

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

As Seen on TV? How Gatekeeping Makes the U.S. House Seem More Extreme

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Today's news media environment incentivizes gatekeeping practices that lead to a bias toward content containing partisan conflict and ideological extremity. Using a content analysis of 46,218 cable and broadcast television news transcripts from the 109th through 112th Congresses, we examined the frequency with which members of Congress appeared on cable and broadcast news. When we modelled on-air statements by members of Congress as a function of legislator and institutional characteristics, we revealed a gatekeeping function that vastly overrepresents extreme partisans on both sides of the aisle. The effect is largely consistent for network and cable outlets alike, suggesting that gatekeeping processes under both market and advocacy models bias content towards the extreme and conflictual. This finding is particularly important in light of recent evidence linking media-driven misperceptions about polarization to partisan-ideological sorting and negative political affect in the electorate.

Keywords: polarization, U.S. Congress, cable news, gatekeeping, ideology

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Today's media environment rewards partisan conflict and ideological extremity. Changes to the media marketplace, brought about by the arrival of cable and the Internet, enabled the re-emergence of partisan news and intensified existing structural biases in the news (Hamilton, 2004). One consequence of these changes was a shift from a predominately market-driven media environment, in which most mainstream news outlets in the United States operated according to a market-based model of journalism, to one in which many emergent outlets followed an advocacy model (Schudson, 1998). Despite the fact that the U.S. press operated under the advocacy model as a partisan press for most of its history,¹ the partial reversion back to party-based advocacy in the newsroom sparked criticism and controversy, grounded in concerns about echo chambers and the polarizing effects of partisan bias in the news

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(e.g., Baum & Groeling, 2008; Levendusky, 2013a; Stroud, 2010). In the time since, these concerns grew in tandem with rising levels of political polarization among partisan elites in Congress and an increasing dislike of partisans on the other side in the mass public (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Lelkes, Sood, & Iyengar, 2017).

The organizational and institutional structures underlying both advocacy and market-based models of news media can foster media bias and political polarization. Biases in news content may be a product of the economic incentives underlying market-based models or an advocacy orientation adopted by individual journalists or news organizations (Cook, 1989). Gatekeeping practices of news selection (Althaus et al., 2011; Searles, Ginn, & Nickens, 2016; Soroka, 2012), among other journalistic routines driven by market-based models of news, distort the information received by the public (Cook, 2005; Hamilton, 2004). Elite polarization leads to mass polarization by clarifying distinctions between the parties and empowering ordinary citizens to determine which party they prefer (Hetherington, 2001; Levendusky, 2009, 2010). For most citizens, however, exposure to political elites occurs primarily through mass-mediated products, created through well-documented norms and routines (Ahler, 2014; Althaus et al., 2011; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Prior, 2013). Congressional elites seek media coverage to win elections and inform the public about policy (Arnold, 2004; Groeling, 2010), while news outlets view government officials as indispensable sources who “officiate” the news (Althaus, 2003; Wagner & Gruszczyński, 2018). Media preferences for partisan content may amplify elite polarization, encouraging audiences to adopt more extreme positions (Ahler, 2014; Stroud, 2010) and feel more hostile toward the opposing party (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2015).

We argue that gatekeeping processes under either model may result in systematic biases in the portrayal of political elites. While many are concerned about the potential for partisan news to polarize, the high-choice nature of today’s media environment often blurs the incentive structures and routines underlying both market-based (i.e., ostensibly neutral) and advocacy models of news (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Media gatekeeping of political elites may foster mass polarization in an already ideologically sorted public that is susceptible to partisan signaling (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Darr & Dunaway, 2018; Holbert et al., 2010; Levendusky, 2013a; Prior, 2013; Stroud, 2011). In mainstream and partisan news, media content may not require echo chambers or partisan selective exposure to polarize, given high levels of mainstream news exposure today (Flaxman et al., 2016; Guess et al., 2018; Weeks et al., 2016).

We extend studies of gatekeeping to broadcast and cable television news portrayals of U.S. House members. Using a content analysis of 46,218 cable and broadcast news transcripts, we assessed media representations of U.S. House members by comparing the ideological distribution of all members of the House to the distribution of members who made televised comments (Wagner & Gruszczyński, 2018).² Controlling for legislator and institutional characteristics, we investigated whether ideology and extremity explain cable and broadcast news appearances during the 109th through 112th Congresses (2005 to 2013), in a particularly polarizing period in

recent history that was characterized by a rapidly expanding media choice environment.³ We included both mainstream and partisan outlets to examine economic (i.e., under the market model) and political (i.e., under the advocacy model) gatekeeping practices across news organizations. We compared the ideological distribution of the members featured most often on television to that of the entire chamber (Carroll et al., 2011). We expected news media to air more statements from ideologically extreme members of Congress, leading to systematic differences between the ideologies of those elites portrayed in the news and the actual ideological distribution in Congress.

We found a gatekeeping function that overrepresents extreme partisans on both sides of the aisle, across most network and cable outlets alike. These findings of substantial gatekeeping bias are consistent with those found by Althaus et al. (2011), Soroka (2012), and Searles et al. (2016). In the polarized, two-party U.S. system, gatekeeping rewards partisan extremity across media outlets. Our finding links media-driven misperceptions about polarization to mass partisan-ideological sorting and negative political affect (Wagner & Gruszczynski, 2018).

Gatekeeping as structural and political media bias

Gatekeeping is the process through which journalists make decisions about what or whom to cover, determining which stories and sources fill the limited news hole (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Soroka, 2012). Uniform news selection criteria lead to “systematic differences between news content and the real world” (Soroka, 2012, p. 515). Under both market and advocacy models, gatekeeping operates within the institutional and market constraints of news organizations to attract and retain audiences (Cook, 2005; Hamilton, 2004; Napoli, 2003). The journalistic model a news organization follows influences its gatekeeping practices.

Gatekeeping under market constraints

Under the market model, exemplified by broadcast news, the gatekeeping function prioritizes stories that appeal to mass audiences (Schudson, 1998), biasing content toward negativity (Lamberson & Soroka, 2018; Soroka, 2014), conflict (Hitt & Searles, 2018; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), proximity, novelty, and timeliness (Darr, 2018; Searles et al., 2016). Market forces affect the depth and quality of news coverage (Dunaway, 2008; Hamilton, 2004; Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004; Napoli, 2003), because market-based gatekeeping decisions are made to appeal to the largest possible portion of the market audience (Hamilton, 2004; Schudson, 1998). Coupled with the news media’s bias towards official sources and strategic coverage (Althaus, 2003; Hitt & Searles, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2004; Wagner & Gruszczynski, 2018), we expect the gatekeeping function to operate through selecting which members’ statements would be aired on news programs, giving preference to members most likely to reflect conflict, contention, and competition between the two major parties. Gatekeeping under the market model would

lead to the expectation that mainstream, “neutral,” national broadcast networks would air more statements from ideologically extreme House members than from moderates.

