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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Following the leaders: Asymmetric party messaging in the U.S. Congress

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Abstract

Today, rank-and-file members are increasingly removed from the legislative process and often rely on congressional leaders for information to discuss major legislative decisions with constituents. As a result, preparing constituent communication materials has become an institutionalized responsibility for party and committee leaders, leading to a partisan discussion of legislation. Using a mixed-methods approach of computational text analysis and elite interviews, I demonstrate how members of Congress use leader-led, partisan messages for constituent communication. Echoing prior work on asymmetric partisanship, I find that Republican leaders are more likely to encourage party-centric messaging, and rank-and-file Republicans, particularly in the House, are more likely to adopt party messaging. The findings illustrate the institutional power of party leaders in a centralized Congress, as well as the role that constituent communication plays in encouraging and maintaining asymmetric polarization.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Any observer of American politics can discern that Democratic and Republican members of Congress communicate differently. Members of the two parties highlight different issues, use different words when discussing policies, and even engage with different news sources (Davis & Dunaway, 2016; Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016; Quorum Analytics, 2017). For members of Congress, communicating with constituents is an essential part of the job, and given partisan pressures at the constituent and elite level, many members communicate in a party-specific way (Abernathy et al., 2019; Grimmer, 2013b; Mayhew, 1974; Russell, 2021; Zaller, 1992). Yet, despite evidence on the importance of constituent communication and the role it plays in polarization and representation, scholars lack an understanding of how these messages are developed in Congress.

The development of partisan constituent communications is all the more perplexing given the evidence that rank-and-file members of Congress have limited involvement in the legislative process. The ongoing centralization of policymaking in Congress is well documented: Party leaders utilize institutional advantages such as access to information (Curry, 2015, 2019; Pearson, 2005), special rules (Aldrich & Rohde, 2000; Cox & McCubbins, 2005, 2007), and larger, more expert staff to take the lead on the development and passage of major legislation (Burgat, 2020; LaPira et al., 2020). The increasing complexity of policymaking and intense polarization among members further necessitate this legislative leadership. As a result, rank-and-file members often find themselves excluded from bill development and negotiations.

However, regardless of their policy knowledge (or lack thereof), rank-and-file members still go to great efforts to explain their legislative decisions to constituents. Although individual members have personal incentives to communicate, they often lack substantial information about major legislation. In a Congress where few rank-and-file members take part in the development of complex legislation and negotiations, how do members fill the information gap to explain their legislative decisions to constituents?

This research addresses this contradiction by considering the role of party leadership in constituent communication. After legislation is developed—but before members discuss policy details and outcomes with constituents—members of Congress must be educated on the details of legislation, or at least, how to speak about it. This research details and analyzes the internal development and distribution of communication guidance to accompany major legislative votes. I find

that communication assistance comes from those who were most involved in bill development and passage: party and committee leaders. This process occurs behind the scenes, as party and committee leaders work together to develop and distribute materials such as talking points and sample press releases by using an extensive network of staff, member-level meetings, and email and phone correspondence. Given the realities of a party-centric, competitive Congress (Lee, 2016; Theriault, 2008) and the demands of an increasingly polarized constituency (Hansen, 2016; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Klandermans, 2014), the communication materials members of Congress distribute and use are overwhelmingly partisan.

Furthermore, given existing work on asymmetric polarization, this research not only considers how party messaging occurs but also how this process differs by party. Using elite interview data and text analysis based on press release language discussing major legislation, I find that the development and distribution of party-specific messaging is asymmetrical, as is the adoption of party messages by rank-and-file members. Congressional Republicans have a robust, centralized, leader-led network of constituent communication that congressional Democrats do not match. As a result, Republicans, particularly House Republicans, are more likely than Democratic members to emulate the language party leaders use in constituent communication.

These findings contribute to our understanding of asymmetric polarization, and have implications for how we understand the communication strategies of the two parties. These institutionalized communication disparities between the two parties encourage—or at least maintain—asymmetric partisan polarization in Congress. This research also sheds light on how the challenges of congressional capacity have manifested in a partisan environment. We know that congressional leaders maintain power in the legislative process given an imbalance of resources and information—and the same can be said for communication and messaging. Today, rank-and-file members are not only reliant on party leaders for policymaking objectives, but also for guidance on how to talk about major policy issues with their constituents.

