Words and Deeds: Do Legislators' Public Messages Reflect Their Behind-the-Scenes Work with Federal Agencies?

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January 16, 2026

Abstract

Do legislators' words match their deeds? We contribute to the promise-keeping literature by introducing "attention consistency" as a measure of representation, theorizing conditions that should produce more consistency between public messaging and behavior in office, and testing whether legislators' public attention to federal agencies in constituent newsletters corresponds to their private engagement with those agencies. We find strong evidence of attention consistency in cross-sectional and within-member analyses in the volume of legislators' attention. Robustness checks evaluating the distribution of legislator attention yield similar results. Legislators who publicly emphasize an agency engage more with that agency behind the scenes. We find no evidence that ideological distance from an agency conditions the consistency of legislators' public and private attention to it. Similarly, while members of relevant oversight committees make more requests of agencies they oversee, we find no evidence that oversight membership conditions the consistency of legislators' public and private attention to it. Our analyses show that legislators' interests, as expressed in their attention to that agency in their newsletters, matter as much as institutional roles in shaping legislators' behind-the-scenes interactions with federal agencies.

Keywords: US Congress, constituency service, congressional capacity, congressional oversight, inter-branch relations

Word count: 9145

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1 Introduction

Do legislators' words match their deeds? This seemingly simple question of whether what legislators say matches what legislators do in office is central to core democratic principles of representation and accountability. Previous research examining this question has focused on legislative activity (Sulkin, 2009, 2011) and legislative effectiveness (Simas et al., 2025) as measures of legislative deeds. But legislative activity, while important, is only one component of representation.

In this paper, we focus on a different core pillar of congressional representation: legislator outreach to federal agencies that occurs in the course of constituency service[1], information-seeking, oversight (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984, Aberbach (1990)), back-channel policymaking,[2], and steering funds to their districts (also known as lettermarking)[3]. Representing constituents in bureaucratic processes through constituency service and steering federal grants is said to contribute to the incumbency advantage, as members of Congress leverage their position to deliver benefits to constituents (and others) — something individuals, non-governmental organizations, and future congressional challengers are less able to do (King, 1991). However, the work legislators do with federal agencies is largely invisible to both voters and journalists, making it extremely difficult for voters to assess what legislators are doing behind the scenes.

We tackle this representational black box directly by examining whether the public attention that legislators pay to an executive agency when talking to constituents corresponds to the largely invisible work they do behind the scenes with that federal agency. The focus of this paper is whether the attention legislators give to agencies when they communicate with their constituents is consistent with their largely invisible behind-the-scenes engagement with those agencies. This analysis is one new way to measure a broader concept we call *attention consistency* that includes any study of the consistency between public messaging (speeches, ads, campaign platforms, newsletters, etc.) and substantive behavior in office (legislative work, voting, constituent service, oversight work, etc.).[4]

We evaluate attention consistency using attention *volume*, which assesses whether legislators who mention an agency more often in their public communications also work more with that agency behind the scenes. This

[1] Building on Fenno's conception of constituency service, Judge-Lord et al. (2026) define constituency service as "how members of Congress help channel and articulate the demands of individuals, groups, and localities to the federal government" (pg. 1).

[2] Ritchie (2023) defines back-channel policymaking as when "Members of Congress exploit the bureaucracy's control over policy implementation using informal channels of communication with agencies" (Ritchie, 2023, pg 5).

[3] Mills and Kalaf-Hughes (2015) define lettermarking as when "members of Congress write to the head of an administrative agency asking (or demanding) that the agency retain, or allocate, distributive benefits to their districts" (pg 548).

[4] Attention consistency focuses on how *legislators'* allocate their own limited attention. There is a parallel concept of representation examining the consistency of legislator beliefs or behavior with their *constituents* priorities, preferences, or interests (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019).

volume-based approach captures the intensity of legislators' engagement with particular agencies and serves as the main focus of our analysis.

We also assess attention consistency using the *distribution* of attention—the share of their public communications and their behind-the-scenes messages to a particular agency—as robustness checks in the Supplemental Appendix.

To measure attention consistency, we combine two new data sets on legislator behavior in the 111th–116th Congresses. The first is Cormack (2025)'s collection of congressional electronic newsletters. The second is a near census of congressional contacts with federal agencies between 2007 and 2021 (Judge-Lord et al., 2026). Combining these two data sets allows us to understand how members of Congress advocate on behalf of their constituents and the extent to which this work aligns with their constituent communications.

We find support for theories that posit consistency of words and deeds using both within-member and across-member designs. When a given legislator changes how much attention they pay to an agency in their newsletters, we see significant changes in the number of requests they make to that agency. This relationship is robust to designs that control for many drivers of variation in legislator behavior, including oversight committee positions and legislative effectiveness. Furthermore, this relationship does not appear to be conditional on legislator or perceived agency ideology. Whether legislators are ideologically close to or distant from an agency, they contact it more often when they mention it more often in their newsletters.

Our broader concept of attention consistency includes what some call "promise-keeping" and has similar normative implications for democratic accountability (Mansbridge, 2003). Scholarship on promise-keeping has examined whether legislators' public communications align with their legislative behavior — whether their words and deeds match (Sulkin, 2009, Sulkin (2011), Grimmer (2013b), Simas et al. (2025)). We build on this work by comparing legislators' public-facing communications *about* individual federal agencies with their behind-the-scenes communications *with* that agency. While our approach does not directly measure policy outcomes or fulfillment, it does identify efforts that legislators make to follow through on their stated priorities. Given that legislators' "presentation of self" is crucial to their overall approaches to representation (Fenno, 1978), understanding the degree to which their work reflects their words is essential to common understandings of representation (Mansbridge, 2003).

The findings in this paper are of particular normative concern to scholars of representation because of the assumption, undergirded by evidence (e.g., Lee, 2016), that messaging has overtaken the importance of policy and other day-to-day work in Congress. The normative hope regarding promise-keeping is that voters can reward legislators who keep their promises with reelection and vote them out of office for those who do not. If legislators' deeds fail to match their words with no apparent electoral consequences, then promissory

accountability is broken. Indeed, some legislators have made headlines in recent years for claiming credit for federal dollars provided to their districts by legislation that they did not support (Smith, 2022),[5] and former House member Madison Cawthorn (R-NC) gained notoriety after admitting that he staffed his office with a focus around communications rather than policy (Holmes, 2021). However, at least in their communications with and about federal agencies, legislators appear to be remarkably consistent. Regardless of whether public communication is driving behind-the-scenes work or vice versa, this finding suggests that legislators see their day-to-day interactions with federal agencies as integral to fulfilling their representational obligations.

2 Consistency Between Words and Deeds

Scholars have devoted significant time and effort to uncovering how the words and work (deeds) of legislators contribute to the representation of their constituents. Scholars have mostly studied words as a separate element of representation, though the literature on promise-keeping has worked to combine the study of these two domains.

2.1 Representation Through Words

While it is expected that legislators spend significant time voting on, writing, and debating legislation, as well as performing oversight, they stand little chance of receiving credit for these efforts without communicating these activities to those holding them accountable and deciding their electoral fates. For members of Congress, outward messaging is an essential form of political behavior.

Classic work on representation in Congress emphasizes the value of legislators' words through credit claiming, advertising, and position-taking (Mayhew, 1974). Through these communicative activities, members take ownership of their political activities, hoping this work will lead to electoral rewards. Recent research expands on this idea, analyzing how legislators use different communication formats — press releases, social media, and constituent newsletters — to shape constituents' perceptions of their work. Taking advantage of both methodological advances and the expanding availability of text data, Grimmer (2013b) revived the empirical study of credit claiming. Since that time, we have seen a dramatic expansion of work on credit claiming (Grimmer, 2013a; Grimmer et al., 2012, 2014; Crosson and Kaslovsky, 2024; Hunt and Miler, 2025; Simas et al., 2025). These studies show that what members choose to emphasize reflects both strategic considerations and representational goals. While there are notable exceptions, most of this work focuses on the words or messages that legislators send to constituents and does not examine the actual actions (deeds) they take while in office.

