

## Study: Local newspapers keep politicians accountable

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In areas where members of Congress get lots of ink in local newspapers, voters are more informed and representatives do more to serve local interests, according to a study to be published next week in the *Journal of Political Economy*.

"Our findings support the idea that press coverage is important for electoral accountability," write the study's authors, James Snyder from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and David Strömberg of Stockholm University. "Voters need information to keep [politicians](#) accountable and the press delivers this information."

However, the researchers say the findings also suggest that the current trend toward fewer local newspapers could make for less responsive politicians in the future.

The research tracked the chain of media impacts link by link. Snyder and Strömberg looked at factors that drive local papers to cover members of Congress, how that coverage influences voters, and how politicians react. The study found that "congruence" between congressional districts and newspaper circulation areas has a strong influence on how much press coverage a member of Congress receives.

The rationale works like this: If a large majority of a newspaper's readers live in one congressional district, that paper has good reason to print stories about that district's representative. In contrast, when a paper's readers are spread over two or more districts, there is less

incentive to cover one representative or another. So when district boundaries are congruent with newspaper markets, that representative should receive more coverage in all of the newspapers in the district compared to representatives of non-congruent districts.

Using data from 1991 to 2002, Snyder and Strömberg found that in a district with the highest possible congruence, the average newspaper writes 170 more stories about a member of Congress than in a district with the lowest congruence. The analysis controlled for other factors that may drive coverage, such as whether a representative was a party leader or was involved in a scandal.

All that extra coverage has a strong impact on both voters and their representatives, the research shows.

Voters in highly congruent areas are far more likely to know their representative's name and are more willing to rate his or her job performance. Voter turnout in congressional elections is also higher in congruent areas. In turn, representatives from highly congruent districts tend to be more constituent-centered. They vote against the party line more often; they are more likely to defend local projects in congressional hearings; and they bring more federal dollars back to the district.

All of these results were driven by the alignment of newspaper markets and district boundaries. Congruence with television markets has none of these effects, the study found.

These results suggest that recent media trends could have a substantial public policy effect, the researchers say. As local newspapers disappear, the remaining papers cover larger areas. In some cases, broadcast media becomes a primary news source.

"The trend is likely to decrease the congruence at local levels," the researchers write. "This might not only affect the congruence of congressional districts, but also that of municipalities, counties and other local government units. Our results suggest that this is likely to reduce voter information, political participation and political accountability."

**More information:** James M. Snyder and David Strömberg, "Press Coverage and Political Accountability." *Journal of Political Economy* 118:2.

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