Below, I discuss how congressional centralization and pressures of constituent communication have facilitated the rise of partisan messaging, and how existing work on asymmetric polarization guides my expectations for how constituent communication occurs in Congress. To empirically capture the use and occurrence of party messaging, I measure the linguistic similarities between House and Senate press releases discussing major legislation from the 113th through 116th Congress, and evaluate which members are more likely to be linguistically similar in their press release text. I pay particular attention to members of leadership, as well as factors such as seniority, electoral vulnerability, and ideology that may lead rank-and-file members to adopt (or not adopt) leadership language. I then present the results of interviews with members of Congress and their staff, which further support my quantitative findings by providing insight into how congressional communication occurs and how it differs by party. Ultimately, I find that Republicans use press release language similar to their peers and party leaders, with House Republicans and freshman members displaying higher levels of text similarity with party leadership than with that of their peers. Elite interviews confirm that this asymmetric adoption is the byproduct of behind-the-scenes message development and distribution by the two parties.

2 | LITERATURE

2.1 | Centralization of resources

The unorthodox lawmaking process of today's Congress is one arguably born out of necessity (Curry & Lee, 2020; Sinclair, 2016). There are very real logistical challenges in policymaking, particularly for major legislation that will directly impact a large population. Federal policymaking is increasingly complex given the growing web of federal code and bureaucratic jurisdiction, and the rise of partisan polarization among both elites and constituents makes negotiation challenging. The result is a competitive dynamic, in which members of Congress are motivated to act as “teams” in pursuit of political power rather than as a unified institution (Aldrich & Rohde, 2000; Cox & McCubbins, 2005; Lee, 2009; Schickler & Rich, 1997).

Congress has subsequently tailored its legislative process to meet the demands of both policy complexity and polarization. Majority and minority party leaders solve the chamber's collective action problems by negotiating legislation on behalf of rank-and-file members. Leaders are wary of opening the negotiation process to rank-and-file members—the more people granted decision-making power, the more difficult it is to reach a conclusive decision. The result is often large or omnibus legislation that contains several provisions to appeal to members and leaders on both sides of the aisle (Curry & Lee, 2020; Sinclair, 2016). These bills are further accompanied by special rules to maintain a delicate legislative balance—resulting in legislation that is complex in both content and procedure.

But the centralization of congressional power goes well beyond the legislative process. Party leaders have an advantage in resources and staff that bolsters their policymaking and informational advantages. Party leaders and committees have larger, more expert staff—many of whom are long-serving and better-paid (Hunt & Burgat, 2020; LaPira et al., 2020). The sheer volume of staff in leadership offices allows them

to develop greater expertise across a range of topics and congressional procedures (Crosson et al., 2018; Miler, 2021; Volden & Wiseman, 2018). Rank-and-file members have few options to counter the centralization of staff and resources. Congressional caucuses—once a source of education and policy development—rarely play a formal role in the policymaking process today (Rubin, 2017; Gaynor, 2021; Miler, 2011), and hiring practices are restricted by limited budgets and unchanging staffing rules. This is particularly true in the House, where members are capped at 18 staff members who are expected to not only assist with policymaking, but also with constituent services and communication. As the number of constituents in each congressional district continues to rise, policymaking becomes more challenging; and as resources and staffing levels for rank-and-file members remain unchanged, reliance on party leadership for information, legislative assistance, and constituent communication will naturally increase.[1]

2.2 | Rise of constituent communication

Just as staff distribution epitomizes a larger trend of congressional centralization, hiring practices within offices also capture the changing priorities of members of Congress. Legislators in both leadership and rank-and-file offices in both chambers are increasingly prioritizing the hiring of communication staff over legislative or constituent-facing staff (caseworkers). A survey by Crosson et al. (2021) found that rank-and-file offices in the House are twice as likely to prioritize communication staffers over other positions, and according to research by Reynolds (2020), in party leadership offices, communications staff now make up nearly half of the already large teams. Given that positions such as press secretaries or communications directors didn't even exist until 1977, this increase in communication staff is notable (Reynolds, 2020).

Members of Congress have always been cognizant of the images and messages they're sending back to constituents. The desire for a popular perception has influenced how members behave on committees (Fenno, 1973; Hall, 1987) and vote on the floor (Ansolabehere & Jones, 2010; Miller & Stokes, 1963). Constituent communication can also allow members to take a stance on issues that don't come up via floor vote (Lipinski, 2009; Mayhew, 1974). Even the allocation of resources and constituent services can be attributed to the positive image they invoke (Grimmer, 2013a; Mayhew, 1974; Miler, 2018). In short, members spend a great deal of time and effort cultivating a constituent-centered image.

However, what communication looks like has greatly and quickly changed. Technology has fundamentally altered the volume and methods of communication. The internet ushered in email and social media—and with them, an expectation of immediate communication and response. Members have evolved by sending newsletters or electronic press releases, as well as making their own social media accounts to directly communicate with constituents. Press releases are particularly popular following a vote because they allow members to quickly and proactively send reporters and constituents information in a timely fashion. These new technological pressures and members' subsequent response require staff to manage this responsibility and develop what Gervais and Morris (2018) call a "digital homestyle."