[5] For example, after opposing the 2021 infrastructure package, several Republican legislators nevertheless touted specific projects funded by the bill in their districts (Smith, 2022).

2.2 Representation Through Deeds

Representational actions — deeds — take many forms, most of which are visible to the public. Legislators represent their constituents by sponsoring and cosponsoring legislation that addresses local concerns or appeals to constituents' ideological preferences (Adler and Wilkerson, 2013; Rocca and Gordon, 2010). They also represent their constituents' interests in roll call votes (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Clinton, 2006). As members of committees, they may engage in activities such as holding oversight hearings, offering amendments, and highlighting salient issues (Hall, 1996; Esterling, 2007; Park, 2021). Floor speeches, like other forms of communication, allow members to take positions in debates and signal attention to constituent priorities in a venue where viewers may perceive them as impacting debate and negotiation among legislators (Grimmer, 2013b). Legislators also direct money and resources to their districts by securing distributive benefits that they can show to their constituents (Berry et al., 2010; Lazarus, 2010). Some legislators engage in highly visible district work, including town halls, site visits, and public appearances designed to signal attentiveness and accessibility (Fenno, 1978; Cain et al., 1987). Most of these visible activities are amenable to systematic measurement and are the focus of extensive empirical literature in legislative studies.

Deeds Behind the Scenes

While voters often evaluate members of Congress on their votes or public positions, much of their day-to-day work on behalf of constituents is less visible and more personalized. Our focus in this paper is on legislator outreach to federal agencies, which encompasses everything from bureaucratic oversight, back-channel policymaking, grantmaking (also known as lettermarking), and constituency service.

One critical form of these behind-the-scenes activities is constituency casework, or helping constituents seek assistance from federal agencies. Scholars describe casework as a representational activity that helps incumbents foster electoral support by strengthening the personal bond between a member and their constituents (Cain et al., 1987; Fenno, 1978).

Constituency service also provides members with opportunities to exercise informal oversight—flagging inefficiencies, identifying agency failures, and pushing for bureaucratic responsiveness (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984). In this sense, it functions as a window into the federal bureaucracy, where the legislator acts as an intermediary between federal agencies and individual citizens. Yet despite its importance, this kind of behind-the-scenes work remains largely hidden from public view and unexplored in existing research. This project brings that work into the spotlight by systematically examining how members engage with federal agencies.

While empirical research on constituency service largely ceased in the 1980s, the last few years have seen a dramatic resurgence. For example, recent scholarship has demonstrated that allegations of Potomac Fever are

ill-founded, with experienced legislators providing greater amounts of constituency service relative to their newly elected colleagues in Congress, even when the balance of their priorities shifts toward policy work (Judge-Lord et al., 2026).[6] Additionally, constituency service varies based on the district in which constituents live, the party of their legislator, demographic characteristics of both the member and constituents, and campaign contributions from relevant industry PACs (Lowande, 2019; Lowande, 2018; Lowande et al., 2019, Powell et al. (2023); Snyder et al., 2025).

Beyond constituency service, legislators' work with federal agencies also includes a variety of policy-focused activities, such as bureaucratic oversight-related queries, back-channel policymaking, and letter-marking. While recent scholarship has yet to focus on bureaucratic oversight-related queries in legislator contacts, back-channel policymaking and letter-marking have each been growing areas of scholarship. Ritchie (2023) defines back-channel policymaking as when "Members of Congress exploit the bureaucracy's control over policy implementation using informal channels of communication with agencies" (pg 5). Scholarship on back-channel policymaking has focused on understanding how and when members of Congress attempt to pressure federal agencies on policy issues (Ritchie, 2018; Ritchie and You, 2019; Ritchie, 2023; Lauterbach and Ritchie, 2025). A different form of policy-related pressure in legislators' communications with federal agencies focused on steering grants toward legislators' districts. This process, often called letter-marking, became an alternative way for legislators to influence federal spending in their districts after Congress passed a ban on earmarks in 2011. Though findings have differed on the extent of these attempts' impact on policy outcomes, research has shown that members of Congress have made concerted efforts to influence this process (Mills and Kalaf-Hughes, 2015; Mills et al., 2016).

2.3 Attention Consistency: Linking Words and Deeds

The domain in which scholars have most directly connected legislators' words to their deeds is the promise-keeping literature. This body of work draws on promissory theories of representation, which focus on whether elected officials fulfill the commitments they make to voters. It explores whether legislative efforts align with campaign rhetoric or other public communications.

Connecting Words and Deeds Through Promise-Keeping

Promissory representation, as defined by Mansbridge (2003), is the traditional model of representation that focuses on the "idea that during campaigns representatives made promises to constituents, which they then kept or failed to keep," (Mansbridge, 2003, pg. 515). In the classic principal–agent model of representation, the central

[6] A related stream of literature (Bernhard and Sulkin, 2018, and Crosson and Kaslovsky (2024)) focuses on "District Advocates" as a legislative style that "devotes their energy and resources to cultivating their districts" (Bernhard and Sulkin, 2018, pg. 47).

question is whether the promises representatives (agents) make to constituents (principals) during campaigns are fulfilled through the actions they take once in office.

Building on the theoretical concepts of promissory representation, formal models lay the groundwork for connecting what legislators say to their constituents and the representational actions they undertake while in office. If voters evaluate incumbents to determine whether they are effectively representing the district (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2006; Gordon and Landa, 2009), then representatives have an incentive to ensure that voters are aware of their efforts and successes. Under this model, constituency service can aid legislators seeking reelection, and *talking about* that service can help ensure that constituents take notice. In congressional correspondence about policy, we expect legislators to have similar incentives to publicize their collaboration with agencies across different policy domains.

Scholars have devoted substantial effort to empirically evaluating how well legislators keep their promises. Perhaps the most robust literature on this topic is in the comparative context, where scholars have focused on evaluating the extent to which parties fulfill the promises they made in their party platforms (Thomson et al., 2017; Naurin et al., 2019). Much of this literature focuses on institutional and electoral factors that facilitate or impede the fulfillment of party platforms (whether the party is in government, coalitional dynamics, etc.). While party platforms are less of a focus in the American context, scholars have attempted to measure party platform fulfillment here. Royed et al. (2019) note the institutional challenges of our system of divided government and checks and balances that inhibit platform fulfillment, yet in their analysis of the 1977-2000 party platforms, they find that 58.3% of all pledges at least partially fulfilled (Royed et al., 2019, pg. 113).

Shifting the focus from party-level promises to those made by individual legislators, a key aspect of representational accountability in American politics, most studies compare political speech with legislative activity in Congress. In seminal work on this topic, Sulkin (2009) and Sulkin (2011) examines televised campaign ads as the promises and evaluates whether or not those promises were kept by examining bill introduction and co-sponsorship activity.[7] Sulkin's approach is attention-based. It examines the topics on which legislators are campaigning, such as crime. Then it evaluates whether they introduce or cosponsor bills on that same topic (a more tractable measure than trying to assess specific promises). Sulkin finds encouraging evidence for an attention-consistency-based approach to promise-keeping. Across most issue areas, she finds that legislators who discussed those issues in televised ads were more likely to engage in both low-effort activities, such as

[7]A different though closely related theoretical lens through which we can consider this relationship between words and deeds is to consider the canonical distinction in legislative studies between show-horses and work-horses (Payne, 1980) in which show-horses seek publicity while doing minimal legislative work (words not deeds) and work-horses who avoid publicity and focus on behind the scenes legislative work (deeds not words).

signing on as a cosponsor to a bill, and high-effort activities, such as introducing a bill on that topic (Sulkin, 2009, 2011).