H1: On broadcast news networks, ideologically extreme House members have more opportunities to speak on air, relative to their moderate counterparts.

Gatekeeping may function differently for those cable news networks that operate under the market model, such as CNN, due to a higher demand for news content (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; Hamilton, 2004) and a more limited market share (Webster, 2014). Cable outlets run on a 24-hour news cycle, which intensifies the demand on journalists to find news, and to manufacture it when there is none to be found (Cook, 2005; Kuypers, 2002). These dynamics also incentivize political elites to attempt to control the news cycle (e.g., Kioussis & Strömbäck, 2010), amplifying adversarial relations between the parties, as well as between politicians and the press. Cable capitalizes on criticism and controversy more intensely than broadcast news, inviting opportunities for on-air conflict through personality-based programs and talking-head debates. The bias toward ideologically extreme members of Congress, therefore, was expected to be more evident among cable news outlets, relative to the broadcast networks.

H2: The gatekeeping effect on ideological extremity should be stronger for market-model cable outlets than broadcast networks: cable channel depictions of House members should reflect more polarization, relative to broadcast network depictions.

Gatekeeping in the advocacy model

In the U.S., the partisan cable news networks are closer to the advocacy model of journalism than the broadcast networks and CNN, which claim professional norms of objectivity.⁴ These advocacy-based outlets, such as Fox News and MSNBC, should cater to partisan audiences, leading to partisan gatekeeping (Schudson, 1998). Partisanship is reflected in the market model as well; even neutral news outlets choose content in line with the dominant, partisan preferences in the market, when they know them (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010). Though the modal viewer for Fox News or MSNBC is outside the nation’s political middle, it is unclear how in-party members of the House may be depicted. Partisan outlets may show in-party elites that broadly reflect the party’s ideology, or show extreme in-party members to reflect the stronger preferences of partisan cable news viewers (Peterson, Goel, & Iyengar, 2019). Our expectation for depictions of out-party House members in partisan media was more straightforward: team-minded partisans love to hate their opponents (Mason, 2016) and to vilify out-partisans by portraying them as extreme (Levendusky, 2013a).

H3: Partisan outlets will portray an array of out-party elites, reflecting an ideological distribution more extreme than the distribution in the real-world chamber.

Explaining the distributional approach

A content analysis would allow us to discern differences between mediated portrayals and other indicators of real-world phenomena (Soroka, 2012), yet would not identify the full range of options from which news organizations can choose when deciding what to cover. Several studies have compared real-world events to coverage (Groeling & Kernell, 1998): for example, Althaus et al. (2011) compared *New York Times* reports of war deaths to Department of Defense data, and Sui et al. (2017) compared news coverage of terrorist events to a database of all such events worldwide. The distributional approach illustrates media selection biases' distortions of real-world information (Soroka, 2012). Soroka (2012) compared the distribution of story tones in *New York Times* stories on unemployment to changes in the actual unemployment rate. Searles et al. (2016) compared coverage of presidential election polls on Fox News, MSNBC, CNN, and the broadcast networks against daily releases of actual polls, finding systematic differences between the picture conveyed by the media and the one revealed by looking at the totality of polls.

The gatekeeping functions of broadcast and cable news outlets should, therefore, distort media depictions of the ideological composition of Congress in systematic ways, as formalized in Soroka's (2012) description of the gatekeeping effect as $M = RW * G$, where M represents media content, RW represents real-world indicators,⁵ and G is the gatekeeping function. We were interested in comparing the real-world (RW) and the mediated (M) distributions of House member ideologies and ideological extremities. Partisan and mass market preferences should lead to a gatekeeping function (G) that, in most cases, prefers ideological extremity to moderation. We used the distributional approach to assess H1, examining whether the gatekeeping function shifted the bimodal distribution of House member ideologies toward the extremes on the three major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC). We assessed H2 by examining whether the gatekeeping effect was stronger for market-model cable outlets, relative to the broadcast networks, and we assessed H3 by examining how advocacy-model cable networks (Fox News and MSNBC) portrayed politicians from the opposing ideology.

Data and methods

We relied on two main data sets. The first contains data about each of the voting members of the 109th ($n = 440$), 110th ($n = 448$), 111th ($n = 445$), and 112th ($n = 445$) U.S. Houses of Representatives. These data include dynamic, weighted nominal three-step estimation (DW-NOMINATE) ideological scores, based on members' voting histories (Carroll et al., 2011). The second data set captures the distribution of congressional ideology on television, created from a content analysis of transcripts from national broadcast and cable television news programs occurring between 3 January 2005 and 3 January 2013, the full terms of these four Congresses.⁶ We collected data on each member's aired statements on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, using a content analysis of news transcripts in LexisNexis. Using

a search string for each member in the sample, we performed 1777 searches, yielding a total of 91,083 transcripts: 19,749 for the 109th Congress; 17,640 for the 110th; 26,209 for the 111th; and 27,485 for the 112th.⁷ The results for each member were saved in a .html format and analyzed using BeautifulSoup, an open source html scraping program.

Broadcast and cable television news transcripts are well suited for computer-aided content analysis, because they follow reliable formatting procedures. For example, transcripts for CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC identify each speaker on first reference by his or her first name, last name, title (if available and/or appropriate), and a colon; second and subsequent identifications of that speaker include only the speaker's last name (accompanied by a first initial if more than one speaker with the same last name is present) and a colon; and first and subsequent identifications are presented in all capital letters.

An analysis of the 91,083 identified transcripts, automated using a commissioned Python script that provided the html scraper with relevant parameters, proceeded in two stages. First, the transcripts for each member were examined for speakers by last name, and the first names associated with each speaker with that last name were identified. First names that clearly referenced the member were recorded, while ambiguous ones were checked manually and then recorded. For example, an analysis for Representative Rahm Emanuel returned four first names associated with a speaker with the last name Emanuel: "Rep.," "Rahm," "Michael," and "Mike." Both "Rep." and "Rahm" meant Representative Emanuel, while "Michael" and "Mike" referenced a Fox News correspondent; only the first names "Rep." and "Rahm" were recorded for the second-stage analysis. By excluding all transcripts in which no member spoke, this first stage analysis winnowed the total number of transcripts in the analysis to 46,218, including 8,656 for the 109th Congress; 9,908 for the 110th Congress; 13,238 for the 111th Congress; and 14,416 for the 112th Congress.