Constituent communication has also been forced to respond to what constituents want to hear. At the most basic level, members have a responsibility to inform their voters about their work in Washington—serving both a constituent need as well as reelection incentives (Grimmer, 2013b; Mayhew, 1974). But as partisanship increases among constituents, so does the focus on partisan messaging (Ballard et al., 2022). The partisanship of constituent messaging will differ by a district's electoral lean, the issue itself, and the member's own personal goals of communication (Blum et al., 2022; Cormack, 2016; Grimmer, 2013a). But given the increasing connection between an individual member's electoral fate and that of their party (Desmarais et al., 2015; Woon & Pope, 2008), there is an understandable pressure for the majority of members to communicate in a partisan way.

2.3 | Asymmetric polarization in Congress

However, not all party messaging is equal. Work on political communication has found evidence of asymmetric polarization between the two parties, with Republicans being more likely to use divisive language or select into partisan networks (Ballard et al., 2022; Banks et al., 2021; Gainous & Wagner, 2014; Gardner & Russell, 2022; Russell, 2021). This asymmetric use of social media goes beyond the chambers. Recent work has found that conservative users on Twitter were more combative, reactive, and unified (Shin & Thorson, 2017), particularly when discussing polarizing issues such as gun control and COVID-19 (Zhang et al., 2022, 2023).

This and other evidence of asymmetrical communication epitomize larger findings on the ideological divisions between the two parties, with many political scientists attributing partisan polarization to the Republican Party's rightward lurch (Barber et al., 2015; Hacker & Pierson, 2015) or the expansive ideological and geographical coalition Democratic members must manage (Rodden, 2010). But while asymmetric polarization is becoming readily accepted, the *reasons* for asymmetric communication and polarization are less

understood. Explanations range from an increasingly polarized voter base (Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Leonard et al., 2014; Mason, 2015), to fundamental differences between the parties' ideology and constituencies (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016; Rodden, 2010), to elite-level ideological alignment (Theriault, 2008), to electoral competitiveness (Butler, 2009; Lee, 2016). The rise of asymmetrical divisions and partisan polarization is a multifaceted story. This research offers an additional reason for the rise of asymmetrical constituent messaging: the institutionalization of leader-led congressional communication.

3 | PARTISAN MESSAGING IN CONGRESS

Members are eager to communicate with their constituents, sending tens of thousands of press releases, letters, and tweets every congressional session. But rank-and-file members often lack the ability and information to develop this messaging on their own. And although in-office resources and external sources of expertise provide helpful information to members of Congress, they often cannot offer an accurate assessment of the legislative process or proposal, particularly for large, multifaceted, major legislation. This is where party messaging comes into play: Party leaders utilize their informational advantages and institutional resources to provide rank-and-file members with knowledge for constituent communication.

For rank-and-file members, assistance with constituent communication can be genuinely helpful. Party-prepared materials allow members to communicate their votes and political positions to constituents in a clear way. And for party leaders, taking the lead on constituent communication has obvious advantages: Not only does this approach further cement rank-and-file reliance on leadership offices, but it also allows party leaders to guide the messaging of their "team"—sending a clear message to their electorate. In an era in which the majority of major legislation is not only complex and multifaceted but also bipartisan (Curry & Lee, 2020), members of Congress must use constituent communication to clarify partisan policy positions.

While prior work has noted the rise of communication resources (Lee, 2016; Reynolds, 2020), as well as the rise of partisan communication in Congress (Gardner & Russell, 2022; Wang & Tucker, 2021), this research considers how party leaders often serve as the source of partisan messaging. Thus, I argue that structural differences between the two parties' communication efforts contribute to asymmetrical partisan polarization. *Given prior work on asymmetric polarization, I expect that the Republican Party in Congress will have more unified and proactive messaging efforts than their Democratic counterparts*. For leaders, I expect this to take the form of robust staff and proactive encouragement to adopt party messages. For rank-and-file members, I expect to see higher rates of message similarity among Republican members compared to Democratic members. I also recognize there are differences among leadership positions. Party leaders are responsible for party-wide goals; committee chairs and ranking members, however, may be seen as more issue-specific experts. Thus, I expect variation in the adoption of messages from party leaders versus from committee chairs.

I also expect there to be variation in message adoption by individual member needs. First, there are differences in congressional capacity: Between the two chambers, senators have larger and more experienced staff, greater in-office resources and time, and more relative voting power than House members. The inherent need for message assistance—and thus adoption rates—will likely be lower for senators compared to House members. Conversely, I expect freshman members to be more reliant on leadership messaging guidance. Not only are they less experienced in discussing legislation, but their staff is often equally inexperienced (Leal & Hess, 2004; Volden & Wiseman, 2018). While the legislation's topic and a given legislator's expertise certainly interact with an individual's reliance on leadership messaging, this research is interested in overarching trends in the communication of major legislation.

