

Common Ground to Combat: How Local News Decline Reframes Congress and Democracy

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Abstract: The decline of local newspapers has been accompanied by a nationalization of news consumption, as a small number of national outlets have captured a growing share of the digital audience. In this project we seek to characterize the differences between how local and national newspapers cover politics, what we term the national and local "lenses." We do so by analyzing coverage of Congress, a national political institution whose members represent distinct local districts. Drawing on a corpus of 77,817 front-page articles from twelve local and three national newspapers between 2000 and 2019, we combine fine-tuned transformer classifiers and zero-shot natural language inference to identify articles about Congress and code their use of strategic-game framing and use the Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary to measure negativity. We find that national newspapers frame Congress as a strategic game roughly 50 percent more often than local newspapers do, and that among local newspapers the use of strategic-game frames increases with circulation size. This gap has widened over the last two decades, as national newspapers make increasing use of strategic-game frames. Differences in overall negativity are smaller but mask substantial convergence over time: in the 2000s, local newspapers covered Congress markedly less negatively than national newspapers, but by the 2010s the two groups were indistinguishable, with the smallest-circulation local newspapers becoming the most negative group of all. Together, these results suggest that the nationalization of news consumption — combined with within-paper shifts in local coverage — has left Americans with a more cynical and strategy-focused view of Congress

The decline of local news, especially of local newspapers, is well documented (Abernathy 2018, Sullivan 2020, Hayes and Lawless 2021). Local newspapers' readership has plummeted over the last three decades (Metzger 2025), while news consumers have increasingly migrated to news outlets who produce for a national audience (Hopkins 2018, Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2018). Much of the existing literature on this nationalization has focused on the loss of coverage of local political institutions (e.g. Hayes and Lawless 2021, Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2021). While important, we argue that this focus overlooks a second way that the nationalization of news consumption shifts the public's views of politics. While local newspapers are unique in their coverage of local institutions, much of the time political coverage in national and local newspapers covers the same topics, issues, and institutions. However, local and national newspapers often cover these topics in dramatically different fashions. We expect that these differences, rooted in different news values, journalistic norms, and economic incentives, result in coverage that paint very different pictures of these topics, issues, and institutions, and, indeed, of politics as a whole. We term these different views of politics national and local "lenses" on politics, and seek to characterize the different view that each lens provides.

In this paper, we focus on the implications of this shift for newspaper coverage of Congress. Congress is an excellent site to study the difference between national and local lenses because it is a national political body comprised of locally-elected representatives. A long literature documents the importance of local newspapers for coverage of individual representatives (Vinson 2003, Arnold 2004, Hayes and Lawless 2015, 2021), and the consequences of the disappearance of such coverage for knowledge of and voting for congressional representatives (Hayes and Lawless 2015, 2018; Trussler 2021). However, less

work documents the difference in congressional coverage between national and local newspapers.

We address this gap using a content analysis of front-page articles about Congress from twelve local and three national newspapers between 2000 and 2019. Starting with a dataset of over 78,000 articles, we identify articles that are primarily about Congress and a subset of these articles that are focused on congressional procedure. We then code each article along two dimensions: the overall negativity of coverage and the use of strategic-game framing. We find that national newspapers use strategic-game frames 50% more frequently in their coverage of Congress. During the 2000s, we find the local newspapers covered Congress less negatively than national newspapers; however, in the 2010s local newspapers converge on national newspapers' level of negativity. These results suggest that changes in media environment and newsgathering resources have left Americans with a much more negative, cynical picture of what Congress does.

National and Local Coverage of Congress

Scholars have long recognized the importance of local coverage of Congress, primarily in the way that local newspaper can cover individual local representatives in a way that national news outlets cannot. Part of this is a product of the sheer number of members of Congress. “[The national press] can focus on some colorful or consequential legislators, making Ted Kennedy and Newt Gingrich into household names. [It] could not possibly make 535 legislators into household names” (Arnold, 2004 pg. 2). This focus on a small number of high-profile members tends to produce a focus on Congress acting relative to other national political actors, such as the

president or the Supreme Court (Cook 1989). The existing literature has found important effects of declining coverage of local members, including reduced knowledge and increased strait-ticket voting (Hayes and Lawless 2018, Peterson 2021, Trussler 2021).

Yet, while coverage of individual local representatives is undoubtedly important, more important may be the different ways that national and local newspapers cover Congress as a whole. Much coverage in both local and national newspapers is not about individual members, but about Congress as a whole, or about the actions of leadership, party factions, or institutional structures (e.g. committees, the CBO). Even when covering individual members, local and national newspapers may differ in how they cover these members in addition to differing in which members they cover. Differences in the attention paid to these topics and in the way these topics are covered will paint a different picture of Congress in the minds of news consumers; if the national and local lenses differ, the holistic view of Congress in citizens minds is likely to change when media consumption nationalizes.

Why might national and local newspapers cover Congress differently, even when covering the same events or issues? First, local and national outlets rely on different news values. National outlets serve geographically dispersed audiences for whom the local relevance of any particular congressional action is unavailable as a hook for attention. As a result, they rely more heavily on conflict, strategy, and institutional critique to make coverage compelling (Boesman and Van Gorp 2018; Harcup and O'Neill 2017). Local outlets have an alternative resource available: the community-specific stakes of national decisions. A congressional vote on agriculture policy might be covered in terms of partisan conflict in the *Wall Street Journal* but in terms of its implications for local corn farmers in the *Des Moines Register*.

Second, local and national outlets serve different audiences. National newspaper readers are more politically engaged, more partisan, and more embedded in the elite political culture in which institutional critique and adversarial procedure are taken for granted as the substance of politics (Usher 2021; Hamilton and Tworek 2023). Local audiences are more politically heterogeneous, less ideologically sorted, and less consistently engaged. Thus, just as local newspapers can count on value from presenting a local angle, national newspapers can count on value from presenting a more elite, analytical, and conflict-focused perspective.