In the second stage, the relevant first names were included in the script parameters and the transcripts for each member were reexamined, analyzing only the statements made by the actual representative. The Python script directed the html scraper to record the speaker's name, the date of the statement, and the network on which the statement appeared. Data corresponded to a total of 243,205 statements (45,545 for the 109th Congress; 47,981 for the 110th Congress; 68,420 for the 111th Congress; and 81,259 for the 112th Congress). Once these files were combined, the data were transformed from the unit of observation (the individual statement) to the unit of analysis (the individual member in each Congress; $n = 1778$).

Applying the distributional approach

We began by comparing the real-world distribution of member ideology to the mediated distribution of member ideology. There are two main distinctions between other distributional approaches and ours. First, we examined gatekeeping effects at

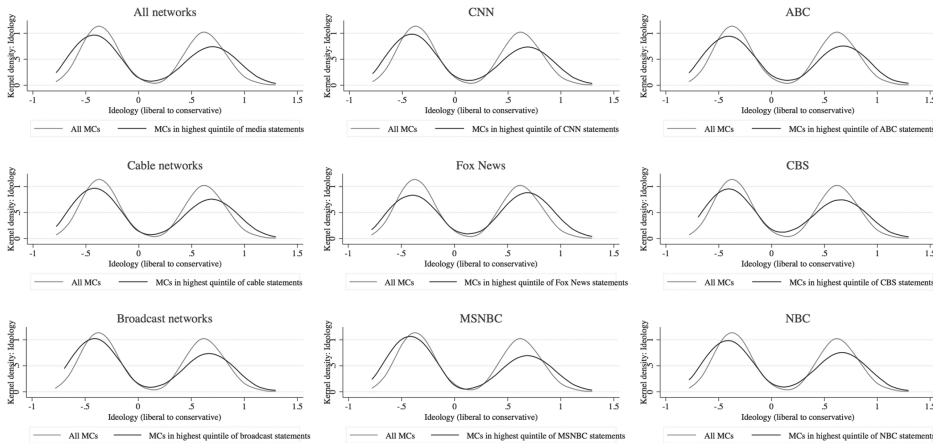
the member level, examining selections about which member statements—not stories or topics—were aired on news programs. Focusing on the members depicted empowered us to explore coverage of Congressional polarization using a distributional approach, allowing us to avoid our own selection biases (Althaus et al., 2011; Soroka, 2012). Our distribution of information from the mediated world was comprised of a subset of the same set of actors underlying our “real-world” distribution of information. Journalists select which members to feature on air, based on what they know about the member. Any expectations about the particular statements members will make are based on that knowledge and particular member traits (e.g., party, ideology, past positions).

Our first measure of interest was members’ on-air “statements” on broadcast and cable news programs. This measure captured media standing (Tresch, 2009): coverage that confers the recipient with a voice to explain, address, or justify his or her policies, issues, or actions. Representatives “made a statement” on television when their statements were covered on air.⁸ Next, we assessed member ideology and ideological extremism using DW-NOMINATE scores (Carroll et al., 2011), which score members’ ideologies on a continuum from -1 (extremely liberal) to $+1$ (extremely conservative), based on an analysis of their roll call votes. Scores for member ideology were converted into quintiles, where the most liberal members were in the first quintile, moderates were in the third quintile, and the most conservative members were in the fifth quintile. We operationalized extremity by taking the absolute value of the ideology score. These extremity scores were also converted into quintiles: the first quintile contained the most moderate and the fifth contained the most extreme members.

Figure 1 contains kernel density plots of the distributions of all members’ DW-NOMINATE ideology scores across the House chamber, against those members classified in the highest quintile of number of televised statements. The distributions are grouped by category (all, cable, and broadcast) in the left column, the three major cable networks (Fox, CNN, and MSNBC) in the center column, and the three major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) in the right column.⁹

The ideological distribution of Congress, portrayed by the gray line in each distribution graph in Figure 1, is bimodal, with a left peak around the ideology score of $-.4$ and a right peak around $.6$. The height of the distribution denotes the proportion of members of Congress with that score. The left-side peak is higher across most networks, as in Congress as a whole, but the right-side peak is wider: in other words, there are more liberals concentrated around one point on the ideological scale, but more conservatives are located further from zero.

Members in the top quintile (i.e., the top 20%) of televised statements are portrayed by the black line in each graph. Those who spoke most often on television were more extreme than Congress overall, as shown by the fact that the left and right peaks of the black line are further from the center than Congress as a whole



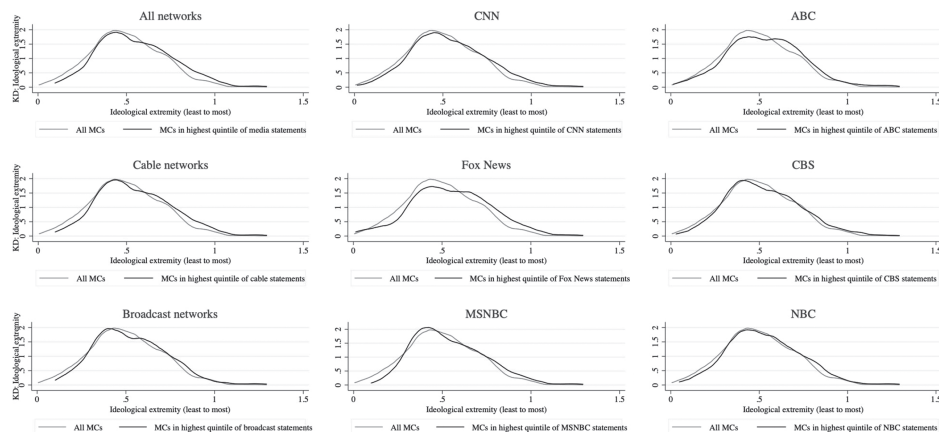
Note. Ideological scores on x-axis. Differences assessed by Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests, with full results in Table A1.1 of section 1 of the Supplemental Appendix.

Figure 1 Distributions of number of televised statements by DW-NOMINATE ideology score: totals, cable networks, and broadcast networks. DW-NOMINATE = dynamic, weighted nominal three-step estimation; MC = member of congress.

(the gray line). There were more televised statements by extreme members and fewer statements by moderate members across all networks and network types. The similarity between networks is striking, particularly across the three broadcast networks. CNN’s distribution resembles the broadcast networks more than the other cable networks. The left-side peak for MSNBC is much taller than for other networks, indicating more quotes from liberals. The opposite is true of Fox News, whose right-side peak is higher than its left-side peak, uniquely among the networks and in contrast with the House distribution.

