's leadership can take full credit. This is particularly visible in the Democratic model of Table 5.5, in which Democratic members are far less likely to communicate when the GOP is in the majority. These two factors—emphasizing partisan votes and selectively highlighting passed (often bipartisan) legislation—encourage a partisan view of congressional activity. Alternatively, there is no statistically significant effect for legislative

complexity, indicating that members are communicating about legislation regardless of how unfamiliar it may be.

Polarization of messages

Given my interest in how members communicate about bipartisan legislation, I now turn to an analysis of message content to evaluate the polarization of constituent communication. In addition to highlighting partisan votes, I expect members to differ in how they discuss legislation. Most successful legislation relies on bipartisan support for passage. In order to understand how, or if, partisan communication is perpetuated even in bipartisan settings, I need to look beyond topic count alone. To do so, I evaluate the ideology of every congressional message on a given Key Vote and measure how distant the two parties are in their ideological scores. This will give us an indication of how members are discussing not only partisan votes, but bipartisan votes as well.

For this content analysis, I rely on the Wordfish model from the Quanteda Initiative (Benoit et al. 2018)—an open-source text analysis software. Wordfish uses Poisson distribution to scale documents, and unlike other scaling methods, does not require reference texts to establish an ideological spectrum. Instead, Wordfish considers word frequencies within documents to estimate an ideological position of the texts. This method has the benefit of allowing me to scale texts within a given topic without a time-consuming training model. Also, given the variation in corpus size across issues (some issues are discussed more frequently than others), this approach allows each model to be fitted by individual topic. Lastly, this approach does not assume every issue has the same ideological variation, and the results of each model reflect varying polarization across Key Votes.

Because the model is untrained, the “ideology” is representative of the individual words used to discuss a given topic, but are not necessarily representative of a partisan divide. The result of each model is an ideological score for every text discussing a given vote. I then consider the mean ideology in the party and compare it with members across the aisle. This approach allows me to calculate an ideology score for each party for every Key Vote, and then compare how distant the two parties are. Because the goal of this analysis is to understand how the two parties are talking about the same pieces of legislation, my baseline assumption is that there is no difference in word usage. In other words, the null hypothesis is that there is no ideological variation in linguistic choices when messaging about Key Votes.

Specifically for this analysis, I run 342 individual models—one Wordfish model for each vote (171), times each constituent communication types (two: press releases and newsletters). Because there is variation in Key Vote polarization, complexity, or ideological divisions, running individual models for each vote allows me to accurately scale legislative communications for that given issue, regardless of these and other external differences between Key Votes. And by looking at press releases and newsletters separately, these models also recognize differences in norms and audience of the two forms of communication. I also remove a dictionary of commonly used press words, such as salutations, datelines, and contact information.⁹² This helps prevent texts from being scored as similar simply because offices use a similar greeting or have a DC office in the same building. Because Wordfish relies on individual words to scale texts, models perform relatively well regardless of the number of communications in a given Key Vote. Some models (32 percent) were unable to converge because texts were too similar, and for 29 votes, no Democratic members released a newsletter.

⁹² See the full list of removed words in the Appendix, Table 5.2.

The resulting Wordfish scores allow me to scale every constituent communication across a continuum. While helpful to think of these scores as ranging from “liberal” to “conservative,” because the model is untrained, it does not know what “liberal” and “conservative” words are. Rather, it assigns each text a score ranging from -1 to 1 by comparing it to other communications on the same topic.⁹³ I use these scores to group the texts by party and find the average ideology score for each issue by party, presenting liberal scores as negative and conservative scores as positive. Figures 5 and 6 present the average text ideology score for each Key Vote topic. As is visible, the parties are divergent on nearly every Key Vote in the dataset, but there is great variation in the ideological range by issue and communication type. Overall, press releases are more divisive than newsletters. This is likely a reflection of the communication purpose behind the two mediums: Press releases are discussing a single vote in clear terms, while newsletters often discuss several issues in a single correspondence and use colloquial greetings and phrases. In Figure 5.5, we see consistent, deep divisions between the two parties—particularly in the first congressional sessions leading up to (ultimately pivotal) midterm elections (2013 and 2017). However, Key Votes following an election are often the least polarized—this could be due to successful legislation passing before a “lame duck” or election period. This could also be reflective of members responding more cautiously to their district after an informative election. Newsletters (Figure 5.6) are more consistently close in ideological averages, which we should expect given the longer texts and greater variation by region and phrasing. However, following the election of Donald Trump (2016-17), we see a large spike in the ideological division between Democratic and Republican members.

⁹³ On occasion there are outliers that exceed these -1 and 1 bounds. These outlier texts often have unique words but are still anchored to their party given other party-specific words. In other words, these outliers capture communications that are very conservative or liberal.

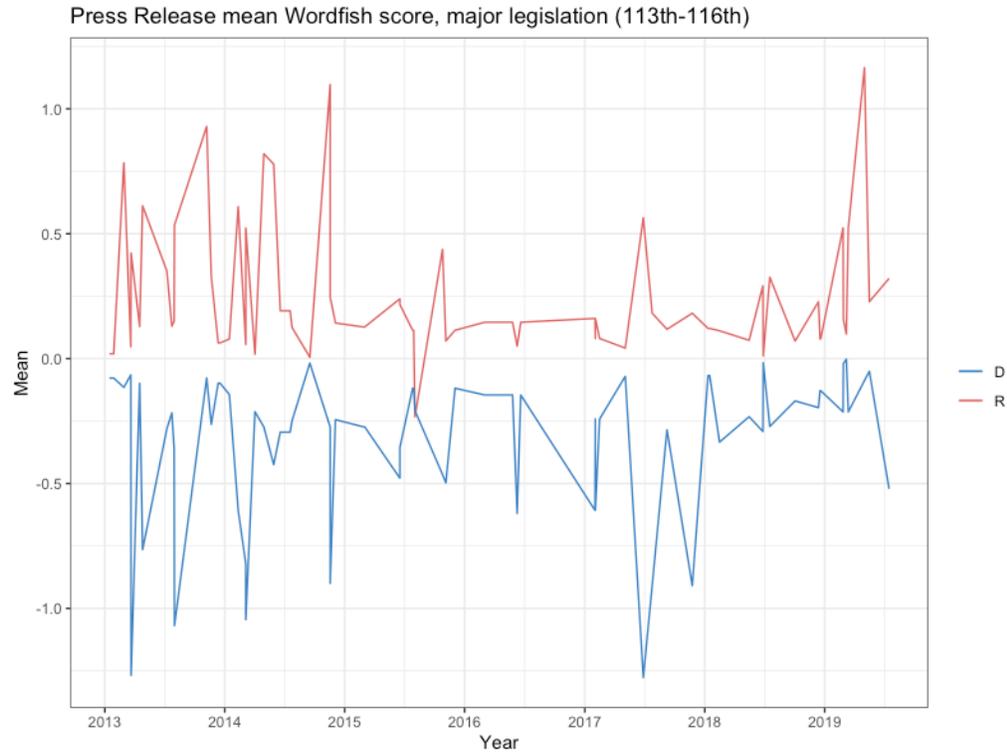


Figure 5.5: Average press release ideology by vote, 113th to 116th Congress
 Note: Party averages are calculated using Wordfish ideology scoring

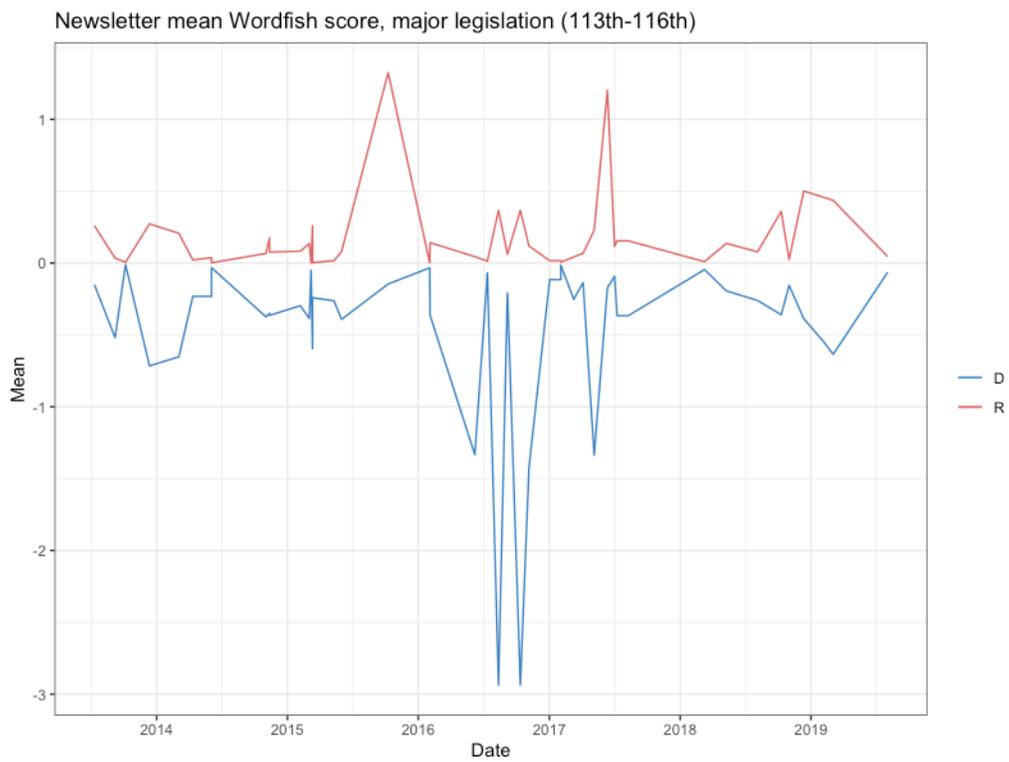


Figure 5.6: Average newsletter ideology by vote, 113th to 116th Congress

Note: Party averages are calculated using Wordfish ideology scoring

I use the absolute value of the distance between the two parties' averages as a measure of partisan division, or communication polarization. The partisan division ranges from 0 (no ideological variation) to a 1.84-point difference for press releases and a 3.39-point difference for newsletters. Mean variation is 0.430 for press releases and 0.432 for newsletters. For press releases, the parties are most divided on H.R. 1215 in the 115th Congress—a bill to curb medical malpractice lawsuits, which passed the House with an overwhelmingly bipartisan majority. Partisan bills—S. Con. Res. 8 in the 113th Congress (budget resolution in the Senate) and S. 1243 in the 113th Congress (Department of Transportation and Department of Housing and Urban Development appropriations) —are the second- and third-most divisive press release texts. For newsletters, bipartisan legislation again takes the most divisive spot: S. 612 (the infrastructure bill of the 114th Congress) and S. Res. 176 in the 116th Congress (resolution supporting the move of the Israeli embassy to Jerusalem). S. J. Res. 22 in the 114th Congress (resolution disapproving of Environmental Protection Agency regulations) was a highly partisan vote and also a divisive topic. The parties are most similar on bipartisan legislation: S. 1177 in the 114th Congress (the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act) and H.J. Res. in the 113th Congress (continuing resolution that included funding to train Syrian rebels).

Given these top trends, it's not inherently clear whether bills with clearly partisan votes or those with bipartisan support generate greater party divisions in constituent communication. Going beyond descriptive observations, I use logistic regression to consider the likelihood of partisan division given legislative and chamber attributes. Partisan division (the range between the two parties' average ideology score) is the dependent variable. Table 5.6 presents these results; the higher the number, the more ideologically divisive the language discussing

legislation.⁹⁴ As apparent in Figures 5.5 and 5.6, press releases use more divisive language than newsletters, holding all else constant. Although our earlier analysis found that polarized votes were more likely to be discussed, these models find no evidence that they encourage polarized *language*. As seen in Table 5.6, the polarization of a vote has a null effect on the polarization of the language used.

Also contrary to initial expectations, complexity had a negative effect on the polarization of constituent communication—press releases are more likely to have slightly similar word usage when discussing complex legislation. However, this ideological division (at 0.675) is above the average for press release divisiveness (0.43). Passed legislation is also less likely to be divisive (average score of 0.536, holding all else constant), yet still 0.1 points higher than the average score for divisiveness. No variables are statistically significant on the impact of newsletter polarization.