There are also individual-level differences in partisan ideology and electoral vulnerability that I expect to impact individual adoption of party messaging. Members who vote with the party consistently will likely also speak with the party consistently. Using the distance between legislators' DW-Nominate scores and the party mean as a proxy for ideological similarity, I expect that members closest to the party mean will be most likely to engage in party-led messaging.

District pressure also should encourage or dissuade members from using party-centric messaging. Although congressional districts are overwhelming (and increasingly) "safe" for one political party, electorally vulnerable members are highly aware of their constituency's ideological preferences and might be likely less willing to copy party leaders' messaging tactics. Instead, they may be inclined to highlight bipartisanship, district issues, or pork projects (Grimmer, 2013a). Amplifying a partisan message may not in their best interest. Thus, I expect members facing a challenging reelection campaign will be less likely to emulate congressional leaders' messages.

Lastly, I expect there to be variation in message adoption given chamber status. When messaging from a minority status, obstruction and disagreement should be a relatively easy position to take. However, members in the majority will be expected to explain the party's priorities and policy proposals. In short, while I expect Republican Party leaders in Congress to have a more

institutionalized party messaging process, I also expect individual-level attributes to impact the likelihood of a rank-and-file member embracing the language of congressional leaders.

4 | TEXT ANALYSIS OF CONSTITUENT COMMUNICATION

4.1 | Data

To first evaluate if rank-and-file members are adopting the messages of party leaders, I consider the content of press releases from the 113th–116th Congress (2013–2020). This expansive period introduces important variation in congressional majorities and chamber control, as well as two presidential administrations (President Barack Obama and President Donald Trump). Because Congress votes on hundreds, sometimes thousands of votes per congressional session—but not all votes warrant large-scale party messaging efforts—I focus on press releases following major legislative votes. This methodological choice is further supported by interview data, discussed below: Party leaders focus their messaging efforts on impactful legislation rather than district-specific endeavors.

For major votes, I rely on the Congressional Quarterly (CQ) Almanac's Key Votes—a yearly list of votes that capture the "major issues of the year." Criteria include bills of major controversy within the chamber, votes that represent presidential or institutional power dynamics, and bills that have a "potentially great impact on the nation and lives of Americans" (CQ Roll Call Group). From 2013 to 2020, there are 171 Key Votes—64 of which occur exclusively in the House, 49 exclusively in the Senate, and 29 in both chambers. These policy issues vary in content, legislative scope, and vote polarization, with many of the bills being supported by large, bipartisan majorities.[2]

Because it is impossible to watch how every member and office develops constituent communication, I rely on the linguistic similarity of their public outputs. I first collected press releases that discuss major votes using the ProPublica Congress API via the computational software R.[3] Although press releases often have an indirect path to voters (members send them to media or interest groups rather than directly to constituents), the ultimate goal is constituent absorption of quotes and general messaging. Furthermore, even in an age of social media and 24-hour news, interview respondents discussed the importance of press releases over other forms of media, making it an excellent resource for this analysis. Not every vote has a corresponding press release, although this is partially due to the challenge of collecting press release data (e.g., not every member refers to the bill by vote number or formal name, some URLs have expired, etc.), as well as the fact that some issues simply did not warrant a press release.[4] However, the data collection process still produces a robust dataset: over 13,000 press releases from the House and Senate from 2013 to 2020. Because the two chambers are often responsive to each other and because constituent communications notably allow members to comment on issues they themselves may not even vote on, I pool the House and Senate votes and press release data together. While the use of press releases slightly increases across my dataset (likely due to the rise of internet accessibility and the data collection process), I still find and collect hundreds of press releases for each congressional session. The majority party sends more press releases in each congressional session.[5]

4.2 | Computing press release similarity

To evaluate if members are adopting language from party leader press releases in personal constituent communication, I use the TextReuse package in R to evaluate the similarity between press release text (Mullen, 2015). Text reuse approaches have been used widely in political science, including measuring the similarity of legislative proposals (Wilkerson et al., 2015), state-level policy absorption (Linder et al., 2020), and the repetition of news stories in a nationalized media environment (Vogler et al., 2020). Like other text reuse approaches, the Mullen (2015) package builds on the Smith-Waterman algorithm to evaluate the similarity of documents in a corpus using natural language processing. I develop corpora (collection of press releases) for each Key Vote and run a pairwise document analysis as a directional ratio of matches within each topic, measuring the similarity of each member's press release to all other members' releases on the same vote (Mullen, 2015). This analysis generates a matrix of similarity scores for every member-to-member connection within a given press release topic, ranging from zero to 1—zero being no similarity between two members' press releases and 1 being an identical match. This approach captures variation in both the strength and quantity of linguistic connections across multiple members and votes.