We conducted Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests of equal distributions for each of the comparisons in Figure 1 to discern whether the distributions of members with high volumes of speaking opportunities were significantly different from those of the entire chamber. In the case of each cell in Figure 1, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests indicated the differences between distributions were statistically distinct from zero in all cases, providing some support for H1.¹⁰ Gatekeeping in television news distorts our picture of the overall ideology of Congress.

The graphs in Figure 2, presenting the distance from zero of each member’s DW-NOMINATE score, show that more extreme members of Congress were more likely to make statements on television. The black line (members in the top quintile of media appearances) was shifted noticeably right of the gray line (all members) across nearly all networks. The cable news networks were much more likely to air comments from extreme members and less likely to air statements by moderates. The distributions in Figure 2 are statistically significant in the Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests, except for the total broadcast (against our expectations in H1), CBS, and NBC statements.



Note. Distance from zero of ideological scores on x-axis. Differences assessed by Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests, with full results in Table A1.1 of section 1 of the Supplemental Appendix.

Figure 2 Distributions of number of televised statements by ideological extremity (distance from zero, DW-NOMINATE score): totals, cable networks, and broadcast networks. DW-NOMINATE = dynamic, weighted nominal three-step estimation; MC = member of congress.

Modeling member statements

Figures 1 and 2 show that there are significant differences between the ideological makeup of Congress and the mediated version encountered by the public. Are these differences explained by news values, as predicted by our theory? To account for the dispersion of the data, we utilized Poisson regression models that estimated the number of speaking opportunities afforded to each individual member as a function of ideology, extremism, and numerous member traits and characteristics: their institutional power, whether they had recently run for another office, distinctiveness, and their legislative and media activity, each of which has been identified as an important predictor of House member coverage (see Arnold, 2004; Cook, 1986, 1989).¹¹

News organizations assign news values on the basis of institutional power. Senior members and those who hold leadership positions in the chamber, as well as those in committees and/or subcommittees, tend to receive more network television news coverage (Cook, 1986; Waismel-Manor & Tsifti, 2011). “House leadership” captures whether a member was a Speaker of the House, Majority Leader, Majority Whip, Minority Leader, Minority Whip, chair of the Republican conference and campaign committees, or chair of the Democratic caucus, steering, and campaign committees (coded 1 if yes, 0 if otherwise). “Seniority” was operationalized as the total number of years served in the House prior to the first day of the term in which the dependent variable was measured, calculated by dividing the total number of days served by 365.

News organizations also assign news values to legislative activity (Arnold, 2004; Cook, 1986). Given that the primary purpose of the House of Representatives is to write and pass legislation, introducing and guiding legislation is newsworthy.

Further, the legislative process is an opportunity for journalists to discuss events on Capitol Hill. Members in important debates or committee proceedings earn more media coverage than their counterparts (Arnold, 2004; Cook, 1986). The data for legislative activity came from Adler and Wilkerson's Congressional Bills Project from 2005–2013 (Adler & Wilkinson, 2017). We operationalized "legislative activity" as the number of substantive bills introduced by the member, reported from committee, and voted on in the House. Representatives who purposefully seek more media coverage may also earn it through dedicating more resources to strategic communication, investing in communication teams that craft press releases, or by being available to journalists (Arnold, 2004). The effort that legislators put toward gaining media coverage is positively related to the amount of media coverage they receive (Gershon, 2012). We operationalized "media activity" as the number of news releases from members and their staffs, using the Congressional Quarterly Press Releases database, available through LexisNexis.

News outlets assign news value on the basis of familiarity, distinctiveness, novelty, timeliness, negativity, and sensationalism (Arnold, 2004; Hamilton, 2004; Iyengar et al., 2004; Soroka, 2012). Name recognition due to running for higher office or involvement in a scandal therefore adds news value to members (Arnold, 2004). We included dichotomous indicators for members running for higher office and under ethics investigations, to account for other explanations for member on-air statements.¹² Finally, Congress is characterized by an institutional history of overrepresentation of White males, making traits such as sex, race, and ethnicity associated with novelty and, therefore, newsworthiness (Lawrence & Rose, 2010). We included dummy variables for female representatives and minority representatives.

Results

Ideology

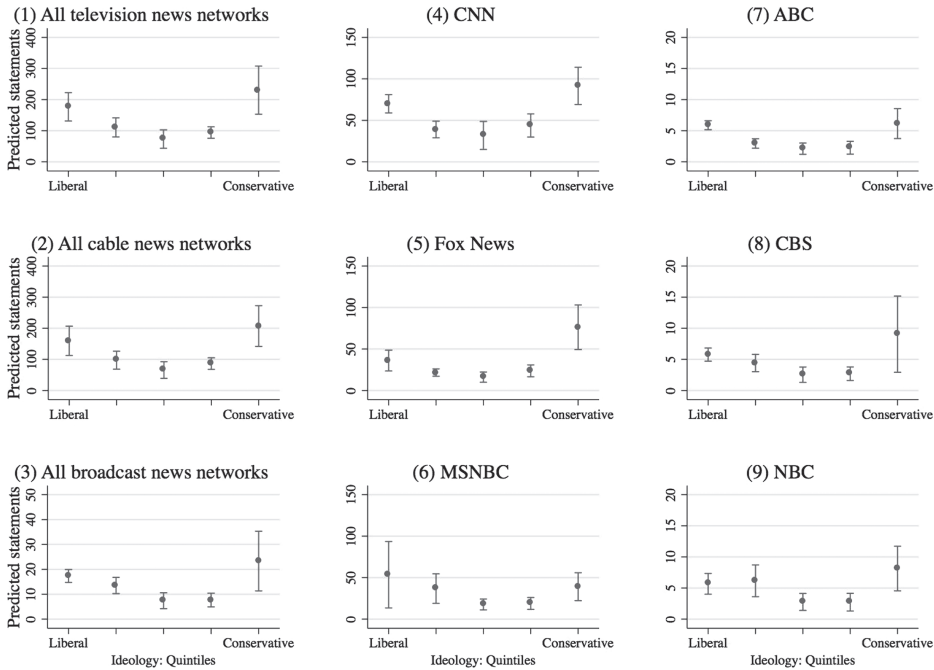
Poisson regression was used for our count-based dependent variable of member statements. We present nine models, each estimating the number of televised statements per member as a function of members' ideology, while controlling for leadership status, seniority, legislative activity, media effort, seeking higher office, involvement in an ethics scandal, and female and minority status. The models present estimates for the (a) total number of member statements across all broadcast and cable outlets examined; (b) total number of statements on the three main cable networks; and (c) total statements across the three major broadcast networks and each of the individual networks: CNN, Fox, MSNBC, ABC, CBS, and NBC, respectively.¹³

Model 1 in Table 1 provides the estimates for total counts of member statements across all six cable and broadcast networks combined. Compared to those in the most liberal (first) quintile, only being in the fifth quintile (most conservative) was positively and significantly related to the number of on-air statements. Since Poisson regression coefficients are difficult to interpret, we present these results as marginal predicted probabilities in Figure 3.