Table 5.6: Polarization of constituent communication, 113th to 116th Congress

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Press releases	Newsletters
Complexity	-0.065* (-0.133, 0.002)	-0.020 (-0.098, 0.057)
Vote polarization	-0.052 (-0.124, 0.020)	-0.003 (-0.085, 0.080)
WH Focus	0.026 (-0.183, 0.236)	0.001 (-0.238, 0.241)
President: Trump	0.123 (-0.053, 0.300)	0.003 (-0.199, 0.204)
Outcome: Passed	-0.272*** (-0.455, -0.089)	-0.083 (-0.293, 0.126)
Chamber Control: GOP	-0.204**	0.088

⁹⁴ Table 5.4 in the Appendix runs each model without Key Votes that had texts that were too similar to find any ideological differences (too similar to converge). The results are consistent across models.

	(-0.375, -0.033)	(-0.108, 0.283)
Interaction: WH Focus * President: Trump	0.156	0.173
	(-0.151, 0.464)	(-0.179, 0.524)
Constant	0.740***	0.405***
	(0.532, 0.948)	(0.168, 0.643)
Observations	170	170
R ²	0.163	0.024
Adjusted R ²	0.126	-0.019

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors reported in parenthesis.

While it's clear that the parties are divergent in the way that they talk about Key Votes—an important overall finding for strategies of policy presentation—the regression analysis does not provide support for the expectation that bill complexity fosters an opportunity for ideological differentiation. And although members of Congress are more likely to discuss passed legislation, the constituent communication discussing these polarized votes is not as divisive as other types of language. Overall though, members are more ideological in their press release language—over 0.3 points higher, or around one-third of the ideological scale for language polarization.

Discussion and conclusion

This chapter offers several important findings for how researchers should understand policy presentation. First, this data shows that policy presentation occurs in two ways. First, members are significantly more likely to discuss partisan votes over bipartisan ones; this is particularly true when the legislation is in response to White House policy preferences. Majority parties are also eager to assert their dominance and policy accomplishments. Press releases in particular are more likely to be sent on major legislation by members of the majority party. Second, this data also shows that the parties are ideologically divided in how they speak about important legislation. This is particularly notable for the discussion of bipartisan legislation, and

fills in an important gap in the literature on congressional polarization. Press releases were particularly polarizing and there was no positive effect of legislative complexity and increased partisan polarization—indicating that members are more likely to send a press release about familiar legislation or communicate on an issue regardless of complexity.

This chapter also addresses a theoretical underpinning of policy presentation: How does what members communicate encourage partisanship? As shown in these results, members are emphasizing partisan votes and partisan goals, despite oft-occurring bipartisan votes. This selective messaging has obvious implications for not only how Congress continues to institutionalize partisan polarization, but also how constituents view Congress. If constituent communication highlights partisan activity over bipartisan agreement, constituents will, understandably, believe Congress to be dysfunctional and polarized. This research finds they may also have a skewed vision on how effective the majority party is (or is not). Passed legislation is overwhelmingly discussed by members of the majority party, even though passage often relies on minority support. Given the future electoral goals of the minority party, it's understandable why minority party members would be less likely to communicate on legislative successes when the accomplishment could theoretically be attributed to the majority party leadership. But given that the majority party dominates policy accomplishments regardless, they are likely missing an opportunity for their own credit claiming.

This chapter does generate areas for future research. One, the dominance of Republican messaging, particularly in newsletters, is an interesting finding. While my expectation is that this is partially related to the decline of rural media and increased reliance on members representing these areas to proactively contact their constituents, I also believe this reflects policy presentation strategy. If congressional leaders are directly encouraging rank-and-file members to send these

types of communication, we should expect to see higher rates. Party leaders can also facilitate the costly logistics of sending out congressional newsletters—supplying rank-and-file members with website vendors and email collection strategies. Future research should examine the role parties play in newsletter communication by expanding the data to periods of Democratic majorities and discussing newsletters more explicitly with interview respondents.

Second, an obvious extension of this research is social media. What do members choose to tweet or post about, and how does that differ along elements of polarization and complexity? As Twitter and Facebook become increasingly essential ways that members communicate with their constituents, understanding what is shared—both in frequency and content—is an important next step to understanding policy presentation.

Overall, this chapter presents findings that showcase the two main strategies of policy presentation by congressional leaders: emphasizing partisan priorities and polarizing communication across all issues, regardless of vote. This chapter also presents an external indicator of the stronger, centralized Republican communication networks detailed in Chapter 4. The following chapter directly considers the role of party and committee leaders in this messaging process by considering the source of constituent messaging and which rank-and-file members are more likely to emulate party leader messages.

Chapter 6: Who engages in policy presentation?

We know that party and committee leaders assist rank-and-file members with message development, and this responsibility has become an embedded congressional institution (Chapter 4). Furthermore, we know that members' resulting messages are often partisan and divisive (Chapter 5). But to what degree are party leaders directly inspiring the external outputs of rank-and-file members? How similar are rank-and-file messages to party leaders, and how does this differ by member, chamber, party, and congressional session? This final analytical chapter considers the source of constituent communication and the members that most likely to emulate leader-led messaging.

This analysis relies on continued computational text analysis of congressional communications, as well as network analysis and Exponential Random Graph Models (ERGM) to evaluate the likelihood of rank-and-file adoption of party and committee leader messages. The results indicate that members do “follow the leader” —particularly, freshmen members. However, the strength of this relationship varies greatly; members are more likely to copy leaders' messages in recent congressional sessions, and House members and Republican members are more likely to copy party leader messaging. However, across all sessions, chambers, and parties, party bonds are strong. If members are not looking to leaders for guidance, they are looking to their ideological peers. Members are significantly likely to copy the words of party peers—further instilling partisan messaging and divisive constituent communication.

This chapter contributes to our understanding of the likelihood of message adoption given important member-level attributes such as electoral vulnerability and seniority. For congressional leaders, this research provides clarity on the success of the behind-the-scenes development and

distribution of policy presentation by demonstrating when leadership messages are more likely to be copied by other members. Although party leaders do not dominate messaging relationships at all times, these results indicate an overwhelmingly positive relationship between rank-and-file members and congressional leader messaging. Lastly, this chapter also has methodological implications: The use of computational text analysis alongside network analysis introduces a new way to study political communication of larger congressional texts.

The remainder of this chapter will first discuss my theoretical expectations based on the theory of policy presentation outlined in Chapter 2. In particular, I argue that the rank-and-file members are reliant on congressional leaders for constituent communication, largely due to party and committee leaders' informational advantages and resources. I then turn to the data and methods of this analysis. This chapter uses textual pairwise analysis of constituent communication to develop a network of linguistic similarity. Using this observed network across four congressional sessions, I then apply an ERGM model to predict the likelihood of messaging similarity based on member-level attributes such as electoral vulnerability, ideology, and leadership positions. The result is a systematic understanding of how leadership messaging is used in constituent communication and which members are more likely to use these messages.

Theory

Congressional leaders have outsized access to legislative information and resources. The centralized nature of lawmaking in Congress today relies heavily on leader-led legislative negotiation and selective information distribution (Curry 2019, 2015, Pearson 2005, Sinclair 1997). In an unorthodox lawmaking setting, rank-and-file members have few alternatives to meaningfully impact legislation, particularly in the House. Special rules restricting amendments and debates, large omnibus packages, and limited time to review legislation have forced rank-

and-file members to be reliant on party leaders for guidance on how to vote, and as this dissertation argues, how to *discuss* legislation.

In addition to these well-documented changes in lawmaking, party and committee leaders also have outsized resources, particularly in the form of large offices filled with experienced staff. The “brain drain” in Congress is particularly felt by rank-and-file members, who not only lose their staff to outside groups, but the better-paying, more prestigious jobs of congressional leadership and committees (Burgat 2020, LaPira et al. 2020, Miler 2020). These experienced staff members supply party leaders with not only legislative assistance, but also the ability to coordinate events and messaging campaigns. Party and committee offices in both chambers have prioritized communication staff, making their offices not only a legislative hub, but a messaging arm as well (Lee 2016). In the House in particular, rank-and-file members cannot compete with these resources. The result is that at both the member and staff level, rank-and-file offices are reliant on party leaders for guidance on how to vote on and speak about legislation, as well as the materials to meaningfully discuss important legislation with constituents. Thus, the overarching expectation of this chapter is that rank-and-file members will be more likely to copy the words of party and committee leaders’ constituent communication over that of other rank-and-file members of Congress.

However, there are important differences among lawmakers that I expect to impact the likelihood of message adoption. First, as respondents detailed in Chapter 4, I expect there to be differences by chamber and party. Senators are less likely to rely on congressional leadership for legislative and messaging assistance. The larger, more experienced staff of Senate offices allows them to counter the resources of congressional leadership. I expect that, compared to senators, House members will be more likely to copy congressional leaders’ constituent communication. I

also expect differences by party, given the results of respondent interviews. Democratic respondents detailed a less centralized message development and distribution process compared to their Republican counterparts. Thus, Republican members should be more likely than Democratic members to copy leadership messages.

Second, at the individual level, each rank-and-file member has different needs. While the legislation's topic and a given legislator's expertise certainly interact with an individual's reliance on leadership messaging, this research is interested in overarching trends on major legislation. Thus, I consider factors that will impact the likelihood of rank-and-file members copying party and committee leaders despite variation in legislative topic. I consider institutional factors that increase the likelihood of a member using party narratives. I expect freshman members to be more reliant on leadership messaging guidance. Not only are they less experienced in discussing legislation, but their staff is often equally inexperienced (Volden and Wiseman 2014, Leal and Hess 2004). Members and staff in new offices will look toward party and committee leaders for messaging ideas. I also expect members who are ideologically aligned with the party mean will be more likely to use party messaging. Members who vote with the party consistently will likely also speak with the party consistently. Using the distance between legislators' DW-Nominate scores and the party's mean DW-Nominate score as a proxy for ideological similarity, I expect that members with a DW-Nominate score closest to the party mean will be most likely to engage in policy presentation.

Third, it is also important to consider how district pressure may encourage or dissuade members from using party-centric messaging. Although congressional districts are overwhelming (and increasingly) "safe" for one political party, some members every congressional session face a constituency who voted at a high margin for either a presidential or

state candidate of a different party. These electorally vulnerable members are highly aware of their constituency's ideological preference and are likely less willing to copy party leaders' messaging tactics. They may be inclined to highlight bipartisanship, district issues, or pork projects (Grimmer 2014)—but amplifying their congressional party's messages is likely not in their best interest. Thus, I expect members who are facing a challenging reelection campaign due to ideological moderation in the district to be less likely to copy congressional leaders' messages frequently.

Overall, I expect both institutional factors (chamber and party) as well as individual-level attributes (seniority, party loyalty, and electoral vulnerability) to impact the likelihood of a rank-and-file member adopting the language of congressional leaders. These variables will be applied to our network analysis using ERG modeling, detailed below, to capture the likelihood of a linguistic connection between leaders and rank-and-file members.

Data and methods

Since policy presentation is an institutionalized responsibility of party and committee leaders, network analysis is a uniquely useful tool to illustrate and document linguistic similarity as a type of congressional relationship. Social network analysis has two main components: individual “nodes” that are connected by “edges” or “links.” In this analysis, nodes are every member of Congress in a congressional session, connected by links, which are a measure of text similarity across congressional press releases. Using members of Congress as social network nodes is a common approach and has been successfully applied to other questions of legislative relationships: Edges between members have included campaign donations (Gaynor 2021, Victor and Koger 2016), legislative cosponsorships (Fowler 2006), and committee assignments (Porter et al. 2005). Social network analysis has also been extensively applied to communication studies,

particularly Twitter networks and their role in user polarization (Aruguete et al. 2021, Banks et al. 2020), as well as questions directly similar to this study: Aruguete and Calvo (2018) track how sharing messages on Twitter indicate acceptance of the original message; Barberá et al. (2015) track how Twitter users are more likely to share and interact with those they already agree with.

The goal of this analysis is to understand whether or not rank-and-file members are utilizing the communication materials prepared by congressional leaders. To measure the likelihood of message similarity between members, this research uses a pairwise measure of text similarity to establish a connection (edge) between two members of Congress. By calculating which members are most closely related in press release word usage, I can then observe which rank-and-file members' words are most similar to the words of party leaders.⁹⁵ However, this analysis cannot establish causality. Members are also receiving information from *external* influences, such as news media, pundits, or think tanks, rather than solely relying on congressional peers and leaders. Message similarity between members could reflect a similarity in external references, rather than mirrored language. However, given the expansive scope of this data in both time and topic, these findings do indicate a likelihood of message repetition between members (possibly in addition to similar external references). Furthermore, even if some members are inspired by external communicators, likely not all are. Rather, members influence their peers to adapt selective external language.