Third, local and national outlets have been differentially affected by changes in journalistic norms. Over the past several decades, elite American journalism has moved toward what scholars call interpretive or contextual reporting, in which journalists provide analysis and inferred motivation alongside factual narrative (Patterson 2015; Salgado and Strömbäck 2012; Fink and Schudson 2014). This shift has progressed furthest at the elite national outlets that train and credential the profession. It has reached local newsrooms more slowly. Each of these differences predicts that national coverage of Congress will emphasize what local coverage has alternative tools for de-emphasizing.

In this paper, we examine two ways that these lenses might differ: Negativity and the use of strategic game frames. Most news coverage shows a negativity bias. This tendency has been documented across types of news, types of outlet, and types of political system (Soroka 2014, Esser et al. 2016). This bias is rooted in both audiences' attention bias towards negative or threatening information and by professional norms that treat conflict, scandal, and institutional failure as inherently newsworthy (Soroka 2014, Soroka and McAdams 2015). Coverage of Congress is a particularly likely site for this difference as criticism of Congress as a dysfunctional institution is a long-standing feature of national political commentary (Fiorina

1989, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, Mann and Ornstein 2006, 2012, Atkinson 2017). That said, negativity in news coverage varies across time and outlets (Dunaway 2013, Esser et al. 2016, Krupnikov and Soroka 2021). Negativity is more prominent in commercial outlets, particularly in highly competitive media markets (Dunaway 2013, Esser et al. 2016). National newspapers' Washington bureaus are deeply embedded in the elite political culture in which Congress-bashing is routine (Fiorina 1989). All of these are reasons to suggest that negativity may be a dimension on which national and local newspapers will differ.

The second dimension is game and strategy framing of politics. The literature on game and strategy framing draws a distinction between issue frames, which covers political issues and events in terms of their substantive impact, and strategy and game frames, coverage treats the same events as contests between elite political actors playing to “win” the game of politics. These frames focus on who is winning or losing, and the strategies and tactics that actors use to gain advantage; underlying substantive issues are discussed primarily as indicators of who is winning or losing, or as factors that shape elite actors political strategies. For example, an article about a strong jobs report might focus on the economic and human implications of the jobs created, the jobs report as an indicator of who is winning (e.g. “a good jobs report for Trump”), or the response of political actors to the job reports (e.g. “Democrats scrambled to portray the economy as weak despite the jobs report.”).

While “horserace” campaign articles are the paradigmatic example of strategy or game framed coverage (Patterson 1993), these frames also feature in coverage of a range of events and issues. This includes Congress (Watts 1997, Lawrence 2000, Atkinson 2017). Similar factors that might predispose national newspapers to present more negative coverage of Congress also may predispose national newspapers to employ game and strategy frames more frequently. In the

absence of proximity to motivate interest in an article, the conflict inherent in game and strategy frames can be a compelling news value. This conflict can also be a driver of attention in a competitive market. Finally, national newspapers' congressional reporters embeddedness in the institution may predispose them to view Congress in terms of strategic conflict between the elites they interact with daily; in contrast, the shrinking number of Washington correspondents from local newspapers may make this view less of a default frame for local newspapers. Supporting this supposition, Dunaway and Lawrence (2015) show that media ownership is related to the tendency to use game frames, and Myers shows that strategic-game frames are used frequently by national newspapers in coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic (Myers 2025) and in political coverage in general (Myers 2026).

Hypotheses

We test two families of hypotheses about how local and national newspapers cover Congress, each concerning one dimension of coverage: the overall negativity of coverage (H1) and the use of strategic game framing (H2).

Negativity

A long line of research documents a pervasive negativity bias in news coverage, driven both by audience demand for emotionally salient information and by professional norms that treat conflict, scandal, and institutional failure as inherently newsworthy (Soroka 2014; Soroka and McAdams 2015). The forces producing this bias should operate most strongly in national newspapers, but as reporting resources decline, we expect local newspapers to converge on national newspapers' levels of negativity:

H1a: National newspapers will cover Congress more negatively than local newspapers.

H1b: Among local newspapers, larger-circulation papers will cover Congress more negatively than smaller-circulation papers.

H1c: The difference between national and local newspapers in the negativity of Congress coverage will narrow over the 2000–2019 period, with local newspapers' coverage becoming more negative.

Strategic Game Framing

Strategic game framing emphasizes the tactics, strategies, and competitive maneuvering of political actors rather than the substantive issues at stake (Patterson 1993; Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2012). Myers (2025) finds that national newspapers used partisan game frames during the early COVID-19 pandemic at more than six times the rate of local newspapers, and Dunaway and Lawrence (2015) find that newspapers owned by larger corporate chains produce more game-framed campaign coverage. We expect the same pattern in coverage of Congress, but we expect that local newspapers will converge to national newspapers' use of these frames over time.

H2a: National newspapers will frame coverage of Congress as a strategic game more frequently than local newspapers.

H2b: Among local newspapers, larger-circulation papers will frame Congress as a strategic game more frequently than smaller-circulation papers.

H2c: The difference between national and local newspapers in the use of strategic game framing of Congress will narrow over the 2000–2019 period, with local newspapers' coverage employing strategic game framing more frequently.

Method

We test these hypotheses using a sample of front-page articles from fifteen newspapers over the 2000–2019 period. We identify articles primarily about Congress (and the smaller subset about congressional procedure) and then code each along the three dimensions above.

Data Collection

We collect front-page articles from twelve local and three national newspapers over a twenty-year period (2000–2019). We focus on front-page articles because they are the most likely to be seen by news consumers. Not only are they the most likely to be read, but because the framings we measure are often signaled in the headline or lead, articles on the front page are likely to incidentally expose a larger audience to a particular framing of politics. Front-page placement also signals editorial priorities and is likely correlated with prominence of distribution over other channels (e.g. social media).

