On the Congress Beat:
How the Structure of News Shapes Coverage of Congressional Action

May 2, 2023

Abstract

Scholars have long criticized media coverage of Congress for its focus on conflict over policy substance. To uncover the drivers of this focus, we examine news coverage of the congressional response to Covid. We select the Covid response as an "extreme case" of Congress coalescing quickly to address a major national crisis in an almost entirely bipartisan way. Our study confirms prior research documenting a media preference for conflict narratives, even in this case. But we also find that the practice of beat reporting on Congress is itself a key factor underlying the dominance of news about conflict. A steady volume of reporting on an institution that acts quickly when there is agreement but slowly when there is disagreement gives rise to a large-scale imbalance favoring stories about conflict. Because conflict necessarily takes up more of Congress's time, it dominates beat reporting on the institution. We find this imbalance is more pronounced in national newspapers, which produce a relatively constant volume of reporting by journalists assigned to the "Congress beat," than in broadcast television news, which reports on Congress episodically and often only in response to legislative enactments. Our findings shed new light on public and scholarly perceptions of the institution's performance.

In 2020, Congress repeatedly coalesced on bipartisan lines to pass sweeping legislation responding to the global Covid pandemic, enacting nearly $3.5 trillion in aid. In inflation-adjusted terms, more was spent on Covid aid in 2020 than in the 2009 stimulus and the New Deal combined. Despite its quick responsiveness, public assessments of Congress appeared largely unaltered. Public approval of Congress increased only slightly following passage of the CARES Act—the centerpiece of Congress's pandemic response—from 23% approving in February 2020 to 30% approving in April but falling back to 17% approval by August (Gallup 2022). One potential explanation for Congress's anemic approval rating is persistent negative media coverage. Reporters have long given more attention to Congress's problems and deficiencies than its accomplishments.

In this paper, we examine media coverage of legislative deliberations and congressional action responding to the Covid pandemic. Our goal is to improve understanding of how and why media coverage of Congress is so pervasively negative and focused on conflict. By choosing this case, we are implementing a form of "extreme" case selection (Seawright and Gerring 2008). We have selected a case on the extreme high ends of bipartisanship, congressional productivity, and public support.[1] If any case might even temporarily change the narrative around Congress and elicit positive coverage of the institution, it should be this one.

We argue that media coverage of congressional action is negative and focused on conflict, even during a period of unprecedented bipartisan cooperation and legislative productivity, for two reasons. The first reason is well established. Media outlets make editorial choices to prioritize coverage of conflict to attract readership (Atkinson 2017; Bennett 2012;

[1] Whereas public opinion grew polarized along partisan lines about various aspects of the pandemic, Congress's economic response to the pandemic, including multiple rounds of direct aid to individuals, retained broad bipartisan support. See, e.g., Deane, Parker, and Gramlich (2021) and Jones (2020).

Morris and Clawson 2005; Patterson 1994). However, we also argue that an additional mechanism drives the media's focus on conflict: the way the *structure* of congressional coverage interacts with the typical patterns of the legislative process. Specifically, newspaper coverage about Congress is typically produced under a "beat" model whereby reporters assigned to the Congress beat produce regular, day-to-day articles about the institution, regardless of what is happening. Meanwhile, in Congress—as in any deliberative institution—easily agreed-upon issues are addressed quickly, while more difficult issues are acted upon slowly, during which time legislators routinely attack one other. The result is a steady stream of news covering congressional conflict that fails to take adequate stock of policy breakthroughs, even when Congress passes a series of truly massive enactments.

We draw on original data on news coverage of Covid relief legislation to assess these claims. We collected all news stories about congressional efforts to enact Covid relief in 2020 and 2021 published in four major national newspapers (n=462) and aired on broadcast television's nightly news (n=185). We then content analyzed each story for its characterization of congressional activity in order to understand how these efforts were portrayed.

Our analyses provide evidence that negative news coverage results *both* from editorial choices to focus on conflict *and* from the ways in which the structure of beat reporting interacts with patterns of legislative deliberation. To assess the former—editorial choices—we look at editorial decisions regarding the placement of articles within newspapers, as well as the discussion of conflict versus action and bipartisan within articles. Our analyses show that newspapers place articles about congressional conflict earlier in the paper than articles about bipartisanship. We also find that even within articles about congressional action, coverage of

conflict appears closer to the start of the article than any mentions of successful legislative action or bipartisanship.

To assess the latter—the structural consequences of beat reporting—we take two steps. First, we look at the day-to-day volume of coverage of congressional action on Covid-19 relief legislation and find that the amount of coverage is unaffected by the advancement or enactment of legislation. Rather, coverage follows a beat pattern with relatively stable coverage day to day. Since there are more days without enactments than with them, this naturally results in far more articles about things not happening, or persistent disagreements on Capitol Hill, than there are articles about things happening. Second, we compare newspaper coverage of congressional action to broadcast television coverage, which does not use a beat structure to cover the institution. Here, we find that on television there is more coverage about congressional action and achievement relative to the amount of coverage about conflict than is found in newspapers.

The consequences of this media imbalance are likely detrimental to public confidence in Congress, as the nature of media coverage shapes approval of both policies and institutions (Cappella and Jamieson 1996; Curry 2019; Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997; Forgette and Morris 2006; Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Jones 2013). If Congress is portrayed negatively even when it is working towards and achieving bold, bipartisan and popular action, it is hard to imagine conditions under which it would be portrayed otherwise.

How Congress is Covered

Coverage of Congress is shaped by (1) media incentives directing attention toward conflict and disagreement in legislative deliberations, and (2) the structure of news coverage itself. With respect to the first factor, scholars have long documented the incentives of news media to prefer

conflict frames in covering politics (Atkinson 2017; Bennett 2012; Morris and Clawson 2005; Patterson 1994).

A less appreciated second factor shaping coverage of Congress is beat journalism. News organizations often generate content through the structure of "beats," where reporters become specialists in certain topic areas, develop relationships with sources, and write regular articles in that space (Eliasoph 1997; Magin and Maurer 2019). An organization providing beat coverage of Congress—meaning a steady volume of continuous reporting on the institution—will wind up generating an outsized number of stories about conflict, simply because conflict takes up most of Congress's time.

Media Incentives

Scholars have documented a general frame of negativity in media coverage of Congress since at least the 1960s or 1970s (Bennett 2012; Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992; Tidmarch and Pitney 1985). If anything, media coverage has become more negative over time (Lichter and Amundson 1994; Zelizer 2004). Above all, the news media focus on partisan conflict (Morris and Clawson 2005). Coverage also tends to showcase extreme rhetoric on each side (Montpetit 2016; Wagner and Gruszczynski 2018).

This negativity frame is the result of several factors. First, the economic pressure media organizations face as they seek to turn a profit in a highly competitive marketplace. Conflict-focused coverage draws an audience (Cook 1998). Consumers prefer stories about conflict to those about policy (Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn 2004). Second, news coverage is "indexed" to conflict among government decisionmakers (Bennett 1996). A lack of "official conflict" among Washington players almost by definition makes something un-newsworthy (Hallin 1984). Third,

Atkinson (2017) notes that the desire to create an entertaining narrative for consumers further interacts with a journalistic norm of balanced, nonpartisan coverage, resulting in an emphasis on conflict and disagreement.

Congressional Processes and Beat Journalism

Conflict-focused media coverage does not merely result from the news media's incentives. It also emerges from the intersection of congressional processes and journalistic workflows. Most coverage of Congress is handled by reporters assigned to the "Congress beat," who are expected to produce regular articles about what is happening in the institution. The Congress beat functions like other prominent news beats—such as sports, entertainment, and health. Beat reporters use their knowledge of the topic and established sources to efficiently assemble news stories. They become familiar with the institution's norms and folkways, as well as common narratives accepted by observers of the institution (Boydstun 2013; Magin and Maurer 2019).

Few institutions receive beat coverage comparable to Congress. The only political institution receiving comparable coverage is the presidency. Congress and the presidency are dense with election-oriented officials who are eager to interact with journalists and participate in news making (Cook 1998). For other institutions, such as foreign governments, journalists instead "helicopter in" to cover breaking news events, like wars and political transitions, rather than providing readers with a sense of how the institution operates day-to-day.

Beat reporting generates a relatively constant stream of stories about the daily happenings in Congress. However, this does not necessarily lead to a balanced view of the institution's performance because Congress does not process legislation at a steady rate. Congress moves

quickly to enact legislation when there is little disagreement about it, while conflict tends to slow the institution down as members wrangle over policy goals and alternatives. Indeed, Congress operates slower than many legislatures due to constitutional and other internal processes that create numerous veto points (Binder 2003; Curry and Lee 2020; Krehbiel 1998; Mayhew 2005).

The upshot is that Congress spends much more time bogged down in disputes than in passing legislation. Activities that are common (and arguably necessary) in any deliberative assembly—debating policy, struggling for electoral advantage, and criticizing presidential leadership—consume much more congressional time than does passing legislation. These routine activities will necessarily dominate news coverage produced continually on a "beat" model. Meanwhile major legislation passes only rarely, yielding fewer news stories about congressional action that are typically concentrated in short bursts. Indeed, the intervals between major enactments have increased in a Congress that enacts fewer individual laws. Today's Congress legislates in large, omnibus packages put together by leadership behind the scenes, typically just before a legislative deadline (Curry 2015; Krutz 2001; Sinclair 2016). These facts about congressional processes mean beat reporting generates many more stories about day-to-day congressional conflict than the institution's occasional successes in enacting major legislation.

Congressional conflict then tends to get fit into the dominant media frames and narratives around party polarization, policy gridlock, and institutional dysfunction. Party leaders and rank-and-file members alike then play into these media narratives to gain attention and disseminate their messages. Over recent decades parties have institutionalized extensive communications operations to convey messages and shape party reputations (Egar 2016; Gelman 2017; Green 2015; Groeling 2011; Harris 2013; Lee 2016; Malecha and Reagan 2012). Legislators in both parties attempt to drive news coverage so as to "win" debates and thereby influence public

opinion (Evans 2001; Evans and Oleszek 2002; Sellers 2010; Schaffner and Sellers 2009).

Individual members of Congress likewise work hard to communicate with the public (Fenno 1978; Grimmer 2013). The emergence of a fractionalized, "high-choice" media environment in recent decades (Prior 2007) strengthened members' incentives to conform to dominant media frames to gain attention and shape political debates (Vinson 2017). Even when examining news articles about major legislative successes, Curry and Lee (2020) find that most quotations from members of Congress are negative in tone. In short, the media's preference for conflict incentivizes lawmakers to say something negative in order to gain coverage (Bennett 2012; Cook 1998).

Taken together, both media incentives and beat journalism bias news coverage of Congress toward a focus on conflict and disagreement, irrespective of Congress's success or failure in enacting legislation. The bulk of congressional news coverage will thus feature conflict and stalemate even at times of remarkable legislative productivity.

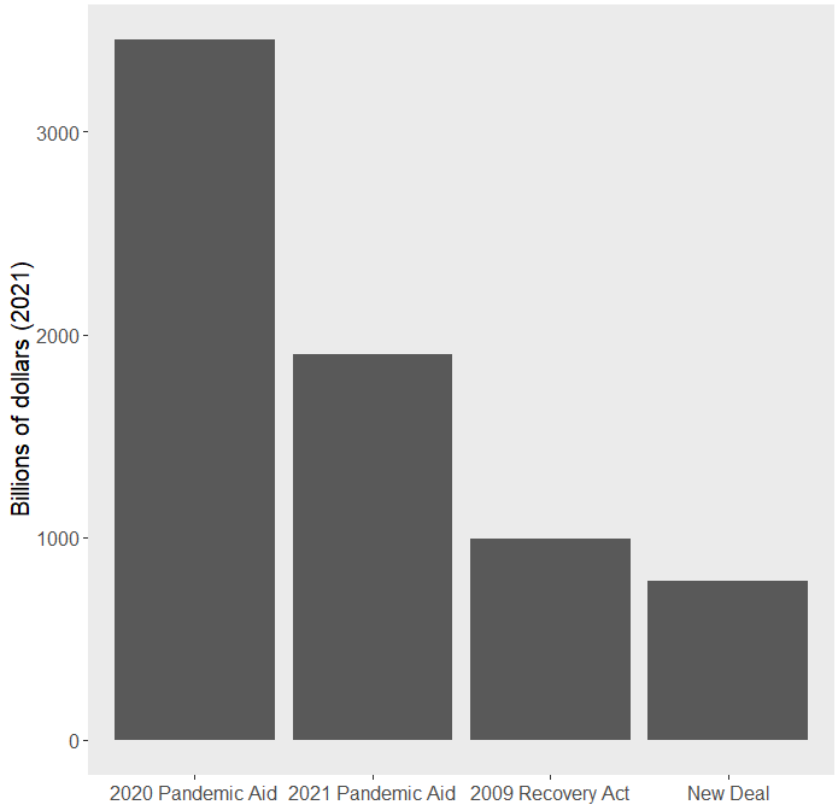
Case Selection – Covid Relief Legislation

To examine how both media incentives and congressional processes drive negative news coverage of Congress, we focus on the case of Covid relief, a series of enactments across 2020 and 2021 designed to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic. We selected Covid relief because it is an extraordinary case where Congress swiftly came together, in almost all cases across party lines, to enact broadly popular legislation with enormous societal and economic impact.

We are interested in understanding whether news media coverage of Congress systematically exaggerates the institution's proclivity toward conflict and stalemate. As such, the

period in which Covid aid was considered and passed constitutes an "extreme case" to "*maximize* variance on the dimension of interest" (Seawright and Gerring 2008, 302). If news coverage still hews to a dominant narrative of conflict and gridlock even in a case where Congress came together expeditiously in response to pressing national needs, then one can infer that conflict bias would be at least as significant when covering more routine periods. Most of the time, Congress is not working on and enacting high-profile bipartisan legislation that has widespread popular support. Accordingly, Covid relief is a best case scenario for observing cooperation-focused coverage of the institution. Congress is more routinely processing (partisan and bipartisan) legislation that is either the subject of contentious debate or is too low profile to generate any coverage at all. By focusing on a non-routine period with a nearly unprecedented series of bipartisan, popular, and consequential legislative actions, we can learn whether newspaper coverage still yields a portrait of Congress bogged down in gridlock. If it does, then it is hard to say whether there are any realistic scenarios under which the institution would not be covered primarily through the lens of conflict and dysfunction.