This attention-based approach to promise-keeping—focusing on whether legislators prioritize in office the issues they highlighted during their campaigns—has become a dominant framework in the literature. Rather than emphasizing policy outcomes, scholars increasingly conceptualize promise-fulfillment in terms of legislative *effort*, such as bill sponsorship or co-sponsorship, which are more squarely within a legislator's control. Sulkin (2011) defines promise-keeping as occurring "when legislators are active in Congress on the issues they prioritized in their campaigns," a view echoed by others who describe this as an "agenda-based conception, rather than a policy congruence–based conception" (Harbridge, 2012). In this view, promise-keeping is fundamentally about attention allocation, not policy success, a distinction that better isolates a legislator's agency from external institutional constraints. Studies have followed this logic by operationalizing promise-fulfillment through various measures of attention, including sponsorship behavior and legislative advocacy (Sulkin, 2011; Sulkin et al., 2015; Russell and Wen, 2021; Željko Poljak and Russell, 2024). While some recent work incorporates legislative effectiveness as a more outcome-oriented measure (Simas et al., 2025), the field remains largely focused on how legislators allocate their time and energy—an approach well suited to examining representational accountability in a complex institutional setting.

Another approach to comparing words and deeds is Grimmer (2013b), which compares whether legislators who focus on credit claiming in their press releases actually engage in legislation actions and legislative speech advancing those causes. Conceptually, Grimmer identifies two different types of deception (legislators misleading constituents) that can arise: fabrication and omission. Grimmer (2013b) defines fabrication as "creating a presentation of work that deviates from what they actually do in Washington." He contrasts this type of deception with omission, which he defines as "failing to report stances or work performed in Washington," (Grimmer, 2013b, pg. 104). He finds little evidence of fabrication, showing that senators who credit-claim in press releases vote in favor of appropriations bills, senators focus attention on the same policy issues in press releases and floor speeches, and senators who pay attention to policy areas in press releases also introduce bills on those topics. By contrast, he finds more evidence of omission showing that legislators' presentational styles impact newspaper coverage and constituent knowledge.

Taking a different approach to comparing the words and deeds of legislators, Simas et al. (2025) compared credit-claiming messages in social media posts and congressional newsletters to legislative effectiveness scores. They find a weak relationship and that even ineffective legislators engage in credit-claiming messages to their

constituents, thus posing a challenge for citizens relying on those messages to hold legislators accountable.[8] Hunt and Miler (2025) take a slightly different approach to addressing a similar problem. They code legislators' newsletters to identify speech claiming "effectiveness" across three distinct areas (lawmaking effectiveness, advocacy effectiveness, and district effectiveness), and correlated that speech with actual legislative effectiveness (deeds). They find that, while legislators tell constituents about all three types of effectiveness, Legislative Effectiveness Scores are only correlated with messages about lawmaking.

Throughout studies that highlight attention, as conceptualized in the promise-keeping literature, it is understood not as a single type of behavior but as a composite of multiple representational activities. When a legislator communicates about their work with federal agencies and follows through by engaging with those agencies, they may be engaging in multiple representational activities at once. In addition to participating in promissory representation, they may simultaneously be participating in *anticipatory* representation, which builds on the idea of retrospective voting, where legislators focus on what they think their constituents will approve of at the next election rather than the promises they made during the last one (Fiorina, 1981; Mansbridge, 2003). Concurrently, we expect that these activities also serve an oversight function, in which constituent complaints and casework requests trigger "fire alarms" that bring their attention to issues within agencies (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984). We expect members' agency correspondence to include at least some of these oversight requests (Aberbach, 1990). We then expect legislators to take credit for that oversight work in their communications about federal agencies.

While there is much work on credit claiming and, to a lesser extent, promise-keeping, we know little about how legislators talk to constituents about specific federal agencies. Strikingly, we were unable to locate any studies that examine this question. Moreover, to our knowledge, no studies have compared how members of Congress communicate about federal agency engagement to actual behavior involving those agencies.

3 Theory and Expectations

Our primary hypothesis is that words and deeds align. This expectation is consistent with prior findings in the promise-keeping and credit claiming literatures that have investigated other outcomes (legislative activity and legislative speech) and found at least some degree of alignment between words and deeds (Sulkin, 2009, 2011;

[8] Recently, scholars of Congressional representation have focused on the constituent side of promise-keeping, in the form of survey experiments to measure how much constituents respond to promise fulfillment (Bonilla, 2024). Bonilla (2024) examines promise-keeping in the context of two specific issues (immigration and human trafficking) and finds evidence that co-partisans differentiate between kept and broken promises, whereas those of opposing parties do not. Strikingly, she finds that all constituents, regardless of partisanship, consider promise-keeping when asked about accountability but do not when asked about approval. Relatedly, Butler et al. (2024) examines how much constituents know about their representatives' legislative effectiveness and finds they know very little. In a randomized survey experiment, they provide the treatment group with objective and credible information about the legislative effectiveness of their representatives. They find that evidence of effectiveness impacted both moderate and (to a lesser extent) partisan respondents.

Grimmer, 2013b; Simas et al., 2025; Hunt and Miler, 2025). We refer to this alignment as attention consistency and evaluate it primarily along a volume-based dimension. Attention *volume* captures whether legislators who devote more overall attention to an agency in public communications also engage more frequently with that agency in private correspondence, measured using counts. This volume-based conception of attention consistency directly reflects the intensity of legislators' engagement with particular agencies and serves as the basis for our main hypotheses and analyses.

We also examine attention consistency using a distributional measure that captures whether legislators prioritize the same agencies across both domains, relative to others (measured using percentages). These analyses are presented as robustness checks in the Supplemental Appendix rather than as part of the main theoretical tests. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

- **H1 - Attention Consistency Hypothesis:** - Legislators' behind-the-scenes work with a federal agency will be positively correlated with legislators' attention to a federal agency in newsletters to constituents.

In our next hypothesis, we consider whether a legislator's institutional responsibilities shape attention consistency. One potential source of variation is committee oversight. Members who sit on a committee overseeing a particular agency may face greater pressure or incentives to monitor and engage with that agency, both publicly and privately. In such cases, consistency may stem less from personal priorities than from institutional responsibilities.

While the oversight literature often emphasizes Congress's failure to systematically monitor the bureaucracy (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984), it also attributes this failure to weak political incentives to prioritize oversight (Evans, 1994). If oversight offers a political payoff, such as credit claiming or demonstrating responsiveness, legislators will likely publicize it. Committee membership may therefore encourage attention consistency not only through institutional obligation but also as a strategic credit-claiming opportunity.

- **H2- Conditional on Oversight Role**: Legislators' behind-the-scenes work with federal agencies will be positively correlated with their attention to those agencies in constituent newsletters, conditional on whether the legislator serves on a committee with oversight jurisdiction over the agency.

Our final two hypotheses present competing expectations about how the relationship between words and deeds may vary conditional on the ideological similarity or dissimilarity between the legislator and the agency in question. One possibility is that legislators are more likely to highlight agencies whose missions align with their ideological preferences. If legislators use newsletters primarily as vehicles for credit claiming, they may be more likely to discuss agencies with which they are ideologically aligned. For example, a conservative member

might claim credit for the expansion of a military base but remain silent on a climate change grant from the EPA. A liberal member might do the opposite. By this logic, we would expect consistency to be strongest when legislators and agencies are ideologically aligned.

- **H3a - Conditional on Ideological Alignment**: Legislators' behind-the-scenes work with federal agencies is positively correlated with a legislator's attention to a federal agency in newsletters to constituents, conditional on ideological agreement between the legislator and the agency.

Alternatively, legislators may use newsletters more for oversight and position-taking than for credit claiming. Prior research shows that behind-the-scenes work is mostly constituency service, which may not be the focus of legislators' public communications. If legislators are more likely to highlight their oversight and accountability work than constituency service in their newsletters, then attention consistency may be stronger when legislators and agencies are ideologically distant.

- **H3b- Conditional on Ideological Disagreement**: Legislators' behind-the-scenes work with federal agencies is positively correlated with a legislator's attention to a federal agency in newsletters to constituents, conditional on ideological disagreement between the legislator and the agency.

4 Data

The focus of this project is on comparing the words and deeds of members of Congress. To that end, we linked our primary explanatory variable of words in the form of congressional newsletter data to our deeds outcome measure of behind-the-scenes legislator engagement with federal agencies.