As discussed by interview respondents, cultivating specific phrases is a key part of partisan constituent communication, and press releases should be succinct and direct—usually no longer than one page (around 250 words). Given pre-processing decisions, similarity scores are not impacted by shared home state or office building address, but rather text in the body of the press release itself.[6] For example, while the decision to use the designation "Obamacare" versus "Affordable Care Act" is only a single word change, it is still a purposeful communicative decision. Because the likelihood of an entire press

release, or even a full sentence, being copied directly is rare, similarity scores are significantly impacted by individual word changes. Thus, it is more common for members to have low, or zero, similarity scores (i.e., low levels of shared text), with a median similarity of 0.015, and standard deviation of 0.036 (see Figure A4 in the Appendix).[7] Given the rightward distribution of the data, I perform a logged transformation, maintaining the zero-to-1 data range.

I convert the matrix of text similarity scores into a data frame for each Key Vote topic, in which each unit of analysis is the unique similarity score between two members. I then pool each Key Vote dataset across congressional sessions (113th–116th Congress), resulting in over 600,000 press release similarity scores. Because the unit of analyses are press release connections—not individual members—there can be repeat connections between members, with varying similarity scores based on the press release topic they discuss. These press release similarity scores serve as the dependent variable in the regression analyses below. Personal attributes, such as party affiliation or leadership position, are paired with the individual legislators, and standard errors are clustered at the member level in the regression analysis. This approach allows me to isolate and evaluate the impact of individual characteristics of members on press release text similarity, across time and press release topics.[8]

In addition to party affiliation, I capture the ideological position of a member in relation to their party using DW-Nominate voting scores to calculate the member's absolute distance from the party mean for each chamber and congressional session. The farther a member's voting average is from the party mean, the more ideologically distant the member is from their party. To capture House members facing a competitive election and senators who are in cycle, I rely on the Cook Political Report's Partisan Voting Index (PVI), which has evaluated the electoral vulnerability of every congressional race since 1997, giving each district (and incumbent member) an estimated likelihood of partisan advantage ranging from "solid Democratic/Republican" to "likely" to "lean" to "toss-up," with the latter being the most electorally vulnerable members. Members are hyper-aware of these ratings, and despite a well-documented incumbent advantage, they are often concerned about reelection (Cox & Katz, 1996; Fouirnaies & Hall, 2014; King & Gelman, 1991; etc.). Thus, any rating from "likely" to "toss-up" is coded as a competitive election (members rated as "solid"—the majority of House members—are not considered vulnerable). I also code any senator facing election in the upcoming race as facing electoral pressure—although not every Senate race is equally competitive, interview respondents noted that communication strategies varied when a senator was in cycle. While a senator who faces an election in a "safe" state is certainly not as vulnerable as a House member (or fellow senator) in a "toss-up" district (or state), this measure of electoral pressure is intended to capture members that are most likely to change their communicative behavior based on electoral pressures. No matter their "safety," senators facing an election have different communication goals than those who are out of cycle. Given this blunt measure includes senators (and some members) who are not truly facing "competitive elections," the results are a conservative estimate of the impact of electoral vulnerability.

Lastly, party and committee leaders are denoted with a dichotomous variable, as are freshmen members.[9] I also collect institutional variables that I expect to impact the distribution and adoption of party messages, such as chamber and congressional session. Although I am unable to prove which press release was sent first, evaluating the text similarity of press releases with that of a member of leadership, committee chair, or other discussed independent variable characteristic is the first step in evaluating the occurrence of strategic partisan messaging.

4.3 | Evaluating press release similarity

Initial descriptive information about press releases discussing major legislation indicates that when party leaders send a press release, rank-and-file members take note. In the 33 cases where no party leaders sent a press release directly discussing a bill, the average number of press releases sent by all members is only 22. But when even just one party leader sends a press release, that average jumps up to 32. If two or more party leaders send a press release on a given vote, the average number of press releases sent by members of Congress rises to 119.

As discussed above, TextReuse similarity scores allow me to evaluate how similar the word usage is between members' press releases. Because this approach uses a token-based and directional matching approach, the higher the similarity score, the more words the two members share (Mullen, 2015). As a baseline, the median similarity score between all members of Congress across congressional sessions is 0.015, with a standard deviation of 0.036. Between party members—particularly between Republicans—similarity scores increase. The median similarity score for Republican members is 0.023, compared to 0.017 for Democratic members. These seemingly minor shifts are indicative of strategic messaging: Press releases can contain infinite word combinations and phrasings, so even slight changes in similarity capture an element of coordination.