No country had a more robust fiscal response to the pandemic than the U.S. The IMF reported that by April of 2021 the United States had deployed extra public spending worth 25 percent of its national economic output, as compared to 10 percent in Germany and less in France, Italy, and Spain (International Monetary Fund 2021). In inflation-adjusted terms, the U.S. spent more on pandemic aid in *both* 2020 and 2021 than it spent on the whole New Deal (Dupor 2021). Figure 1 shows a comparison of Covid aid in 2021 and 2020 to government spending in the New Deal and in the 2009 stimulus bill, all in 2021 dollars. For another comparison, pandemic aid expenditures were roughly equivalent to what the country spent on war production in 1943 (Romer 2021).



Source: Dupor 2021

Figure 1: Amount spent on the New Deal, the 2009 stimulus, and 2020-2021 pandemic relief, in 2021 dollars

The spending made a big difference. During the height of the pandemic recession, more than 30 million Americans lost their jobs, and yet poverty did not rise (Han, Meyer, and Sullivan 2021). In fact, poverty for much of the pandemic was lower than it had been in January 2020, with the declines in hardship greatest among low-income households (Cooney and Shaefer 2021). Under the pandemic unemployment program, the average unemployed American saw 146 percent of their lost wages replaced. No other country came close to that level of income replacement. The result, according to Greg Ip of *The Wall Street Journal*, was that "the fiscal response to the pandemic succeeded in pushing poverty in the opposite direction from what usually happens in recessions" (Ip 2021).

In conjunction with three rounds of direct payments to taxpayers and assistance to small businesses, pandemic unemployment aid saved millions of Americans from economic devastation. Encompassing direct and indirect aid to a vast array of entities, pandemic assistance preserved whole sectors of the economy (e.g., airlines, child care, entertainment, hospitality, cultural institutions), funded hospitals, food aid, rental assistance, state and local governments, rail and mass transit, and underwrote the fastest vaccine roll-out in history. By November 2021, the U.S. was the only G-7 country to have exceeded its pre-pandemic GDP (OECD 2021).

Congressional action was the lynchpin of these policy successes, principally the CARES Act, "the largest fiscal relief measure in U.S. history," approved without opposition in both House and Senate (Shutt and Tully-McManus 2020). In addition to CARES, Congress passed four other large-scale pandemic aid packages, as well as three acts expanding the Paycheck Protection Program for small businesses. With the exception of the American Rescue Plan passed in March 2021, all of these enactments were overwhelmingly bipartisan.

Table 1 displays summary information on congressional action across the eight pandemic aid enactments of 2020-21, as well as two more legislative efforts that resulted in failure, for a total of 10 legislative efforts. The table shows the date range that each enactment covered (meaning the days between the date the first newspaper article on the effort was published and

the date the final article was published);[2] the percentage of representatives and senators who voted yes on final passage;[3] and the amount of spending authorized by each bill.[4]

Taken together, the successful enactments authorized more than $5 trillion in new spending, with seven passing in the 116th Congress and one (the American Rescue Plan) passing in the 117th Congress. Both failed efforts occurred in 2020. The first of these failed efforts was Congress's inability to pass a second major stimulus bill for months after the enactment of CARES. Various proposals for a follow-up bill, which we call CARES II, were voted on, but no legislation passed prior to the November 2020 elections. After the elections, a second stimulus package was successfully enacted (the "Coronabus"). The Coronabus was clearly a separate legislative effort from the pre-election wrangling, with a different set of senators taking the lead in negotiations on a different range of policies.[5] The second failed effort was a brief attempt in late December 2020 to increase the stimulus checks in the Coronabus package from $600 to $2,000.[6]

Our goal for this paper was to conduct a comprehensive content analysis of national media coverage of these congressional Covid relief efforts. We identified relevant news stories through a two-step process. First, we conducted broad keyword searches in the ProQuest

[2] We made some minor adjustments to ensure that our date ranges were not distorted by outlier articles. Specifically, we did not use four articles from November 2020 and December 2020 in the date range for the American Rescue Plan because they came well before President-elect Biden proposed the bill on January 14, 2021. We also excluded four articles for the CARES Act (1), the American Rescue Plan (2), and the failed CARES II effort (1) that came at least two weeks after the legislative effort ended and were not accompanied by other coverage.
[3] Coalition size was calculated by dividing the number of yes votes by the total number of members who cast votes on final passage of the enactment (or initial passage for the four failed efforts that are included). Voice votes, where no roll call was taken, are reported as 100%.
[4] The amounts of the successful enactments come from Congressional Budget Office (CBO) reports. Because the CBO did not issue reports for the four failed enactments, we use estimates from Werner and Stein (2020), Carney (2020), and Committee for a Responsible Budget (2020).
[5] Among other differences from the more expansive CARES II negotiations, the Coronabus excluded from consideration aid to state and local governments as well as liability protections for businesses and other entities against Covid-related litigation.
[6] This increase was later enacted as part of the American Rescue Plan.

Table 1: Legislative efforts to pass Covid relief (February 2020 – March 2021)

Lawmaking effort	Abbreviation	Dates covered	Articles	Coalition size	Amount
Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Act (HR 6074)	Corona Prep	116th: Feb 25— Mar 5 (10 days)	5	House: 99.5% Senate: 99.0%	$8 billion
Families First Coronavirus Response Act (HR 6201)	Families First	116th: Mar 10 -19 (10 days)	14	House: 90.1% Senate: 91.8%	$192 billion
Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (HR 748)	CARES I	116th: Mar 10 – Apr 1 (23 days)	33	House: 100% Senate: 100%	$1.7 trillion
Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act (HR 266)	PPP I	116th: Apr 8-24 (17 days)	20	House: 98.7% Senate: 100%	$484 billion
Paycheck Protection Program Flexibility Act (HR 7010)	PPP 2	116th: May 29 – Jun 3 (6 days)	4	House: 99.8% Senate: 100%	No CBO report
To extend the Paycheck Protection Program (S 4116)	PPP 3	116th: Jun 30 – Jul 2 (3 days)	3	House: 100% Senate: 100%	No CBO report
Consolidated Appropriations Act (HR 133)	Coronabus	116th: Nov 5 – Jan 2 (59 days)	56	House: 87.1% Senate: 93.9%	$868 billion (COVID relief only)
American Rescue Plan Act (HR 1319)	ARP	117th: Jan 5 – Mar 19 (74 days)	118	House: 50.8% Senate: 50.5%	$1.8 trillion
Failed efforts in 2020 to pass a second major stimulus bill (Various bills)	CARES II	116th: Apr 1 – Oct 30 (213 days)	199	*Failed effort* House (HR 6800): 51.1% Senate (S 178): 52.5% House (HR 925): 50.8%	Proposed amounts: HR 6800: $3.4 trillion[7] S 178: $500 billion[8] HR 925: $2.2 trillion[9]
Caring for Americans with Supplemental Help Act (HR 9051)	Checks	116th: Dec 29-31 (3 days)	9	*Failed effort* House: 67.2%	Proposed amount: $464 billion[10]

database and downloaded a large selection of national newspaper articles and broadcast news stories about Congress in 2020 and 2021. We then examined each article and story to determine whether it focused on Covid relief efforts in Congress.[11] We wanted articles that we could associate with any of the lawmaking efforts shown in Table 1. Our efforts yielded 462 articles from four national newspapers – the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*[12] and 185 stories from three evening news programs, *ABC World News Tonight*,

[7] Werner and Stein (2020)
[8] Carney (2020)
[9] Werner and Stein (2020)
[10] Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget (2020)
[11] See the appendix for more details on the keyword searches and how we selected articles for the dataset.
[12] Articles published in the *Post* and the *Times* constitute 37.2 percent and 31.2 percent of the dataset, respectively. The *Journal* comprises 23.4 percent of the data and *USA Today* comprises 8.2 percent.

NBC Nightly News, and *CBS Evening News*.[13] Our data begin in February 2020 with the introduction of the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Act and extend through passage of the American Rescue Plan Act in March 2021.

Our analysis focuses most intently on national newspapers rather than other news sources because they offer the "best case scenario" for high quality coverage of Congress, consistent with our extreme case selection approach (Seawright and Gerring 2008). National newspapers are better positioned to provide complete and accurate coverage of Congress than other news sources. First, national newspapers provide continuous, in-depth coverage of congressional activity. Newspaper reporters on the Congress beat have specialized knowledge of the institution rather than the generalist familiarity characteristic of television and radio reporters (Hess 1981). Second, they are widely read by policymakers and serve as an information conduit critical for governance (Cook 1998), with policymakers monitoring coverage and providing feedback to correct errors. Third, the national newspapers have the largest stable of reporters and the most journalistic resources dedicated to coverage of Congress. Local newspapers have experienced declining revenues and readership since the 1990s, limiting their coverage (Angelucci and Cage 2019; Hayes and Lawless 2021).

After collecting our data, we assigned codes to the text of each news story based on how Congress and congressional action were characterized.[14] In coding newspaper articles, we assigned a set of codes to each headline, lede paragraph, and body paragraph that mentioned

[13] Stories run by ABC comprise 23.8% of the data while NBC comprises 30.3 percent and CBS comprises 45.9 percent.

[14] This coding scheme was developed via an iterative piloting process in which the authors coded a common set of articles until we arrived at a reproducible coding scheme that allowed us to summarize the relevant content of the news coverage. We conducted intercoder reliability tests in MAXQDA to ensure that we were applying the coding scheme consistently. After moving from piloting to the main coding task, we regularly spot-checked work by our research assistants and each other to further ensure consistency. See the appendix for more information.

Congress or congressional actors.[15] First, we coded whether the headline/paragraph focused on (1) *conflict* and disagreement or (2) *action* and movement in the lawmaking process.[16] Coders could assign both conflict and action codes to a single headline/paragraph if both were mentioned. The *conflict* code was assigned to headlines/paragraphs indicating that actors were disagreeing with one another over policy or non-policy issues or if the legislative process was gridlocked. The *action* code was assigned to headlines/paragraphs where Congress was shown to be either making progress in negotiations or accomplishing something (i.e. enactment, passage through one chamber or committee, etc.). Finally, we coded whether actions and legislative proposals were depicted as partisan, bipartisan, or neither.[17] We coded TV news stories for their characterization of congressional activity using the same categories. Given their short length, TV news stories could generally be characterized with a single code, but additional codes applied to individual sections of stories were occasionally needed for more detailed stories.[18]

The resulting data allow us to gauge how media coverage characterized congressional action on Covid relief. We use these data to assess whether news reporting was focused on conflict or action in Congress—as well as how the various types of content were prioritized in reporting and the news production process. We also use these data to assess the degree to which media incentives and the structure of media coverage each play a role in how Congress and congressional action are characterized.

[15] Additional details on the coding scheme are included in the appendix.
[16] Coders could also add a "Neither" code, which accounted for about 2.1 percent of all Congress codes.
[17] Overall, we assigned 5,573 unique Congress codes to 4,877 paragraphs across the newspaper articles. About 53.2 percent were conflict codes,20.5 percent were proposal codes and 24.0 percent were action codes. Among the action and proposal codes, 51.9 percent covered partisan activity and 31.9 percent covered bipartisan activity.
[18] Overall, we assigned 191 unique Congress codes to 185 television news stories. About 34.6 percent were conflict codes, 20.9 percent were proposal codes, and 43.5 percent were action codes. We did not code these stories for partisan or bipartisan activity as we were interested in assessing TV news for the beat coverage question, not the media incentives question.

Assessing Media Coverage of Covid Relief Efforts

Below we present our analyses of newspaper coverage of congressional consideration of Covid relief. For the reasons stated above, newspaper coverage should provide the most complete account of congressional activity. We find that even in this period of bold legislative action and overwhelming bipartisan cooperation, newspaper coverage of congressional action on Covid relief was still decidedly negative and conflict-focused. The evidence we present supports the two complementary explanations for conflict coverage discussed above – beat journalism and media incentives. While prior literature has mostly focused on media incentives, we show that incentives are not a *necessary condition* for conflict coverage. Beat coverage of congressional processes also creates the conditions for a dominant focus on conflict.

Consistent with the beat coverage model, we show that newspaper coverage of Covid relief efforts was relatively constant across the first year of the pandemic regardless of whether Congress was passing legislation or mired in gridlock. We also show that the amount of newspaper coverage a legislative effort receives is largely determined by the number of days the effort was under consideration. In the aggregate, this leads to more coverage of conflict rather than action and more attention to drawn out failures rather than the relatively condensed successes and moments of action. We conduct a similar analysis of television news coverage, which does not follow a beat coverage model. Consistent with our expectations, this leads to more focus on congressional action and achievement and less emphasis on conflict during the period. Additional analyses support the conventional emphasis on media incentives by showing that newspapers disproportionately highlight conflict in story structure and layout design. Our findings affirm the prior literature while also showing that there are alternative mechanisms that contribute to the prevalence of conflict-oriented coverage.

Newspapers: Beat Coverage and the Conflict Focus

Our data indicate that newspaper coverage of Covid relief efforts reflects a beat reporting structure. First, we find that the volume of newspaper coverage of Congress does not track successful legislating. Figure 2 shows the number of newspaper articles about congressional Covid relief each week from February 2020 and March 2021, with the efforts focused on by each article denoted. While there is some variation in coverage volume from week to week, this variation does not clearly reflect congressional achievements. Although there are spikes in coverage when the most consequential legislative enactments were passed—March-April 2020 (CARES I and PPP I), December 2020 (Coronabus), and March 2021 (ARP), there were similarly sized spikes in May 2020 and July-August 2020 and a smaller but significant spike in October 2020—all periods where Congress was deadlocked. There was also incredibly low coverage when three significant enactments passed (Corona Prep, PPP II, and PPP III).

Second, newspaper reporting on Congress also reflects a beat structure in its relatively steady volume of coverage over time. Figure 3 shows the smoothed average number of articles per day, with vertical lines indicating the dates when the eight successful enactments were signed into law. The trendline is nearly flat across the entire year except for a slight increase from December 2020 through March 2021. This continuity reflects a relatively stable allocation of journalistic resources to covering Congress across the time frame. Coverage levels do not track the passage of major enactments (denoted with vertical lines). Instead coverage of Covid relief efforts was broadly constant, regardless of whether Congress was passing a major bill or engaging in its regular deliberative activities.