4.1 Dependent Variable: Legislator Requests to Federal Agencies

To measure legislators' behind-the-scenes engagement with federal agencies, we rely on Judge-Lord et al. (2026)'s data on legislator requests to federal agencies. To obtain the data, they filed 434 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests with all federal departments, agencies, and sub-agencies for all records of incoming communication from members of Congress between January 1, 2007, and the date of the request. These contacts include letters from individual legislators, committee chairs in their capacity as committee chairs, and groups of legislators. We aggregated the sub-agency units to the highest level (often the Department), resulting in a total of 36 agencies. We use a count of all requests a legislator sent to a specific agency in a year, as well as the percentage of that legislator's total requests directed to each agency. These requests include constituency service

work, policy work, and oversight work.[9] We use a count of all requests a legislator sent to a specific agency in a year, as well as the percentage of that legislator's total requests directed to each agency.[10]

4.2 Primary Explanatory Variable: Attention to Federal Agencies in Congressional Newsletters

We use 150,581 newsletters collected by the DC Inbox Project (Cormack, 2025) from the 111th – 116th Congresses to identify mentions of federal agencies by members of Congress. Newsletters are one of the most direct ways in which members communicate with constituents. They are of relatively low cost to write, do not require the member's travel or personal attention, and can be drafted by staff. They also do not require the use of the franking privilege, giving members and their staff members greater control over the frequency of these communications. Legislators' offices have practically unlimited control over the length and content of these newsletters, making them a valuable tool for understanding legislators' discursive preferences. As such, they have been used to uncover partisan trends in attention to veterans, environmental issues, the propensity of lawmakers to blame each other for legislative inaction, and the extremity of members' ideological stances (Cormack, 2016, 2018; Walker, 2011; Doherty and Harbridge-Yong, 2020).

Identifying Attention to Federal Agencies in Newsletters

To identify attention to federal agencies in members' constituent newsletters, we search newsletters for mentions of federal agencies' full formal names, acronyms, and other commonly used nicknames for the agency. For example, Veterans Affairs is also known as "the Department of Veterans Affairs" as well as "the VA." Under the Department of Commerce, the United States Census Bureau goes by several other names: "US Census Bureau", "United States Census", "CEN" (agency acronym), and even "the Census". Each of these is included within our alias list.[11] By only coding for the agency's full name, we would likely miss most of its mentions within the newsletter data. We count the number of newsletters from each legislator that mentioned each agency per year, as well as the percentage of agency-mentioning newsletters in which that agency appeared.

[9] Judge-Lord et al. (2026) analyzed the content of these requests and found that: 71% was constituency service work on behalf of an individual constituent, 7% was constituency service work on behalf of a nonprofit or local government, 6% was constituency service work on behalf of a corporation, 13% was general policy work, and 3% was policy work related to corporations. The data do not code for oversight work, so the proportion of the requests involving oversight of federal agencies is unknown.

[10] Because percentage-based measures treat attention as a fixed budget and introduce interdependence across agencies, we use also explicitly model legislators' *distributions* of attention across agencies using Dirichlet regression as a robustness check. Both analyses of the *distribution* of attention across agencies show similar results to the main analysis using *counts* and are available in the Supplemental Appendix.

[11] When listing aliases for subagencies that had common names, we utilized full acronyms such as "USDA OIG" as well as including the main agency name, for example, "USDA Inspector General" instead of "Inspector General".

While the dataset includes 903 legislators (2,788 legislator-congress and 4,840 legislator-year observations), 300 member-Congress newsletter pairs are missing.[12] These omissions occur for several reasons. Some legislators did not offer a newsletter subscription during certain Congresses, meaning they likely did not publish any newsletters. Others were sworn in late or initially used basic websites that lacked a subscription option. Subscription links also varied widely in placement and labeling, making them easy to overlook—one member, for instance, required filling out a survey to subscribe, while others had links embedded in small header text. Many of the missing members joined Congress later in the term, often as late as August, November, or December, and either had no opportunity to publish newsletters or had no newsletters collected.

4.3 Additional Explanatory Variables

Oversight Role

To assess whether holding an oversight role for an agency affects the alignment between a legislator's public and private attention to it, we compare attention consistency between agencies over which they have oversight with those over which they do not. We measure oversight positions using data from Lewis and Selin (2012), which document the committees on which legislators serve and their formal jurisdictions. This approach allows us to identify whether institutional oversight responsibilities affect attention consistency.

Legislator-Agency Ideological Alignment

To assess the ideological similarity between members of Congress and specific federal agencies, we compare members' first-dimension DW-NOMINATE scores (Lewis et al., 2024) with measurements of federal agencies' perceived ideological leanings (Richardson et al., 2018) in two ways. To measure the ideological *distance* between members of Congress and federal agencies, we subtract each member's first-dimension DW-NOMINATE score from the ideology score of each agency. Alternatively, we also create an indicator for whether the legislator and agency ideology scores have the same sign as a binary measure of ideological *alignment*. In both scales, negative numbers are associated with more liberal positions, and positive numbers are associated with more conservative positions.

Institutional Power

Previous work has shown that legislator capacity and, thus, the volume of contact with agencies varies with institutional position (Judge-Lord et al., 2026). We use three measures of legislators' institutional power: (1) whether they are a committee chair, (2) whether they are the ranking member of a committee, and (3) whether

[12]To understand the reasons for missingness, we manually verified the absence of these newsletters and assessed the cause by checking the DCInbox site for each missing member-Congress pair and searching archived versions of their websites on the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine to confirm whether they had published newsletters during that period. We considered members who offered a newsletter subscription to be those who did publish newsletters during that Congress.

they are members of a prestige committee. Each position represents a different way legislators can acquire more power. As a legislator becomes a committee chair or ranking member, they have increased responsibilities when drafting and revising legislation. They also have greater access to committee resources, including the power to direct committee staff. Similarly, legislators who join more prestigious committees gain opportunities to shepherd policy through the legislative process.

We compiled committee membership and committee leadership data for this period by combining data from Stewart and Woon (2017) and the @unitedstates-project (2025). To measure committee prestige, we follow Judge-Lord et al. (2026)'s revealed preference approach (what members think is most valuable) using party rules that limit members to serving on only one of certain desirable committees. For House members, these "exclusive" committees are Appropriations, Energy & Commerce, Financial Services, Rules, and Ways & Means (Congressional Research Service, 2022). For senators, these exclusive ("Super A") Committees are: Appropriations, Armed Services, Finance, and Foreign Relations (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

Seniority

Previous work by Judge-Lord et al. (2026) show that legislators' capacity increases non-linearly with seniority, with the most substantial gains occurring during a member's first two-year Congress and leveling off later in their career. While their models include separate indicators for each of the first six years in Congress, we simplify this approach by using a single indicator for freshman legislators, defined as House members in their first term or senators in their first two-year Congress. Legislators beyond their first term serve as the reference category. We rely on Lewis et al. (2024)'s data for legislators' seniority in Congress.

Majority Party

We include a control for whether a legislator is a member of the majority party because of the extensive literature on the power and influence of the majority party in the House of Representatives (Cox and McCubbins, 2005). On one hand, we could imagine that members of the majority party might be less inclined to engage in behind-the-scenes work with federal agencies because they are more occupied with traditional lawmaking activities. On the other hand, federal agencies might be especially attentive to members of the majority party, which could encourage those members to write more to federal agencies. Previous work by Judge-Lord et al. (2026) found inconsistent results regarding majority-party membership and writing to federal agencies, which varied depending on the model specification. We rely on Lewis et al. (2024)'s data for legislators' party membership.

President's Party

We include a control for whether legislators are members of the president's party. It is plausible that members of the president's party would have different incentives to write to executive agencies controlled by their own party. Berry et al. (2010) found legislative districts represented by members of the president's party received disproportionate federal spending. Judge-Lord et al. (2026) found inconsistent results regarding the effect of the president's party membership on writing to federal agencies, depending on the model specification.