To evaluate the impact of personal attributes on the likelihood of using party and committee leader messaging, I isolate the strength of text similarity scores

between leaders and committee chairs (member A) and rank-and-file members (member B). I use linear regression interaction models to predict the effects of seniority, vulnerability, ideology, and chamber in leader-led messaging adoption. This modeling allows me to evaluate which rank-and-file members have higher (or lower) similarity scores with party and committee leaders, given a legislator's personal attributes and pressures. The dependent variable is percentage change in similarity score between members. Table 1 presents the results of the regression analysis of press release similarity with Republican and Democratic party leaders in both chambers, from the 113th through 116th Congress, and Table 2 presents the results for committee chairs. The predicted effects of leader and committee chair connections on similarity score for groups of rank-and-file members are presented in Figures 1 and 2, respectively. Given my interest in asymmetric patterns of party messaging, I divide the full data set into Republican-to-Republican connections and Democratic-to-Democratic connections (See Tables A2 and A3 for pooled results).[10]

The results indicate notable differences in the parties' use of party leaders' press releases for personal constituent communication. First, Republican members start at a higher rate of text similarity within their party (median similarity score of 0.022) compared to Democratic members (median similarity score of 0.018 among party peers). Differences between the parties are particularly pronounced when considering the interaction effects of party leaders and specific groups of rank-and-file members. For freshman Republican members, the likelihood of using words similar to Republican party leaders increases by 0.005%, holding all else constant (0.13 standard deviation of Republican similarity scores)—a difference of over 10 shared words in a 250-word press release. The median similarity score between Republican freshmen and party leaders is 0.024 but falls to 0.019 when compared with Republican rank-and-file members.

Conversely, there is a statistically significant, negative relationship between Republican senators and Republican party leaders—indicating that for Republicans, similarity with party leaders is in part a result of congressional capacity. The likelihood of Republican senators using similar words as party leaders decreases by 0.0028, compared to other rank-and-file members (0.12 standard deviation of Republican similarity scores), while House members are more reliant on party leaders, maintaining a 0.026 median similarity score with Republican party leaders (compared to a median similarity score of 0.012 between senators and Republican party leaders). Senators, with their larger staff and access to information, are less likely to turn to party leaders for press release assistance in the same way as freshmen members and other rank-and-file House Republicans. There are no statistically significant effects on the relationship between party leaders and those facing competitive elections.

Democratic rank-and-file members start with lower similarity scores with party leaders (median: 0.0165), and this trend continues with more specific groups. Democratic freshmen members are less likely to share similar messages with party leaders than other rank-and-file Democrats by 0.002% (0.05 standard deviation of Democratic similarity scores). Like Republican senators, Democratic senators are 0.0052% less likely

TABLE 1 Regression analysis of change in similarity scores between members of Congress and party leaders, 113th–116th Congress.

	Dependent variable	
	Percent change in similarity scores	
	Republican model	Democratic model
Leadership (A)	0.0021*	−0.0025***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Freshman (B)	−0.0015	0.0023***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Competitive election (B)	0.0005*	0.0031***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Distance from party mean (B)	−0.0145***	−0.0284***
	(0.001)	(0.000)
Senate (B)	−0.0028***	0.0019***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Leadership * Freshman	0.0054**	−0.0020**
	(0.002)	(0.000)
Leadership * Competitive race	−0.0012	−0.0015**
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Leadership * Distance from party mean	−0.0267***	0.0116***
	(0.006)	(0.003)
Leadership * Senate	−0.0028*	−0.0041***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
114th Congress	0.0015***	−0.0037***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
115th Congress	0.0140***	−0.0024***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
116th Congress	0.0037***	0.0018***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Constant	0.0284***	0.0259***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Observations	114,169	281,087
R^2	0.0281	0.0069

Note: Leadership includes Speaker of the House, minority and majority leader, party whips, and conference and policy chairs in both chambers. Fixed effects for congressional session of each key vote. Standard errors are clustered by member.

*$p<0.1$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$.

TABLE 2 Regression analysis of similarity scores between members of Congress and committee chairs, 113th–116th Congress.