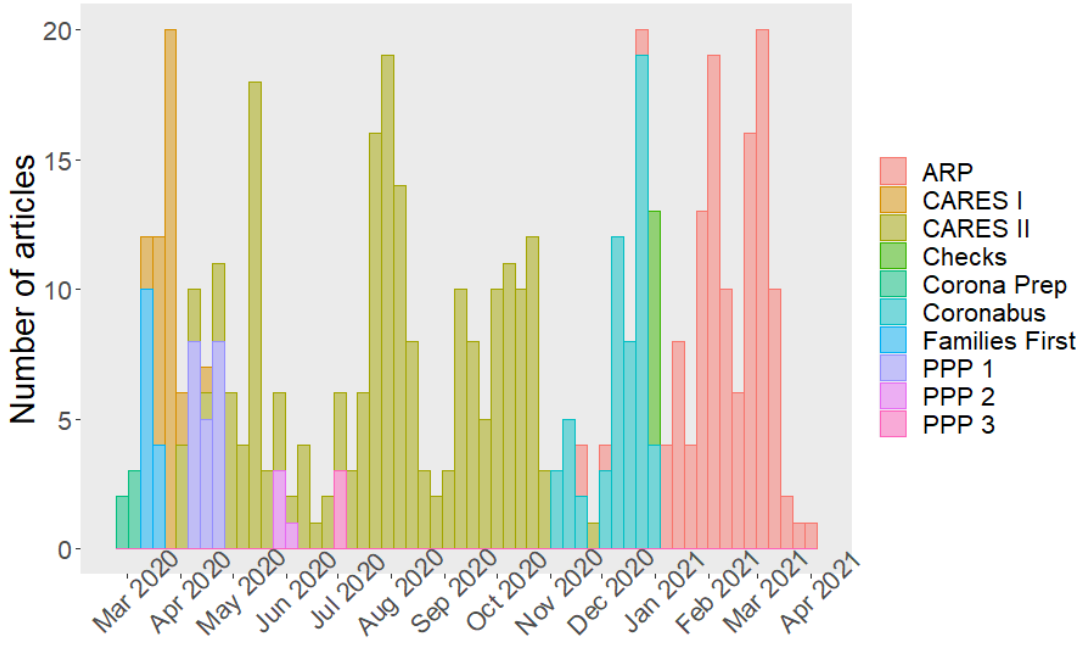


Figure 2: Number of newspaper articles on Covid relief efforts per week (February 2020 – March 2021)

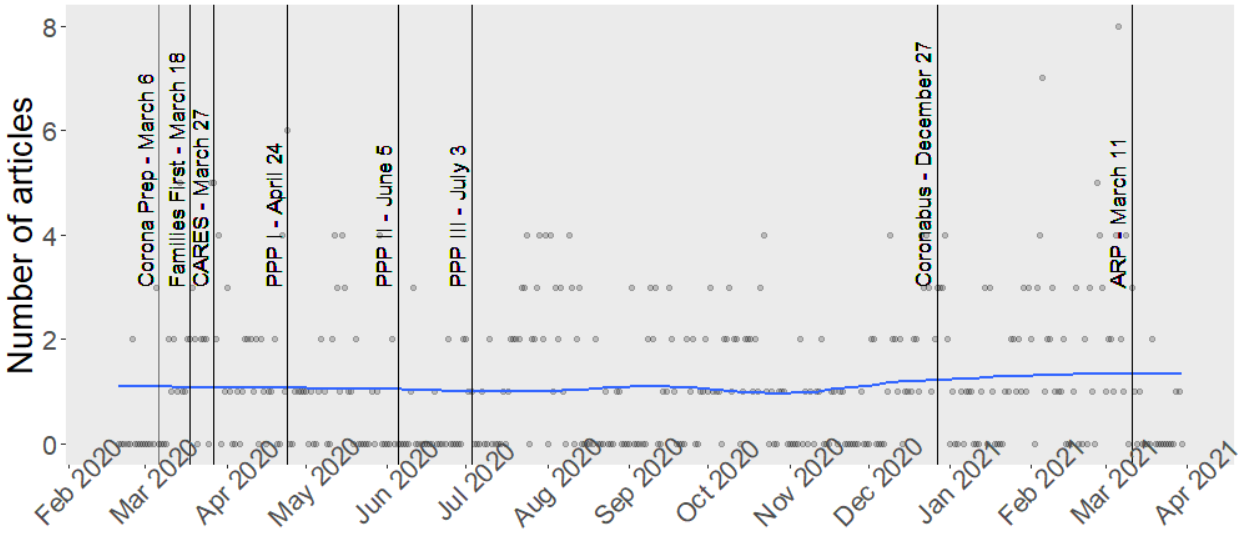


Figure 3: Smoothed daily average of Covid relief newspaper coverage with dates of major enactments

Figure 4 provides further evidence that the amount of newspaper coverage that a legislative effort receives is largely driven by the beat reporting structure and not other factors, such as the size or significance of the legislation. We regressed the number of articles written about each effort on the number of days of coverage (as shown in Table 1). The linear model in Figure 4 indicates that nine of the 10 efforts are well predicted by this simple model, falling within the regression line's 95 percent confidence interval. The only effort that falls outside the confidence interval is the American Rescue Plan, which received more coverage than predicted by the number of days it was under consideration. Although fully assessing why the ARP received disproportionate coverage is outside the scope of this article, potential explanations include that it was a major presidential agenda item or that it fit a traditional news narrative of Democrats significantly expanding the government's role over Republican objections. In any case, this analysis further suggests that media organizations primarily cover legislative efforts through a daily coverage model rather than focusing on significant actions.

Beat reporting has important consequences for what readers learn from following news about Congress. Figure 5 reveals that newspaper coverage of Congress is distorted in the aggregate. Even though February 2020 to March 2021 was a period of unusually high legislative productivity and bipartisanship, more than 55 percent of article headlines and/or ledes focused on conflict. The amount of conflict coverage is significantly greater than coverage of action (35 percent).

Importantly, much of this imbalance reflects the amount of *time* Congress was engaged in conflict, rather than a *deliberate* media preference for conflict stories. Figure 6 shows the number of conflict and action articles for legislative efforts grouped by whether they were failures, bipartisan successes, or partisan successes. As is evident here, there were more action-focused

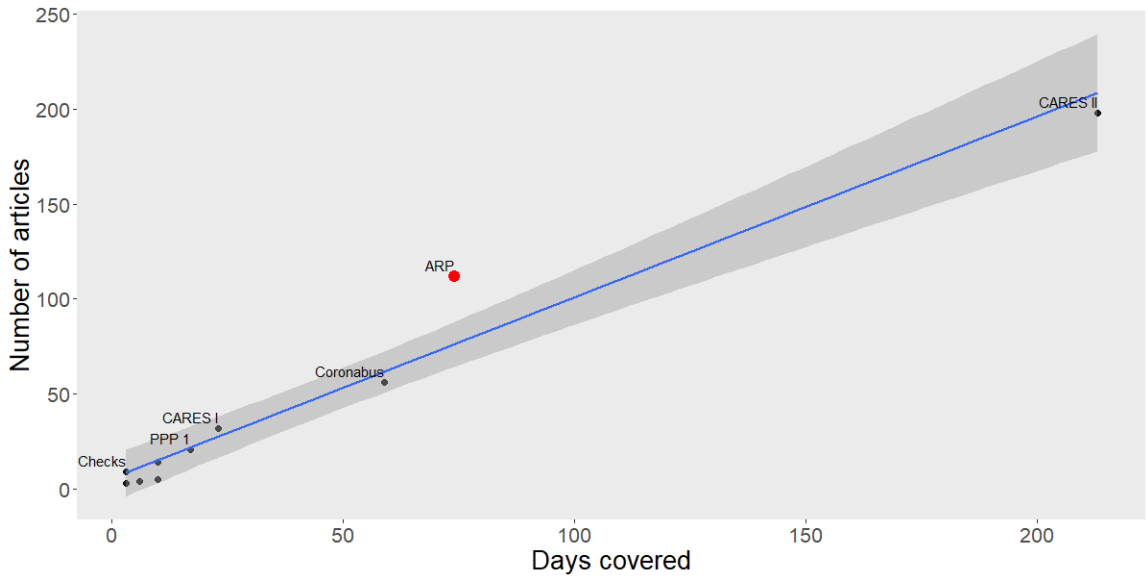


Figure 4: Linear model showing relationship between the number of newspaper articles and total days of coverage for each legislative effort[19]

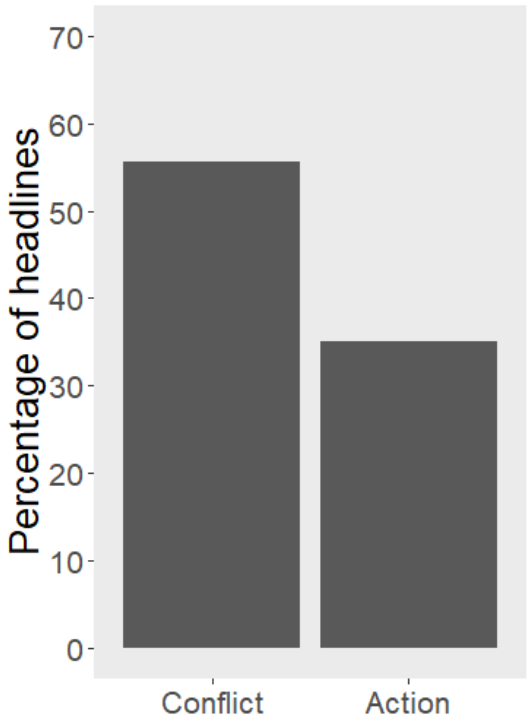


Figure 5: Percentage of newspaper articles with headlines characterizing congressional activity

[19] Labels are not shown for Corona Prep, Families First, PPP 2, and PPP 3, which are all clustered near the origin of the regression line.

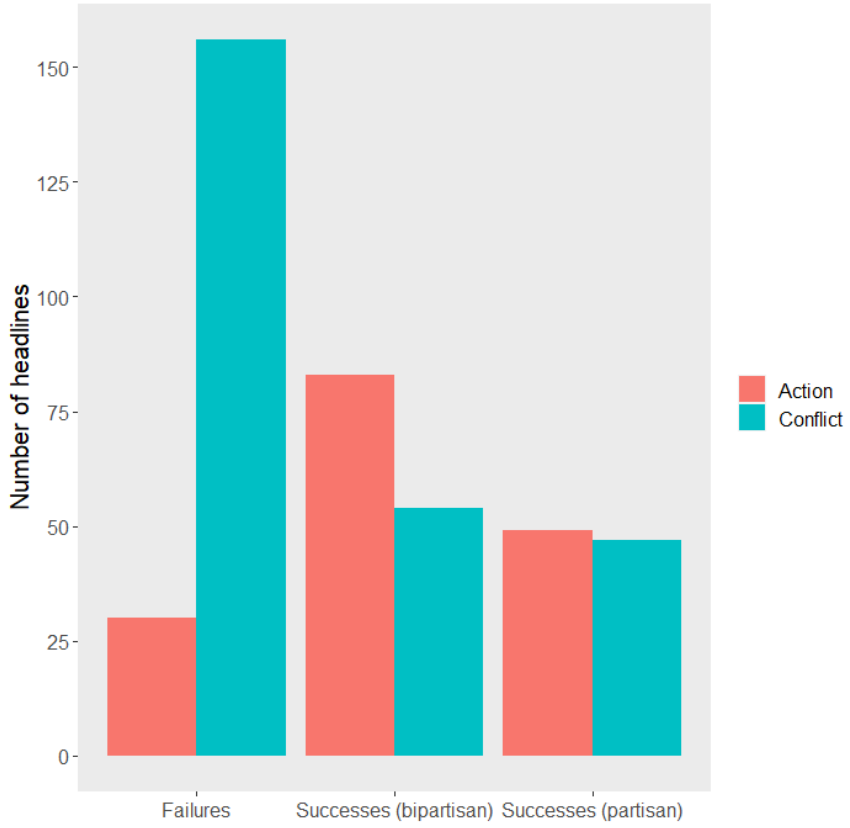


Figure 6: Number of newspaper headlines characterizing types of congressional activity by type of legislative effort

articles for the successful enactments and more conflict-focused for the failed efforts. In other words, the media did not fail to report on legislative action when it occurred. However, the overall number of conflict articles was far greater for the failed efforts because the failures took up far more time on Congress's agenda than the successes. Simply, the amount of time spent on each effort, rather than significance or success of the effort, drives the volume of coverage.

Overall, the general thrust of the news coverage accurately reflected what was happening inside Congress, day to day. Successful enactments received more action coverage than conflict coverage while failed efforts received more conflict coverage. However, accurate reporting on individual efforts still aggregated to a highly misleading overall portrait. The CARES II failure received an enormous number of conflict articles, simply because it was under consideration for

so long. There were 148 conflict articles written about CARES II, nearly one-third of *all* articles written about Covid relief efforts.

Table 2 highlights this imbalance by cross-tabulating the number of newspaper articles covering successful or failed efforts with action or conflict headlines. The modal article about congressional negotiations on Covid relief is a conflict-focused piece on a failed legislative effort, accounting for nearly 34 percent of all articles. Even among the headlines coded for articles on successful efforts, 43 percent still focused on conflict.

Table 2: Percentage of newspaper articles covering successful vs. failed legislative efforts and conflict vs. action headlines[20]

	Success	**Failure**
Action	132 (28.6%)	30 (6.5%)
Conflict	101 (21.9%)	156 (33.8%)

The combination of Congress's institutional processes and the media's beat reporting model not only drove disproportionate coverage of lengthy, doomed legislative negotiations. It also constricted the periods in which readers saw coverage of legislative action and cooperation. Legislative deal making tends to happen in short bursts that beat reporters cover *as they occur*, not before and not after. Once coalition leaders attain the support necessary for passage, party leaders schedule and pass the bills with short notice (Curry 2015). Because of this, coverage of action concentrates in short periods proximate to final passage.

Figure 7 shows that most action-focused articles were published within 10 days of the president signing one of the eight successful enactments.[21] The "all enacted bills" bars in Figure 7 show that these pre-signature periods (which, altogether, cover 59 days, or about 20 percent of

[20] The percentages do not add to 100 because about 10 percent of articles were about legislative proposals and, thus, did not feature action nor conflict in the headline.
[21] Coverage that occurred after the presidential signature was also included in this count.