Based on the behind-the-scenes coordination of message development discussed in Chapter 4, I assume that linguistic similarity indicates a coordinated messaging effort—or, at the

⁹⁵ Because I do not have the time stamps available for every press release, we are unable to see who is writing the first press release and who is subsequently copying—however, I do not consider echoed language to be coincidence.

very least, a member purposefully emulating the words of another member. Furthermore, if congressional leaders are using certain words, I assume the messages are sanctioned, if not explicitly encouraged, by congressional leaders. In the absence of directly watching members and staff create and send press releases, I use computational text analysis to uncover text similarities between members and leaders.

Data collection

In addition to the original data on press releases described in previous chapters, I also incorporate several sources of original data for this social network analysis. First, to understand how individual member attributes are influencing the formation of the congressional social network and linguistic matching, I gather biographical information on every member of Congress from the 113th through 116th Congress. I am interested in five variables that I believe impact the likelihood of message distribution and adoption: ideological similarity to the party mean, electoral vulnerability, whether a member is a party leader, whether a member is a committee leader, and whether a member is newly elected.

To capture ideological similarity to the party mean, I collected the DW-Nominate voting scores from Voteview.com (Lewis et al. 2022) from both chambers for each congressional session (113th to 116th). Using the DW-Nominate scores of all members, I find the mean party average for each chamber in a congressional session. I use the party and chamber average to calculate the absolute distance from the party mean for each member. As illustrated in Figure 1, the majority of members across all congressional sessions are close to the party mean of DW-Nominate scores. This is to be expected, given the rise of unorthodox lawmaking and partisan polarization; DW-Nominate scores are increasingly reflective of two unified political parties. For ease of analysis, I create a categorical measure of ideological similarity by dividing the continual

variable of distance from the party mean into 1st, 2nd, and 3rd terciles for each congressional session (1st tercile members have a score closest to the party mean, 3rd tercile members have a distance farthest from the party mean).

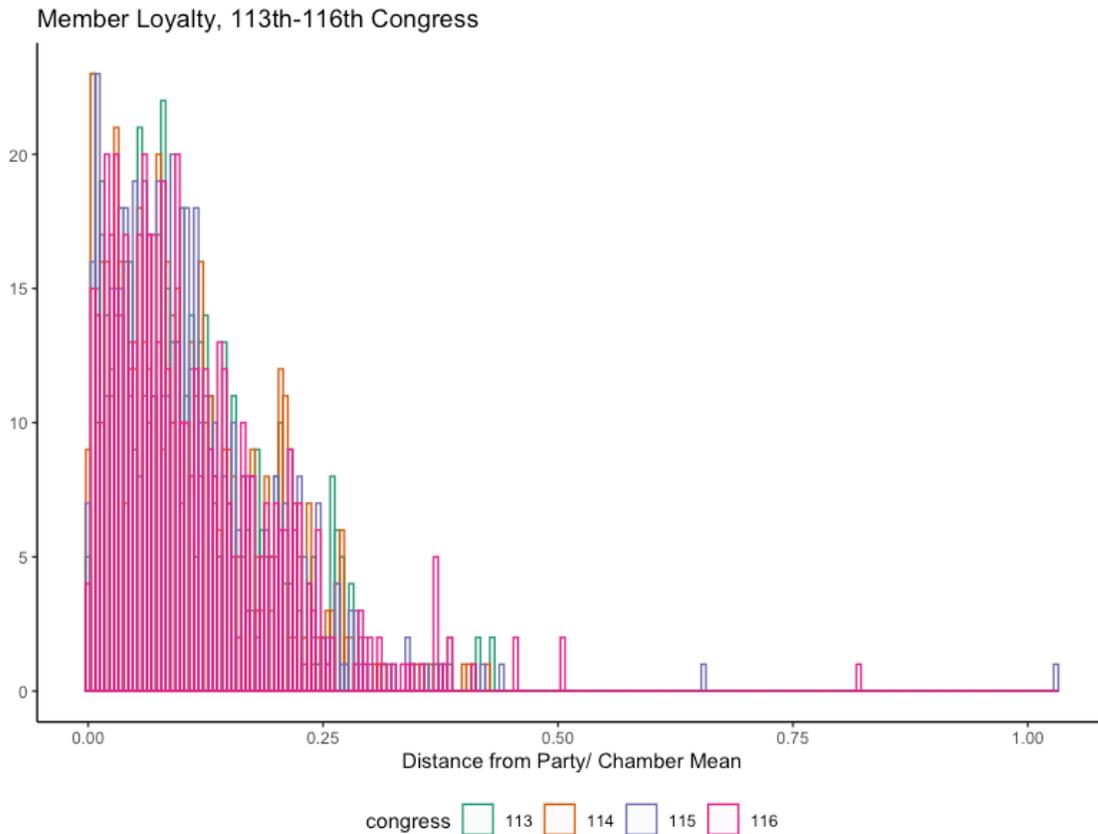


Figure 6.1: Distribution of member distance from DW-Nominate mean, 113th to 116th Congress

To capture electoral vulnerability, I rely on the Cook Political Report’s Partisan Voting Index (PVI). The PVI has evaluated the vulnerability of every congressional race since 1997. The measure relies on presidential vote share in the district, the congressional candidate’s previous vote share, national- and district-level polling on party and candidate popularity, district changes due to redistricting, and other important factors. The PVI then rates the partisan composition of the district by estimating the likelihood of party advantage (e.g., Republican + 5, Democratic + 10). The PVI then uses these scores to break the district down into electoral

vulnerability for the party currently holding the seat, ranging from “likely Democratic/Republican” to “lean Democratic/Republican” to “toss up Democratic/Republican,” with the latter being the most vulnerable members.⁹⁶ Members are hyper-aware of these ratings, and they often form the basis of other party-wide electoral strategies. Because members are often overly concerned about their electoral chances (despite a well-documented incumbent advantage [Cox and Katz 1996, Fourinaies and Hall 2014, King and Gelman 1991]), any rating, from likely to toss-up, is likely taken as a sign of candidate vulnerability. Because of this, I code any member who receives a competitive Cook’s PVI rating (1). I also code any senator facing election in the upcoming election as a competitive race (1). Although several of these senators have “safe” seats, Senate elections are large, expensive, statewide campaigns that impact how senators spend their time in D.C. Unlike House elections that occur for every member every two years, senators don’t have to focus on reelection concerns every year. However, as an election nears, senators spend more time on campaign endeavors (phone calls, meetings and events, campaign communication, etc.). Additionally, Senate respondents revealed that communication strategies differed during election years and reported being more likely to pay attention to district issues or electoral concerns. Statewide seats are likely ideologically (and sometimes, demographically) more heterogeneous than a single district. Senators facing reelection should be more likely to focus on state-specific issues rather than party positioning. Across all congressional sessions, 16 percent of members are considered electorally vulnerable.

Lastly, I collect institutional variables that I expect to impact the distribution and adoption of policy presentation. I code party and committee leadership as separate dichotomous

⁹⁶ These ratings only focus on competitive races—these categories (D likely, D lean, D toss up, R toss up, R lean, R likely) only encompass the most competitive races. The majority of races are not rated at all because they are not considered competitive.

variables. Party leadership includes Speaker of the House, minority and majority leader, party whips, and conference and policy chairs in both chambers (5.2 percent of members across all congressional sessions). Committee leaders include the majority party chair and the minority ranking member for all standing committees in both chambers (14.2 percent of members). I also code all new members for each congressional session as a dichotomous variable. Across all congressional sessions, 14.9 percent of members are freshman members.

Measuring text similarity

To establish our “edgelist,” or the connecting measurements between each node, I use the press releases by members of Congress on all Key Votes from the 113th through 116th Congress (2013 to 2019) to establish a measurement of text similarity across all members. Building off of the press release data, which were described in Chapter 5, I use the TextReuse package in open-source software R (Mullen 2015), which compares the contents of each press release to find the matching press release in the dataset that is most similar in word choices.⁹⁷ This approach has been successfully applied to reprinted newspaper articles (Cordel and Smith 2017) and adoption of legal code (Funk and Mullen 2018), where scholars have examined similarity in text.

I run this pairwise document analysis for every Key Vote in the dataset, matching the similarity of tens of thousands of documents. The models create a matrix of pairwise measures, ranging from zero to one, that catalogues the similarity between every single document for each Key Vote. After generating matrices of comparisons, I calculate the most similar press release and the corresponding member for every press release. The result is a list of every member’s top

⁹⁷ Because this approach creates a pairwise comparison of each individual legislator press release in the dataset, this method is ideal for “medium size” text analysis, compared to common computational text analysis approaches that rely on “big data” (Mullin 2015).

press release match in Congress—pairing every member of Congress with the legislator they are most linguistically similar to, for every press release in the dataset. Importantly, this text matching does not necessarily create reciprocated pairs. Every press release is its own individual entry; while Member A’s press release may be most similar to Member B’s, Member B’s press release may be more similar to Member C. Some members send two press releases on a given topic—they often are “paired” with themselves. These cases are removed—however, this does not preclude other members from matching with them. For example: current House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) often sends multiple press releases for a given vote (usually a formal press release and the transcript of a speech or press conference). Under this pairwise analysis, she is often rated as most similar to herself (given she is often reusing quotes across the two press releases). However, other rank-and-file members are using her language—so although Speaker Pelosi may not rely on their language, they are relying on hers, making her *their* top match.

For every Key Vote with more than two press releases,⁹⁸ there is a corresponding list of matching members of Congress. Because each congressional session has several Key Votes, members are often connected to several nodes (members) across a congressional session. Theoretically, a member of Congress could pull from one member’s press release for one vote and turn to another member’s press release when discussing a different vote. I then join these pairwise lists for each vote together by congressional session. This forms four datasets (113th, 114th, 115th, and 116th Congress) of every linguistic connection in a congressional session, which then serve as the edgelists for my network analysis.

⁹⁸ As detailed earlier, given the data collection process, some Key Votes do not have any press releases, and one Key Vote in the dataset (S.J. Res. 63, a resolution on health insurance, 115th Congress) only has one press release.

Social network analysis

I use these two data sources (biographical information on members of Congress, and connections of text similarity) to establish a social network analysis of linguistic similarity. Figure 6.2 below displays the partisan breakdown of the social networks for the 113th through 116th Congress, with each node (dot) representing a member of Congress, and each edge (line) indicating the member they are linguistically most similar to. There are few things to consider when interpreting the visuals of a network analysis. First, the closer a node is to the center of the network, the more nodes it is connected to. Conversely, nodes on the edge of the network are connected to fewer nodes. For this analysis, this means that a member closer to the center is more likely to be copied by several members or is a frequent copier of the language of other people in the center. Nodes on the edge are connected to other nodes on the edge, meaning that they are likely to copy members who are unconnected to well-connected members at the center of the network. Second, the visual density of the models provides an indication of how many connections there are throughout the network. When nodes are well connected, particularly if they have several connections throughout the network, they will appear more closely clustered together.⁹⁹

Given these basic factors, Figure 6.2 highlights potentially compelling linguistic differences across congressional sessions. First, as indicated by node color, the two parties are increasingly divided by party. In the 113th Congress, nodes are somewhat divided by party—by the 116th Congress, nodes are far less likely to be connected to out-party members. This is reflective of the trends noted in Chapters 4 and 5—members are likely to discuss legislation in a

⁹⁹ The figures in this chapter use the Fruchterman-Reingold algorithm, a force-directed algorithm that distributes nodes in relation to their network connections and makes social networks easier to view.

partisan way. Second, there is also notable variation in the density of these networks. The 116th Congress—notably, the only Congress in which there is a Democratic majority in both chambers—is far less connected compared to the other networks of this analysis. This indicates that there is less text matching in this Congress than the 113th, 114th, and 115th.



Figure 6.2: Social network of message similarity, by party, 113th to 116th Congress

Note: Each node represents a member of Congress. Each edge (gray line) represents linguistic similarity (the most similar member to them based on press release text). Layout is established using a force-directed algorithm (Fruchterman-Reingold).