Table 1 Statements on Television From Members of Congress, by Quintiles of Ideology

	(1) All	(2) Cable	(3) Broadcast	(4) CNIN	(5) Fox	(6) MSNBC	(7) ABC	(8) CBS	(9) NBC
Ideology: liberal to conservative									
1 st quintile omitted									
2 nd quintile	0.962 (0.074)	0.922 (0.077)	1.356* (0.158)	0.987 (0.124)	0.896 (0.090)	0.846 (0.164)	0.935 (0.226)	1.376+ (0.181)	1.718** (0.201)
3 rd quintile, moderate	0.813 (0.203)	0.786 (0.205)	1.115 (0.210)	1.055 (0.278)	0.851 (0.082)	0.486 (0.234)	1.052 (0.282)	1.148 (0.345)	1.153 (0.261)
4 th quintile	0.936 (0.215)	0.938 (0.246)	0.897 (0.151)	1.334 (0.254)	1.120 (0.182)	0.471 (0.275)	0.865 (0.309)	0.996 (0.277)	0.844 (0.377)
5 th quintile, most conservative	2.296** (0.346)	2.252** (0.347)	2.714** (0.758)	2.805** (0.560)	3.571** (1.082)	0.981 (0.220)	2.341** (1.403)	3.410* (1.403)	2.459 (1.186)
Seniority	1.026* (0.010)	1.024+ (0.011)	1.042** (0.005)	1.034** (0.009)	1.019 (0.012)	1.014 (0.013)	1.040** (0.005)	1.052** (0.010)	1.033** (0.003)
Leadership position	5.118** (0.350)	4.713** (0.259)	9.325** (1.426)	4.574** (0.303)	5.615** (0.556)	4.115** (0.296)	9.432** (2.218)	7.603** (1.190)	11.286** (2.655)
Legislative activity	1.021** (0.006)	1.022** (0.006)	1.014* (0.004)	1.025** (0.006)	1.019* (0.007)	1.018 (0.012)	1.013 (0.007)	1.016** (0.003)	1.013 (0.007)
Press releases sent	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.004** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.002** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.001)
Seeking higher office	1.929* (0.389)	1.873* (0.431)	2.554** (0.274)	1.705* (0.279)	1.734* (0.302)	2.302 (0.999)	1.336 (0.479)	1.976+ (0.536)	4.068** (1.167)
Female	.829 (0.127)	.834 (0.136)	.772+ (0.086)	.781 (0.102)	.649** (0.085)	1.082 (0.274)	.903 (0.087)	.840 (0.194)	.637 (0.177)
Minority	1.146 (0.155)	1.163 (0.170)	.949 (0.147)	1.269 (0.216)	1.447 (0.431)	.865 (0.118)	.964 (0.170)	.936 (0.147)	.945 (0.259)
Ethics investigation	1.735 (0.538)	1.763 (0.525)	1.468 (0.731)	1.418 (0.415)	2.060 (0.768)	2.016+ (0.671)	2.139 (1.183)	1.132 (0.483)	1.307 (0.671)
Constant	5.759** (8.402)	47.516** (8.937)	3.525** (0.482)	14.587** (1.770)	11.747** (2.485)	23.924** (11.025)	1.100 (0.419)	1.027 (0.154)	1.404 (0.591)
Observations	1777	1777	1777	1777	1777	1777	1777	1777	1777

Note: Data used Poisson regression. Robust standard errors (clustered by Congress) are shown in parentheses. * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$, + $p < .05$.



Note. Calculated using `-marginsplot-` in Stata, using a poisson regression; see Equation 1 for full specification. Standard errors clustered by Congress.

Figure 3 Predicted marginal probabilities of televised statements of members of Congress on each of the major cable and broadcast networks, by quintiles of ideology (DW-NOMINATE scores). DW-NOMINATE = dynamic, weighted nominal three-step estimation.

In **Panel 1 of Figure 3**, we present more evidence that television networks grant speaking opportunities to those on the polar ends of the ideological continuum. The effect of being in the most conservative quintile was consistently stronger than the effect of membership in any of the three mid-range quintiles, and the effect of being most liberal was also strong. Model 2, across all cable outlets, again largely reflected the findings for total statements. Model 3 in **Table 1 (Panel 3 of Figure 3)** showed slight differences when we isolated the three major broadcast networks: the most conservative members earned more statements than somewhat conservative members and moderates, but left-leaning members earned more on-air statements than moderate members.

For CNN (Model 4), being in the most conservative quintile was positively and significantly associated with higher rates of on-air statements. The positive effect of being in the fifth quintile was stronger for everything except the effect of being in the most liberal quintile, providing some support for H2: there was more polarization on CNN than the broadcast networks. We observe a similar general pattern for Fox News: the effect of being in the most conservative ideological

quintile on member statements was positive and significant. For Fox News, the predicted number of statements for members in the most conservative quintile were more than double those of moderates. The effects of member ideology and statements on Fox News and CNN were asymmetric: being in the most liberal quintile did not garner as much coverage as being in the right-most category. Though more liberal members were those most likely to get more airings, the effect of being far left was not the same as being far right. If CNN is considered a left-leaning outlet, this could be seen as an effort to highlight out-party views as extreme.

The estimates in Model 6 revealed a key difference in gatekeeping practices on MSNBC. When compared to the baseline, most liberal category, membership in none of the other five categories significantly predicted on-air statements. Though members in the most liberal quintile had higher predicted counts than others, the effects were neither significant nor substantively large. MSNBC, though left leaning, seems to have prioritized content from the most conservative members of the House (fifth quintile) more than merely conservative members (fourth quintile), possibly in an effort to present negative exemplars to liberal audiences for criticism, supporting H3.

Among the broadcast networks, results for ABC (Model 7) revealed a familiar pattern in favor of statement opportunities for members on the polar ends of the left and right. The effect of being in either the left-most or right-most quintile was positive, significant, and substantially large. Quintiles for the far left and right had higher expected counts than all three more moderate ideology quintiles.