We selected local newspapers using a stratified random sampling procedure to ensure diversity in circulation size and geographic location. Specifically, we randomly selected one high-circulation, one medium-circulation, and one low-circulation newspaper from each of the four U.S. Census regions.¹ We drew one newspaper from each tier in each Census region at

¹ To determine the cut points between these circulation levels we use data from UNC's Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media on the circulation of daily newspapers in 2016. We divided the newspapers in their database into three tiers, high, medium, and low-circulation, such that the total circulation of the newspapers in each group was roughly the same. The high-circulation tier included newspapers with a weekday circulation of at least 125,000; the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel was the smallest circulation newspaper in this group. The medium-circulation tier included newspapers with circulations less than 125,000 but greater than 35,000, ranging from the

random, weighing the chances of each newspaper being selected by its circulation. If we could not locate digital reproductions of the newspaper's front pages for our sampled dates, we drew a different newspaper from the same tier and Census region. Table [1] shows the sampled newspapers.

Newspaper	Tier	Census Region
National		
New York Times	National	—
Wall Street Journal	National	—
Washington Post	National	—
Local — High Circulation		
Boston Globe	High	Northeast
Minnesota Star Tribune	High	Midwest
Orlando Sentinel	High	South
Arizona Republic	High	West
Local — Medium Circulation		
Scranton Times-Tribune	Medium	Northeast
Des Moines Register	Medium	Midwest
Memphis Commercial Appeal	Medium	South
Modesto Bee	Medium	West
Local — Low Circulation		
Meriden Record-Journal	Low	Northeast
Vincennes Sun-Commercial	Low	Midwest
Baxter Bulletin	Low	South
Helena Independent Record	Low	West

Table 1: Sampled Newspapers

We collected digital reproductions of the full front pages of each local newspaper from Newspapers.com, a division of Ancestry.com that provides digital reproductions of the print editions of thousands of newspapers. This overcomes the fact that common academic archives of

Riverside, CA Press-Enterprise, to Boise's Idaho Statesman. The low-circulation tier includes all daily newspapers with circulations lower than 35,000, the largest of which was the Desoto, TX Focus Daily News.

newspapers do not include wire stories and other syndicated articles (Ridout et al. 2012). We analyze articles that had two complete paragraphs of text on the front page and at least part of a third. We collected the text of front-page articles from the three national newspapers — the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post — from Proquest.²

Identifying Political Articles

The first stage of our coding procedure identifies articles in our corpus that mention any political actor. We applied this filter because the framings we measure presuppose the presence of political actors who could be cast in strategic, adversarial, or unitary terms. We define a political actor broadly to include individual political leaders or politicians (e.g. president, senator, representative, congressional leader, or candidate for federal office), political parties, and other political actors (campaign teams, political organizations, political commentators). This definition does not include government officials in a role that is unelected and not explicitly political (e.g. an executive-branch agency administrator describing a regulatory action, or a federal prosecutor charging a routine criminal case).

To classify articles in our corpus along this dimension, four undergraduate coders trained on the coding rules by test-coding a series of articles. After training was complete, we coded a set of 1,595 articles to serve as the training set for a classifier model. Each article was coded by two coders, who then met to adjudicate any disagreements. We used this training set to fine-tune a DeBERTa-v3-base transformer classification model (He et al. 2021; Timoneda and Vallejo Vera 2025) to identify political articles in the full corpus. This model achieved an F1 score of 0.954 on

² Notably, text from the local articles included only the headline and text that appeared on the front page, while articles gathered from Proquest included the headline and all of the article text. However, all articles were truncated to 510 tokens (approximately 390 words), including the headline, for analysis by the transformer-based models described below. This also has the effect of rendering the articles more comparable in length.

a held-out test set. We applied this model to all 77,817 articles in the corpus, classifying 30,623 articles (32.8 percent) as political.³

Identifying Articles About Congress

Of the political articles in the corpus, we are interested in the subset that is primarily about Congress, and within that subset, the smaller subset that is primarily about congressional procedure rather than about congressional actors generally or about substantive policy debates among members of Congress. We identify articles along both dimensions using zero-shot natural language inference (zero-shot NLI), a method that uses a pre-trained natural language inference model to score how strongly the content of an article entails a hypothesis stating that the article is "about" some construct. Zero-shot NLI does not require labeled training data: rather than fitting a model to a large hand-coded sample, we calibrate the wording of the hypothesis statements against a smaller hand-coded validation set. Burnham et al. (2025) develop a publicly available NLI model fine-tuned on political text — *Political DEBATE* — that has been shown to perform well on a range of political-classification tasks. We use the large variant of this model for both filters.

Because zero-shot NLI is sensitive to the wording of the hypothesis, we calibrated the hypothesis templates for each filter by comparing several candidate wordings on a 500-article calibration sample drawn from the political-articles corpus, examining each variant's predictions on high-confidence positive cases, high-confidence negative cases, and articles where variants disagreed. For the filter identifying articles about Congress, we ultimately selected a hypothesis pairing in which the positive label specified that the article is "primarily about the United States

³ 10,685 articles from national newspapers, 6,906 from high-circulation local newspapers, 6,186 from medium-circulation local newspapers, and 4,828 from low-circulation local newspapers.

Congress, its members, or legislation being considered in Congress."⁴ This wording outperformed alternatives by correctly excluding executive-branch and foreign-policy articles that other variants admitted as false positives. We applied an analogous procedure for the filter identifying articles about congressional procedure, selecting a wording that best identified articles describing the legislative process specifically.⁵

Measuring Negativity

We operationalize negativity in coverage of Congress as document-level sentiment, measured using the Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary (LSD), a validated dictionary developed for political text (Young and Soroka 2012). The LSD assigns each word in a document a positive, negative, or neutral valence, and a document-level sentiment score is computed as the proportion of positive words minus the proportion of negative words. The LSD was developed and validated against political news content and has been used widely in political communication research. Its dictionary-based design provides a transparent and reproducible measure of sentiment that does not require additional training data or model selection. We compute LSD scores for articles about Congress and for articles about congressional procedure, and use these scores as our outcome measures for H1a.