Figure 6.3 presents these same social networks, showing the distribution of nodes by chambers. In all networks, there is a clear division between House and Senate members, but there are clearly cross-chamber links, indicating that members are using similar language as their cross-chamber peers. The stark division between the nodes is likely due to a difference in the Key Votes of each chamber—while members can (and certainly do) discuss votes that occur on the other side of the Capitol, they largely focus on chamber-specific issues. Thus, the similarity between the two chambers for press releases generally is likely even higher, considering the difference in votes.

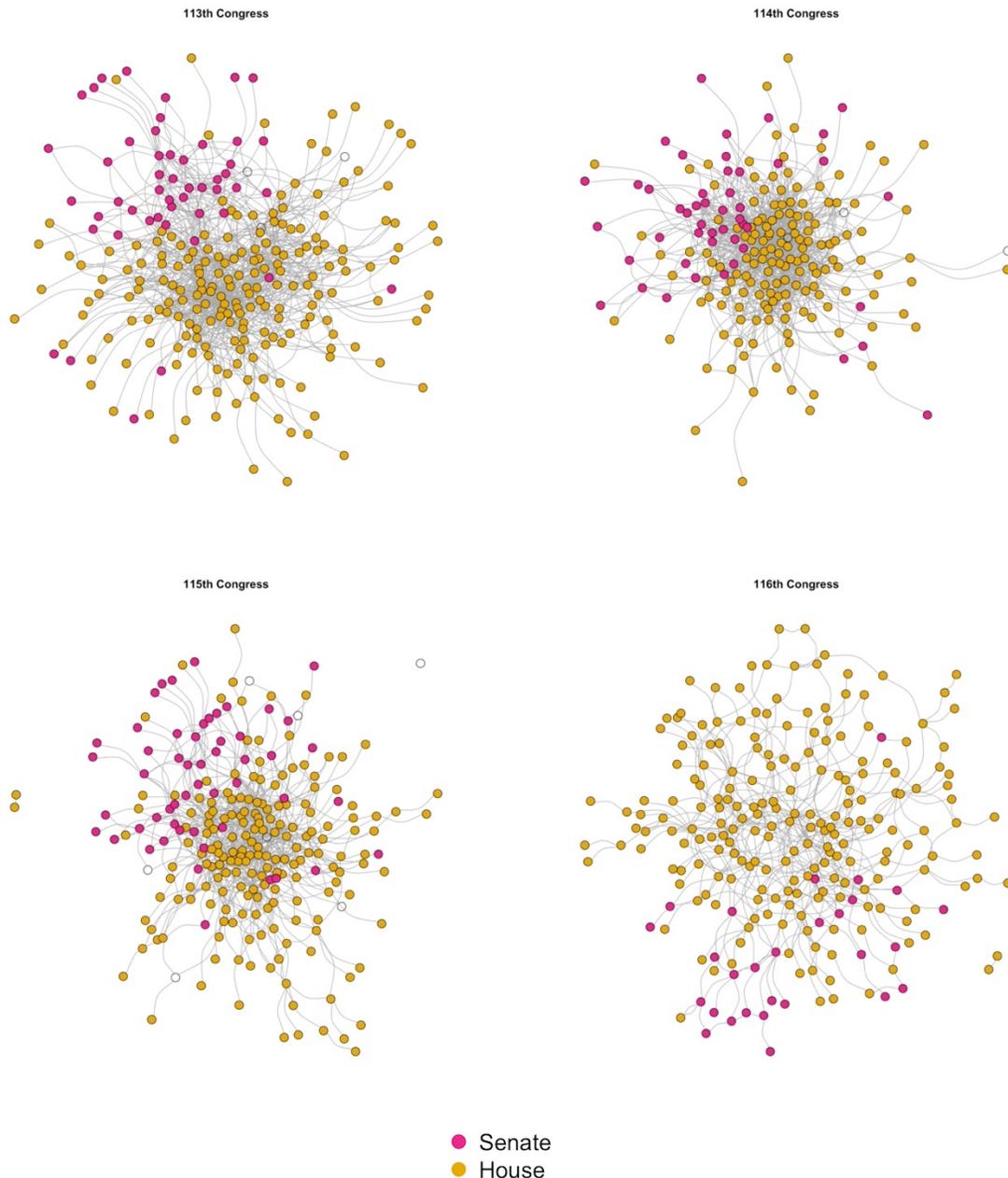


Figure 6.3: Social network of message similarity, by chamber, 113th to 116th Congress

Note: Each node represents a member of Congress. Each edge (gray line) represents linguistic similarity (the most similar member to them based on press release text). Layout is established using a force-directed algorithm (Fruchterman-Reingold).

Lastly, and of particularly importance to this research, Figure 6.4 presents the location of party leaders and committee leaders in the networks. Again, because node centrality indicates a higher rate of connections to other members, a visual observation of congressional leaders’

location in the network can be helpful. Given my expectations that members are copying the words of congressional leaders, I expect to see party and committee leader nodes in the center of the networks, because their messages are being adopted by many other members. Interestingly, in the networks with higher visual density (114th and 115th Congress), party leaders are closer to the center (although not all are). However, in many cases, nodes on the edge of the network are in the center of the Senate nodes, thus this is capturing Senate leadership. If policy presentation is occurring, this could be correlated—in a network where leaders are aggressively driving constituent communication, leaders should be at the center of a dense network. Interestingly, in the sparsest network, the 116th Congress, party and committee leaders are dispersed throughout, indicating that party and committee leaders are not driving the messaging connections.

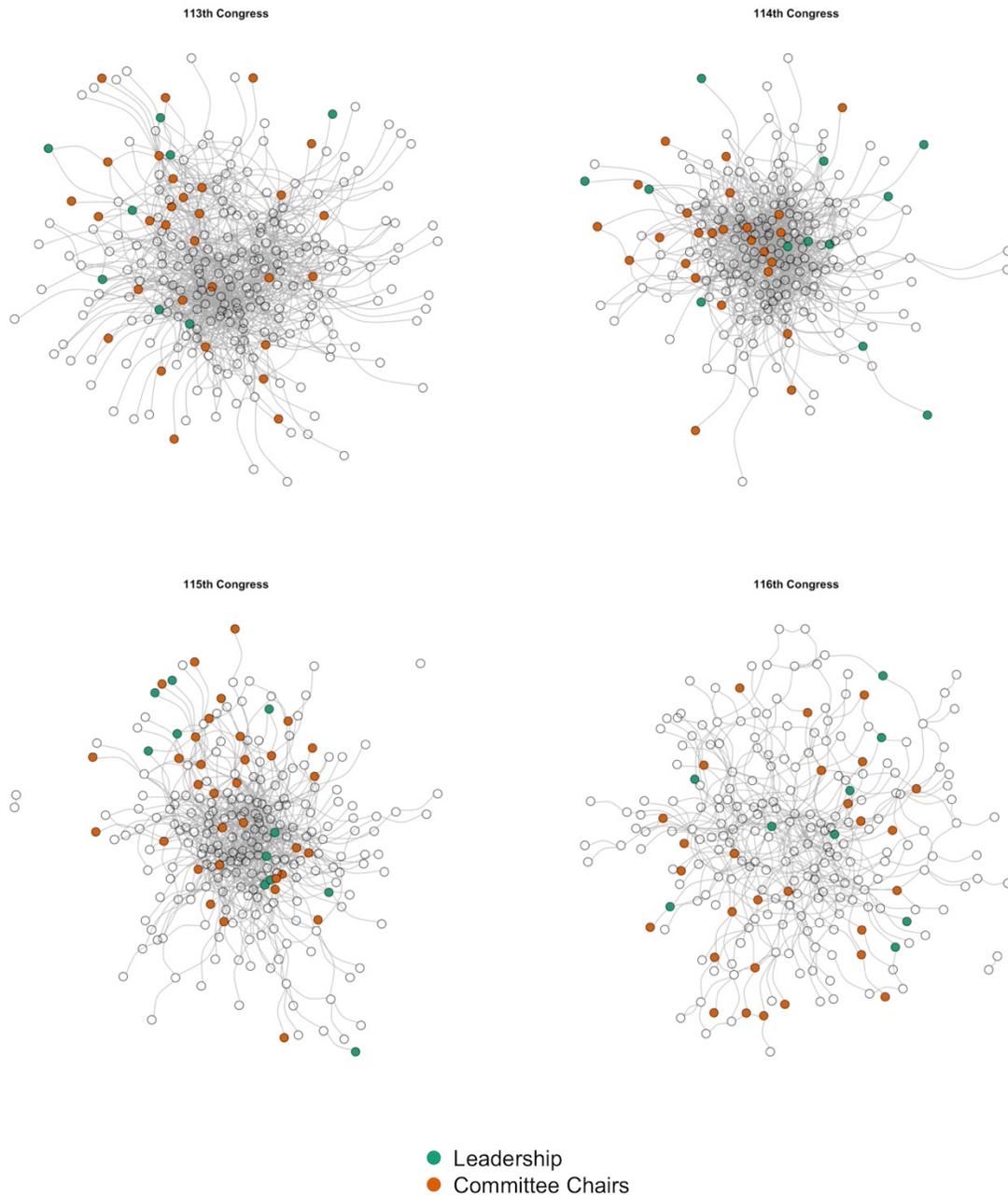


Figure 6.4: Social network of message similarity, highlighting leadership and committee chairs, 113th to 116th Congress

Note: Each node represents a member of Congress. Each edge (gray line) represents linguistic similarity (the most similar member to them based on press release text). Layout is established using a force-directed algorithm (Fruchterman-Reingold).

ERGM analysis

Although social network analysis provides researchers with a great deal of information about relationships (how many connections an individual node has, how central the node is in the network in relation to other nodes, and how strong a relationship is given potential measures of weight), it does not provide a great deal of information about the nodal attributes that influence the likelihood of a connections. In other words, while network analysis can tell us that there is a connection between two nodes, it cannot tell us *why*. Exponential Random Graph Models (ERGM) allow researchers to apply node-level attributes to estimate the likelihood of an edge connection. ERGM is an ideal application for my research question; by pairing the node-level biographical information with our edgelist of similar press release language, I can estimate the likelihood of members replicating congressional leaders' messaging on Key Votes, given other personal attributes.

ERG models establish a likelihood of a connection by comparing the actual, observed relationship against a simulated random network (Cranmer and Desmarais 2011). The random networks consider all possible relationships in a network (matrix format), and then uses Maximum Likelihood Estimator (MLE) to estimate the likelihood of a connection given the true network. The dependent variable is an "edge" or connection (matched press release language), while the independent variables are nodal attributes: distance from the party mean, divided by terciles; electoral vulnerability, measured by Cook's PVI; and whether the member is a party leader, committee chair, or freshman.

These models ask: Out of all possible members of Congress, who are most likely to be connected to whom via message repetition? These models consider the likelihood of matching a party or committee leader given rank-and-file characteristics (party loyalty, electoral vulnerability, freshman status, chamber, and party). This approach does not preclude the

possibility that congressional leaders are copying other congressional leaders, or that congressional leaders are copying rank-and-file members. However, given the low percentage of party and committee leaders (5.8 percent), statistically significant evidence of a shared relationship most likely reflects a rank-and-file member copying a committee leader (i.e., there is a greater likelihood of a strong connection between several members and party leaders being driven by 95 percent of nodes, not the 5 percent of party leader nodes). In addition to measuring the likelihood of a connection given nodal attributes, I also consider the likelihood of a “mutual” connections between party members (when both the initial message and the “copied” message are from members of the same party).

In the results below, I run four models, one for each congressional session. The choice to run the models separately for each congressional session addresses common problems of network degeneracy (bias), and also provides an opportunity to observe how, or if, congressional relationships have evolved over the six-year timespan of this data.¹⁰⁰ Given that interviews revealed important differences in policy presentation by chamber and party, I run each model four time: first, isolating nodes by chamber, and second, running the models by each individual party.

Results

ERGM estimations are interpreted in the same way as logistic regressions—a negative number indicates a likelihood under fifty percent, while a positive number indicates a likelihood over fifty percent. I will use the predicted probabilities of the ERGM outputs when discussing the results. As a helpful baseline, across both parties and chambers, members are unlikely to

¹⁰⁰ Additional goodness-of-fit measures can be found in the Appendix.

have a connection to another member—around 10 percent for the 113th Congress, and 2 percent for the 116th Congress.¹⁰¹ Because our node list contains every member of Congress that sent a press release in this period (not just those who were connected to another member’s press release text), this is likely a conservative estimate. As discussed in the prior chapter, press releases are difficult to study because of the limitations of data collection, particularly for archived congressional sessions. However, this measure (edges) does provide us with a helpful baseline for analyzing the likelihood of other connections, based on nodal attribute.