On CBS (Model 8), the gatekeeping preference for members on the fringe of ideology was less clear. The estimates for both the second and fifth quintiles were positively and significantly related to statement counts, compared to the baseline quintile, which represented the left-most ideological positions. Members on the far right had more statements relative to right-leaners and moderates, but did not earn more statements relative to far-left or left-leaning members. Members on the far left did not earn significantly more statements than left leaners, though they had more speaking opportunities relative to moderates.

On NBC (Model 9), being in the second quintile of ideology (somewhat liberal) was significantly related to more statements, though the coefficient for the fifth quintile was larger (though not significant, due to a large standard error).

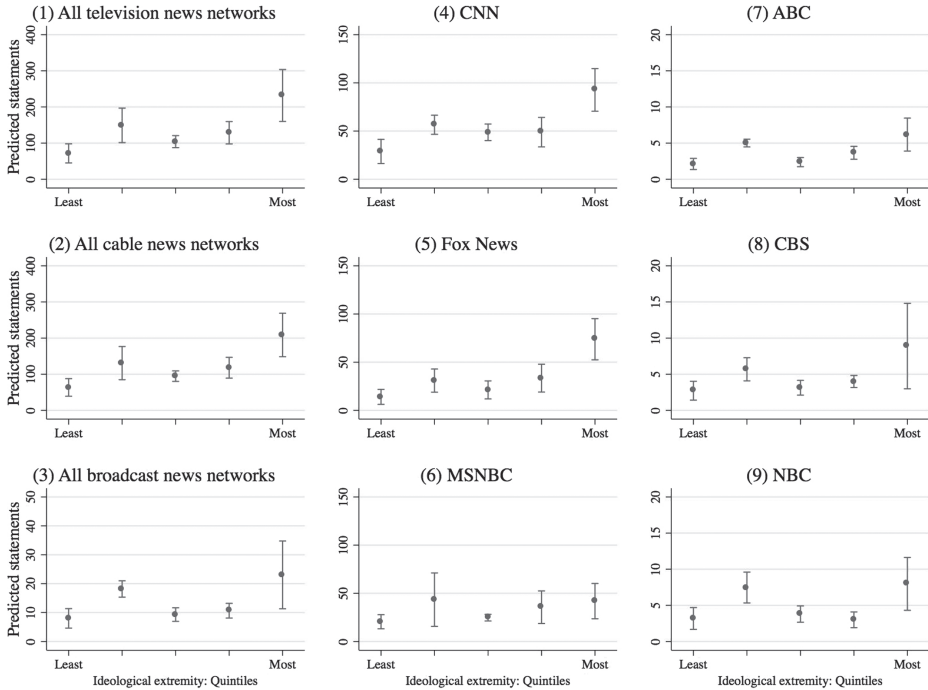
Ideological extremity

We were interested in whether ideological extremity was rewarded by television networks. We re-estimated Models 1–9 using ideological extremity (the distance from zero of a politician's DW-NOMINATE score) as the dependent variable, with Poisson regression results displayed in Table 2 and marginal predicted probabilities in Figure 4. Model 3 tested H1, while comparing the results from Models 4–6 allowed us to test H2.

Table 2 Statements on Television From Members of Congress, by Quintiles of Ideological Extremity

	(1) All	(2) Cable	(3) Broadcast	(4) CNN	(5) Fox	(6) MSNBC	(7) ABC	(8) CBS	(9) NBC
Ideology, least to most extreme									
1 st quintile omitted									
2 nd quintile	1.409 (0.302)	1.433 (0.324)	1.232 (0.272)	1.249 (0.238)	1.578 (0.485)	1.616 (0.411)	1.030 (0.216)	1.174 (0.512)	1.421** (0.148)
3 rd quintile	1.171 (0.183)	1.205 (0.209)	.927 (0.094)	1.316 (0.298)	1.257 (0.236)	1.007 (0.207)	.811 (0.144)	.906 (0.099)	1.032 (0.152)
4 th quintile	1.378+ (0.191)	1.452+ (0.213)	.854 (0.072)	1.252 (0.193)	1.946 (0.674)	1.416 (0.298)	1.103 (0.112)	.941 (0.160)	.608** (0.029)
5 th quintile, most extreme	2.996** (0.874)	3.082** (0.887)	2.350+ (0.873)	2.967** (0.930)	4.861** (1.799)	2.008+ (0.546)	2.367* (0.700)	2.787+ (1.298)	1.972 (0.747)
Seniority	1.025* (0.009)	1.023+ (0.009)	1.040** (0.005)	1.031** (0.008)	1.014 (0.011)	1.018 (0.012)	1.039** (0.005)	1.048 (0.009)	1.033** (0.004)
Leadership position	5.119** (0.431)	4.705** (0.340)	9.565** (1.476)	4.504** (0.374)	5.466** (0.644)	4.242** (0.260)	9.283** (2.070)	7.734** (1.448)	11.934** (2.442)
Legislative activity	1.021* (0.007)	1.022* (0.007)	1.014* (0.005)	1.024** (0.006)	1.019* (0.006)	1.021 (0.012)	1.014+ (0.007)	1.015** (0.004)	1.013+ (0.006)
Press releases sent	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.001)	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.002** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.001)	1.002** (0.001)
Seeking higher office	2.002** (0.362)	1.943* (0.400)	2.658** (0.250)	1.783* (0.315)	1.811** (0.285)	2.362+ (0.821)	1.339 (0.475)	2.044+ (0.595)	4.356** (1.144)
Female	.822 (0.120)	.827 (0.126)	.759+ (0.089)	.730* (0.087)	.613** (0.067)	1.205 (0.337)	.907 (0.093)	.812 (0.178)	.623+ (0.148)
Minority	1.180 (0.105)	1.206+ (0.111)	.908 (0.190)	1.142 (0.148)	1.433 (0.307)	1.143 (0.112)	1.028 (0.212)	.883 (0.173)	.838 (0.206)
Ethics investigation	1.710+ (0.440)	1.746+ (0.428)	1.382 (0.613)	1.415 (0.360)	2.047* (0.563)	1.952+ (0.574)	2.042 (1.065)	1.053 (0.394)	1.241 (0.578)
Constant	38.565** (5.671)	34.436** (5.269)	4.011** (1.106)	14.332** (3.042)	8.668** (2.625)	11.092** (1.095)	1.081 (0.358)	1.257 (0.249)	1.687 (0.572)
Observations	1777	1777	1777	1777	1777	1777	1777	1777	1777

Note: Data used Poisson regression. Robust standard errors (clustered by Congress) are shown in parentheses. * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$, + $p < .05$.



Note. Calculated using `-marginsplot-` in Stata, using a poisson regression; see Equation 1 for full specification. Standard errors clustered by Congress.