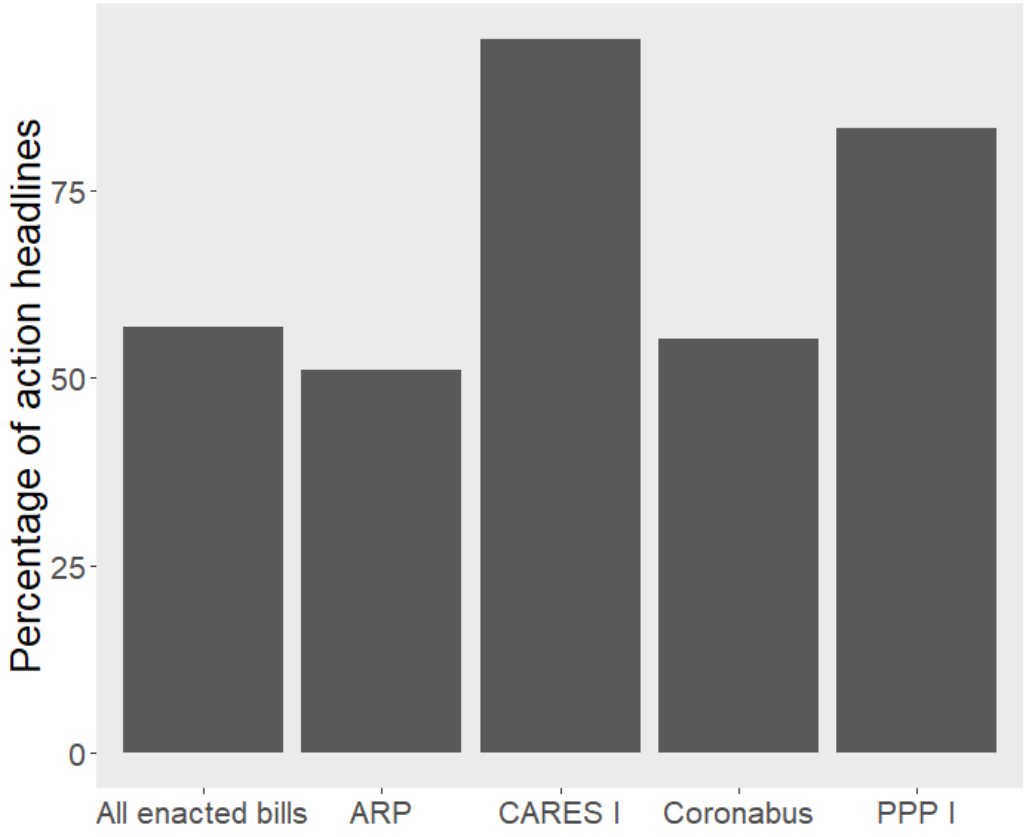


Figure 7: Coverage of action in periods 10 days prior to president's signature

all days in our period, due to overlap) contain 56 percent of all action articles.[22] The bars further to the right in Figure 7 show the percentage of action headlines that were published in the final 10 days for the four most expensive enactments.[23] Nearly all action coverage of CARES and PPP I occurred in the final 10 days—95 percent for CARES I and 83 percent for PPP I. Coverage of action on other enactments was also largely concentrated in the final 10 days—55 percent for the Coronabus and 51 percent for the ARP. Regression analysis in the appendix confirms that action-oriented stories are concentrated on the days when Congress actually accomplished something, with stories produced at most other times focusing on conflict.

[22] The denominator here is all headlines covering action, including headlines from the failed legislative efforts.
[23] The denominator here is headlines covering action for each enactment.

Altogether, our analyses reveal that beat coverage of congressional processes drives a focus on congressional conflict. The amount of time consumed debating a Covid-relief effort was the primary driver of the volume of coverage it received, rather than the amount of money or policy stakes involved. Because Congress devoted more of its institutional time to controversial efforts prone to failure and newspaper reporters reported continuously on these failures, the regular newspaper reader would infer that Congress was mired in stalemate and getting little done. Reporters dutifully wrote stories documenting action and accomplishment when Covid-relief packages passed, but those stories occurred rarely, and very proximate to legislative enactments. Once those occurred, reporters then moved on to cover the new conflicts.

TV News: Less Sustained Beat Coverage of Congress, Less Focus on Conflict

The analysis of newspaper coverage above indicates that beat coverage of Congress contributes to the media's dominant focus on conflict in Congress. To gain a better sense for *how much* the beat coverage model contributes to conflict-oriented coverage of Congress, it is necessary to vary the media's reporting model. In other words, we want to ascertain if coverage of Congress is less focused on conflict when there is less sustained coverage of the Congress beat. For this, we turn to television news.

Broadcast television news cannot offer coverage of Congress to nearly the same extent as national newspapers. Nightly television news programs typically have just 30 minutes to deliver content to viewers. Accordingly, producers must prioritize the coverage of certain stories and make tradeoffs that newspaper editors – who need to fill an online dashboard, newsletters, as well as a physical paper of variable length– do not have to consider. Such a limited format is far less conducive to beat coverage of Congress. Instead, television news programs "helicopter in"

to provide coverage of Congress when producers judge the news as important. As such, unlike newspapers, TV news cannot provide daily updates about ongoing negotiations in Congress, most especially not updates on deadlocked negotiations unlikely to yield a legislative breakthrough soon.

Given these differences, comparing newspaper coverage to television news coverage is effectively *varying* the coverage model while *holding constant* the story content. Through this comparison, we expect to find greater variation in coverage of Congress over time as reporters focus on significant moments rather than the day-to-day. Accordingly, we also expect to see a relatively higher number of stories about Congress engaging in action by passing or advancing legislation and relatively fewer stories about Congress being bogged down by conflict.

We test these expectations by analyzing broadcast nightly news programming on CBS, NBC, and ABC. As expected, television news shows greater variation in its coverage of Congress over time. Figure 8 shows the smoothed average number of television stories per day across the entire time series. Comparing this trendline to the newspaper coverage shown in Figure 3, we see that there is greater variation over time in the volume of Covid relief stories run by television news. The average number of Covid relief television news stories was about one per day when the four major relief bills passed in March and April 2020. It then steadily declined to nearly zero during the summer and early fall before increasing again to about one per day in the winter and early 2021 when the Coronabus and ARP passed. In contrast, the newspaper coverage trendline in Figure 3 is flat at one article per day on average across almost the entire times series. There are no similar over-time fluctuations in coverage levels in the national newspapers.

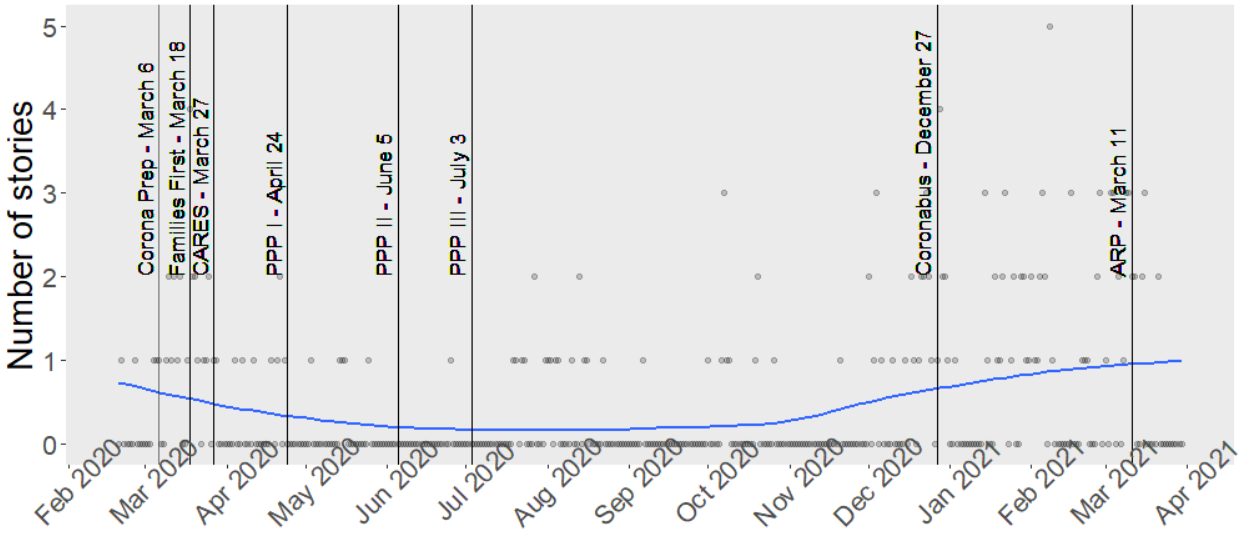


Figure 8: Smoothed daily average of Covid relief television coverage with dates of major enactments

Without constant stories updates from beat reporters, Congress needs to be doing something newsworthy to warrant attention from television news. Routine conflict in Congress often fails to meet the bar, while passing legislation more often will. As Figure 9 shows, television news is less likely to run stories on Congress where conflict is the main focus. While 55 percent of newspaper articles focused on conflict, only 36 percent of television news stories did. Instead, Congress taking action is more likely to be highlighted on TV news, with 45 percent of television stories featuring action compared to 35 percent of newspaper articles.

Compared to newspapers, television news provides less coverage of protracted, often doomed negotiations. As we saw above, newspapers constantly reported on the CARES II negotiations as they stretched out over the summer of 2020. While television news did not ignore CARES II, the ups-and-downs of the negotiations were not emphasized to nearly the same degree. Figure 10 shows that television news devoted only 25 percent of its coverage to failed efforts compared to 45 percent of newspaper coverage. Television news compensated for its lack

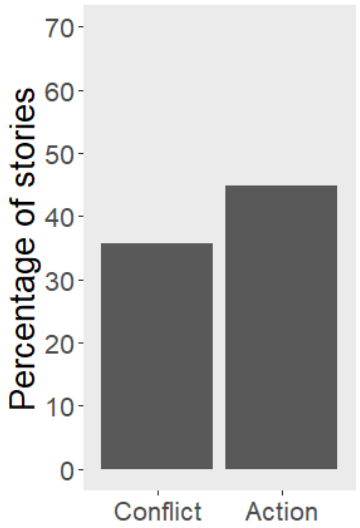


Figure 9: Percentage of television news stories characterizing congressional activity

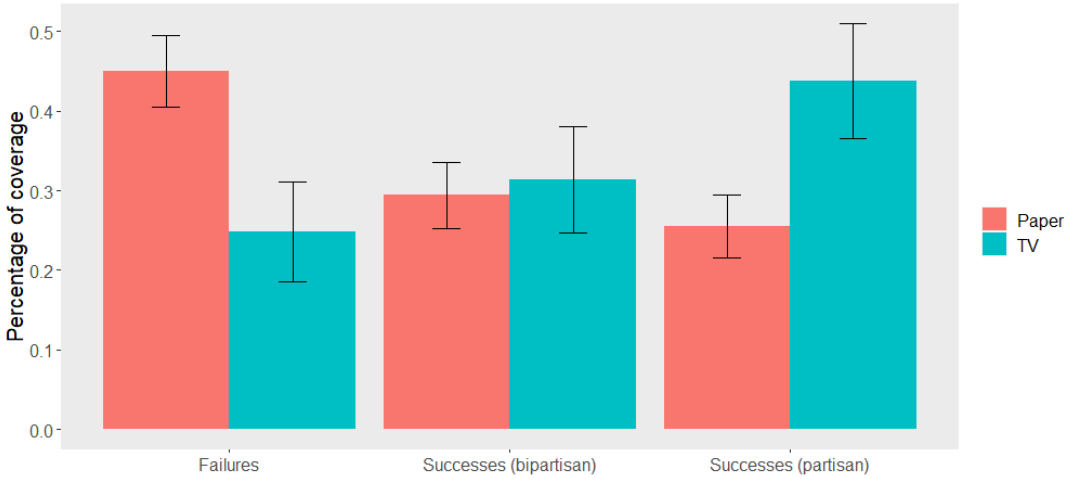


Figure 10: Proportion of coverage by type of legislative effort and medium

of coverage of failed efforts by focusing 44 percent of coverage on the partisan American Rescue Plan, which was expected to pass given Democrats' decision to use the budget reconciliation process. Meanwhile, newspapers only focused 25 percent of their coverage on the ARP.

The emphasis of television news on important moments and legislative successes affected what the average television viewer learned about Covid relief efforts. TV news viewers were exposed to less conflict-oriented coverage than newspaper readers. Table 3 shows that the modal

television story was about action on a successful effort, with 42.2 percent of articles fitting these criteria compared to 28.6 percent of newspaper articles. Conflict on failed efforts was still the second most common story type at 20 percent. While this is a significant amount of conflict coverage for an issue area featuring unusual bipartisanship and legislative productivity, TV news is much less focused on conflict than the 33.8 percent of similar newspaper articles.

Table 3: Percentage of television stories covering successful vs. failed legislative efforts and conflict vs. action

	Success	**Failure**
Action	78 (42.2%)	5 (2.7%)
Conflict	29 (15.7%)	37 (20.0%)

Our analysis of television news coverage provides additional evidence for our claim that beat reporting meaningfully contributes to conflict-oriented coverage of Congress. Even at a time of historic legislative productivity, Congress spent far more of its time engaged in conflict than passing legislation. Beat reporting on Congress reflects this fact, but in aggregate yields a portrait of an institution bogged down in conflict rather than one that coalesced successfully to enact truly vast legislation on multiple occasions. While television news also devoted considerable attention to conflict in Congress, the portrait of the institution one gains from television news is less tilted toward conflict, simply because television news does not provide continuous beat coverage of the institution. Television news was more likely to simply ignore Congress when it was engaging in routine conflict. As a consequence, TV news focuses more of its coverage on significant moments when legislative breakthroughs occurred.

News Prioritization: Media Preference for Conflict Stories

Scholars have long argued that economic incentives drive the news media to prioritize conflict as a means of engaging audience interest. These incentives would, in turn, *compound* the imbalances favoring conflict coverage stemming from the beat reporting model. To examine this type of coverage prioritization, we look at decisions about content placement both within and across newspaper articles on Covid-relief.[24] For our within-article analysis, we examine, on average, how early in an article four characterizations of Congress were mentioned. In addition to (1) conflict and (2) action, we also look at whether coverage of congressional *action* and *proposals* was characterized as (3) partisan or (4) bipartisan.

Newspaper reporting is organized in an "inverted pyramid" style, where information judged to be most important is placed toward the beginning (Scanlan 2003). If journalists and editors assess conflict as more interesting to their audiences, conflict and partisanship will be covered toward the top of news stories, while coverage of action and bipartisanship will be buried deeper inside articles. To measure such placement, we assigned each paragraph in an article a number in ascending order, with the first paragraph assigned a 1, the second paragraph assigned a 2, and so on.