Given expected differences between House and Senate members, I first present the results for the 113th to 116th Congress by chamber. This approach provides greater clarity of the differences between chambers in policy presentation—a key contribution of this dissertation. Table 6.1 presents the results of the four ERG models for House members only. Although the likelihood of a random connection with any fellow House member is low (around 10 percent for the 113th to 115th Congress, but as low as 3 percent in the 116th Congress) the likelihood of a connection with a House leader is much higher. In the 114th Congress, there is a 57.3 percent increased likelihood of matching the language in press releases of a party leader as compared to a rank-and-file colleague. In the 115th Congress, there is a 63.5 percent increase. In the 114th Congress, there is also an increased likelihood of matching committee chair language: 59.7 percent at a statistically significant level. Also notable, and expected, members in competitive races are less likely to have connections with other members of Congress. In the 115th and 116th Congress, members facing a competitive district were only 41.2 percent and 45.1 percent more likely to have a linguistic connection, respectively.

¹⁰¹ See Table 6.1 in the Appendix for the results of the full network, including both parties and chambers.

Easily the strongest and most predictive effect in the models, though, are the shared relationships between party peers. Again, this measure (“shared party”) captures the likelihood of one node having a messaging connection to a member of the same party. For all congressional sessions, this impact is positive and statistically significant, and noticeably, increases over time. In the 113th Congress, there is a 68 percent increased likelihood of a shared relationship between members of the same party, but by the 116th Congress there is a 79.6 percent likelihood of shared messaging. Because the measure of text similarity is simply comparing the entire press release text, cross-party connections are likely due to simply discussing logistics, such as the same bill title or congressional hearing. However, members are still more likely to be connected to a member of the same party than any other random member of Congress. This, of course, should be no surprise given the findings of Chapter 5—members are communicating in a partisan way—yet it shows that members are looking toward other partisans for message development.

Table 6.1: ERGM results, House members, 113th to 116th Congress

	<i>Likelihood of a messaging connection</i>			
	113 th Congress	114 th Congress	115 th Congress	116 th Congress
Leadership	-0.343 (0.235)	0.294** (0.148)	0.552*** (0.141)	0.253 (0.209)
Committee chair	0.051 (0.112)	0.392*** (0.104)	-0.149 (0.128)	0.131 (0.133)
Freshman	0.146** (0.063)	0.413*** (0.071)	-0.161 (0.106)	0.367*** (0.096)
Competitive race	0.009 (0.090)	0.099 (0.117)	-0.354** (0.139)	-0.198* (0.119)
Shared party	0.754*** (0.082)	0.823*** (0.086)	0.815*** (0.098)	1.361*** (0.141)
Party mean distance: 2 nd tercile	-0.137* (0.071)	0.081 (0.070)	0.154* (0.082)	0.084 (0.092)
Party mean distance: 3 rd tercile	-0.074 (0.066)	0.137* (0.070)	0.279*** (0.081)	0.078 (0.094)
Edges	-4.538*** (0.091)	-4.414*** (0.096)	-4.867*** (0.108)	-5.987*** (0.155)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	6,618.820	5,748.596	5,046.220	4,020.298
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	6,696.054	5,820.966	5,122.040	4,098.243

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Table 6.2 presents the Senate-only network results (113th to 115th).¹⁰² Here, the notable distinction is in the relationship between members and committee chairs. In the 113th and 114th Congress, there is a statistically significant and positive relationship, with members being 63 percent more likely to copy the press releases of Senate committee chairs in the 113th, and 57 percent more likely to copy committee chairs in the 114th. Conversely, party leaders were not a positive source of message development. However, that committee chair influence decreases

¹⁰² The 116th Congress did not converge due to too few connections between Senate-only members.

over time, to a point where it is not statistically significant in the 115th and 116th Congress, is also interesting, and possibly indicative of a more centralized, party-leader-led communications process.

Freshman members in the 113th and 114th Senate are more likely to rely on other members for messaging guidance (67.2 percent and 67.4 percent), as was the case for their House counterparts, and competitive races had a negative relationship with other members in the 115th Congress. Also, like House members, intraparty connections are positive, and in the 113th Congress, statistically significant (61.5 percent increased likelihood of a connection).

Table 6.2: ERGM results, Senate members, 113th to 115th Congress

	<i>Likelihood of a messaging connection</i>		
	113 th Congress	114 th Congress	115 th Congress
Leadership	-0.069 (0.229)	-0.934*** (0.264)	0.117 (0.214)
Committee chair	0.676*** (0.175)	0.284* (0.158)	0.087 (0.181)
Freshman	0.717*** (0.251)	0.725*** (0.218)	-0.290 (0.445)
Competitive race	0.158	0.158	-0.415**

	(0.210)	(0.172)	(0.201)
Same party	0.470**	0.327	0.301
	(0.200)	(0.204)	(0.247)
Party mean distance: 2 nd tercile	0.317	-0.017	0.445**
	(0.197)	(0.191)	(0.195)
Party mean distance: 3 rd tercile	-0.455*	0.132	-0.049
	(0.239)	(0.180)	(0.250)
Edges	-4.375***	-3.747***	-3.822***
	(0.367)	(0.285)	(0.365)
<hr/>			
Akaike Inf. Crit.	781.903	756.343	682.544
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	834.138	807.835	735.838

*Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. The 116th Congress did not converge due to too few connections between Senate-only members.*

The House-wide findings on the increased relationship between members and congressional leaders, particularly party leaders, provide further clarity to the mechanisms of policy presentation. Although it was expected that senators will rely heavily on their own individual staff for message development, in the earlier congressional sessions (113th and 114th), committee chairs appear to play a strong role in message development. Table 2 indicates that House members are increasingly reliant on party and committee leaders for legislative information, with the exception of the 116th Congress—notably the only session in which Democratic members are in the majority. Likewise, the null findings of the 116th session for the Senate—where Democratic members are also in the majority—is interesting. Considering the results of Chapter 5, which found that majority parties often drive the conversation when discussing policy achievements, this could reflect a lack of policy presentation by the current majority party. Thus, to consider party-specific differences more clearly, I isolate nodes by party membership. Table 6.3 presents the results of Republican members in both chambers, while Table 6.4 presents Democratic members.

Statistically significant results show that Republicans are more likely to be connected to party leaders (58.5 percent more likely in the 115th Congress) as well as committee chairs (58.3 percent more likely in the 113th Congress, and 60.7 percent more likely in the 114th). For Democratic members, the results are largely statistically insignificant, but there is a negative relationship with party leaders in the 114th Congress (only 19 percent increased likelihood). Across both parties, freshmen members remain more likely to be connected to other members, while the electorally vulnerable are less likely. These findings indicate that much of policy presentation is occurring through Republican members, consistent with evidence from prior chapters.

Interestingly, for both parties, members who were more ideologically distant became more unified in party messaging when they were in the minority in both Congress *and* in relation to the presidency. In Table 6.3, in the 116th Congress, when Republicans were in the minority of both chambers and facing a Democratic President Biden, even members in the 2nd and 3rd tercile of distance from the party voting mean were far more likely to copy other members of the party, at statistically significant levels. Likewise, Democratic members in the 115th Congress—in the minority of both chambers and under President Trump—were statistically likely to be more unified, even if they were in the 2nd tercile of distance from the party mean. This indicates that messaging is in fact easier and more unifying when the party has a clear minority position (in both the chamber and in relation to the White House).

Table 6.3: ERGM results, GOP members of Congress, 113th to 116th Congress

	<i>Model</i>			
	113 th Congress	114 th Congress	115 th Congress	116 th Congress
Leadership	-0.197 (0.196)	-0.169 (0.148)	0.341** (0.156)	-0.044 (0.615)
Committee chair	0.335*** (0.120)	0.434*** (0.106)	-0.219 (0.160)	0.151 (0.289)
Freshman	0.119 (0.091)	0.497*** (0.077)	-0.045 (0.130)	0.392* (0.211)
Competitive race	0.171 (0.133)	-0.165* (0.095)	-0.173 (0.161)	-0.003 (0.253)
Senate	-0.796*** (0.129)	-0.254*** (0.093)	-0.669*** (0.114)	-0.062 (0.300)

Party mean distance: 2 nd tercile	0.147 (0.096)	-0.008 (0.083)	0.027 (0.104)	0.572** (0.237)
Party mean distance: 3 rd tercile	-0.233*** (0.089)	0.013 (0.081)	-0.040 (0.093)	0.499** (0.209)
Edges	-3.609*** (0.109)	-3.293*** (0.109)	-3.402*** (0.111)	-5.238*** (0.314)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	3,385.332	3,714.615	3,145.527	3,145.527
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	3,454.169	3,779.775	3,213.322	3,213.322

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. The 113th Congress has mixed control (Democratic control of the Senate, Republican control of the House); the 114th and 115th Congress is under unified Republican control, and the 116th Congress is under unified Democratic control.

Table 6.4: ERGM results, Democratic members of Congress, 113th to 116th Congress

	<i>Model</i>			
	113 th Congress	114 th Congress	115 th Congress	116 th Congress
Leadership	-0.367 (0.404)	-1.447*** (0.460)	-0.005 (0.281)	0.066 (0.230)
Committee chair	0.250 (0.154)	-0.118 (0.210)	0.094 (0.211)	0.033 (0.145)
Freshman	0.323*** (0.113)	-0.115 (0.207)	-0.133 (0.241)	0.423*** (0.111)
Competitive race	0.091 (0.135)	-0.639 (0.604)	-0.522** (0.236)	-0.220* (0.134)
Senate	0.220* (0.124)	-0.384* (0.200)	0.239 (0.249)	-0.104 (0.157)
Party mean distance: 2 nd tercile	-0.111 (0.121)	0.037 (0.147)	0.480*** (0.165)	-0.024 (0.107)
Party mean distance: 3 rd tercile	-0.185 (0.148)	-0.431** (0.203)	0.022 (0.224)	-0.246** (0.122)
Edges	-4.525*** (0.142)	-3.717*** (0.137)	-5.060*** (0.194)	-4.544*** (0.121)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,178.952	1,526.859	1,874.395	2,990.036
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	2,247.350	1,591.296	1,8749.739	3,062.991

*Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. The 113th Congress has mixed control (Democratic control of the Senate, Republican control of the House); the 114th and 115th Congress is under unified Republican control, and the 116th Congress is under unified Democratic control.*

Discussion and conclusion

These results provide further evidence that messaging is likely a party-wide endeavor, particularly for House members and Republicans. Although looking at similar language alone does not establish causality, it should be considered a meaningful indicator that constituent communication is developed with the assistance of other members. As expected, these results show that freshmen members, who have less experienced and often minimal staff, are more likely to rely on other members of Congress for messaging ideas than more senior members. Legislators in competitive elections, on the other hand, are more likely to rely on their own original messaging and have consistent, statistically significant negative relationships with the messaging choices of other members of Congress. Interestingly, members' closeness to the ideological mean of the party as captured through DW-Nominate does not seem to play a consistent role in the likelihood of message adoption, with the exception of the 115th and 116th Congress for Democratic members and Republican members, respectively. This indicates that truly unified party messaging, regardless of potential ideological differences, is most likely when the party faces a clear minority position in both the chamber and under an out-party president. Other than this possible pattern, ideological distance does not seem to have a consistently negative impact—members of all ideological divisions are generally connected to other members. However, future research should consider alternative sources of linguistic inspiration beyond party and committee leaders that might be driving these findings, such as congressional caucuses or external resources.

These findings also indicate that the occurrence of policy presentation varies over time. Both the visual analysis and the ERGM results demonstrate an evolving social network of constituent communication. Partisan connections and reliance on leadership increased from the 113th through the 115th Congress, but are curtailed in the 116th Congress. This is possibly a reflection of the Democratic majority—weaker ties and a decentralized policy presentation system likely result in a sparser network. This research also indicates a gradual shift in the role of committee chairs. Members are more likely to be connected to a party leader rather than a committee chair. In an era of increased party centralization, as well as the nationalization of political messaging, the policy-focused messaging of committee chairs may be increasingly irrelevant. However, further research should consider other possible reasons for these differences across congressional sessions, such as policy agendas or legislative topics.