Figure 4 Predicted marginal probabilities of televised statements of members of Congress on each of the major cable and broadcast networks, by quintiles of ideological extremity (distance from zero, DW-NOMINATE scores). DW-NOMINATE = dynamic, weighted nominal three-step estimation.

In Model 1, those in the fourth or fifth quintile of ideological extremism gave significantly more televised statements. Other factors also contributed to speaking more on television, such as the number of press releases sent, seeking higher office, being in leadership, and legislative activity.

The predicted marginal effects in Panel 1 of Figure 4 demonstrate that, even when holding other legislator characteristics constant, the most extreme members of Congress got the most speaking opportunities. Model 2, across all three cable news organizations, showed nearly identical results to Model 1. Model 3, across the broadcast networks, revealed some differences relative to cable: members in the highest quintile of ideological extremism made more statements on broadcast TV than other quintiles, but the relationship was weaker ($p < .05$). These results provide some support for H1. We again observed the influence of more traditional indicators of newsworthiness as applied to legislators: legislative and press effort, seniority, seeking higher office, and holding leadership positions. Even on these mainstream news outlets, extreme members were granted more frequent speaking opportunities, relative to moderate members.

Providing more support for H2, the differences between the most and least extreme quintiles were much larger on CNN (Model 4) than on broadcast TV (Model 3), though the patterns were similar across these non-partisan, ostensibly objective news outlets. However, Fox News (Model 5) and MSNBC (Model 6) also rewarded extremity, with only the fifth quintile being statistically significant. The effect was substantially larger for Fox News (4.861; $p < .001$) than for MSNBC (2.008; $p < .05$) or CNN (2.967; $p < .001$). MSNBC and Fox News also were the only networks for which being the subject of an ethics investigation was related to the number of statements.

There were also similarities and differences between the broadcast networks. Model 7 showed that the most extreme politicians received more coverage on ABC. The data displayed in [Panel 7 of Figure 4](#) show that most extreme members were significantly more likely to appear on ABC than all but members in the second quintile. The estimates in Model 8 (CBS) also favored the most extreme. [Panel 8 of Figure 4](#) shows that the marginal effect of being in the highest quintile of extremity, relative to the other quintiles, was weaker for CBS. The estimates for NBC ([Panel 9 of Figure 4](#)) show that those in the second and fifth quintiles made higher numbers of statements, though the fifth quintile was not statistically significantly different in [Table 2](#).

The idiosyncratic preference for extremity across the broadcast networks, relative to cable, suggests some mixed support for our expectations. These findings show that the gatekeeping practices of cable outlets reflect more intense pressures for sensational, conflictual content, relative to the broadcast networks. Almost all networks favored extreme members of Congress, across cable and broadcast news outlets alike.

Discussion

Gatekeeping effects play an underappreciated role in many theories of politics. In this article, we identified how gatekeeping has affected the televised distribution of ideology in the U.S. House on the major cable and broadcast news networks, finding that these news outlets amplified the speech of the most ideologically extreme House members and provided them with far more opportunities to explain, address, and justify their positions and actions.

We found an additional way that media may polarize, beyond persuasion or attitude reinforcement. How the news can polarize has remained unresolved in previous work, given that news rarely shifts strongly held beliefs among those who consume it and rarely reaches the inattentive ([Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013](#); [Arceneaux, Johnson, & Cryderman, 2013](#); [Peterson et al., 2019](#); [Prior, 2013](#)). News media's preference for quotes from partisan representatives on the polar ends of the ideological continuum may distort perceptions of elite polarization in the mass public by sending biased information cues ([Hetherington, 2001](#); [Levendusky, 2009](#); [Wagner & Gruszczynski, 2018](#)). When elites seem more polarized and partisan distinctions are clearer ([Ahler, 2014](#)), mass polarization follows ([Darr & Dunaway, 2018](#); [Hetherington, 2001](#); [Levendusky, 2009, 2010](#)). We also advance the literature by moving beyond partisan

news and revisiting structural biases in news media that produce systematic biases in coverage. Even objective news can polarize if gatekeeping leads to a preference for extremity (Wagner & Gruszczynski, 2018).

Our study has several limitations. It remains unclear why the preference for ideological extremity has been so consistent across organizations. There are several possible explanations, however. In today's high-choice media environment, mainstream journalism is experiencing identity confusion due to the difficulty of identifying their audiences (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016; Schudson, 1998; Webster, 1998) and what news those audiences demand (Hanitzsch, 2004; Schudson, 1998). While we found differences across media organizations, broader institutional influences persist, such as the norms and routines of news making (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016).

We are not the first to recognize that gatekeeping effects are more institutional than organizational or individual (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Other news organizations, like PBS, may strive to service the audience as a trustee with a news product that is as close to a mirror as possible.¹⁴ And though the broadcast networks and major newspapers in the United States clearly operate under a market model, their training, ethics, and professional practices mean their journalism is more accurately a product of a hybrid model: somewhere between market and trustee. Even partisan outlets, while ostensibly following the advocate model, cannot separate completely from the constraints of the market or the professional ideal of the trustee.

Institutional routines persist over organizational differences because, even as journalists "adjust their 'responsibilities' to the interests of *their* specific audiences" (Hanitzsch, 2004, p. 489), it is difficult to partition today's news audiences (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016; Webster, 1998). The mass and niche partisan audiences overlap (Webster, 1998, 2014), and share news preferences for conflict, controversy, and accuracy. Journalists at partisan media organizations cannot operate entirely outside the constraints of the market. Thus, for organizations under all news models, "news values are negotiated between journalism and its audiences" (Hanitzsch, 2004, p. 490). Though journalists tend to prefer political moderation (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) and organizations like PBS strive to provide accurate and informative news without regard to ratings, the gatekeeping bias for extremity is largely consistent across these organizational forms.

Factors external to the newsroom may also influence gatekeeping processes, and we arguably have not paid sufficient theoretical attention to processes of agenda building and mediatization. The publicity-seeking efforts of House members and the parties within the chamber, and how they interact with strategic messaging from the White House, influence story selection through a negotiation of newsworthiness (Cook, 1989; Kiouisis & Strömbäck, 2010). Though we accounted for many of these characteristics in our empirical analyses, the complexities of these processes deserve much more thorough attention. For example, our analyses based on legislative votes could not differentiate sincere from symbolic voting, or determine votes designed to attract media attention. Roll call-based measures such as DW-NOMINATE invite these criticisms. The present analyses also cannot tell us the extent to which air

time for more extreme members is a product of mediatization or institutional dominance by media or by Congress, though media likely still have the upper hand in relationships with individual members (Vinson, 2013). We found that, when holding numerous member and institutional factors constant (i.e., members' seniority, leadership roles, legislative activity, press releases, seeking higher office, demographic characteristics, and suspected ethics violations), we observed a consistent selection bias favoring speaking opportunities for more extreme partisans in the House, and observed that this behavior extends to news organizations operating under market, advocate, and trustee models.