4.4 Examples of Agency Attention in Newsletters

Attention to agencies within these letters takes several forms, which provide some insight into how different members use alternative rhetorical strategies to inform and cultivate favor with constituents. In some cases, attention to agencies in newsletters was purely informational, with members providing updates to agency services. For example, during the 2020 pandemic, members frequently gave updates on how different agencies' services might be affected. For some members, discussing agencies such as the VA was simply a way to provide useful information to constituents:

> "The US Department of Veterans Affairs VA announced today telehealth video appointments using VA Video Connect increased from approximately 10000 to 120000 appointments a week between February and May of 2020. This is attributed to VA providers and Veterans taking precautions against COVID[-]19, VA Video Connect allows Veterans and their caregivers to meet virtually with their VA care teams […]." - Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI)

Other cases followed the more traditional path of position-taking. Here, members made pledges about the policies they would work to enact, as well as those they would oppose. In cases where these included attention to the agency responsible for the policy, legislators' policy positions in their newsletters directly affected the work of federal agencies.

> "On the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, I will work to expand the Veterans Choice Program, reduce wait times at VA clinics, and ensure the mental health needs of our veterans are being met" - Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN)

Finally, legislators used their newsletters to critique federal agencies and their officials and to demonstrate how they were providing oversight of these agencies and their programs.[13] These included describing the

[13] Legislators' newsletters at times also included form language which mentioned an agency. These standardized agency mentions at times were framed as offers of casework assistance, or as a way to opt-in to receiving more information about an agency.

member's participation in an oversight hearing related to the agency, or members' writing letters to federal agencies to ask questions or demand action:

> "[I] signed a bipartisan letter to ask the US Department of Veterans Affairs VA why it denied New Jersey's request for additional medical personnel needed to combat coronavirus outbreaks in the state long-term care facilities" - Rep. Mikie Sherrill (D-NJ)

This newsletter refers directly to Sherrill's behind-the-scenes work with the agency, which we also see in records obtained from the VA via FOIA requests.

4.5 Descriptive Statistics

We find that during our time period of interest, the average House member published 55 electronic newsletters, and the average senator published 45 electronic newsletters. Figure 1 presents variation in attention to federal agencies. Specifically, it shows the average annual number of newsletters that mention federal agencies from House members (panel a), Senators (b), and the average number of contacts with federal agencies from House members (c) and Senators (d). While legislators in both chambers regularly mention federal agencies in their newsletters and contact agencies, there is variation between legislators in the frequency of those mentions and contacts.

Figure 2 shows the agencies ranked by the average number of times each legislator mentioned a federal agency in their newsletters (panel a) and contacted federal agencies (panel b) per year. The Department of Defense (DOD) was by far the most frequently mentioned, averaging 8 mentions per year. That was roughly twice as often as the two next-closest agencies, Health and Human Services (DHHS) and Homeland Security (DHS), which averaged four mentions per year.

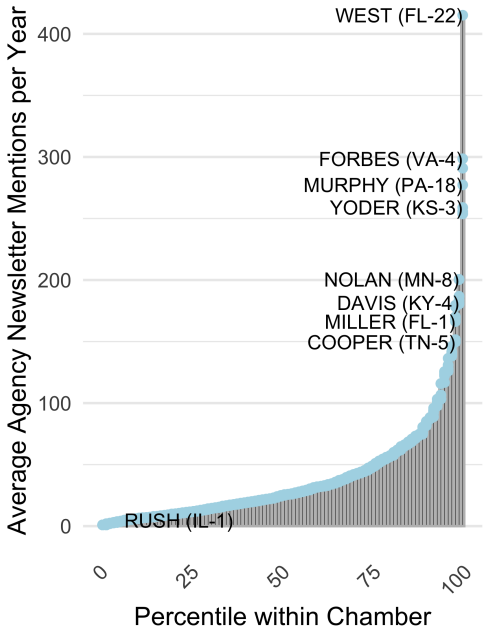
Regarding contacts

Viewing counts of mentions for each agency during each year demonstrates how attention to agencies shifts with current events that make those agencies more salient to legislators and their constituents. Figure 3 demonstrates this using two different agencies that were consistently among the top agencies mentioned in newsletters each year.

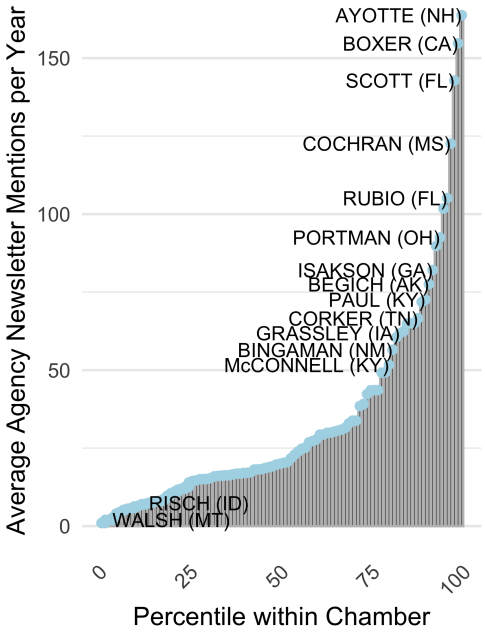
Panel (a) of Figure 3 shows that newsletter mentions of the Department of Veterans Affairs peaked during the VA Scandal in 2014 (Lopez, 2015). Members working behind-the-scenes with the VA (b) were already on the rise, but rose even more steeply after the scandal broke. This is a strong example of attention consistency.

Figure 1: Variation in Attention to Federal Agencies in Newsletters and Contacts by Percentile