⁴ The corresponding negative label specified that the article is "primarily about a topic other than Congress, such as state or local government, the executive branch, foreign affairs, or a policy issue." Naming concrete categories of negative cases — particularly "the executive branch" and "foreign affairs" — substantially reduced false positives on executive-branch foreign-policy articles relative to a more abstract negative label.

⁵ The positive label specified that the article is "primarily about members of the U.S. Congress at work — interacting with one another, deliberating, negotiating, cooperating, disagreeing, or voting on legislation," with a parallel negative label specifying that the article is "primarily about a topic other than how members of Congress interact with one another, such as state or local government, the executive branch, foreign affairs, a policy issue, or an individual political figure." The verb list is balanced across unitary-leaning (deliberating, cooperating), adversary-leaning (disagreeing), and neutral (interacting, negotiating, voting) framings, in order to identify articles that describe the legislative process without privileging any particular conception of how it operates.

Coding Strategic-Game Framing

We operationalize the strategic-game frame using the definition from Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese (2012), which codes each political article's dominant frame as either a strategic-game frame or an issue frame. A strategic-game frame treats politics as a contest, with a focus on who is winning or losing and on the strategies, tactics, and personalities that contribute to this winning or losing. Horse-race coverage of campaigns is the paradigmatic example, but strategic-game framing also appears in non-campaign coverage when an article treats events primarily as contests where the goal is winning rather than as disagreements over substantive policy-making. An issue frame, by contrast, treats politics as a forum for addressing substantive problems. Issue frames may contain conflict, but this conflict is over substantive policy decisions and is motivated by sincere belief in different policies or goals rather than by a desire to win for its own sake. Many political articles contain elements of both frames; coders were instructed to identify the frame that dominated each article, using the amount of text devoted to each frame as the primary criterion, with extra weight given to the headline and lead.⁶

To classify articles in the political corpus along this dimension, four undergraduate coders trained on the coding rules by test-coding a series of articles. Each coder then independently coded an initial set of articles, after which we calculated inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.72$). Coders met to discuss disagreements and settled on consensus codes. We then

⁶ The full coding rule reads as follows: "What is the dominant framing of politics? Coders should type 0 for 'Issue frame' and 1 for 'Strategic game frame.' 'Strategic game frame' includes news stories that frame politics as a game, personality contest, as strategy, and as personal relationships between political actors not related to issue positions. News stories that focus on the tactics or strategy of political campaigning, how they campaign, on the images of politicians, on political power as a goal in itself, and on politicians as individuals rather than as spokespersons for certain policies, should count as 'Strategic game frame.' The same applies for horse race coverage. 'Issue frame' includes news stories that focus on issues and issue positions, on real-life conditions with relevance for issue positions, and on what has happened or what someone has said and done to the extent that it deals with or is depicted as relevant for the political issues. Coders should select the frame that dominates in the news story. Usually, dominance is decided by space in which the respective frames are applied, but the headline and lead should be given extra weight in the judgment of what frame dominates the news story."

used an iterative active-learning process in which the model classified articles in batches and then identified articles about which it was most uncertain; these uncertain articles were prioritized for coding in the next batch, with the updated training set used to refine the model. Coding proceeded until the model's F1 score on a held-out test set reached 0.8.

We applied this model to all 30,623 political articles in the corpus, of which 9,236 (32.3 percent) were classified as carrying a dominant strategic-game frame.⁷ For the analyses reported below, we restrict attention to the subset of these predictions on articles classified as primarily about Congress.

Results

We test each hypothesis in turn, reporting results for the cross-sectional comparison of national and local newspapers, the tier breakdown across the three circulation tiers of local newspapers, and the change in cross-sectional differences across the two halves of the study period. We restrict attention to articles classified as discussing Congress, and report results in the body of the paper using this filter. We supplement these results with a more restrictive filter that further limits the sample to articles discussing congressional procedure, but mention these results in the text only where they differ meaningfully from those for articles about Congress; the full results for both filters appear in the tables. Because two of the eighteen calendar years (2000 and 2019) fall outside complete Congresses, all over-time analyses use the 2001–2018 window covering Congresses 107 through 115; full-period totals in the tables are computed over this same window.

⁷ 4,832 articles from national newspapers, 1,891 from high-circulation local newspapers, 1,398 from medium-circulation local newspapers, and 1,115 from low-circulation local newspapers.

Sentiment in Articles About Congress

We find mixed support for H1a. Table 2 shows sentiment that in articles about Congress is more negative in national than in local newspapers across the full 2001–2018 period, with national newspapers averaging a sentiment score of -0.066 versus -0.045 for local newspapers. The direction of the difference is consistent with the prediction. We test the statistical significance of this difference using a non-parametric Mann-Whitney test that treats each newspaper as an observation and find that this difference does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. We find the same overall result with respect to articles specifically about congressional procedure (estimated difference = -0.058 , $p = 0.295$).

Table 1. H1 (sentiment toward Congress): National vs. Local across decades

Filter	Group	N papers	N articles	Full 2001-2018	2001-2010	2011-2018
About Congress	National	3	1,619	-0.066	-0.052	-0.082
	Local	12	2,828	-0.045	-0.030	-0.083
	Mann-Whitney (National vs. Local)			H-L = -0.015 [-0.101, 0.043] p = 0.448	H-L = 0.004 [-0.130, 0.049] p = 1.000	H-L = -0.018 [-0.060, 0.065] p = 0.885
Congressional Procedure	National	3	1,012	-0.080	-0.049	-0.120
	Local	12	1,646	-0.039	0.001	-0.116
	Mann-Whitney (National vs. Local)			H-L = -0.058 [-0.110, 0.057] p = 0.295	H-L = -0.049 [-0.138, 0.052] p = 0.448	H-L = -0.022 [-0.117, 0.131] p = 1.000

All means computed at the newspaper level; each newspaper contributes one value. Test cells show the Hodges-Lehmann shift estimate (National - Local), 95% CI, and Mann-Whitney p-value. N papers and N articles are full-period totals.