Figure 11 shows the average position of the first mention of each type of congressional characterization along with 95 percent confidence intervals.[25] It is immediately clear that coverage of bipartisanship is buried deeper in the articles relative to all other characterizations, while conflict is positioned higher. When bipartisanship is covered (n = 286 articles), it is usually

[24] Given their short length and more scattered focus, we could not analyze television news stories at the paragraph level. We also did not have information about precisely when stories aired during the broadcast.

[25] An example can clarify how we calculated the point estimates in this figure. For the bipartisanship code, we identified all articles that had *any* bipartisanship codes. Then for each article, we identified the earliest paragraph (the lowest number) with a bipartisanship code. We then took the average of the earliest paragraph numbers across all articles with bipartisanship codes. We used the same procedure for partisanship, action, and conflict.

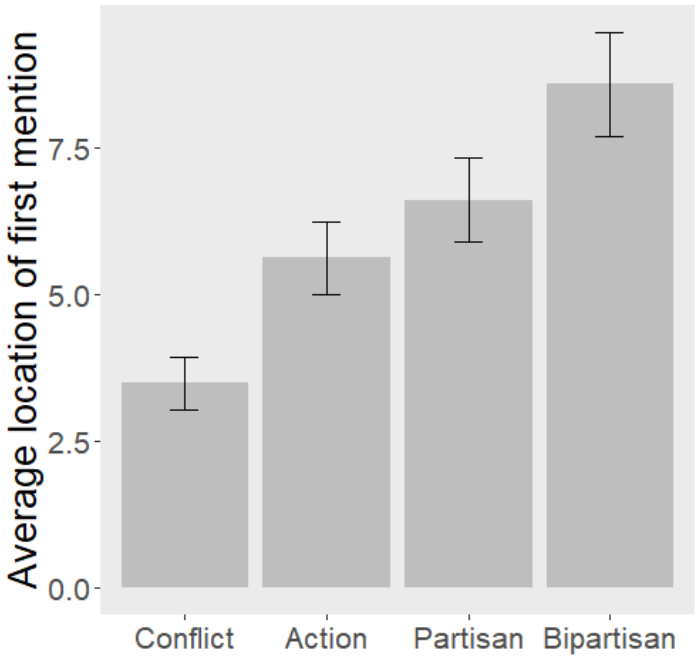


Figure 11: Average paragraph position for the first mentions of four characterizations of Congress

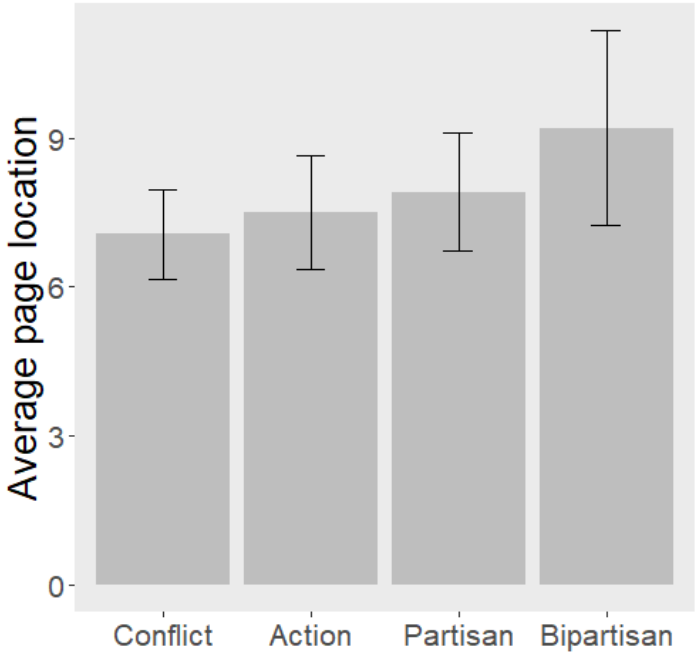


Figure 12: Average page position for articles with headlines on the four characterizations of Congress

first mentioned between the 8th and 9th paragraphs. In contrast, partisanship (n = 355 articles) comes in between the 6th and 7th paragraphs, action (n = 375 articles) comes in between the 5th and 6th paragraphs. Conflict (n = 433 articles), notably, comes in much sooner, between the 3rd and 4th paragraphs. All of these differences are statistically significant.

These data reveal that reporters and teams of content editors are positioning information in news reporting so as to foreground conflict and bury bipartisanship. The tendency to deemphasize bipartisanship can occur at the layout and design level, as well, where decisions about where to place articles within the newspaper are made by senior editors. To test for this relationship, we examine the placement of the 392 articles that appeared in the A sections of physical newspapers.[26] We assumed that articles placed closer to A1 (the front page) are receiving higher priority than articles placed on higher page numbers.

To evaluate whether these article placement decisions are associated with coverage content, Figure 12 shows the results of an analysis of how headlines indicating action, partisanship, and conflict relate to the placement of Covid-relief articles. While the differences between the partisan, action, and conflict point estimates are not statistically significant, the average placement of articles about bipartisanship is significantly deeper in the newspaper. Those articles, on average, appear between pages A9 and A10, while all other articles appear between pages A7 and A8.

We fit OLS models to further investigate this relationship. These models use an indicator variable for coverage of bipartisanship in the headline to predict page position. Table 4 shows three models, all of which show a positive association between the bipartisanship indicator and page placement that is statistically significant at the $p < 0.1$ level, meaning that stories about

[26] The A sections in national newspapers cover matters of general public concern. Online articles are excluded from this analysis as it was impossible to determine their prioritization.

bipartisanship appear deeper inside the paper. Model 1 shows the bivariate relationship, Model 2 includes news source fixed effects, and Model 3 includes news source and legislative effort fixed effects. We report robust standard errors across the three specifications.[27]

In short, our analyses in this section show that newspaper reporters and editors prioritize stories about conflict. The analyses in the preceding section showed beat reporting yields an emphasis on conflict, stemming from the sheer amount of time Congress spends engaged in conflict. This imbalance is more pronounced in newspaper coverage than in television news,

Table 4: Analysis of bipartisan news coverage and article page placement

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Bipartisan	1.991* (1.059)	1.540* (0.904)	1.818* (0.963)
Constant	7.213*** (0.371)	9.132*** (0.729)	10.206*** (0.959)
Newspaper fixed effects?	No	Yes	Yes
Bill fixed effects?	No	No	Yes
Adjusted R squared	0.007	0.217	0.218
*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01; OLS regression models with robust standard errors; N= 392 for all models			

given newspapers' closer adherence to the beat reporting model. Compounding those imbalances stemming from beat journalism, journalists and editors then systematically place content on legislative action and bipartisan agreements later in articles and deeper into newspapers. Combined, these factors produce an overall impression of conflict and stalemate in Congress, even during a period of remarkable legislative accomplishment and bipartisan cooperation.

[27] Robustness checks, including clustering standard errors on source/bill, tobit regression models, and models with journalist fixed effects, are included in the appendix.

Conclusions & Implications

In this paper, we examined media coverage of the congressional response to the Covid pandemic to gain deeper insight into the long-documented tendency of news reporting to focus on conflict and stalemate in Congress. We selected the Covid response as an "extreme case" (Seawright and Gerring 2008) of Congress coalescing quickly to address a major national crisis in a popular, highly bipartisan way. Although Congress has rarely enacted so much policy so quickly or in a more bipartisan manner, we find that in covering congressional action on Covid relief throughout 2020, most reporting still focused on conflict and stalemate.

Our study confirms prior research documenting a clear media preference for conflict narratives, likely grounded in both the media's economic incentives (Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn 2004) and journalistic norms (Atkinson 2017). We find that editors tend to place stories about conflict in Congress closer to the front of newspapers and stories about bipartisan agreement deeper in newspapers, even though enactments have much more effect on readers' lives. Journalists and content editors also tend to place accounts of congressional conflict toward the top of the "inverted pyramid structure" that governs the conventions of newspaper reporting, with headlines and ledes focusing on conflict and reports about bipartisanship and legislative action buried deeper inside articles. These tendencies were evident for all of the newspapers in our analysis, as well as for each of the individual Covid relief enactments.

But our study also highlights an underappreciated driver of the media's focus on conflict: beat reporting. The simple fact is that conflict consumes much of Congress's time day to day. Conflict is unavoidable for a legislature, especially in a polity as large and diverse as the United States. It would be unrealistic to expect Congress to avoid conflict given the important role it plays in representing and giving voice to the nation's considerable political differences. Under a

beat reporting model providing continuous coverage of the institution, the bulk of news reporting simply reflects the large amount of time Congress devotes to hashing out conflicts, with major legislation passing only at wide intervals. Even during a time of historic legislative productivity, Congress still spent most of its time bogged down in disputes.

Our results show the importance of beat journalism in driving the media's conflict narrative in several ways. First, we show that the amount of time a legislative effort consumed is the best predictor of the amount of coverage it received, with the amount of money at stake and the urgency of the legislation having no obvious impact. The more controversial relief efforts (especially CARES II) consumed more time and therefore received more coverage, even when they were not as important as other enactments for Covid policy. Second, we show that journalists accurately reported legislative action and accomplishments when they occurred, but such stories tended to be concentrated in time, generally within 10 days of major enactments. Because such moments were short and fleeting, bipartisanship, action, and policy breakthroughs received little sustained attention. Third, we showed that the imbalance favoring stories about conflict over legislation action was more pronounced for newspapers, which adhere more closely to the beat reporting model, than for broadcast news programs, which allocate attention to Congress episodically rather than continuously.

In the parlance of journalism, beat coverage of Congress produces more dog-bites-man stories than man-bites-dog stories. As such, it ultimately yields far more attention to the things that Congress routinely does – namely squabble over legislation that has no realistic chance of becoming law – rather than to its rare but incredibly important bursts of action and cooperation, which tend to be condensed into relatively brief periods of time.

The result is that even during 2020, amidst a period of extremely high congressional policy activism, the typical piece that a newspaper reader encountered reported on conflict about a legislative effort that would never became law. Journalists did not misrepresent or inaccurately characterize the extent of conflict in Congress. There was abundant conflict for reporters to write about! Disagreements consumed most of Congress's time even during the Covid relief negotiations, a set of issues on which members cooperated across party lines far more than on most of what is on Congress's agenda.

These imbalances in coverage likely have a negative impact on public understanding of Congress. Even during one of the most productive and consequential periods of lawmaking in the 21st century, readers of the country's most prestigious and widely-read newspapers mostly consumed content emphasizing conflict and stalemate – a misleading, if not wholly incorrect, characterization of how Congress responded to the pandemic. Although our analysis focuses on newspaper coverage, the imbalances documented here likely extend to any other news sources providing routine beat coverage of Congress. Beyond newspapers, there are numerous online news sources—an increasingly popular means of accessing news (Shearer 2021)—that provide coverage of the Congress beat. Likewise, those who rely on social media for congressional news will encounter the same day-to-day coverage focusing on conflict.

The dominance of conflict coverage likely contributes to public disapproval of Congress, particularly among the most politically engaged citizens. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) documented that those most knowledgeable about Congress were also the most disapproving of the institution. Better educated respondents, as well as those more interested in public affairs, give Congress systematically lower feeling thermometer ratings.[28] Attentive news consumers

[28] See the appendix for more recent data from the ANES confirming that the patterns found by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) still hold.

ingest a steady diet of news stories about conflict in Congress and are rarely treated to accounts of bipartisanship, action, or major policy breakthroughs. It is not surprising that regular consumers of such content would have a more negative view of the institution.

Finally, the data presented here raise some questions about the dominant scholarly portrait of Congress as an institution mired in dysfunction and stalemate. That Congress devotes the bulk of its time to waging battles over policy likely shapes scholars' perceptions as well as those of news readers. Recent congresses have enacted a remarkable amount of legislation, more than they have been given credit for, often packaged in huge omnibus enactments that clear just before legislative deadlines (DeSilver 2021). Looking back, there is little question that the 116th Congress was a watershed moment in terms of the government's role in sustaining the national economy through crisis. Nevertheless, much of the media coverage analyzed here reinforces the gridlock narrative. Amidst an unending stream of news reporting about the latest conflict, Congress's processes contribute to perceptions of institutional dysfunction out of alignment with actual congressional performance.

References

Angelucci, Charles and Julia Cage. 2019. "Newspapers in Times of Low Advertising Revenues." *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 11(3): 319-364.

Atkinson, Mary Layton. 2017. *Combative Politics: The Media and Public Perceptions of Lawmaking*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Bennett, W. Lance. 1996. "An Introduction to Journalism Norms and Representations of Politics," *Political Communication*. 13:373-384.

-----. 2012. *News: The Politics of Illusion*, 9th Edition. New York: Pearson.

Binder, Sarah A. 2003. *Stalemate: Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Boydstun, Amber E. 2013. *Making the News: Politics, the Media, and Agenda Setting*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press

Cappella, Joseph N., and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. 1996. "News Frames, Political Cynicism, and Media Cynicism." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 546(1): 71-84.

Carney, Jordain. 2020. "Senate Democrats block GOP relief bill." *The Hill,* September 10, 2020, https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/515867-senate-democrats-block-gop-relief-bill (accessed April 1, 2022).

Claudio Deane, Kim Parker, and John Gramlich. 2021. "A Year of U.S. Public Opinion on the Coronavirus Pandemic," Pew Research Center, March 5, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/2021/03/05/a-year-of-u-s-public-opinion-on-the-coronavirus-pandemic/ (accessed December 15, 2022).

Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget. 2020. "How Much Would $2,000 Checks Cost?" https://www.crfb.org/blogs/how-much-would-2000-checks-cost (accessed April 1, 2022).

Cook, Timothy. 1998. *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Cooney, Patrick and H. Luke Shaefer. 2021. "Material hardship and mental health following the COVID-19 relief bill and American Rescue Plan Act." Poverty Solutions, University of Michigan. http://sites.fordschool.umich.edu/poverty2021/files/2021/05/PovertySolutions-Hardship-After-COVID-19-Relief-Bill-PolicyBrief-r1.pdf (accessed April 1, 2022).

Curry, James M. 2015. *Legislating in the Dark: Information and Power in the House of Representatives.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

-----. 2019. “Congressional Processes and Public Approval of New Laws.” *Political Research Quarterly* 72(4): 878-893.