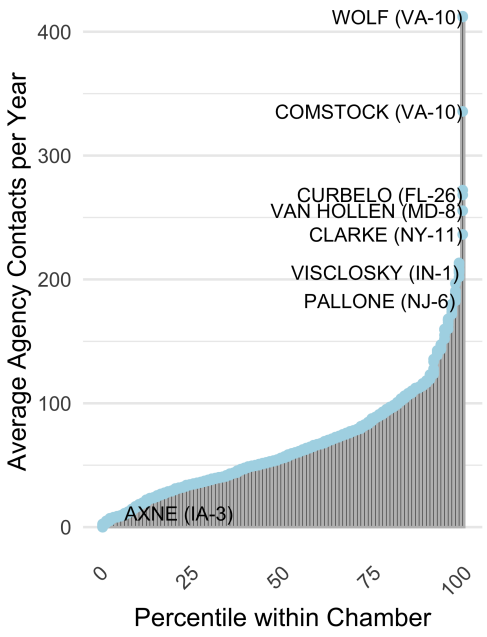
(a) Words: House Member Newsletters



(b) Words: Senator Newsletters



(c) Deeds: House Member Agency Contacts



(d) Deeds: Senator Agency Contacts

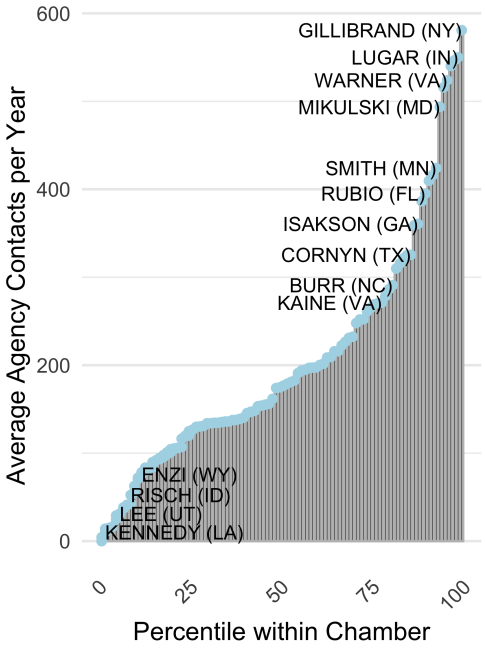


Figure 2: Words and Deeds: Agencies by Averages Per Legislator Per Year

(a) Words: Newsletter Mentions

(b) Deeds: Contacts with Agency

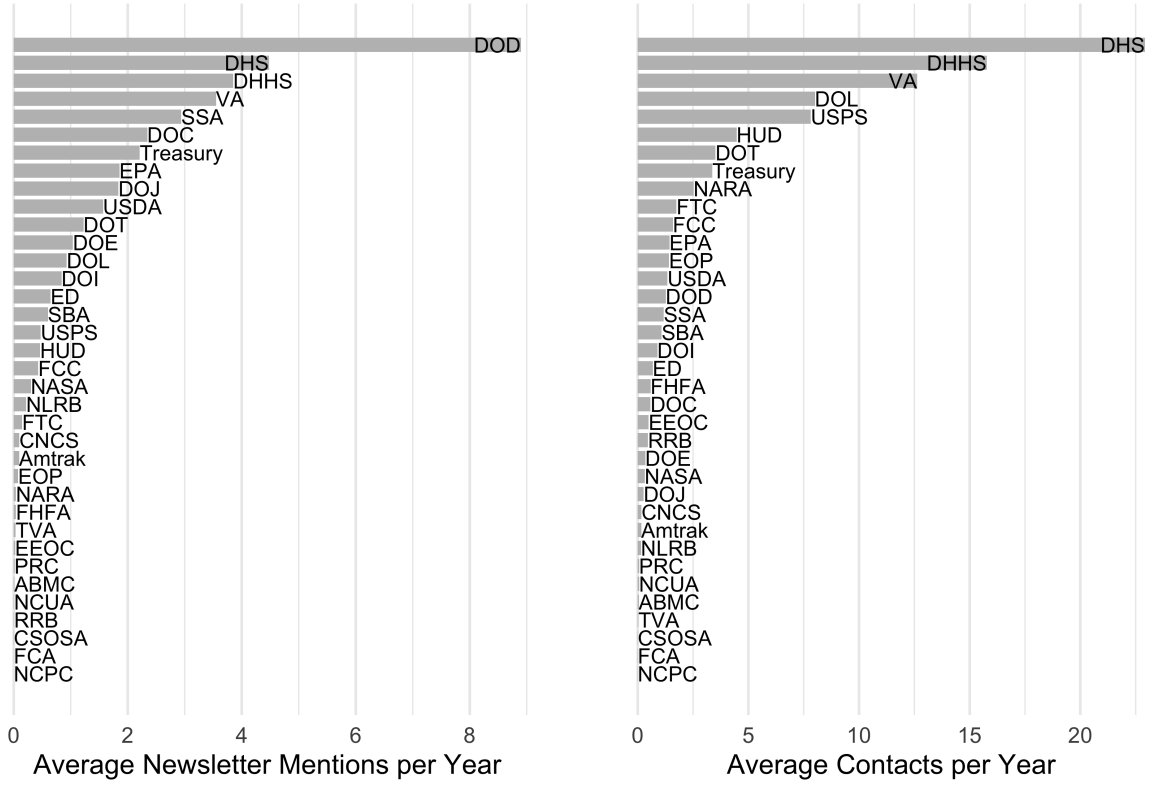
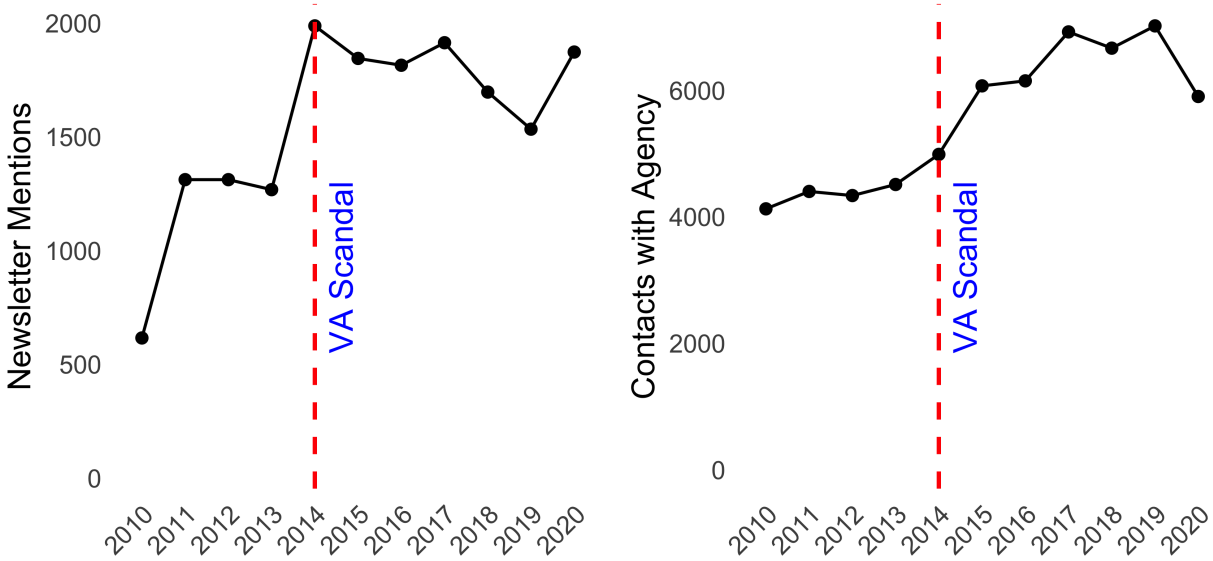


Figure 3: Congressional Attention to Selected Federal Agencies Over Time

(a) Words: Dept. of Veterans Affairs Newsletter Mentions

(b) Deeds: Dept. of Veterans Affairs Contacts



5 Analysis

Our analysis in this section is at the legislator-agency-year level. Our primary models are difference-in-differences regressions, similar to the specifications in Berry and Fowler (2016) and Judge-Lord et al. (2026). Our most stringent model specifications test for differences within legislator-agency pairs (Equation 1).

While difference-in-differences models help us isolate the relationship of interest, causality could go multiple ways. Legislators may wish to draw their constituents' attention to their oversight work, or they may generate demand for constituency service by advertising their services in their newsletters. Indeed, our theory posits a latent interest in particular agencies at particular times that may drive both behaviors.

Because the outcome (the number of times each legislator contacts each agency per year) is a count and the data are overdispersed, we estimate a negative binomial model:

$$\log(\mu_{ijt}) = \beta_1 \textbf{log(Newsletter Mentions + 1)}_{ijt} + \beta_{2:n} X_{it} + \gamma_{ij} + \delta_{jt} + m_{it} + p_{it} + \epsilon_{ijt} \quad (1)$$

μ_{ijt} is the number of requests legislator i makes to agency j in year t. γ_{ij} is a fixed effect for the legislator-agency pair. This fixed effect controls for **time-invariant legislator characteristics**, such as legislators who are more skillful at attending to news about agencies in their newsletters, conducting policy work, or filling constituency service requests than others. Critically for our research design, this fixed effect also accounts for **time-invariant constituent demand**, ensuring that differences in constituent requests across legislators do not drive our results. It also accounts for **state and district characteristics**, including population, demographics, and local industries that might be particularly likely to request help from specific agencies. $\beta_{2:n}$ captures variation related to **time-variant legislator characteristics** X that may affect the number of requests made by legislator i at time t. δ_{jt} is an agency-year fixed effect that accounts for agency-specific shocks that may affect legislator requests and the different periods for which data were available from each agency. This difference-in-difference design ensures that coefficients β_1 capture variation related to changes in the number of mentions of agency j in legislator i's newsletters, not other factors that may vary across districts, legislators, or agencies.

Assuming that legislators' trends in the number of requests to a given agency and their attention to it follow parallel paths over time, β_1 represents the average correlation between newsletter mentions of a given agency and requests to that agency.