We find at most weak support for H1b, the hypothesis that lower-circulation local newspapers will be less negative than higher-circulation local newspapers. Table 3 shows that the tier means are in the direction predicted by the hypothesis: low-circulation papers averaged -0.011 , medium-circulation papers averaged -0.057 , and high-circulation papers averaged

−0.067, with sentiment becoming more negative as circulation rises. However, a Jonckheere-Terpstra test for an ordered gradient does not reach conventional significance (JT = 15, p = 0.110). The pairwise comparisons confirm this: no Mann-Whitney comparison among the three local tiers yields a p-value below 0.20. The corresponding test for articles about congressional procedure yields a comparable result (JT = 14, p = 0.085). We therefore find that the tier means are consistent with H1b in direction but that the gradient is too weak to attain conventional levels of statistical significance given our sample of newspapers.

Table 2. H1 (sentiment in articles about Congress): Tier breakdown across decades

Filter	Group	N papers	N articles	Full 2001-2018	2001-2010	2011-2018
About Congress	National	3	1,619	-0.066	-0.052	-0.082
	High	4	1,243	-0.067	-0.060	-0.078
	Medium	4	991	-0.057	-0.046	-0.075
	Low	4	594	-0.011	0.015	-0.101
	Jonckheere-Terpstra (Low > Med > High, locals only)			JT = 15 p = 0.110	JT = 14 p = 0.082	JT = 22 p = 0.656
Congressional Procedure	National	3	1,012	-0.080	-0.049	-0.120
	High	4	718	-0.073	-0.028	-0.131
	Medium	4	597	-0.042	-0.010	-0.085
	Low	4	331	-0.001	0.041	-0.138
	Jonckheere-Terpstra (Low > Med > High, locals only)			JT = 14 p = 0.085	JT = 16 p = 0.144	JT = 18 p = 0.401

All means computed at the newspaper level. JT cells show the Jonckheere-Terpstra statistic and one-sided p-value (testing an increasing gradient Low < Med < High among locals). N papers and N articles are full-period totals.

However, we find clear descriptive support for H1c. In 2001–2010 local newspapers averaged −0.030 against the national average of −0.052, with locals notably less negative than nationals; by 2011–2018, the two groups were essentially identical (national −0.082, local

-0.083). The convergence is even more dramatic in coverage of congressional procedure specifically, where local newspapers were on average slightly positive in the first decade (mean = +0.001) while national newspapers were already meaningfully negative (mean = -0.049), with the two groups converging to nearly identical sharply negative scores by the second decade (national -0.120, local -0.116). Figures 1 and 2 show the year-over-year trends underlying this pattern.