Curry, James M. and Frances E. Lee. 2020. *The Limits of Party: Congress and Lawmaking in a Polarized Era*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

DeSilver, Drew. 2021. “Nothing lame about this lame duck: 116th Congress had busiest post-election session in recent history.” *Pew Research Center*, January 21, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/21/nothing-lame-about-this-lame-duck-116th-congress-had-busiest-post-election-session-in-recent-history/ (accessed April 1, 2022).

Dupor, Bill. 2021. “How recent fiscal interventions compare with the New Deal,” Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/regional-economist/third-quarter-2021/how-recent-fiscal-interventions-compare-new-deal (accessed April 1, 2022).

Durr, Robert, John Gilmour, and Christina Wolbrecht. 1997. “Explaining Congressional Approval.” *American Journal of Political Science* 41(1):

Eliasoph, Nina. 1997. “Routines and the Making of Oppositional News.” In *Social Meanings of News: A Text-Reader*, ed. Daniel A. Berkowitz. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Evans, C. Lawrence. 2001. “Committees, Leaders, and Message Politics.” In *Congress Reconsidered*, 7th Edition, eds. by Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, 217–43. Washington, DC: CQ Press.

Evans, C. Lawrence, and Walter J. Oleszek. 2002. “Message Politics and Senate Procedure.” In *The Contentious Senate: Partisanship, Ideology, and the Myth of Cool Judgment*, eds. Colton C. Campbell and Nicol C. Rae, 107–30. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Fenno, Richard F. 1978. *Homestyle: House Members in Their Districts*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Forgette, Richard, and Jonathan S. Morris. “High-Conflict Television News and Public Opinion.” *Political Research Quarterly* 59(3): 447-456.

Gallup. 2022. “Congress and the Public.” https://news.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx (accessed April 1, 2022).

Green, Matthew N. 2015. *Underdog Politics: The Minority Party in the U.S. House of Representatives*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Grimmer, Justin. 2013. *Representational Style in Congress: What Legislators Say and Why It Matters*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Groeling, Tim. 2010. *When Politicians Attack: Party Cohesion in the Media*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Han, Jeehoon, Bruce D. Meyer, James X. Sullivan. 2021. "Real-time poverty estimates during the COVID-19 pandemic through June 2021." Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities at Notre Dame and the Harris School of Public Policy. http://povertymeasurement.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Real-time-Poverty-Estimates-through-June-2021-Updated-July-15-2021.pdf (accessed April 1, 2022).

Krutz, Glen S. *Hitching a Ride: Omnibus Legislating in the US Congress.* Ohio State University Press, 2001.

Hallin, Daniel. 1984. "The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media." *Journal of Politics* 46(1):

Harbridge, Laurel, and Neil Malhotra. 2011. "Electoral Incentives and Partisan Conflict in Congress: Evidence from Survey Experiments." *American Journal of Political Science* 55(3): 494-510.

Harris, Douglas B. 2013. "Let's Play Hardball: Congressional Partisanship in the Television Era." In *Politics to the Extreme: American Political Institutions in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Scott A. Frisch and Sean Q. Kelly, 93–115. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hayes, Danny and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2021. *News Hole: The Demise of Local Journalism and Political Engagement*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hess, Stephen. 1981. *The Washington Reporters*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Hibbing, John R., and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. 1995. *Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes Toward American Political Institutions*. NY: Cambridge University Press.

International Monetary Fund. 2021. "Fiscal monitor: A fair shot." https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/FM/Issues/2021/03/29/fiscal-monitor-april-2021#Full%20Report (accessed April 1, 2022).

Ip, Greg. 2021. "How the U.S. nailed the economic response to Covid-19." *Wall Street Journal,* Sept. 15, 2021. https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-the-u-s-nailed-the-economic-response-to-covid-19-11631714400 (accessed April 1, 2022).

Iyengar, Shanto, Helmut Norpoth, and Kyu Hahn. 2004. "Consumer Demand for Election News: The Horserace Sells." *Journal of Politics* 66(1):

Jones, David. 2013. "Do Major Policy Enactments Affect Public Evaluations of Congress? The Case of Health Care Reform." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 38(2):

Jones, Jeffrey M. 2020. "Bipartisan Support for COVID-19 Rescue Legislation," Gallup, March 30, 2020. https://news.gallup.com/poll/305720/bipartisan-support-covid-rescue-legislation.aspx (accessed December 15, 2022).

Krehbiel, Keith. 1998. *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Lichter, Robert, and Daniel Amundson. 1994. "Less News is Worse News: Television News Coverage of Congress, 1972-92" in *Congress, the Press, and Public*, eds. Thomas Mann and Norm Ornstein. Washington, DC: AEI and the Brookings Institution.

Lee, Frances E. 2009. *Beyond Ideology: Politics, Principles, and Partisanship in the U.S. Senate*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

-----. 2016. *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Magin, Melanie and Maurer, Peter. 2019. "Beat Journalism and Reporting." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*.

Malecha, Gary Lee, and Daniel Reagan. 2012. *The Public Congress: Congressional Deliberation in a New Media Age*. Taylor and Francis.

Mayhew, David R. 2005. *Divided we Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking and Investigations, 1946-2002*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Montpetit, Eric. 2016. *In Defense of Pluralism: Policy Disagreement and its Media Coverage*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Morris, Jonathan S., and Rosalee A. Clawson. 2005. "Media Coverage of Congress in the 1990s: Scandals, Personalities, and the Prevalence of Policy and Process." *Political Communication* 22(3): 297-313.

Neuman, W. Russell, Marion Just, and Ann Crigler. 1992. *Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

OECD. 2021. "OECD GDP slows in third quarter but regains pre-pandemic level." https://www.oecd.org/sdd/na/GDP-Growth-Q321.pdf (accessed April 1, 2022).

Patterson, Thomas E. 1994. *Out of Order.* New York: Vintage Books.

Peterson, Erik. 2021. Paper Cuts: How Reporting Resources affect Political News Coverage. *American Journal of Political Science* 65(2): 443-459.

Prior, Markus. 2007. *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Romer, Christina. 2021. "The fiscal policy response to the pandemic." *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*. https://www.brookings.edu/bpea-articles/the-fiscal-policy-response-to-the-pandemic/ (accessed April 1, 2022).

Sacerdote, Bruce, Ranjan Sehgal, and Molly Cook. 2020. "Why is All COVID News Bad News?" National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper, DOI 10.3386/w28110.

Scanlan, Chip. 2003. "Writing from the Top Down: Pros and Cons of the Inverted Pyramid," *Poynter*, June 20, 2003. https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2003/writing-from-the-top-down-pros-and-cons-of-the-inverted-pyramid/ (accessed April 1, 2022).

Schaffner, Brian F., and Patrick J. Sellers, eds. 2009. *Winning with Words: The Origins and Impact of Political Framing*. New York: Routledge.

Seawright, Jason, and John Gerring. 2008. "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options." *Political Research Quarterly* 61(2): 294-308.

Sellers, Patrick J. 2010. *Cycles of Spin: Strategic Communication in the U.S. Congress*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Shearer, Elisa. 2021. "More Than Eight-in-Ten Americans Get News from Digital Devices," *Pew Research Center*, January 12, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/ (accessed December 12, 2022).

Shutt, Jennifer and Katherine Tully-McManus. 2020. "Trump signs massive $2.3 trillion coronavirus relief package." *Roll Call*, March 27, 2020, https://rollcall.com/2020/03/27/massive-coronavirus-aid-package-clears-awaits-trump-signature/ (accessed April 1, 2022).

Sigal, Leon. 1973. *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company.

Sinclair, Barbara. 2016. *Unorthodox Lawmaking: New Legislative Processes in the US Congress*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage / CQ Press.

Tidmarch, Charles, and John Pitney. 1985. "Covering Congress." *Polity* 17(3): 463-483.

Vinson, Danielle. 2017. *Congress and the Media: Beyond Institutional Power*. New York: Oxford University Press.

-----. 2018. "Congress and the Media: Who Has the Upper Hand?" in *New Directions in Media and Politics*, ed. Travis Rideout. New York: Routledge, 141-157.

Wagner, Michael W., and Mike Gruszczynski. 2018. "Who Gets Covered? Ideological Extremity and News Coverage of Members of the U.S. Congress, 1993 to 2013." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 95(3): 670-690.

Werner, Eric and Jeff Stein. 2020. "House Democrats pass $2.2 trillion stimulus bill over GOP opposition," *Washington Post*, October 1, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/us-policy/2020/10/01/white-house-democrats-economic-stimulus/ (accessed April 1, 2022).

Zelizer, Julian. 2004. *On Capitol Hill: The Struggle to Reform Congress and Its Consequences, 1948-2000*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Supplemental Appendix

This appendix explains (1) the process we used to identify relevant newspaper articles and television coverage and (2) the process we used to code news coverage. It also includes (3) a short descriptive analysis of ANES data investigating the relationship between education/political knowledge and congressional approval, (4) regression analyses that confirm coverage of congressional action is strongly associated with achievements, and (5) alternative specifications for the regression models in Table 4.

Search terms to identify news coverage

To create our dataset of national newspaper articles on Covid relief legislation, we first had a research assistant conduct key word searches in the ProQuest U.S. Newsstream database to locate articles that were published between February 20, 2020, and March 30, 2021. We chose our start date as February 20 because the Trump administration requested its first Covid aid package on February 24. We chose our end date as March 30 because this was one day before President Joe Biden proposed his infrastructure bill, which was the next major presidential agenda item after the American Rescue Plan. We assumed that enactment-level coverage of the American Rescue Plan would have largely ended by the time a new major bill was put on the agenda.

Table A1 provides a list of terms that we included in our search. Each article had to have at least one word from Column 1 (Title) in the article headline, and the headline could not include any of the words from Column 2 (Not in title). Moreover, the body text of the article had to include at least one word from Column 3 (Body paragraph). We excluded the terms in Column 2 because, after initial piloting, we recognized that they were likely to be associated with false

positives. Note that Table A1 shows terms without the wildcards or stemming typically used in database searches.

The initial searches returned 2,169 articles. After downloading these articles and separating them into individual .txt files, we had our research assistant go through the articles and flag those that were clearly not related to Congress's Covid relief efforts.

Table A1: Search terms used to locate articles for initial data download

Column 1: Title	Column 2: Not in title	Column 3: Body paragraph
Congress	Cuomo	Aid
House	Confirm	Response
Senate	Nominate	Relief
Democrat	Gun	Stimulus
Republican	China	Legislation
Trump*	Russia	Bill
Biden*	Iran	Measure
Mnuchin	Germany	Law
Pelosi	Europe	Proposal
McConnell	E.U	Package
Schumer	Japan	Policy
McCarthy	Immigration	Covid
Pence	Riot	Pandemic
Manchin	Gender	Coronavirus
	Trial	
	Floyd	
	Police	
	Refugee	
	Border	
	Veteran	
	Labor	
	Georgia	
	Perdue	
	Warnock	
	Loeffler	
	Ossoff	
	Abortion	
	Protest	
	Statehood	
	Kansas	
	Kentucky	
	Ohio	
	New York	
	Alaska	
	North Carolina	
	Pennsylvania	
	Wisconsin	
	Michigan	
	Iowa	
	South Carolina	

	Nevada Arizona New Jersey Florida Texas CPAC Convention Style	

***** We included additional search terms, such as "legislation" and "sign," to avoid picking up more general articles about Trump and Biden.

For example, articles about China's National Congress and Mark Meadow's appointment as White House Chief of Staff were excluded at this point. Our research assistant also flagged articles where the relevance of the article to Covid relief efforts was borderline – for example, articles focused on congressional oversight of Covid relief. We reviewed the borderline articles and made decisions about which types to exclude. We excluded articles that primarily focused on the social problems related to the pandemic (i.e. unemployment or Covid deaths), policy implementation and oversight (i.e. fraud in the Paycheck Protection Program), the 2020 election (i.e. coverage of Senate races that mentioned the relief efforts), Congress's institutional adjustments to the pandemic (i.e. work-from-home rules and proxy voting), and tangential legislative efforts (i.e. government funding efforts that occurred alongside Covid relief). In addition to deciding on the relevance of individual articles, we also used this process to locate duplicate articles (which often ran under different headlines) and ensured that each article was only counted once. Ultimately, we included 462 articles in the final dataset, which was about 21 percent of the original data download. Table A2 shows the number of articles from each news source for both the initial data download and the final dataset.

Table A2: Number of articles in initial data download and final dataset by newspaper

Paper	**Initial download**	**Final dataset**
All newspapers	2,169	462
The New York Times	847 (39.0%)	144 (31.2%)
The Washington Post	784 (36.1%)	172 (37.2%)

The Wall Street Journal	369 (17.0%)	108 (23.4%)
USA Today	169 (7.8%)	38 (8.2%)

We used a similar process to identify relevant television news coverage. Our searches were conducted in the Nexis-Uni database, which has transcripts of nightly news broadcasts for ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, and NBC Nightly News. We used the same search terms as those in columns 1 and 3 above to sift through the titles of all news transcripts released by ABC, NBC, and CBS for the relevant timeframe and then further narrowed our search results based on whether "World News Tonight," "Nightly News," or "Evening News" was included in the transcript's metadata. This initial search yielded 591 results. We then went through the transcripts manually and discarded false positive transcripts that did not include discussion of Covid relief efforts. The false positives were often about the pandemic generally or about some aspect of the president's response (i.e. Trump's task force or Biden's roll in vaccine rollout). Ultimately, we included 185 news stories in our final dataset. Table A3 shows the number of stories from each news source for both the initial data download and the final dataset.

Table A3: Number of articles in initial data download and final dataset by TV network

TV network	**Initial download**	**Final dataset**
All TV stories	591	185
ABC	123 (20.8%)	44 (23.8%)
CBS	251 (42.5%)	85 (45.9%)
NBC	217 (36.7%)	56 (30.3%)

Coding scheme

To code our newspaper data, we downloaded each article (as a .txt file) into the qualitative research software program MAXQDA. MAXQDA allowed us to highlight text within the articles and add codes that described the highlighted text. Our goal was to use the codes to categorize the content within the articles and develop overall impressions of how the news media

discussed congressional policymaking on Covid in 2020 and 2021. In this section, we explain the piloting process through which we developed and refined our coding scheme. We then show the overall results of our coding. We conclude with a shorter note on our television coverage coding.