This chapter also introduces a new way to measure messaging relationships in Congress. Using computational text analysis to form an edgelist for advanced social network analysis opens the door to new possibilities of linguistic exploration. Future work could consider how bill or amendment similarity travels through Congress, or how committee testimony is used in floor speeches and constituent communication. A natural next step for this analysis is to incorporate features of the texts in addition to features of the legislator. How do edge-level attributes impact the likelihood of a connection—i.e., how do connections evolve as the partisanship, complexity, and legislative topic change?

This chapter also highlights the importance of continuing the research with social media data, particularly Twitter. Social network analysis is often applied to understanding relationships on Twitter, through retweets and other social interactions. This chapter shows how linguistic similarity can also serve as a connection and establishes a strong foundation for future research

on the use of social network analysis in constituent communication. Given the expanding role of social media in constituent communication, the I'm eager to evaluate how party leaders direct or inspire social media messages.

Overall, this analysis provides additional evidence of the presence and process of policy presentation in Congress, that when combined with qualitative data from Chapter 4, paints a clear picture about the role of policy presentation in constituent communication. Members are emulating the words of co-partisans, and in many cases, the words of party leaders in particular. These relationships are especially strong in the House, where rank-and-file members often lack the resources to develop original research or constituent communication. Furthermore, the use of partisan sources and relationships is increasing over time, adding to our understanding of increasing polarization within Congress and among constituents.

Chapter 7: Policy presentation and the future of constituent communication

Overview of findings

This dissertation has sought to understand how members of Congress communicate with their constituents in a centralized legislature and polarized political environment. The challenges facing modern lawmakers are unprecedented. Constituencies are larger and more diverse than at any prior point in history. Technology has facilitated a looming mountain of constant constituent demands. And against a backdrop of rising political polarization, compromise often appears untenable. The legislative solution to these coalescing challenges has been to centralize the policymaking process into the hands of party and committee leaders. For the majority of rank-and-file members, this delineation of bill writing and negotiating works; major legislation is often passed with bipartisan support, and omnibus bills give most members a reason to vote “yea.” Additionally, partisan messaging bills provide an easy vote for members to show constituents at home their ideological position.

But figuring out how to talk about these votes and decisions is difficult. How can an individual member of Congress meaningfully discuss legislation they did not help write, and in many cases, did not even read? As I detail throughout this project, just as rank-and-file members rely on leaders to create and pass legislation, they also rely on leaders for messaging guidance. What I refer to as “policy presentation” has become an institutionalized stage of the policymaking process. Coinciding with passage of major legislation, party and committee leaders create materials to assist rank-and-file members with constituent messaging. These materials—talking points, sample press releases, and themed newsletters—are distributed to members through a network of staff, meetings, and party leadership offices. However, because Congress is a majoritarian institution and party leaders have majoritarian goals, the materials congressional

leaders provide are partisan. The goal of these communication efforts is to not only explain a legislative decision but to justify that decision through a partisan lens.

Members have few alternatives to policy presentation. Although members often strive to create original, district-specific press releases or newsletters, they lack the substantive information to do so. Furthermore, because members increasingly represent homogeneous constituencies that are ideologically aligned, leadership-provided materials are often ideal for members' communication goals. Members also lack the resources and staff to consistently counter the output of party and committee leaders—congressional leaders' large, expert staff can simply prepare more and higher-quality materials, and in less time than most rank-and-file offices. For individual legislators, it's inefficient and costly to produce original communication for every vote, particularly when the messaging the party provides is well suited for their constituencies.

This research offers the first encompassing look at how policy presentation occurs in the U.S. Congress. In both chambers and both parties, congressional leaders focus policy presentation efforts on major legislation. Major legislation, as captured by CQ Key Votes, are the most likely to impact the largest number of rank-and-file members, either due to policy implications or partisan messaging opportunities. Thus, party and committee leaders dedicate outsized resources to ensuring the party goals of major votes are communicated to constituents.

Across both chambers and parties, policy presentation often began with committees. As has been documented, committees perform the important task of problem definition and fact-finding (Lewallen et al. 2016, Lewallen 2020, Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Party leaders then use these materials to develop and distribute easy-to-understand partisan communication

materials. However, throughout this research, I have found that policy presentation differed by legislative attributes and environment, as well as the personal characteristics of legislators.

Institutional differences in policy presentation

I first examined whether differences in the legislation itself—namely, legislative complexity and vote polarization—would impact the likelihood of policy presentation. I initially expected that large, complex policy issues would result in polarized policy presentation, but found that complexity played little role in the likelihood of member discussion or the polarization of the discussion. Rather, vote polarization proved to be a much more predictive effect in how legislation was discussed. Members were far more likely to discuss partisan votes, particularly through press releases. And across all legislation, discussion between the two parties was divisive. In other words, even when the votes are bipartisan, members presented the legislation in a partisan way. Thus, I found that policy presentation occurs in two ways: by overemphasizing partisan votes, and discordant communication when discussing bipartisan votes. These findings were confirmed by both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Although committee and party leader resources are similar on both sides of the aisle and in both chambers, I also found that the policy presentation process differs by chamber and, notably, by party. House members, as expected, are far more likely to rely on party leaders for messaging guidance. The lack of resources in rank-and-file offices is the driving factor for this. Less experienced, smaller staff and pressing constituent demands often led House members to rely more heavily on party and committee staff. Senators claim large, experienced personal staff, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will bypass party or committee messaging. However, even Senate offices rely on leadership for logistical support, background information, and in the case of high-profile nominations, messaging inspiration.

While I expected that majority party status would impact policy presentation habits, I instead uncovered major differences between the two parties. Majority party status did lead to higher rates of policy presentation, as expected, but results also uncovered more effective and aggressive Republican communication efforts. Both interview respondents and social network analysis revealed a centralized and professionalized Republican communication machine. Republican party leaders, particularly in the House, were more proactive in their messaging guidance. As a result, Republican House members were more likely to emulate party leader messages. Democratic members, however, were less likely to receive explicit guidance from party leaders, and committee leaders often provided decentralized information in the absence of party-leader policy presentation efforts. These findings mirror other work that indicates Republicans are polarizing at a more extreme rate than Democrats. The party is more demographically and ideologically homogeneous, making polarization more likely (Grossman and Hopkins 2015) and communication easier (Russell 2018). This difference between the two parties' messaging strategy is one of the most interesting findings of this research—and undoubtedly a point of future extensive research.

Individual differences in policy presentation

I also considered how individual members differ in their adoption of policy presentation. Both interview data and social network analysis revealed that constituent-level considerations of electoral vulnerability impacted the policymaking process and the likelihood of message adoption. Given the outsized attention that members increasingly pay to elections, it's not surprising that electoral vulnerability was the most significant individual-level indicator of policy presentation adoption. Congressional leaders prepare constituent messages with the entire party goal in mind. Members from competitive districts are more likely to differentiate themselves

from a potentially controversial party, emphasizing instead constituent services or nonpartisan policy positions. I find that vulnerable members are less likely to copy the messages of party leaders. However, in an era of increasingly “safe” congressional districts, I expect the use of policy presentation to only increase for rank-and-file members.

Beyond the electorally vulnerable, party connections are strong. Although party fit as measured by DW-Nominate distance from the mean of the party had little impact on the likelihood of a connection in text similarity with party leaders, I did find close intraparty connections and messaging similarities. All party members, regardless of vote record, are close-knit—and in cases where members do not rely on party or committee leaders for messaging guidance, they turn to other party members.

Policy presentation over time

Throughout this leader-led communication process, rank-and-file members are emphasizing partisan priorities and polarizing the discussion of legislation. This surely has implications for how constituents view the work of Congress. Scholars and pundits have noted that the consistent decline of Congress’ approval rating (Gallup 2022) has coincided with rising levels of partisanship (McCarty et al. 2006, Theriault 2008), and these two phenomena are likely intertwined. Public opinion surveys reveal constituents eager for bipartisanship and compromise (Pew 2021), but they are presented with a Congress that overwhelmingly touts partisan achievements. Gridlock as a result of partisan disagreement has a particularly negative effect on how the public views Congress (Flynn and Harbridge 2016). As constituents learn about legislation through a partisan lens, they are more likely to see the policy—and the chamber—as partisan, further instilling the vision of a Congress that is partisan and defective. Policy presentation maintains this vision.

Policy presentation also impacts how members of Congress interact with one another. Partisan division is encouraged from the very first days of congressional orientation (each party has a separate orientation) to seating arrangements in the chamber. The staff, resources, and processes of policy presentation are other institutionalized divisions. For individual members, working around these well-maintained divisions is costly and time-consuming. There is already little incentive (or opportunity) for rank-and-file members to work with one another, and bipartisan relationships are reliant on individual legislators. Additionally, members have little reason to not follow their leaders; the materials they provide are helpful and informative, and seeking out nonpartisan or partisan information is often unnecessary. But when party and committee leaders present competing arguments on the same policy issues, members are less likely seek bipartisan compromise or enter into debate with full information or good-faith arguments. And while this research does consider policy presentation as an additional step in the policymaking process, it is very possible that policy presentation is occurring *throughout* the policymaking process. Party and committee leaders may very well be prioritizing communication efforts or policy narratives when they decide which bills to introduce, hearings to hold, and topics to address. In other words, it's reasonable to assume that policy presentation is driving the policy agenda, rather than reflecting it.

Furthermore, both interview respondents and evidence from social network analysis indicate that policy presentation is increasing over time. Respondents shared how party efforts became more professional and proactive—implementing reward systems, creating email listservs, and hiring large staff dedicated to making videos and graphics. The bonds between Republican members and party leaders also strengthened over time; by the end of the Trump

administration, members were more likely to copy the messages of party leaders than create their own original press materials.

Given the accelerating rise of partisan polarization, this should come as little surprise. Not only has polarization necessitated centralized lawmaking and complex negotiations, but it has also made partisan constituent communication all the more appealing. The evolution of lawmaking and constituent communication documented in this research epitomize a nationwide crisis. The United States is polarizing at a rate faster than any other established democracy in the world (Boxell et al. 2020). While America's two-party system and ideological sorting is partly to blame, the uniquely American phenomenon of 24-hour partisan news undoubtedly plays a role as well. This constant demand for partisan policy coverage hovers over Capitol Hill. News cameras camp out in the Cannon Building Rotunda, and members of Congress filter through every hour—sharing partisan positions, which party leaders often directly encourage. Understanding how policy presentation fits into rising levels of partisanship among elites and constituents is a primary contribution of this research.

The future of policy presentation

The increase of policy presentation tactics, particularly among Republican lawmakers, has serious implications for not only Congress but the country as a whole. Polarized policy narratives continue to drive constituents further apart, masking any bipartisan efforts of lawmaking. Members and constituents are already inclined to listen to those who share the same ideological beliefs (Wilson et al. 2020, Berelson et al. 1968). As research has shown, how members present policies to their constituents impacts both their eventual support (Hill and Tausanovitch 2015) and how voters view members of the opposing party (Mason 2014, 2018).

Policy presentation efforts risk enflaming rising levels of affective polarization—dividing constituents along not only policy debates, but personal beliefs as well.

Perhaps more alarming is when policy presentation is used to spread misinformation discrediting not only the out-party’s policy position, but their legitimacy to govern as well. During the course of this dissertation research, divergent narratives about congressional activity reached historically sinister levels. On January 6, 2021, a political mob encouraged by then-President Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol, demanding that lawmakers refuse to certify the election results that confirmed Joe Biden as president. Seven Senate Republicans and the overwhelming majority of House Republicans, including Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.), obliged and refused to recognize the 2020 electoral results. Leading up to and following the vote, the majority of Republican constituent communication on this vote and the results of the 2020 election was not only polarizing, but false. Republican members justified their vote or by falsely claiming that the 2020 election was “fraudulent.” Newsletters blamed the Capitol attack on “Antifa” and “communists.”¹⁰³ Party leaders downplayed the severity of the attack as “legitimate political discourse.”¹⁰⁴ And in the days and months to follow, Republicans remain united in denying the legitimacy of the authoritarian threat, refusing to recognize the Select Committee established to investigate the January 6th attack and even formally removed Rep. Liz Cheney (R-Wyo.) from her position as conference chair (notably, the messaging arm of House Republicans).

¹⁰³ Newsletters collected via DC Inbox (Cormack), including quotes from Rep. Greg Steube (R-Fla.), April 10, 2021; Jeff Duncan (R-Calif.), July 23, 2021; Rep. Paul Gosar (R-Ariz.), May 16, 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Weisman, Jonathan and Epstein, Reid J. February 4, 2022. “G.O.P. Declares Jan. 6 Attack ‘Legitimate Political Discourse,’ *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/us/politics/republicans-jan-6-cheney-censure.html>.