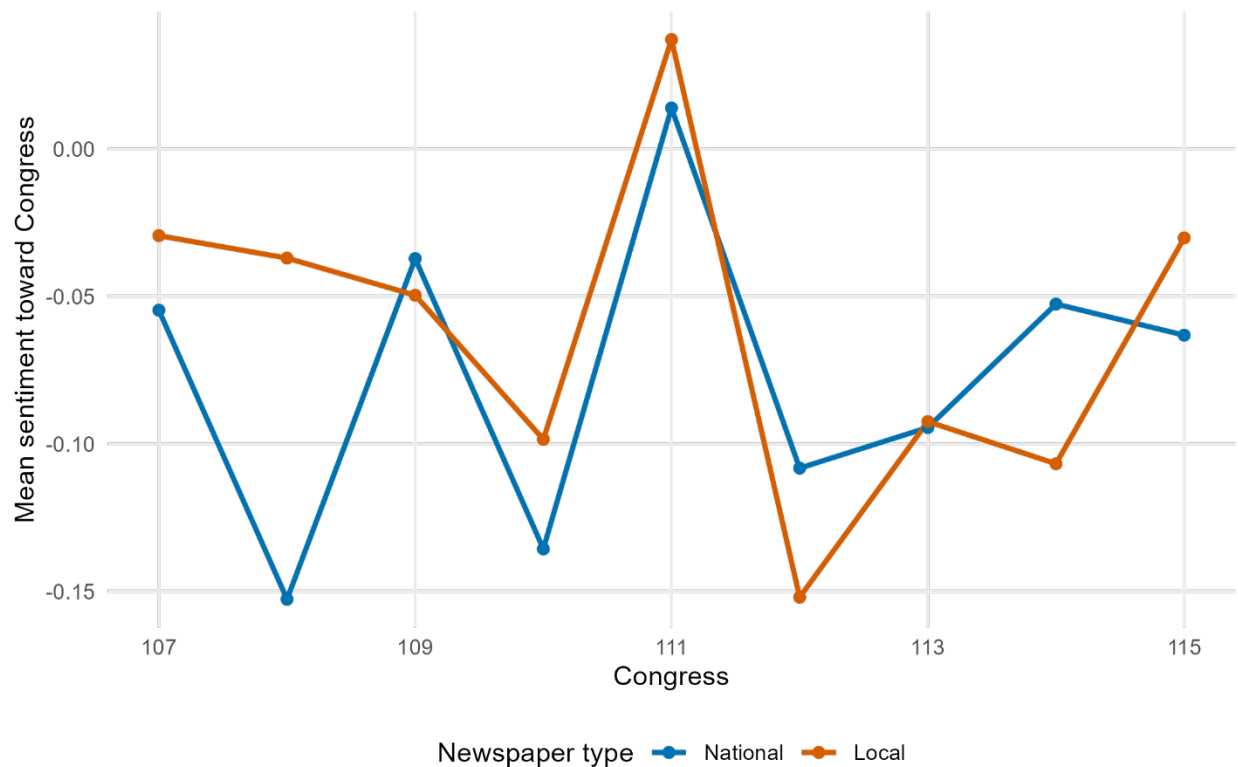


Figure 1: Negativity in Local and National Newspapers by Congress

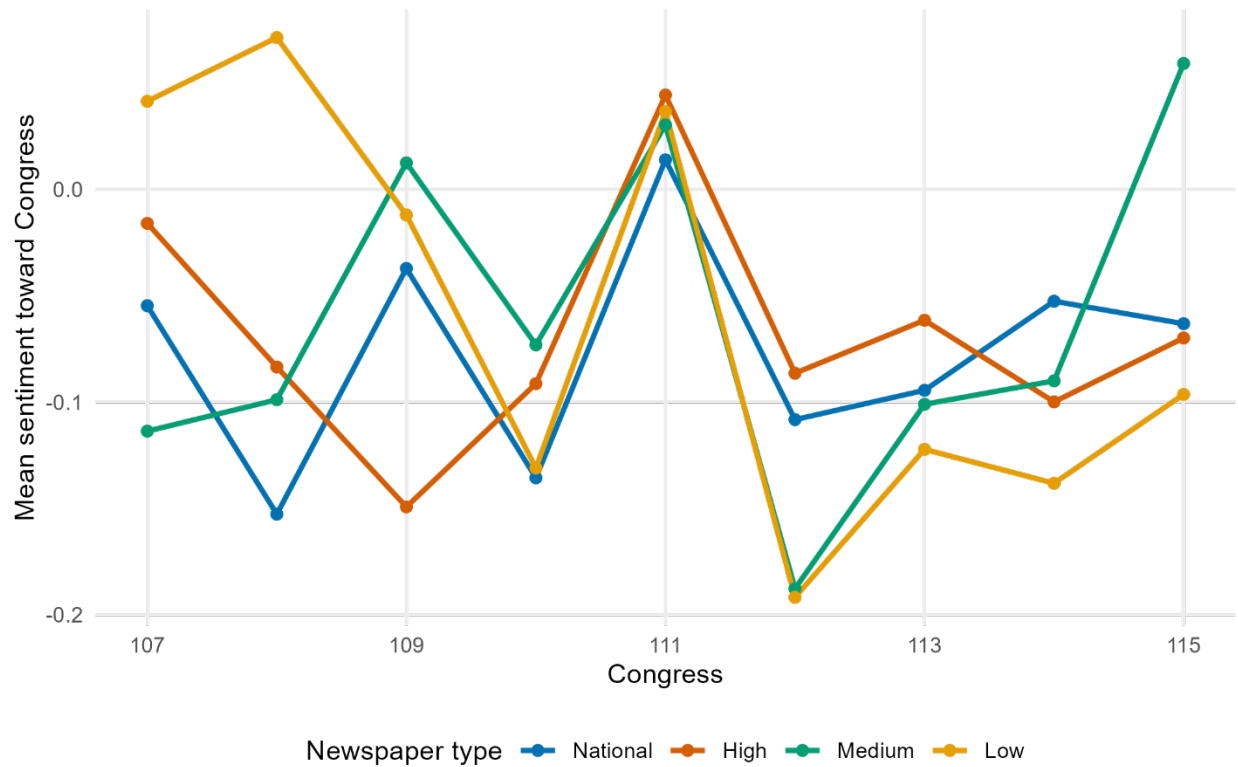


Figure 2: Negativity in Newspapers by Circulation Tier by Congress

Table 3 shows over-time trends in negativity across newspaper circulation levels. High-circulation local newspapers were already approximately as negative as national newspapers at the start of the study period (-0.060 vs. -0.052 in 2001–2010), so they had little room to converge further. The dramatic movement was concentrated in low-circulation newspapers, whose sentiment swung from a slightly positive 0.015 in 2001–2010 to -0.101 in 2011–2018 — meaning that low-circulation papers ended the period as the most negative group rather than the least. Medium-circulation newspapers showed an intermediate pattern, with a swing of -0.029 . Thus, while local newspapers converged to national newspapers’ levels of negativity, this was largely a result of low circulation newspapers going from the least negative set of newspapers to the most negative set of newspapers.

Strategic Game Framing

We find strong support for H2a. As Table 4 reports, national newspapers frame Congress as a strategic game far more often than local newspapers do. Across articles about Congress, 65.0 percent of national newspaper articles carry a dominant strategic-game frame, against 45.5 percent of local newspaper articles, with an estimated difference of 0.222 ($p = 0.009$). The pattern is essentially identical for articles about congressional procedure ($p = 0.004$). Strategic game framing of Congress is thus roughly 50 percent more common in national as in local coverage, and the difference is statistically significant despite the small number of newspapers in each group.

Table 3. H2 (strategic game framing): National vs. Local across decades

Filter	Group	N papers	N articles	Full 2001-2018	2001-2010	2011-2018
About Congress	National	3	1,619	0.650	0.597	0.716
	Local	12	2,828	0.455	0.427	0.490
	Mann-Whitney (National vs. Local)			H-L = 0.222 [0.082, 0.301] p = 0.009	H-L = 0.170 [0.084, 0.245] p = 0.004	H-L = 0.249 [0.004, 0.433] p = 0.038
Congressional Procedure	National	3	1,012	0.620	0.560	0.700
	Local	12	1,646	0.400	0.370	0.455
	Mann-Whitney (National vs. Local)			H-L = 0.219 [0.101, 0.324] p = 0.004	H-L = 0.184 [0.123, 0.287] p = 0.004	H-L = 0.264 [0.046, 0.425] p = 0.011

All means computed at the newspaper level; each newspaper contributes one value. Test cells show the Hodges-Lehmann shift estimate (National - Local), 95% CI, and Mann-Whitney p-value. N papers and N articles are full-period totals.