We began the coding pilot by creating a list of codes that fit into four categories: (1) What is Congress Doing? (AKA Characterizations of Congress), (2) Actors, (3) Policies, and (4) Quotations. We refined and renamed this list of codes through the piloting process, eventually deciding on the codes listed in Table A4.[1] Each column in A3 is a category. Within each column, we list high-level codes (denoted by a letter or a Roman numeral) and low-level codes that nest within the high-level codes. We decided on these particular high- and low-level codes because they captured the key concepts we were interested in and were simple for coders to apply to text. For example, coders could ask themselves "Does this text describe what Congress is doing?" If the answer was yes, the coder would look in category (1). They then could ask "Does it describe Congress as engaging in conflict?" This would tell them which high-level code to use. If the answer was yes, they would then ask "Is this conflict between the parties or within a party?" This would tell them which low-level code to use. Note that the codes in categories (1) and (4) required the coders to make judgment calls about the text. They needed to read the

Table A4: Overview of the final coding scheme that was applied to articles

(1) What is Congress Doing?	***(2) Actors***[2]	***(3) Policies***	***(4) Quotations***
A. Action/Progress	Trump	Total cost	**A. Policy quote**
i. Proposal	Biden	Direct payments	Positive
Bipartisan	Pelosi	Unemployment	Negative
Partisan	Schumer	State and local aid	**B. Lawmaking quote**

[1] We created 120 codes total, many of which were used for administrative or technical purposes. Because this is a larger number of codes than we could feasibly include in a table, we list only the most important codes for categories (2) and (3). All codes for categories (1) and (4) are included. Please contact the authors if you wish to see the full coding scheme.

[2] Note that while we applied codes in categories (1), (3), and (4) to both headline/ledes and body paragraphs, (2) was only applied to headline/ledes. It would have been overly burdensome to require coders to capture every actor mentioned in an article.

Other	McConnell	Business liability	Positive
ii. Progress/Achievement	McCarthy	Corporate aid	Negative
Bipartisan	House Dems	Small business aid	**C. Other**
Partisan	Senate Dems	Workplace safety	
Other	House Reps	Education	
B. Conflict	Senate Reps	Higher education	
i. Policy	Congress	Housing and rental	
Within Party	House	Welfare and food aid	
Between Party	Senate	Tax credits	
Other	Democrats	Minimum wage	
ii. Non-policy	Republicans	Hospitals	
Within Party	Moderates	Vaccines/treatments	
Between Party	Liberals	Covid tracing	
Other	Conservatives	Paid leave	
C. Miscellaneous	Mnuchin	Voting and elections	

paragraph and decide what impressions were being conveyed. This was usually straightforward, but there were occasionally borderline cases where we had to convene group discussions to arrive at a final coding decision. On the contrary, categories (2) and (3) were simpler to apply as coders only had to check whether a particular name or word was mentioned in the paragraph and then add the relevant code (i.e. if the text mentions Trump then add the Trump code; if the text mentions stimulus checks then add the Direct payments code).

We also used the piloting process to decide how to apply codes consistently so that analyses of articles could be comparable. We determined that coders should mostly add codes at the paragraph level, which was easy to apply in MAXQDA as the software automatically assigns a number to every paragraph in descending order. This made it very clear to coders which units of text they should be considering when assigning codes. There were two exceptions to the paragraph-level coding rule. First, we instructed coders to code the headline and lede[3] of the article as a single paragraph. This was because we wanted to capture the overall impression that

[3] The lede of a news article is the first 1-3 sentences. It is intended to draw the reader in and is usually expected to contain the most important information about the story.

an article was trying to convey, and the lede is often necessary to understand the headline (and vice versa). Second, we instructed coders to treat quotations as a single coding decision, regardless of how many paragraphs it spread across. They were also instructed to capture enough of the context surrounding the quote so that its meaning could be understood by an analyst.

We also decided during the piloting that paragraphs could be double coded. We realized that paragraphs often included multiple characterizations of Congress and that it would be arbitrary to make decisions like "Paragraph A contained more conflict than progress" when both were mentioned. This helped us develop general advice for coders: they should read the text as if they were a reader with little or superficial background knowledge of the topic at hand. We did not want them to "read between the lines" and gather what the paragraph was *really* trying to convey when making coding decisions. We wanted them to take the text at face value when assigning codes. For example, if a paragraph said "the parties were finding agreement on a major issue even though significant differences still existed on policy X," we would add both progress and conflict codes rather than assuming that one or the other was the *real* story.

In addition to making decisions about which codes to use and how to apply them, we used the piloting process to ensure that the understanding of the coding scheme and process was relatively consistent across coders. To do this, we conducted several intercoder reliability tests where all three principal researchers and both research assistants coded the same articles. We then used MAXQDA's intercoder reliability function to check how consistent the codings were. This process helped us simplify the coding scheme and identify points of confusion. We never obtained perfect consistency – on the final check, we were less than 60 percent consistent on the category (1) codes and close to 90 percent for categories (2), (3), and (4). However, this is a low estimate of our actual alignment as MAXQDA only allowed us to conduct the reliability checks

for the low-level codes and treated any differences as unaligned. All analyses in the paper are conducted at higher levels of coding, where it is much easier to reach alignment because the concepts are more clearly distinguished. In other words, the reliability check required our low-level codes to be *exactly* aligned (i.e. every coder needed to assign the exact set of low-level codes to the same paragraphs) while our analyses did not require nearly that level of precision. In practice, we only compare codes under higher level headings (i.e. conflict vs. progress). Still, we carefully tracked and double-checked coding throughout the process to ensure there was relative consistency in low-level coding and that no major errors were made. We also encouraged all coders to leave comments on individual paragraphs when they were unsure so that we could discuss the coding decision as a group.

After we completed the piloting process, our two research assistants began coding the 462 articles in the dataset under our supervision (we conducted regular spot checks of their work). They coded 301 articles before their period of employment ended. We then coded the final 161 articles ourselves, again spot checking each other's work and raising concerns/making corrections when necessary. Table A5 shows the results of the main coding at the highest level – the number of codes assigned overall and the number assigned in major category. The Administrative/Other category captures codes that were used to identify the headline/ledes, codes used to connect articles with legislative efforts, and miscellaneous codes.

Table A5: Overview of codes assigned in main coding task

Category	**Number (%)**
Total	17,713 (100%)
Administrative/Other	1,486 (8.4%)
(1) What is Congress Doing?	5,573 (31.5%)
(2) Actors	1,035 (5.8%)
(3) Policies	7,315 (41.3%)
(4) Quotations	2,304 (13.0%)

Table A6 shows the number of times that each low-level code listed in Table A4 was used across the 462 articles. This number is listed in parentheses beside each low-level code.

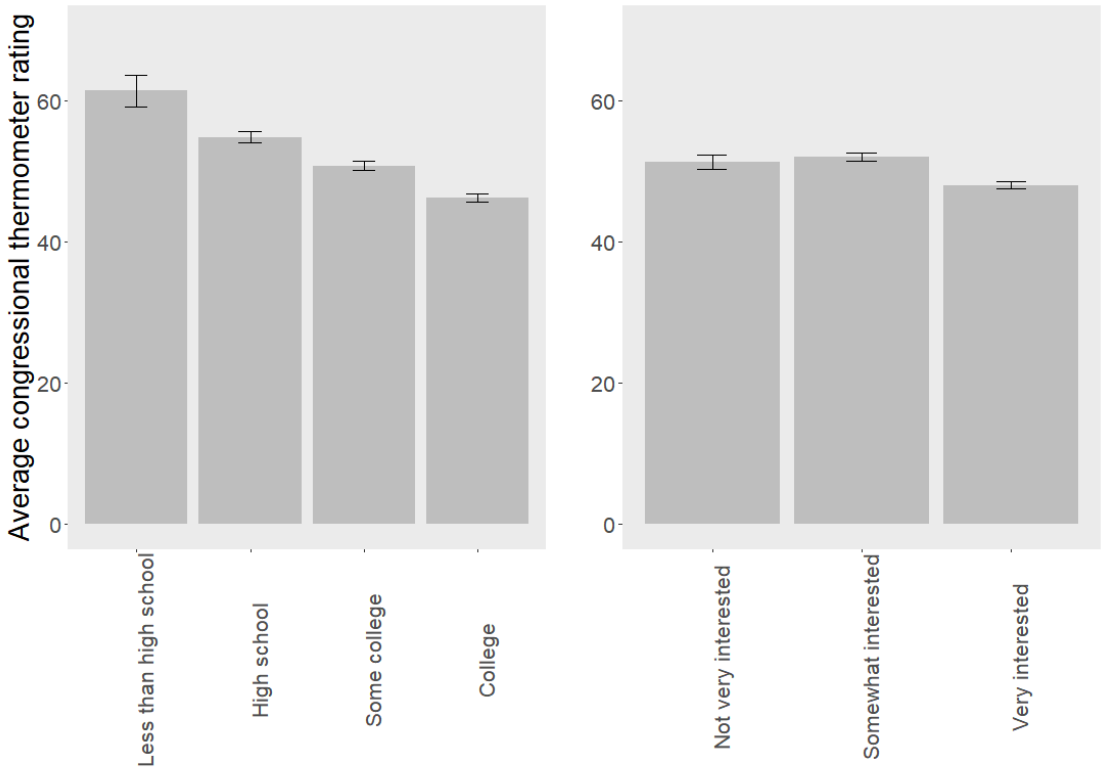
Table A6: Frequency of low-level codes (number of assigned codes are in parentheses)

(1) What is Congress Doing?	***(2) Actors***	***(3) Policies***	***(4) Quotations***
A. Action/Progress	Trump (175)	Total cost (1,134)	**A. Policy quote**
i. Proposal	Biden (102)	Direct payments (875)	Positive (467)
Bipartisan (195)	Pelosi (48)	Unemployment (893)	Negative (371)
Partisan (827)	Schumer (10)	State and local aid (567)	**B. Lawmaking quote**
Other (120)	McConnell (35)	Business liability (168)	Positive (494)
ii. Progress/Achievement	McCarthy (0)	Corporate aid (273)	Negative (723)
Bipartisan (600)	House Dems (33)	Small business aid (717)	**C. Other (249)**
Partisan (469)	Senate Dems (18)	Workplace safety (24)	
Other (269)	House Reps (2)	Education (236)	
B. Conflict	Senate Reps (51)	Higher education (69)	
i. Policy	Congress (110)	Housing and rental (117)	
Within Party (670)	House (53)	Welfare and food aid (97)	
Between Party (1,221)	Senate (71)	Tax credits (146)	
Other (310)	Democrats (115)	Minimum wage (343)	
ii. Non-policy	Republicans (71)	Hospitals (84)	
Within Party (196)	Moderates (11)	Vaccines/treatments (157)	
Between Party (409)	Liberals (8)	Covid tracing (239)	
Other (157)	Conservatives (1)	Paid leave (134)	
C. Miscellaneous (115)	Mnuchin (35)	Voting and elections (66)	

Our process for coding TV stories was simpler than the newspaper coding process described above as we only wanted to know whether the central focus of the news story was Congress engaging in action or conflict. To avoid confusion, we also included a proposal code and an "other" code. Across our 185 articles, we added just 191 codes, a reflection of the relatively narrow scope of this task. We added 66 conflict codes, 83 action codes, 40 proposal codes, and 2 other codes. We generally tried to add one code per article, but coders added two codes (usually a proposal code along an action or conflict code) in a few select cases.

ANES data

Figure A1 confirms that the patterns found by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) – suggesting that those most knowledgeable about Congress were also the most disapproving of the institution – still hold. Better educated respondents, as well as those more interested in public affairs, give Congress systematically lower feeling thermometer ratings. Although more research on these patterns is needed, they make sense in light of our data. Attentive news consumers ingest a steady diet of stories about conflict in Congress and are rarely treated to accounts of bipartisanship, action, or major policy breakthroughs.



Source: ANES

Figure A1: Congressional thermometer ratings by education level and political interest (2008-2020)[4]

[4] Errors bars denote 95 percent confidence intervals

Regressions predicting coverage of congressional action

Table A7 presents regression analyses that provide further evidence that beat coverage yields extremely limited coverage of congressional action relative to conflict. We tested whether there is a relationship between Congress achieving something on a given day (model 1) or week (model 2) and the number of action-oriented articles that newspapers published. Achievements include successful House or Senate floor votes, successful committee votes, or presidential signatures. For model 1 data, each day-newspaper dyad is coded for whether Congress achieved something (1) or not (0).[5] For model 2 data, each week-newspaper dyad is coded similarly. Both models show a positive, statistically significant association between achievements and the number of action articles published. The effect sizes are substantively large. Without achievements, the models predict that newspapers published 0.3 action articles per day and 1.3 action articles per week. When achievements occurred, newspapers published 1.4 daily action articles (438 percent increase) and 5.5 weekly action articles (334 percent increase).

Table A7: OLS models showing the relationship between actual congressional action and media coverage of legislative action

	(1)	(2)
Daily achievement	0.283***	
	(0.041)	
Weekly Achievement		1.053***
		(0.175)
USA Today	-0.091***	-0.627***
	(0.020)	(0.161)
Washington Post	0.017	0.119
	(0.025)	(0.212)
Wall Street Journal	-0.017	-0.119
	(0.024)	(0.208)
Constant	0.088***	0.473***
	(0.017)	(0.135)
Observations	1,620	236
Adjusted R squared	0.092	0.228

[5] Because newspaper coverage usually lags one day behind events, we also code the day following the achievement as 1.

*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01; OLS regression models with robust standard errors

Table 4 robustness checks

In this section we report several other specifications for the regression models in Table 4. While we reported an OLS model with robust standard errors, there are several other specifications that one might have used. The main results from Table 4 are robust across the specifications. First though, we show the full Table 4 results in Table A8, reporting the coefficients for all newspaper and bill level fixed effects.