These messaging choices and behaviors in response to January 6th and false claims of electoral fraud are emblematic of the cyclical nature of policy presentation: In a desire to appease a highly partisan yet misinformed constituency, members of Congress use constituent communication to show their solidarity and ideological alignment. This communication further polarizes the constituency by legitimizing their misinformation and claims of electoral fraud. This escalation of polarizing communication—condoning and amplifying conspiracy theories and domestic terrorism—is dangerous territory.

Partisan divisions on policy arguments are one thing, but denying the legitimacy of free and fair elections is a perilous level of political polarization. This research largely considers how members convey biased (yet arguably factual) information to constituents. But when the messages being distributed by party leaders are false or even dangerous, the implications of policy presentation can be grave. This threat is all the more concerning given House Republicans' established infrastructure to facilitate policy presentation; the preexisting structure intended for constituent communication efforts makes it incredible easy for party leaders to distribute policy positions and ideological beliefs.

Just as is the case for all of the policy debates within this research, I cannot capture the true beliefs of members of Congress. Members of Congress would not be the first to succumb to misinformation. Misinformation is a prominent and growing phenomenon in American political communication (Lewandowsky et al. 2017, Jerit and Zhao 2020), and has long accompanied policy debates, even if unintentionally (Pasak et al. 2015). But given that members of Congress who are advocating for a reversal of an election that they themselves were elected in, it is likely that the majority of members are communicating in an effort to appease constituents. Knowingly and purposefully disseminating a conspiracy theory through official congressional channels is a

precarious elevation of misinformation. When members of Congress use their resources to present information that delegitimizes the American electoral system, their constituents will take notice.

Members have autonomy in what they choose to discuss. Yet as this research shows, they often rely on congressional leaders to guide them. This guidance is born out of a logistical necessity as well as an ideological desire to appeal to an increasingly partisan constituency. But given the findings of House Republicans' centralized and effective communication network uncovered in this dissertation, as well as their refusal to recognize the very serious threats facing American democracy, there is a responsibility to examine the potential future implications of coordinated misinformation from elites. My hope is that this dissertation is only a starting point for future personal research on political communication in Congress, particularly given the partisan asymmetry I uncovered—and also that it provides scholars with evidence to explain the rapidly polarizing nature of American politics.

Conclusion

Members of Congress follow their leaders. While this relationship between rank-and-file and congressional leadership has been well documented for legislative development, this research also shows that members are reliant on leaders for messaging guidance as well. Members of Congress need help discussing major legislation with their constituents, and party and committee leaders step in to fill the gap. Party leaders in particular oversee an extensive network of professional communicators that develop and distribute messages. Rank-and-file members, particularly House members, utilize these resources when speaking to constituents.

This research has introduced policy presentation as both an understudied stage in the policymaking process and a factor in the sustained (and rising) levels of political polarization.

However, in an endeavor to end on a positive note, I offer hope that these well-established communication networks and resources can be used for good, or at least, to counter the spread of political misinformation and affective polarization.

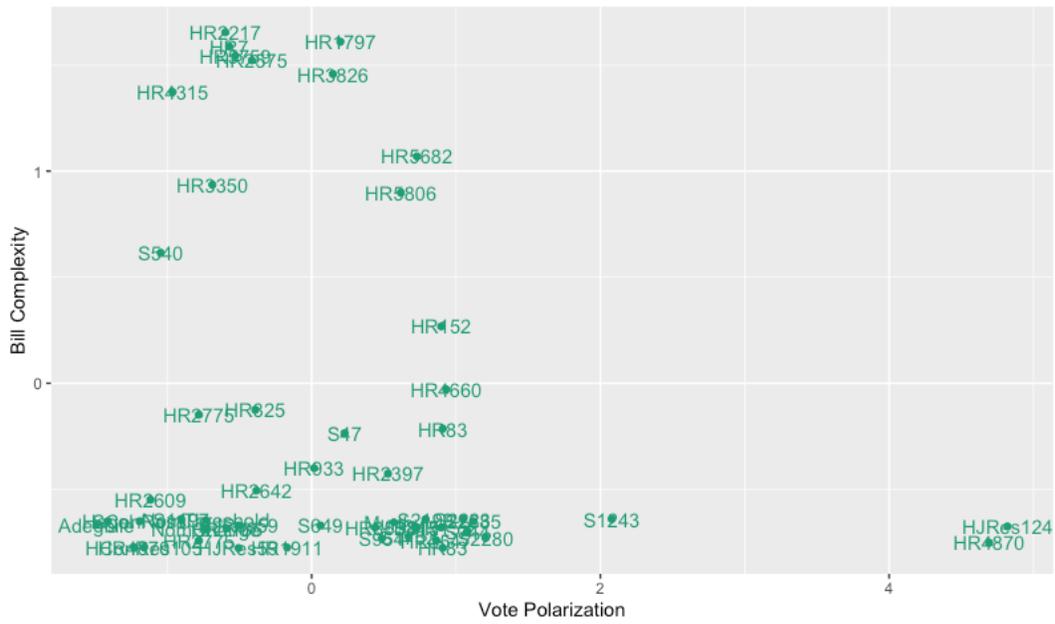
First, party leaders can choose to discuss legislation through a bipartisan lens. Although messaging that emphasizes areas of cooperation may not have a party-specific benefit, it would restore the public's view of congressional capacity and ability to problem solve—a benefit to any legislator, regardless of party. This approach could be simple: for example, encouraging members to issue joint statements with another member of the opposing party, explicitly highlighting a bipartisan vote, or educating constituents on the legislative process alongside a personal quote. Because the legislation that party leaders are discussing often *is* bipartisan, highlighting how Congress is actually operating can help curb the “doom loop” (Drutman 2020) of congressional politics and restore trust in the institution.

Second, other party entities—namely, Democratic leaders and Senate Republicans—could more proactively counter misinformation by further professionalizing and centralizing their messaging efforts on par with House Republicans. This, of course, could further escalate partisan polarization, but providing an alternative narrative to misinformation is an important step in fighting it (Acerbi et al. 2022). The currently unmatched prowess and extremity of the House Republican network is not sustainable—rebutting misinformation in a clear, coordinated campaign could likely redirect Americans who believe the words of their representative as truth. Of course, this potential solution also requires these entities to remain dedicated to democratic values and norms. Were Democratic leaders or Senate Republicans to align with the anti-democratic values of the majority of House Republicans, these professionalized networks could be further weaponized.

Policy presentation is here to stay. Its role in the legislative process has been institutionalized through dedicated leadership offices and hundreds, if not thousands, of communication staff across Capitol Hill. What can change, however, is how these resources are used and the messages they communicate. If congressional leaders want to decrease polarization among themselves and their constituencies, they have the tools to do so—they just need to develop and distribute the message.

Chapter 3

Bill Distribution, 113th Congress



	(-5.868, 17.290)	(-5.586, 14.970)
Vote polarization	2.753 (-9.765, 15.271)	15.312*** (4.228, 26.396)
WH Focus	-4.531 (-40.220, 31.158)	-17.767 (-49.473, 13.939)
President: Trump	15.218 (-14.782, 45.218)	-40.805* (-87.312, 5.702)
Outcome: Passed	35.190** (4.005, 66.374)	27.953** (0.323, 55.583)
Chamber Control: GOP	22.868 (-6.870, 52.605)	-62.602*** (-89.171, -36.032)
Interaction: WH Focus * PresidentTrump	-45.371* (-98.835, 8.092)	-47.916* (-95.467, -0.364)
Constant	4.558 (-31.248, 40.365)	-520.402*** (-707.829, -296.974)
Observations	170	170
R ²	0.099	0.280
Adjusted R ²	0.059	0.243

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Table 5.2: Words removed from text corpus

Dictionary	Removed words
Press Words	"news", "home", "about", "distict", "issues", "legislation", "newsroom", "week", "review", "image", "street", "suite", "tel", "phone", "rayburn", "longworth", "cannon", "representative", "hello", "update", "profile", "privacy policy", "(202)", "(c", "/", "%", "Washington", "DC", "D.C.", "Rep", "Sen", "Representative", "Senator", "D-", "R-")

Table 5.3: Regression Results, communication polarization, outliers (0) removed

	Dependent variable:	
	Press Releases	Newsletters
Complexity	-0.072* (-0.152, 0.009)	-0.010 (-0.090, 0.069)
Vote polarization	-0.016	0.040

	(-0.132, 0.100)	(-0.075, 0.155)
WH Focus	0.032	-0.065
	(-0.332, 0.396)	(-0.426, 0.296)
President: Trump	-0.153	-0.087
	(-0.406, 0.100)	(-0.338, 0.163)
Outcome: Passed	-0.092	0.023
	(-0.369, 0.185)	(-0.252, 0.298)
Chamber Control: GOP	-0.424***	-0.099
	(-0.664, -0.184)	(-0.336, 0.139)
Interaction: WH focus * President Trump	0.031	0.064
	(-0.481, 0.543)	(-0.444, 0.572)
Constant	1.001***	0.533***
	(0.742, 1.261)	(0.276, 0.791)
Observations	60	60
R ²	0.280	0.036
Adjusted R ²	0.183	-0.094

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Chapter 6

Table 6.1A: ERGM Results, Full Network

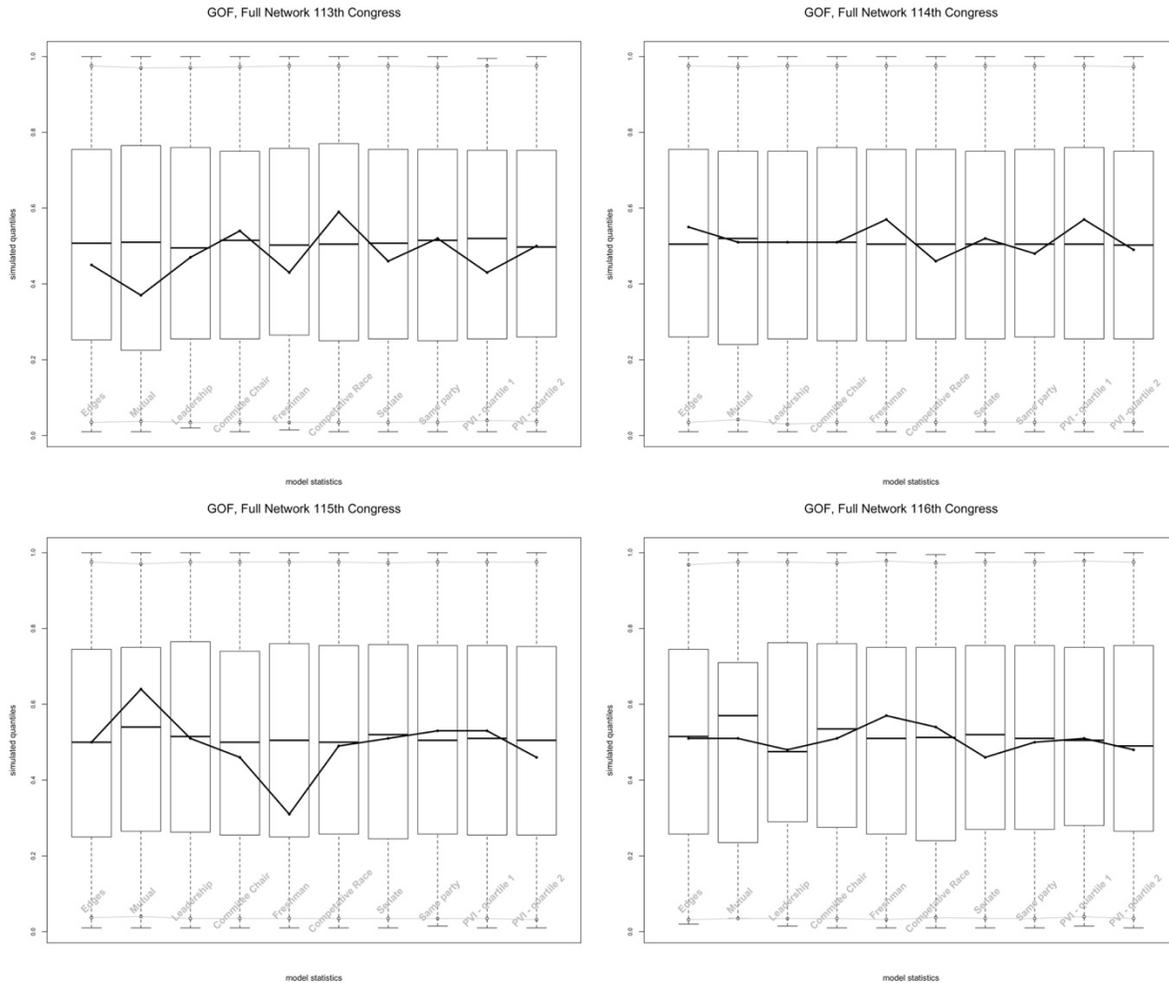
	<i>Likelihood of a messaging connection</i>			
	113 th Congress	114 th Congress	115 th Congress	116 th Congress
Leadership	-0.297** (0.147)	-0.372*** (0.116)	0.226** (0.106)	0.061 (0.186)
Committee Chair	0.213*** (0.077)	0.272*** (0.075)	0.013 (0.086)	0.044 (0.119)
Freshman	0.131** (0.057)	0.435*** (0.057)	-0.139 (0.094)	0.367*** (0.087)
Competitive Race	-0.006 (0.075)	0.061 (0.073)	-0.408*** (0.097)	-0.257** (0.109)
Shared party	0.692*** (0.071)	0.677*** (0.067)	0.730*** (0.080)	1.399*** (0.131)
Senate	-0.258***	-0.244***	-0.239***	-0.175