We find similarly strong support for H2b. Table 5 documents a monotonic ordering across the four newspaper groups, with the proportion of articles carrying a dominant strategic-game frame increasing as one moves from low-circulation local newspapers to high-circulation local

newspapers to national newspapers. The means are 0.416 for low-circulation locals, 0.451 for medium-circulation locals, 0.499 for high-circulation locals, and 0.650 for national newspapers. The Jonckheere-Terpstra test for an increasing gradient across the three local-newspaper tiers is significant (JT = 36, $p = 0.048$), and the same is true for articles about congressional procedure (JT = 36, $p = 0.046$). Pairwise tests show that all three local tiers differ substantially from national newspapers (estimated differences between national and each tier ranging from 0.140 to 0.278), with these differences attaining the floor of the achievable Mann-Whitney p -value (0.057) given the small number of newspapers per group.

Table 4. H2 (strategic game framing): Tier breakdown across decades

Filter	Group	N papers	N articles	Full 2001-2018	2001-2010	2011-2018
About Congress	National	3	1,619	0.650	0.597	0.716
	High	4	1,243	0.499	0.467	0.530
	Medium	4	991	0.451	0.411	0.512
	Low	4	594	0.416	0.402	0.408
	Jonckheere-Terpstra (Low < Med < High, locals only)			JT = 36 $p = 0.048$	JT = 32 $p = 0.143$	JT = 29 $p = 0.081$
Congressional Procedure	National	3	1,012	0.620	0.560	0.700
	High	4	718	0.438	0.408	0.478
	Medium	4	597	0.421	0.382	0.475
	Low	4	331	0.342	0.320	0.397
	Jonckheere-Terpstra (Low < Med < High, locals only)			JT = 36 $p = 0.046$	JT = 36 $p = 0.049$	JT = 26 $p = 0.174$

All means computed at the newspaper level. JT cells show the Jonckheere-Terpstra statistic and one-sided p -value (testing an increasing gradient Low < Med < High among locals). N papers and N articles are full-period totals.

H2c predicts that the rates of strategic game framing in national and local newspapers will converge over time. Instead, we find that strategic game framing of Congress diverged between national and local newspapers across the two decades studied. The gap between national

and local newspapers in strategic game framing was 0.170 in 2001–2010 and 0.249 in 2011–2018, an increase of nearly 50 percent in the size of the cross-sectional difference. Both groups increased their use of strategic game framing across the two decades — national newspapers' rate rose from 0.597 to 0.716, while local newspapers' rate rose from 0.427 to 0.490 — but national newspapers' increase was roughly twice as large as local newspapers'. The pattern in coverage of congressional procedure is the same, with the gap widening from 0.184 to 0.264. Figures 3 and 4 show the year-over-year trends, which display the same pattern as the decadal averages: a steadily rising trajectory among national newspapers, against a flatter and less sloped trajectory among local newspapers. The divergence pattern persists when attention is restricted to coverage of Congress specifically.