Table A8: Full reporting of coefficient estimates for Table 4

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Bipartisan	1.991* (1.059)	1.540* (0.904)	1.818* (0.963)
USA Today		-6.503** (0.755)	-6.202** (0.766)
Washington Post		0.753 (0.937)	0.733 (0.936)
Wall Street Journal		-6.047*** (0.739)	-5.992*** (0.747)
CARES			-1.608 (1.403)
CARES II			-1.297 (0.795)
Coronabus			-2.371** (1.199)
Checks			-4.970*** (1.665)
Corona Prep			0.772 (1.507)
Families First			-1.442 (1.152)
PPP 1			-1.361 (1.702)
PPP 2			-0.505 (1.525)
PPP 3			3.427 (4.837)
Constant	7.213*** (0.371)	9.132*** (0.729)	10.206*** (0.959)
Adjusted R squared	0.007	0.217	0.219

*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01; OLS regression models with robust standard errors; N= 392 for all models

Second, we report the same OLS models but cluster standard errors at the newspaper level (Table A9) and the legislative effort level (Table A10). Clustering by newspaper source inflates the standard errors and pushes the key result (Bipartisan) for Models 2 and 3 slightly above the $p < 0.1$ significance level ($p = 0.14$ for both models). Clustering by legislative effort decreases the size of the standard errors, leaving the key result for Models 1 and 3 significant at the $p < 0.05$ level and the key result for Model 2 significant at the $p < 0.1$ level. While the appropriate *a priori* decisions about whether to cluster standard errors and on which level to cluster are unclear (especially since fixed effects are included for both the newspaper and the legislative), the results do not significantly change regardless of the specification. Both versions of Model 1 return results that are significant at the $p < 0.05$ level and all versions of Models 2 and 3 return p values that are within the 0.04 to 0.14 range.

Table A9: OLS models with SEs clustered by newspaper

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Bipartisan	1.991** (0.920)	1.540 (1.035)	1.818 (1.230)
USA Today		-6.503*** (0.071)	-6.214*** (0.202)
Washington Post		0.753*** (0.010)	0.733*** (0.075)
Wall Street Journal		-6.047*** (0.034)	-5.992*** (0.126)
CARES			-1.608 (1.653)
CARES II			-1.297 (0.819)
Coronabus			-2.371*** (0.886)
Checks			-4.970* (2.917)
Corona Prep			0.772 (2.172)
Families First			-1.442 (1.519)
PPP 1			-1.361** (0.596)
PPP 2			-0.505

			(0.827)
PPP 3			3.427 (5.892)
Constant	7.213*** (1.856)	9.132*** (0.162)	10.206*** (0.672)
Adjusted R squared	0.007	0.217	0.219
*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01; OLS regression models with standard errors clustered by newspaper; N= 392 for all models			

Table A10: OLS models with SEs clustered by legislative effort

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Bipartisan	1.991** (1.944)	1.540* (0.842)	1.860** (0.873)
USA Today		-6.503*** (1.124)	-6.202*** (1.107)
Washington Post		0.753 (0.615)	0.733 (0.630)
Wall Street Journal		-6.047*** (0.965)	-5.992*** (0.993)
CARES			-1.608*** (0.206)
CARES II			-1.297*** (0.098)
Coronabus			-2.371*** (0.157)
Checks			-4.970*** (0.082)
Corona Prep			0.772** (0.350)
Families First			-1.442*** (0.443)
PPP 1			-1.361*** (0.235)
PPP 2			-0.505 (0.638)
PPP 3			3.427*** (0.310)
Constant	7.213*** (0.415)	9.132*** (0.967)	10.206*** (0.610)
Adjusted R squared	0.007	0.217	0.219
*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01; OLS regression models with standard errors clustered by bill; N= 392 for all models			

Third, we use tobit regression to account for left censoring (the page number cannot be lower than 1) and right censoring (the page number is never greater than 28, indicating the finite

number of pages that can be included in the A section) in the dependent variable. We report the tobit models with robust standard errors (Table A11), standard errors clustered by newspaper (Table A12), and standard errors clustered by legislative effort (Table A13). The tobit model results are almost exactly the same as the OLS model results. All of the bipartisanship indicators in Table A11 have positive coefficients that are significant at the $p < 0.1$ level. In Table A12, the bipartisanship coefficients in Models 2 and 3 are, again, just above the $p < 0.1$ threshold ($p = 0.15$ for Model 2 and 0.13 for Model 3). In Table A13, all three models return bipartisanship coefficients that are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level or lower.

Table A11: Tobit models with robust SEs

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Bipartisan	2.326* (1.274)	1.811* (1.095)	2.151* (1.154)
USA Today		-6.602*** (1.059)	-6.147*** (1.072)
Washington Post		0.737 (1.143)	0.676 (1.133)
Wall Street Journal		-6.307*** (0.972)	-6.307*** (0.974)
CARES			-2.207 (1.803)
CARES II			-1.080 (0.964)
Coronabus			-3.028** (1.541)
Checks			-7.614** (3.315)
Corona Prep			1.560 (1.640)
Families First			-1.558 (1.646)
PPP 1			-2.195 (2.225)
PPP 2			0.174 (1.633)
PPP 3			4.292 (4.803)
Constant	6.022*** (0.460)	8.196*** (0.913)	9.370*** (1.179)
Log Likelihood	-1,160.652	-1,128.605	-1,122.630

Wald Test	0.007	0.217	0.219

*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01

Tobit models with robust standard errors; N= 392 for all 3 models

A12: Tobit models with SEs clustered by newspaper

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Bipartisan	2.326**	1.811	2.151
	(1.165)	(1.265)	(1.393)
USA Today		-6.602***	-6.147***
		(0.121)	(0.359)
Washington Post		0.737***	0.676
		(0.005)	(0.078)
Wall Street Journal		-6.307***	-6.307***
		(0.033)	(0.112)
CARES			-2.207
			(1.770)
CARES II			-1.080
			(0.834)
Coronabus			-3.028***
			(1.095)
Checks			-7.614
			(5.503)
Corona Prep			1.560
			(2.180)
Families First			-1.558
			(1.614)
PPP 1			-2.195***
			(0.740)
PPP 2			0.174
			(0.814)
PPP 3			4.292
			(5.939)
Constant	6.022***	8.196***	9.370***
	(1.653)	(0.503)	(0.604)
Log Likelihood	-1,160.652	-1,128.605	-1,122.630
Wald Test	0.007	0.217	0.219

*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01

Tobit models with standard errors clustered by newspaper; N= 392 for all 3 models

A13: Tobit models with SEs clustered by legislative effort

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Bipartisan	2.326**	1.811**	2.151***
	(0.941)	(0.801)	(0.823)
USA Today		-6.602***	-6.147***
		(1.354)	(1.357)

Washington Post		0.737 (0.602)	0.676 (0.594)
Wall Street Journal		-6.307*** (1.058)	-6.307*** (1.071)
CARES			-2.207*** (0.193)
CARES II			-1.080*** (0.111)
Coronabus			-3.028*** (0.155)
Checks			-7.614*** (0.233)
Corona Prep			1.560*** (0.343)
Families First			-1.558*** (0.420)
PPP 1			-2.195*** (0.241)
PPP 2			0.174 (0.623)
PPP 3			4.292*** (0.313)
Constant	6.022*** (0.409)	8.196*** (0.065)	9.370*** (0.062)
Log Likelihood	-1,160.652	-1,128.605	-1,122.630
Wald Test	0.007	0.217	0.219

*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01

Tobit models with standard errors clustered by bill; N= 392 for all 3 models

Finally, we report an OLS model that includes journalist fixed effects to control for the possibility that some journalists are systematically positioned on certain pages in the paper. Our model included a dummy variable for each of the 123 journalists who were on an article byline. With fixed effects included and robust standard errors, the bipartisanship indicator variable returns a similarly sized coefficient as the models from Table 4 but it is not statistically significant at the conventional level (p = 0.20).

A14: OLS model with journalist fixed effects

	(1)
Bipartisan	1.489 (1.169)
Constant	7.148*** (1.148)

Journalist fixed effects?	Yes
Observations	392
Adjusted R squared	0.206
*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01; OLS regression model with robust standard errors	

Table A15 shows the coefficient estimates for each of the 123 journalist level fixed effects from the model reported in Table A14. Because of the large number of results, this table is in a different format than those above.

Table A15: Full results for regression model with journalist fixed effects

Bipartisan	1.489
	(1.169)
`Collins, Michael`	-3.431**
	(1.335)
`Wu, Nicholas`	-1.925
	(1.189)
`Cowley, Stacy`	
`Stein, Jeff`	1.951
	(1.465)
`Werner, Erica`	2.403
	(1.494)
`Cochrane, Emily`	0.632
	(1.550)
`Rosenberg, Eli`	-2.733
	(6.086)
`Smialek, Jeanna`	3.481
	(4.853)
`Montague, Zach`	
`Hulse, Carl`	6.166***
	(2.796)
`Kane, Paul`	0.336
	(2.063)
`Deerwester, Jayme`	
`Ryzik, Melena`	13.852***
	(1.148)
`Tankersley, Jim`	1.400
	(1.963)
`Kaplan, Thomas`	3.697
	(2.619)
`Lynch, David J`	10.459***
	(2.060)
`Elbeshbishi, Sarah`	-5.148*
	(1.148)
`Long, Heather`	1.627

	(3.367)
`Gearan, Anne`	0.901
	(1.738)
`Romm, Tony`	-0.313
	(2.900)
`Thomas, Ken`	-2.329**
	(0.996)
`Peterson, Kristina`	-2.161
	(0.598)
`Broadwater, Luke`	3.714***
	(2.302)
`King, Ledyard`	-2.556**
	(1.155)
`Brown, Dalvin`	
`Kim, Seung Min`	-1.623*
	(2.367)
`Swenson, Kyle`	
`Mary Williams Walsh`	-6.148***
	(1.148)
`Parlapiano, Alicia`	2.852
	(1.148)
`Siegel, Rachel`	-4.578***
	(2.537)
`Duehren, Andrew`	-2.649
	(0.830)
`DeBonis, Mike`	-0.044
	(2.038)
`Hayes, Christal`	-2.149***
	(1.186)
`Grandoni, Dino`	-5.824***
	(3.952)
`O'Donnell, Paul`	
`Flitter, Emily`	
`Irwin, Neil`	
`Groppe, Maureen`	-1.591
	(1.227)
`Edmondson, Catie`	-0.678
	(3.499)
`Wagner, John`	0.791
	(3.538)
`Mann, Ted`	-3.987
	(0.824)
`Claire Cain Miller`	0.852
	(1.148)
`Green, Erica L`	5.852***
	(5.849)
`Linskey, Annie`	1.852
	(1.148)
`Jonathan O'Connell andrew Van Dam`	2.385*

	(5.146)
`Crowley, Michael`	
`Rappeport, Alan`	-2.104*
	(2.880)
`Shaban, Hamza`	10.852***
	(1.148)
`Cummings, William`	-4.637
	(1.577)
`Costa, Robert`	-0.530
	(4.118)
`Bade, Rachael`	2.392**
	(3.104)
`Andrews, Natalie`	-2.182*
	(0.883)
`Ryan, Tracy`	-2.989***
	(1.241)
`Timiraos, Nick`	-4.247***
	(1.248)
`Rogers, Katie`	8.220***
	(1.191)
`Tergesen, Anne`	
`Richards, Erin`	-6.148***
	(1.148)
`Jamerson, Joshua`	-1.317**
	(0.762)
`O'Connell, Jonathan`	5.972***
	(4.943)
`Davidson, Paul`	
`Olorunnipa, Toluse`	-3.148***
	(1.148)
`Newmyer, Tory`	9.852***
	(1.148)
`Schlesinger, Jacob M`	-0.148
	(1.148)
`Rubin, Richard`	-1.358
	(0.817)
`Hughes, Siobhan`	-2.149*
	(0.901)
`Davidson, Kate`	-1.351
	(0.911)
`Lucey, Catherine`	0.012
	(0.824)
`Karni, Annie`	6.839***
	(1.801)
`Chaney, Sarah`	-3.966***
	(0.648)
`Fandos, Nicholas`	-2.946
	(1.996)
`Restuccia, Andrew`	-2.351**
	(0.825)
`Phillips, Amber`	-5.148***

	(1.148)
`Haberman, Maggie`	0.013
	(1.414)
`Baker, Peter`	
`Yoder, Eric`	-3.148
	(1.148)
`Puko, Timothy`	-0.819
	(0.953)
`Mitchell, Josh`	-2.469
	(1.119)
`Kiernan, Paul`	-4.311**
	(1.702)
`Wise, Lindsay`	-1.084
	(0.638)
`Ballhaus, Rebecca`	-0.987
	(0.824)
`Radnofsky, Louise`	6.852***
	(1.148)
`Sheryl Gay Stolberg`	-3.208***
	(4.254)
`Bhattarai, Abha`	12.852***
	(1.148)
`Weiland, Noah`	-0.987
	(1.414)
`Bogage, Jacob`	-2.148
	(1.148)
`Jeff Stein andrew Van Dam`	15.585***
	(6.189)
`Gupta, Alisha Haridasani`	
`Benner, Katie`	
`Alyssa Fowers andrew Van Dam`	-7.775***
	(3.203)
`Dawsey, Josh`	-1.587*
	(2.754)
`Demirjian, Karoun`	-4.803
	(1.700)
`Subramanian, Courtney`	-1.931
	(1.789)
`Sanger-Katz, Margot`	
`Yeganeh Torbati`	10.028***
	(2.663)
`Sullivan, Sean`	
`Gregg, Aaron`	10.467***
	(5.053)
`Fuchs, Hailey`	6.738**
	(2.451)
`Collins, Eliza`	-0.732
	(0.570)
`Sider, Alison`	-5.476

	(1.241)
`Parker, Ashley`	
`Davis, Bob`	0.203
	(1.128)
`Calfas, Jennifer`	-5.286
	(1.490)
`Omeokwe, Amara`	-2.807
	(0.807)
`Bachman, Rachel`	
`Aratani, Lori`	6.499
	(1.363)
`Bailey, Philip M`	0.409
	(1.227)
`Shear, Michael D`	-7.548
	(2.172)
`Sullivan, Eileen`	
`Zitner, Aaron`	-3.830
	(0.837)
`Rein, Lisa`	-3.476
	(3.272)
`Fritze, John`	-0.660
	(1.704)
`Fowers, Alyssa`	
`Merle, Renae`	-8.007
	(2.591)
`Abutaleb, Yasmeen`	9.114
	(2.322)
`Eavis, Peter`	
`Herndon, Astead W`	-10.494
	(2.458)
`Lazo, Alejandro`	
`Morath, Eric`	0.371
	(0.841)
`Hudson, John`	-4.512
	(2.755)
`Sun, Lena H`	4.499
	(1.363)
`Rappeport, Ala`	
`Haberman, Ma`	
`Schechner, S`	
Constant	7.148***
	(1.148)
Observations	392
R2	0.407
Adjusted R2	0.206

```
Residual Std. Error                     6.159 (df = 292)
F Statistic                         2.027*** (df = 99; 292)
=============================================================
Note:                             *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
```