	(0.070)	(0.068)	(0.083)	(0.129)
Party mean distance: 2 nd tercile	-0.072	0.111**	0.135**	0.075
	(0.063)	(0.057)	(0.067)	(0.091)
Party mean distance: 3 rd tercile	-0.129**	0.143**	0.174**	0.057
	(0.059)	(0.060)	(0.068)	(0.087)
Edge	-4.633***	-4.395***	-4.867***	-6.034***
	(0.081)	(0.080)	(0.087)	(0.150)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	9,032.049	8,731.959	7,248.579	4,681.856
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	9,122.598	8,818.174	7,338.481	4,771.005

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

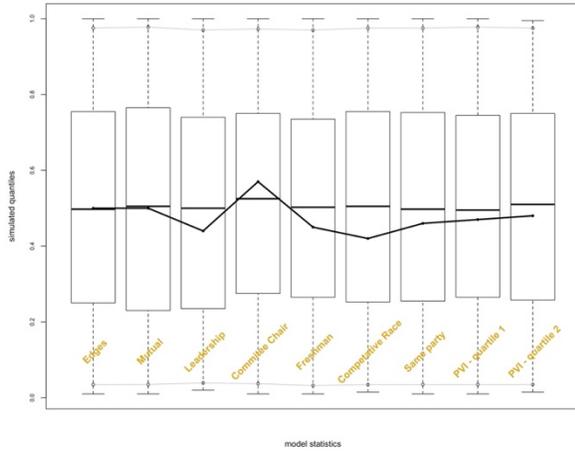
Goodness-of-fit: ERG Models

Full network

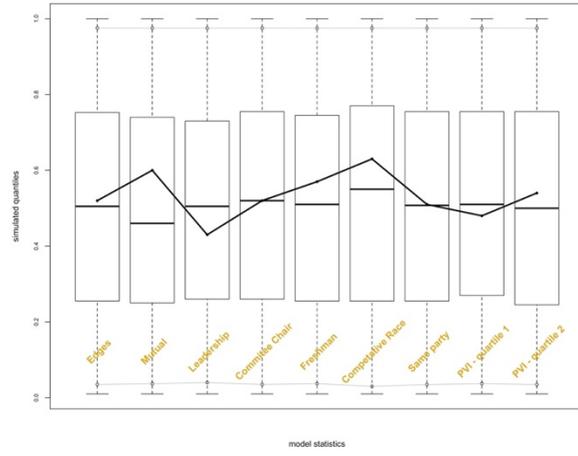


House Networks

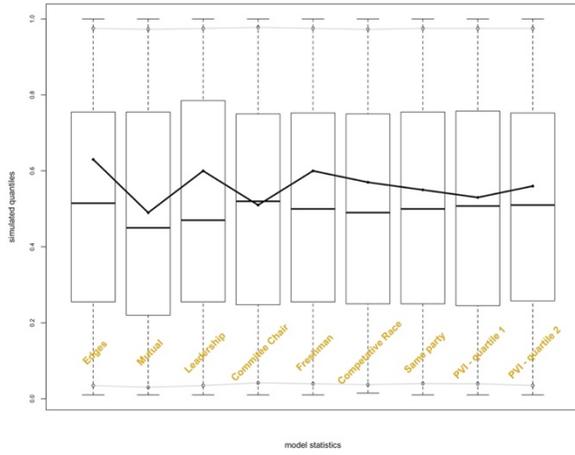
GOF, House Network 113th Congress



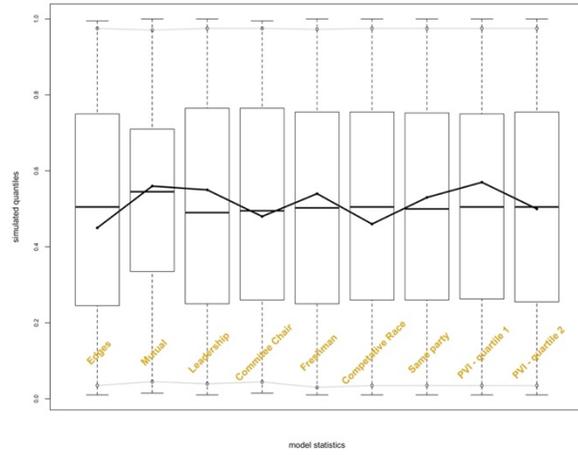
GOF, House Network 114th Congress



GOF, House Network 115th Congress

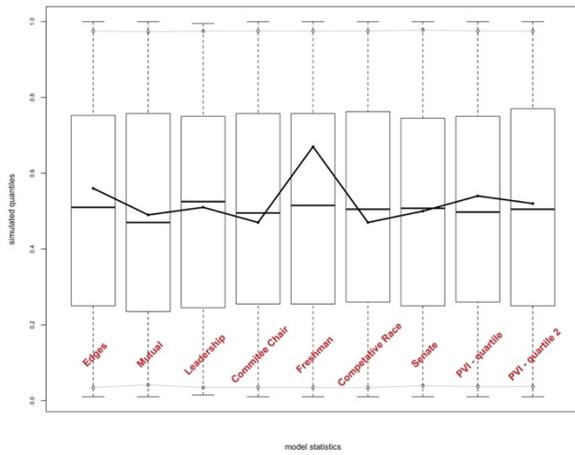


GOF, House Network 116th Congress

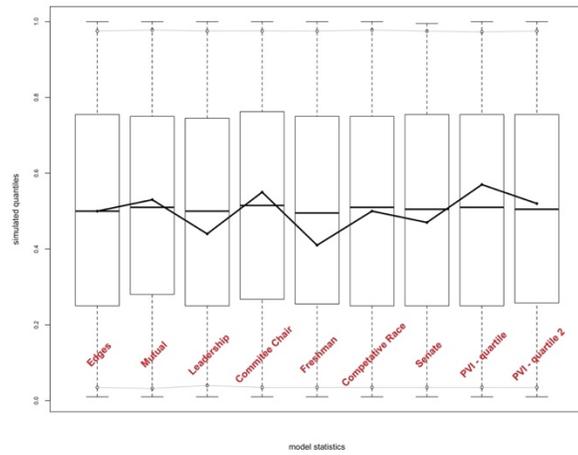


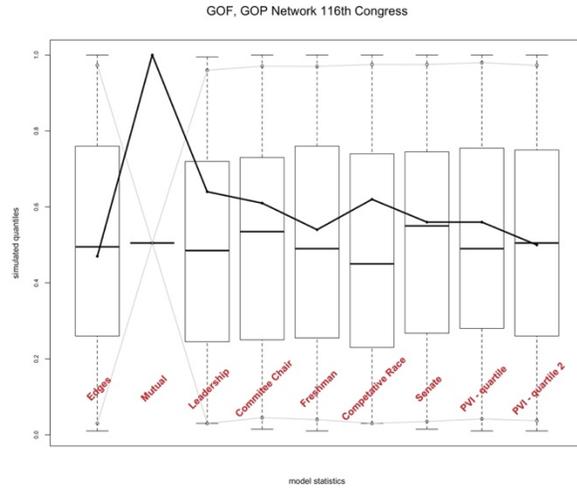
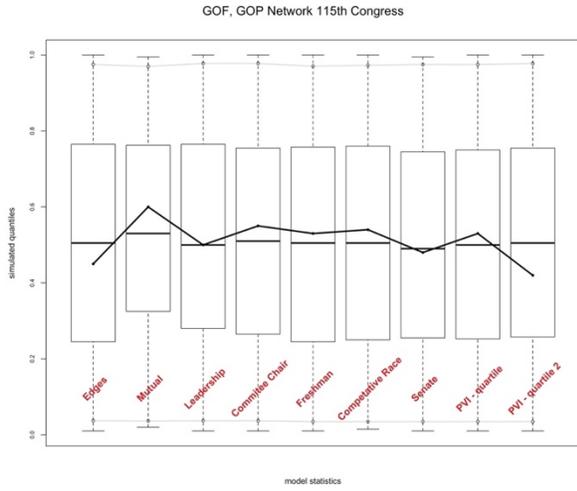
Republican networks

GOF, GOP Network 113th Congress

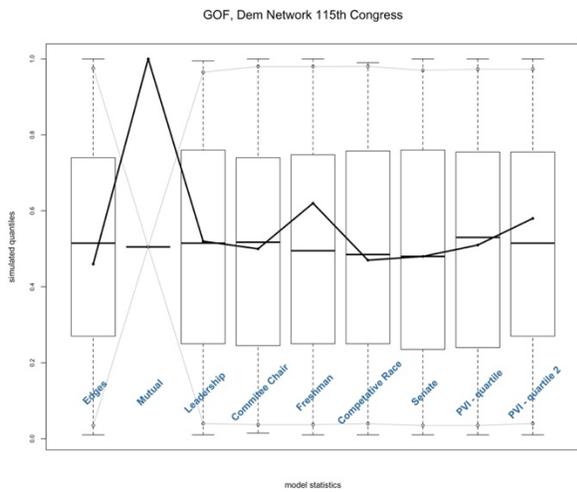
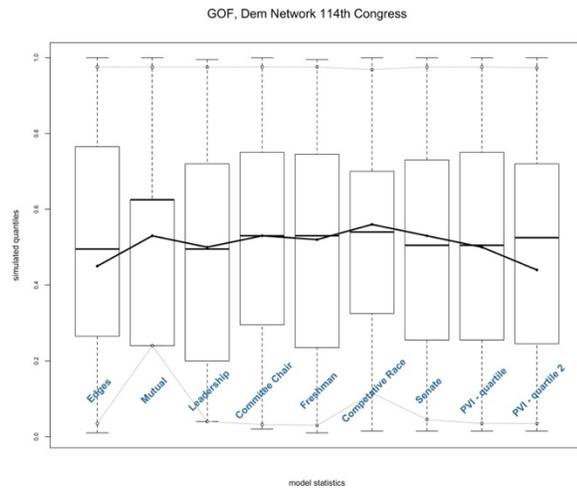
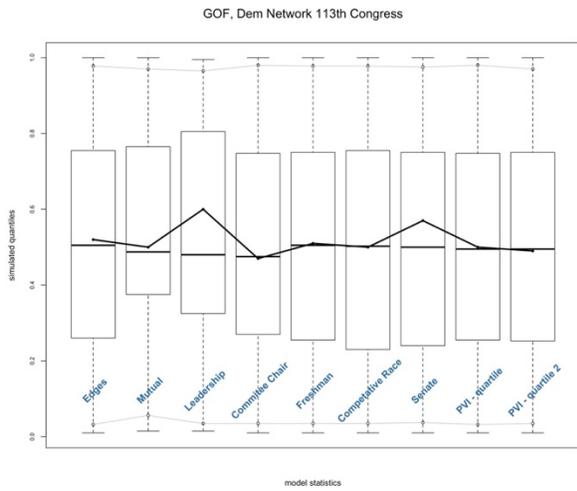


GOF, GOP Network 114th Congress





Democratic networks



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