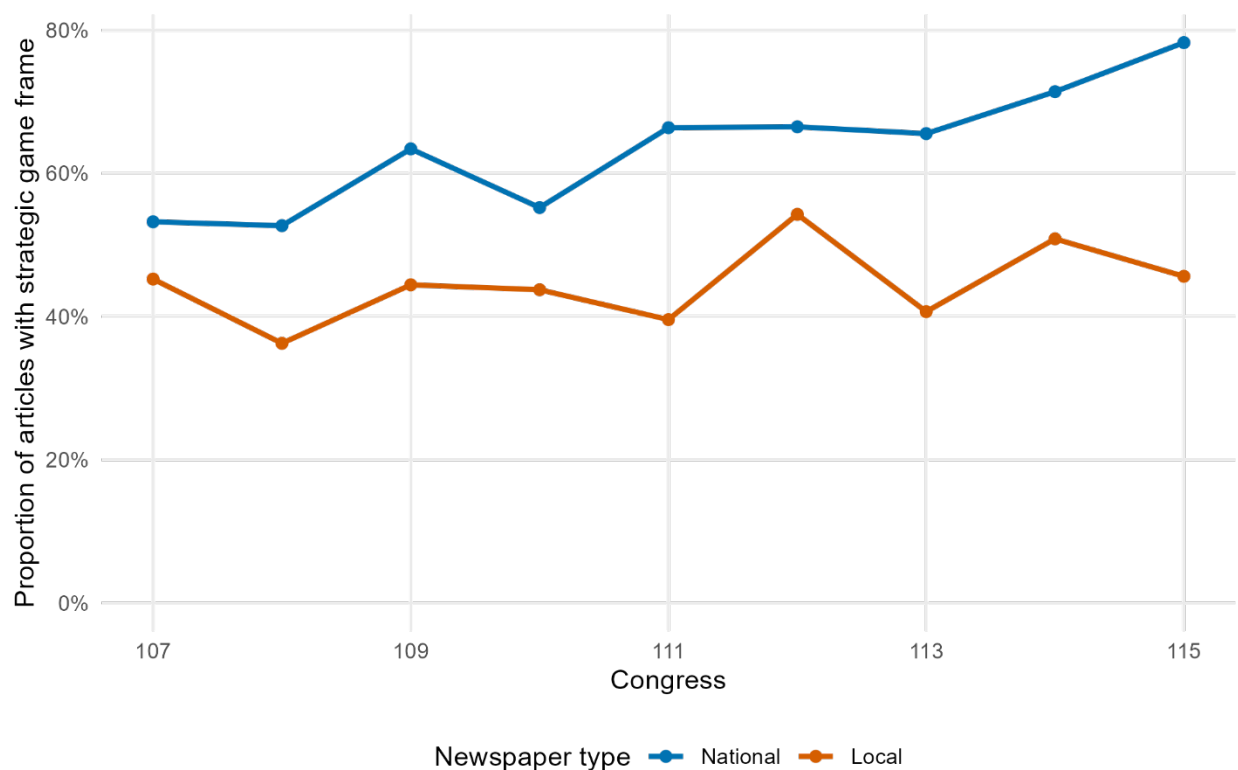


Figure 3: Strategic-Game Frame Dominance, National vs. Local

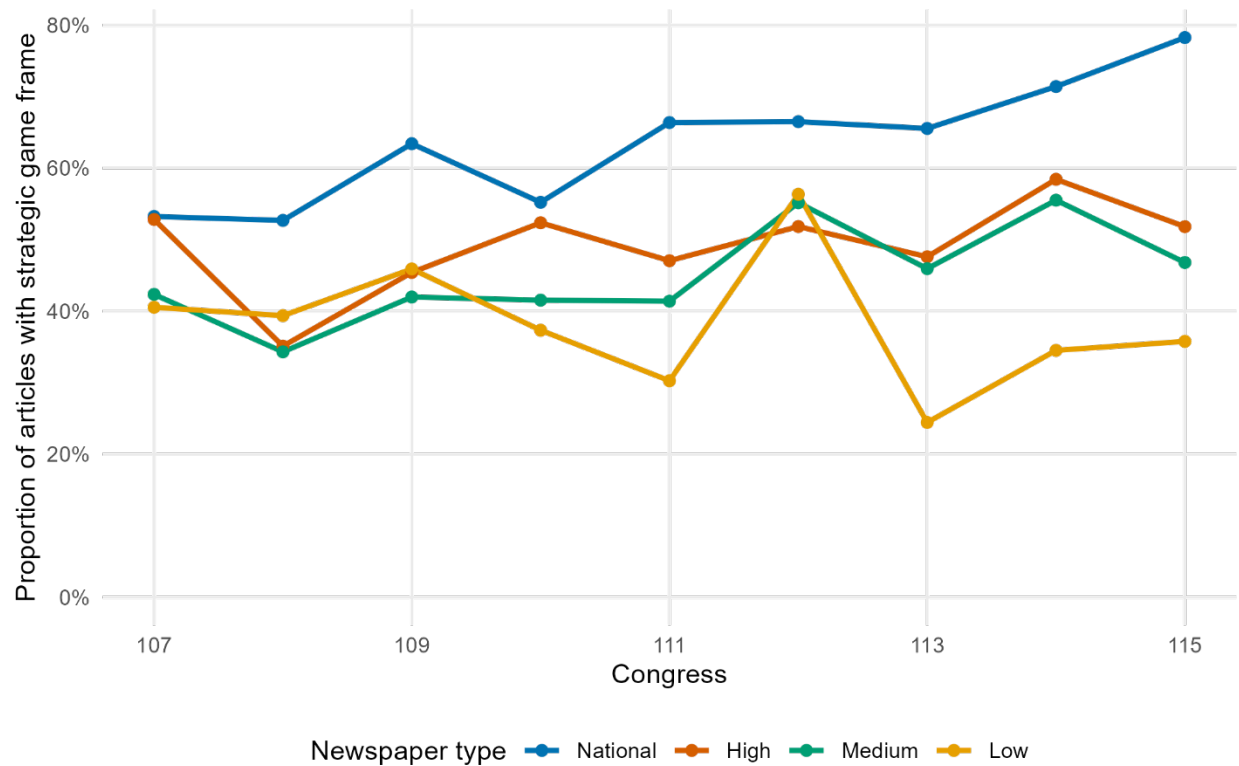


Figure 3: Strategic-Game Frame Dominance by Circulation Tier

Discussion

This paper documents how national and local newspapers' coverage of Congress differs across two important dimensions. We find clear evidence that national and local newspapers differ in their use of strategic-game frames: National newspapers use these frames more frequently than local newspapers, high-circulation local newspapers use them more than low-circulation local newspapers, and this gap has grown over time as national newspapers frame an increasing percentage of their congressional coverage in strategic-game terms.

Our findings about negativity are more equivocal about the differences between national and local newspapers. While we see the same pattern of differences – national newspapers more

negative than local newspapers, and high-circulation local newspapers more negative than low-circulation local newspapers – these differences are less substantial and statistically significant. However, we see two clear overtime trends: All newspapers have grown more negative in their coverage of Congress, and local newspapers have gotten much more negative in their coverage. The result is that, in the second decade of our sample, local newspapers are as or more negative towards Congress than national newspapers. This is particularly true of small-circulation local newspapers, which are net-positive in their coverage of Congress in the first decade but slightly more negative than national newspapers in their second decade.

These findings have important implications for understanding how citizens view Congress. Nationalization of media consumption has led more people to see Congress through a national, instead of local lens. This national lens is more negative and portrays Congress as a site where elites play games for power instead of addressing substantively important issues. These two lenses have changed over time: the national lens has grown more focused on political strategy and tactics, while both lenses have become more negative. However, even without these changes within local and national newspapers, the nationalization of consumption would mean that more people will see Congress through a negative, cynical lens.

These results may help explain the low esteem that Congress is held in. While Congress has consistently been the least popular branch of government, its popularity has reached new lows in recent decades. Citizens see Congress as an institution dominated by conflict and name-calling, with members of Congress more concerned with showing up their partisan opponents than addressing the serious problems facing the nation (Atkinson 2017). To be sure, Congress has grown more polarized, and less productive, over the last two decades (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016, Mann and Ornstein 2012, Binder 2015). But our results suggest that some of

these changes in view is a result of a change in the media citizens consume, which accentuate the negative and the strategic over and above the important policy stakes that are at the center of congressional debates.

These findings have several limitations. Our measure of negativity uses a dictionary-based approach and measures sentiment in articles about Congress rather than negativity towards Congress; both of these methodological choices have come under attack (Bestvater and Monroe 2023, Zhao and Wong 2024, Burnham 2025). In future work, we will expand our measure of negativity to address these critiques. Our sample contains a very large number of articles but a relatively small number of newspapers and expanding our sample of newspapers will increase our confidence in these findings. Finally, our dataset captures the period of local newspapers' most rapid collapse, but we are limited in what we can say about the most recent years of congressional coverage.

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