	Dependent variable	
	Percent change in similarity scores	
	Republican model	Democratic model
Committee chair (A)	−0.0001	0.0009*
	(0.002)	(0.000)
Freshman (B)	0.0002	0.0024***
	(0.004)	(0.000)
Competitive election (B)	0.0002	0.0029***
	(0.003)	(0.000)
Distance from party mean (B)	−0.0124***	−0.0262***
	(0.002)	(0.001)
Senate (B)	−0.0039***	−0.0012***
	(0.004)	(0.000)
Committee chair * Freshman	−0.0010**	−0.0023***
	(0.002)	(0.001)
Committee chair * Competitive race	0.0015	−0.0006
	(0.007)	(0.000)
Committee chair * Distance from party mean	−0.0207***	−0.0056*
	(0.004)	(0.003)
Committee chair * Senate	0.0054***	0.0131***
	(0.001)	(0.000)
114th Congress	0.0020***	−0.0029***
	(0.004)	(0.000)
115th Congress	0.014***	−0.0019***
	(0.003)	(0.000)
116th Congress	0.004*	0.0031***
	(0.001)	(0.000)
Constant	0.0281***	0.0244***
	(0.056)	(0.000)
Observations	114,169	281,087
R^2	0.0288	0.0091

Note: Committee chairs include committee chairs and ranking members of all standing and select committees. Fixed effects for congressional session of each key vote. Standard errors clustered by member.

*$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

to rely on party leader messaging compared to other rank-and-file members (0.14 standard deviation). When compared to House members, Democratic senators and party leaders have a median similarity score of 0.014, compared to 0.018 for Democratic House members and party leaders. Lastly, Democratic members facing a competitive election share greater similarity with other rank-and-file members of their party (median score of 0.018), than party leaders (median score of 0.016).

There is a notable difference between the two parties in how the ideology of party members affects similarity scores with party leaders. For rank-and-file Republicans, ideological distance has a statistically significant, negative effect on shared similarity with party leaders. As rank-and-file Republican members fall further from the party average, similarity scores with party leaders also drop: For every one-unit increase in ideological distance from the party mean, the similarity score with party leaders falls by 0.0267%—0.64 standard deviation of Republican similarity scores. Yet for Democratic members, ideological distance has a statistically significant, positive effect on shared similarity with party leaders. However, as Figure 3 shows, this effect is limited—only resulting in a 0.012 increase in similarity score with party leaders for every one-unit increase in ideological distance, yet this is inconsistent across ideological positioning.

Table 1 also illustrates how institutional factors such as majority/minority status impact the similarity

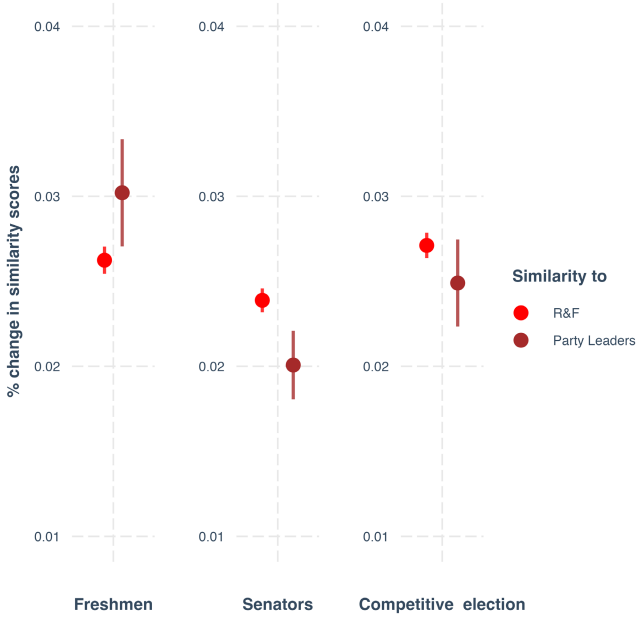

FIGURE 1 Predicted percentage change in similarity scores between Republican party leaders and rank-and-file members. Standard errors are clustered by member.

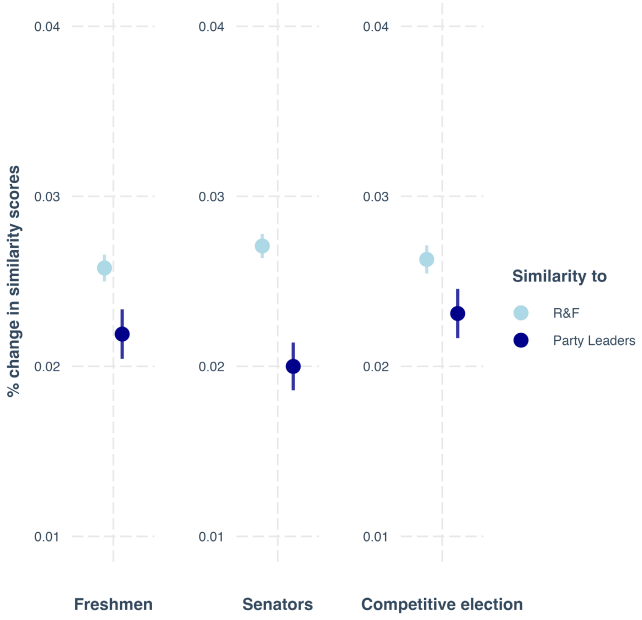

FIGURE 2 Predicted percentage change in similarity scores between Democratic party leaders and rank-and-file members. Standard errors are clustered by member.