Another limitation is that our study is centered around the United States, both theoretically and empirically. This raises questions about the generalizability of our findings. Our United States focus and narrow selection of news outlets came from our interest in identifying mechanisms that would address lingering puzzles in existing work on media and polarization in the United States. We started with questions about: (a) how polarization among elites trickles down to the mass public via the media; and (b) how coverage inflates perceptions of polarization beyond its actual levels. Specifically, we wanted to identify how (and whether) media, outside of simply partisan news, could exacerbate mass polarization. While the findings we present achieved these aims, they are of limited value to our understanding of the broader influence of gatekeeping and mediatization across cultural and institutional contexts. In future work, we will incorporate cross-national variations to see whether these patterns hold across media systems and institutional configurations.

Our analyses also did not actually assess the influence of ideological gatekeeping on public perceptions. With respect to this point, it is important to note that even as we point to recent studies demonstrating the effects of media-fed misperceptions about polarization (Ahler, 2014; Ahler & Sood, 2018; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2015), we do not assume massive media effects from the trends we observed here. For this question to be answered, we will rely on future research, using experiments or observational studies.

The generalizability of our study is also limited by the truncated time period we examined. Our data began with the 109th Congressional session and ended with the 112th session in 2013. These years were particularly tumultuous, both politically and economically, including two changes in the House's partisan majority (in 2007 and 2011), a change in the presidency (in 2009), a massive downturn in the global economy, and a rapidly expanding media environment. Partisan polarization increased over this time, continuing its decades-long trajectory toward greater distance between the parties. Given that our supplementary analyses show that the preference for giving more airtime to more polarized elites is increasing over time, it is important for future work to consider whether ongoing changes will challenge or reinforce our conclusions.

The Congress that people see on their televisions is not the same one, ideologically, that exists in the Capitol Building. While this dynamic may polarize voters,

as described above, we are also concerned about its effects on political elites. The media's prioritization of partisan extremity incentivizes legislators to be ideologues, along with other changes in the media environment. The decline of local newspapers and nationalizing news consumption weakened House members' ability to cultivate a personal vote based on service to the district (Trussler, 2018), which shifts the basis of democratic accountability to national, partisan criteria (Darr, Hitt, & Dunaway, 2018; Hopkins, 2018; Martin & McCrain, 2019; Trussler, 2018). Considering that legislators shifted their voting behavior rightward in response to Fox News entering their district (Arceneaux, Johnson, Lindstädt, & Wielen, 2016; Clinton and Enamorado, 2014), and that moderates are unlikely to run for Congress if they perceive a lack of fit with the national party (Thomsen, 2014), the implications of our findings are especially distressing. The media's rewards for ideological extremity in Congress could prove self-reinforcing, by encouraging extreme voting behavior and discouraging moderates from running for office.

Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article.

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Notes

- 1 The dominance of market-based journalism in the United States began somewhat recently with the advent of the mass printing press (Hamilton, 2004), making this shift more a reversion to the norm than transformational change (Groeling & Baum, 2013).
- 2 Wagner & Gruszczynski (2018) explored a similar question—the prioritization of extreme partisans in news coverage—but used only the *New York Times*, CBS News, and NBC News, and did not compare the televised statements to the distribution of ideology in the House.
- 3 In 2000, Fox reached few viewers; by 2012, it reached 1.9 million in prime time (Webster, 2014).
- 4 In the case of U.S. partisan cable news, a firm distinction between mass and partisan audiences is too simplistic (e.g., Webster, 1998), because changes in market structure created the financial incentive to cater to niche, partisan audiences (Hamilton, 2004). Fox News arose in response to a market demand for an alternative to the “liberal,” mainstream media. Similarly, MSNBC turned to the left partially in response to the financial success of Fox News, though without similar success in the marketplace (Webster, 2014). The partisan cable outlets have elements of both the advocacy and market models: the market

- audience is also an advocacy audience. However, there are significant audience overlaps between and across partisan and broadcast major news outlets (Webster, 2014).
- 5 Our “real-world” indicator is dynamic, weighted nominal three-step estimation (DW-NOMINATE) scores, which are based on legislative voting histories: the most commonly used measure of legislator ideology in political science (Carroll et al., 2011). Arguably, these are less “real” than unemployment rates and casualty counts. See Supporting Information Appendix Section 5. We also note that news is not a perfect mirror; all news involves selection, by necessity (Hanitzsch, 2004).
 - 6 These data were collected in 2014, following the conclusion of the 112th session of Congress, as part of a larger data collection. We opted to collect additional data for several sessions prior to the 112th to ensure that our findings were not specific to one session of Congress, but they were not deliberately chosen for the purpose of our analyses. We discuss possible limitations from this timing in the concluding section of the manuscript.
 - 7 Full details of the search strings used can be found in the Supporting Information Appendix. The sample included on-air speaking opportunities or aired direct quotes for all voting members of each session ($n = 1777$), excluding only those who did not serve the entire term ($n = 84$).
 - 8 The measure used did not capture the statements’ content. We present analyses in Section 4 of the Supporting Information Appendix, utilizing the partisan phrases detailed in Gentzkow & Shapiro (2010) in the 109th Congress, to analyze the slant of the televised statements, finding that Democrats used more Democratic-aligned phrases and Republicans used more Republican-aligned phrases.
 - 9 Figures displaying the gatekeeping function (Soroka, 2012) are displayed in Figures A1.1 and A2.1 of the Supporting Information Appendix.
 - 10 Full results from the Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests are available in Table A1.1 of the Supporting Information Appendix.
 - 11 Distributions of the dependent variables are in Section 5 of the Supporting Information Appendix. Distributions of the covariates by quintiles of ideology and ideological extremity are in Section 6.
 - 12 “Ethics scandal” was operationalized as a binary indicator, based on whether the member was investigated by the House Ethics Committee.
 - 13 Please see Sections 3, 7, and 8 of the Supporting Information Appendix for alternative model specifications, accounting for effects by congressional session and member-state effects, and pooled across outlets. The substantive findings of our original models are consistent, though we note that the observed preference for extremity increased over time from the 109th through 112th Congresses.
 - 14 We analyzed PBS NewsHour for one Congress (112th); these results resembled other networks. Please see Section 9 of the Supporting Information Appendix.

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