5.1 Public Attention to Agencies Correlates with Action

Table 1 shows a positive and statistically significant relationship between words (newsletter attention to an agency) and deeds (number of legislator requests to that agency). All coefficients represent the effect on the log

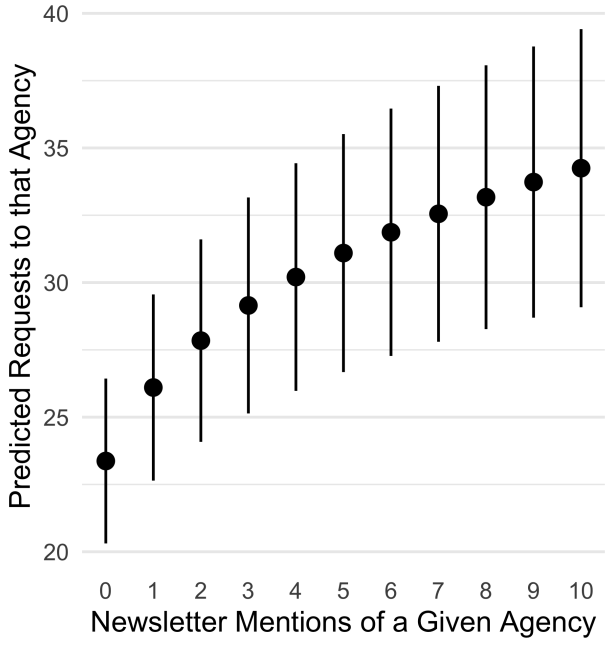
of the average additional requests per year *per agency*. Model 1 (the first column of Table 1) shows differences across legislators.[14] We find that legislators who pay more public attention to agencies also contact those same agencies more often. That is, more attention to an agency in a legislator's newsletters indicates more contact with that agency.

While not our primary focus, we show that including our new measure of public attention to agencies does not diminish the effects of institutional power and experience shown in previous research. Legislators with more institutional power make more requests, and newer legislators make fewer requests. As with prior work, evidence about the effects of majority party status or having a co-partisan president is less conclusive.

However, these cross-sectional differences may be the result of other legislator characteristics. If legislators who are better at their jobs write more detailed newsletters and also contact agencies more often, then the estimates from Model 1 confound legislators' overall ability with their attention dynamics. To address potential confounding, Model 2 (column 2 of Table 1) shows the difference-in-differences specification in Equation 1.

Figure 4 shows the predicted number of agency requests at different levels of newsletter attention, holding other variables at modal values. Legislators who mention an agency more often make substantially more requests to that agency.

Figure 4: Predicted Number of Total Requests to Federal Agencies by Newsletter Mentions (Cross Sectional), 2007-2020



[14]As a further robustness check, we conduct the same analysis while including Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LES) to test whether overall capacity rather than intentional patterns of communication drives attention consistency.

Table 1: Newsletter Attention and Requests to Federal Agencies

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Dependent variable	**Count**	**Count**	**Count**	**Count**	**Count**	**Count**
log(Newsletters + 1)	0.159**	0.071**	0.154**	0.068**	0.133**	0.098**
	(0.016)	(0.012)	(0.017)	(0.013)	(0.023)	(0.024)
Ideological Distance					-0.193**	
					(0.031)	
log(Newsletters + 1)*Distance					0.027	-0.028
					(0.019)	(0.021)
Oversight*log(Newsletters + 1)			-0.000	0.027		
			(0.024)	(0.026)		
Oversight Member			0.178**	-0.007		
			(0.034)	(0.048)		
Freshman	-0.102**	-0.108**	-0.091*	-0.108**	-0.098**	-0.088*
	(0.036)	(0.035)	(0.036)	(0.035)	(0.037)	(0.039)
Senate	1.057**	0.906**	1.039**	0.854**	1.088**	0.916**
	(0.067)	(0.100)	(0.068)	(0.115)	(0.069)	(0.134)
Committee Chair	0.217**	0.098	0.225**	0.099	0.231**	0.078
	(0.071)	(0.068)	(0.072)	(0.069)	(0.073)	(0.075)
Ranking Member	0.210**	0.087	0.192**	0.089	0.209**	0.064
	(0.075)	(0.065)	(0.073)	(0.067)	(0.080)	(0.077)
Prestige Committee	-0.034	-0.015	-0.025	-0.027	-0.055	-0.019
	(0.038)	(0.049)	(0.039)	(0.051)	(0.040)	(0.051)
Majority	0.067*	0.047†	0.059†	0.042	0.076*	0.012
	(0.032)	(0.028)	(0.032)	(0.029)	(0.033)	(0.031)
President's Party	0.051	-0.027	0.045	-0.023	0.008	-0.033
	(0.032)	(0.026)	(0.032)	(0.026)	(0.033)	(0.029)
Observations	128,993	89,292	127,286	88,034	107,173	77,750
R^2	0.23	0.812	0.231	0.812	0.217	0.817
Year x agency fixed effects	X	X	X	X	X	X
Legislator x agency fixed effects		X		X		X

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

This table shows negative binomial regression models. Models 1, 3, and 5 show the average differences across legislators. Models 2, 4, and 6 present the difference-in-differences estimates.

When a legislator increases their mentions of a federal agency in their newsletters, they also increase the number of formal requests to that agency. This supports our attention consistency hypothesis and suggests that members' public words reflect their deeds behind the scenes. Rather than being purely symbolic, agency mentions may reflect or even facilitate deeper engagement with the federal bureaucracy.

5.2 Does Having an Oversight Role Explain the Relationship between Public Communication and Private Action?

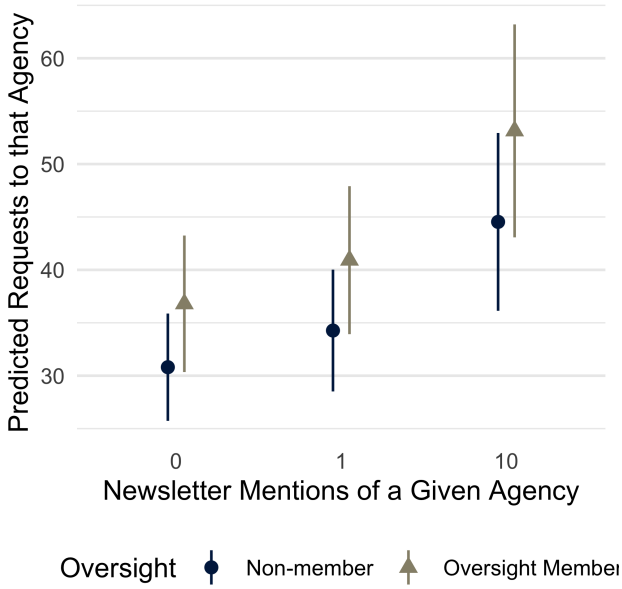
Next, we examine whether the relationship between public communication and private action differs when a legislator holds an oversight role over an agency. We assess this by interacting our main predictor, the logged number of newsletter mentions per year, with an indicator for whether the legislator serves on an oversight committee with jurisdiction over the agency. This allows us to test whether legislators have different levels of attention consistency toward the agencies they actively oversee. Columns 3 and 4 of Table 1 present estimates of the correlation between attention to agencies in constituent newsletters and work with that agency, conditional on oversight status.

The coefficient on logged newsletter attention remains consistently positive and statistically significant across all model specifications (0.154 in Model 3 and 0.078 in Model 4), further supporting the robustness of our attention consistency findings even when controlling for legislators' oversight roles. The interaction term oversight × logged newsletter attention is negative and statistically significant in Model 3, indicating that the positive effect of newsletter attention on requests is weaker for legislators serving on oversight committees with jurisdiction over the agency. We also find that this interaction is not statistically significant in the difference-in-differences model. However, the coefficient remains in the same (negative) direction as in the models for differences across legislators. Weaker attention consistency likely reflects a preexisting relationship: legislators with an interest in a given agency may be more likely to pursue relevant oversight committee assignments. As a result, the difference-in-differences models may capture this underlying proclivity rather than a causal effect.

Taken together, these results suggest that having an oversight role does not fully explain the relationship between public communication and private action. Legislators continue to exhibit attention consistency between agency mentions and behind-the-scenes requests even when controlling for oversight status. While the interaction term indicates that this relationship is somewhat weaker among oversight members, the overall pattern remains consistent. This implies that public communication signals broader engagement with an agency beyond that attributable solely to formal committee roles.

Figure 5 visualizes the results from our oversight models. The figure shows predictions from Model 3 in Table 1, estimating cross-sectional differences in attention consistency. We find no support for H2. In fact, the pattern runs in the opposite direction. The relationship between newsletter attention and requests is driven by non-oversight members, not oversight members, suggesting that public attention and formal oversight operate as distinct channels of engagement. Holding an oversight seat substantially increases the baseline number of

Figure 5: Predicted Number of Total Requests to Federal Agencies by Newsletter Mentions and Oversight Status (Cross-Sectional), 2007-2020



requests even at zero mentions, but increased newsletter attention primarily raises contact among non-members, effectively bringing the most attentive non-oversight legislators up to the level of oversight members.

5.3 Does Ideological Alignment or Disagreement Explain the Relationship between Public Communication and Private Action?

Next, we turn to our competing hypothesis about how ideological alignment or distance may affect the relationship between public communication and private action. To do this, we interact our main predictor variable, newsletter attention (logged), with measures of ideological alignment or distance. The interaction tests whether legislators have a different relationship between public and private action for agencies with which they are ideologically aligned versus distant. First, Models 5 and 6 in Table 1 use a continuous measure of ideological *distance* created by subtracting a member's first-dimension DW-NOMINATE score from the perceived ideology score of the agency. This distance measure is larger when they are further apart on these two scales.[15]

The models are the same as Equation 1, except that they now include an additional variable of interest related to ideological distance interacted with the log count of newsletter mentions, as shown in Equation 2. These models, which test how ideological distance shapes attention consistency, no longer include legislator-year fixed effects

$$\gamma_{ij}$$

because distance does not generally vary over time.

$$\begin{aligned} \log(\mu_{ijt}) = & \beta_1 \textbf{log(Newsletter Mentions + 1)}_{ijt} + \\ & \beta_2 \textbf{Ideological Distance}_{ijt} + \\ & \beta_3 \textbf{log(Newsletter Mentions + 1)}_{ijt} \times \textbf{Ideological Distance}_{ijt} + \\ & \beta_{4:n} X_{it} + \delta_{jt} + m_{it} + p_{it} + \epsilon_{ijt} \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

Columns 5 and 6 of Table 1 show estimates of the correlation between newsletter attention toward an agency and the number of requests a legislator makes to that agency, allowing for different relationships when legislators are aligned or distant from a given agency. All coefficients represent the correlation with the log of the average additional requests per year *per agency*.

Model 5 (the fifth column of Table 1) shows differences across legislators, using the continuous measure of ideological distance. The interaction term tests the hypothesis that the relationship between newsletter mentions and ideological distance is near zero and not significant; thus, we fail to reject the null hypothesis of no conditional relationship. Interestingly, the plain ideological terms themselves are significant, indicating that

[15]We include an indicator for ideological alignment in the supplemental materials. This variable equals 1 when the legislator's first-dimension DW-NOMINATE score and the agency's perceived ideology score share the same sign (negative for liberal, positive for conservative) and 0 otherwise.

legislators more often contact agencies perceived as ideologically closer. But ideology does not condition the relationship between words and deeds, the focus of this study.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

This paper examines whether the public attention legislators devote to a federal agency in their newsletters correlates with the level of private requests they make to that agency. We find that attention to an agency in a legislator's newsletters is correlated with their direct work with that agency, even when accounting for the alignment (or lack thereof) between the legislator's and the agency's ideologies. Furthermore, we show that changes in attention to specific agencies in members' newsletters predict changes in the number of requests made to those agencies.

These findings align with Sulkin (2009) and Sulkin (2011), as we demonstrate alignment between public attention and work behind the scenes, reflecting a link between public signaling and actual contact with agencies. Building on Grimmer (2013b), we show that legislators' actual activities are not separate from the things for which they might claim credit. The degree to which the level of attention in newsletters is associated with private correspondence suggests that newsletters serve as an extension of the behind-the-scenes work, rather than an empty vehicle for political self-promotion.

The relationship between public and private attention persists, even when we account for differences in agency and member ideology. We expected differences when these ideological orientations were aligned or misaligned, but we found little evidence to support that expectation.

At the same time, we find that institutional roles matter. Legislators who sit on oversight committees with jurisdiction over particular agencies send substantially more requests to them than their colleagues. Oversight roles are associated with a substantially higher baseline of agency requests. However, the relationship between newsletters and requests is not additive for oversight members: additional mentions in newsletters correspond to a much smaller increase in requests compared to non-members. This pattern suggests that legislators with a preexisting interest in an agency both highlight the agency in newsletters and pursue oversight positions, meaning the observed effect reflects underlying preferences rather than committee membership amplifying the newsletter–request link. Importantly, while oversight membership attenuates the marginal relationship between newsletters and requests, neither oversight nor chair status eliminates the broader consistency between public and private attention.

In supplemental analyses examining the distribution of attention (rather than overall volume). Despite *distribution* of attention differing conceptually from *volume* of attention, we find results consistent with our main analysis: legislators' public and private attention to agencies is strongly aligned. The percentage of a legislator's newsletters devoted to an agency predicts the percentage of their requests sent to that agency. As with the analysis of attention volume, ideological alignment and distance also matter when we focus on the distribution

of attention: legislators direct a greater percentage of requests to aligned agencies and avoid ideologically distant ones. Importantly, these ideological factors do not condition the relationship between newsletters and requests, and the consistency between public and private attention holds across ideological contexts.

This pattern fits the expectation that committee assignments reflect underlying policy interests: legislators who care about an agency pursue oversight roles, and these roles are associated with higher levels of engagement. By contrast, ideological alignment or distance matters for the overall level of engagement, but does not condition the relationship between newsletters and requests. This distinction has implications for representation. Conditionality on oversight roles reflects legislators investing where they already intend to work, which is consistent with representation, whereas conditionality on ideological alignment would suggest a distortion in responsiveness. Our findings show the former but not the latter: legislators' selective engagement is consistent across public and private domains, without attention consistency being systematically biased toward ideologically proximate agencies.

While we have made strides toward clarifying the link between constituency service activities behind the scenes and attention to federal agencies in congressional communications, further work is needed to establish a more definite picture. Our study has several key limitations. Most significantly, we do not explicitly establish the causal direction of the relationship between public and private attention. Even our difference-in-differences designs, which show within-legislator attention consistency over time, only demonstrate a correlation between the two types of attention. Furthermore, the setup of all our models posits that public attention, along with controls, predicts private attention. We do this, in part, to improve our models by allowing fixed effects to control for missingness in the FOIA data. There is a potential that this relationship goes in the opposite direction, with members' behind-the-scenes work predicting what they discuss in their newsletters.

Regardless of the direction of causality, attention consistency matters for representation. Our data on legislators' behind-the-scenes activities allows us to build on previous studies of consistency between legislators' words and deeds (e.g., Sulkin, 2009, Sulkin2011, Grimmer2013) to show that attention consistency persists even when it is difficult or impossible for constituents to trace their legislators' actions. Constituents, for the most part, cannot see the work that legislators are doing to communicate with federal agencies–and yet legislators' newsletters honestly represent this work, at least in terms of the agencies that legislators prioritize. Although we do not disaggregate types of newsletter attention–for instance, whether legislators mention agencies in discussions of casework or oversight–attention consistency that mixes discussions of casework and oversight still bodes well for representation. Casework and related communications from constituents can help bring problems to legislators' attention and therefore affect their oversight activities. Future research could offer a more fine-grained analysis to determine whether oversight members and legislators who perform large amounts

of casework primarily mention agencies in each context. Overall, despite concerns that the contemporary Congress is a "broken branch" (Mann and Ornstein, 2006) engaged in a "perpetual campaign" (Lee, 2016), we find reassuring evidence that the legislators are fulfilling their representational roles.

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