of word usage between party members. For both parties, members are statistically more likely to rely on party leader messaging when the party is in the majority. During the 115th Congress—when Republicans controlled both chambers and the White House, and were thus responsible for communicating policy decisions—the median similarity score between Republican party leaders and all rank-and-file members increased by 0.0148% (0.35 standard deviation shift), and the median similarity score among members was at its highest (0.031). The same was true for Democratic members in the 116th Congress when they controlled the House and Senate following the 2021 special election in Georgia—although the effect was notably lower than Republican members, with a median Democratic score of 0.017 (0.0027 percentage increase in similarity scores, 0.07 standard deviation shift).

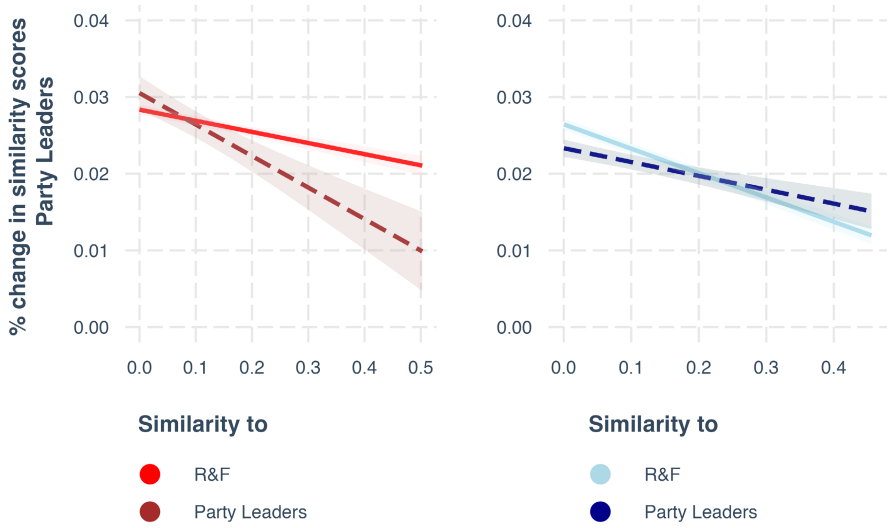

FIGURE 3 Predicted percentage change in similarity score, given members' ideological distance from the party mean—Party Leaders and Rank-and-File members. Standard errors are clustered by member.

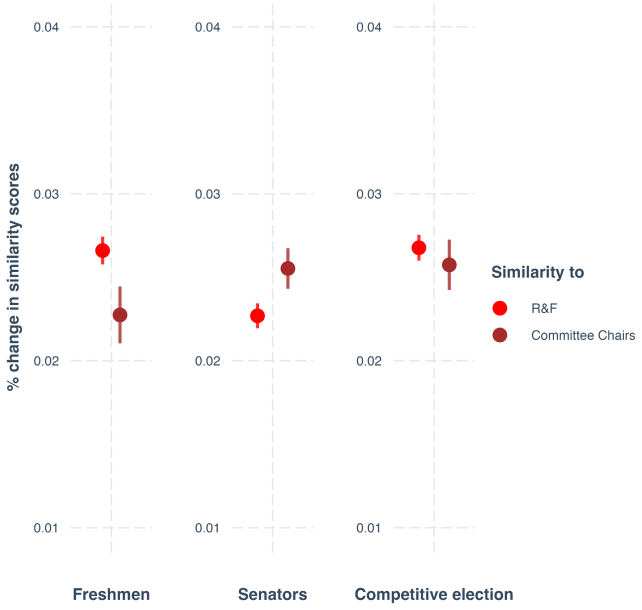

FIGURE 4 Predicted percentage change in similarity scores between Republican committee chairs and rank-and-file members. Standard errors are clustered by member.

Table 2 considers the similarity of press release language between party members and committee chairs (Figures 4 and 5). Overall, Republican members appear less reliant on committee chairs compared to party leaders. Unlike the relationship with Republican party leaders, there is no statistically significant evidence of shared text between Republican rank-and-file members and Republican committee chairs; the median similarity score between rank-and-file members and committee chairs is 0.019, which is lower than that between other rank-and-file members (0.022). This negative relationship continues with Republican freshmen as well: Although Republican freshmen may rely on party leaders, they are statistically less likely to share similar words with committee chairs, yet the effects are small (0.001% change, 0.02 of the standard deviation of Republican similarity scores). However, Republican senators are statistically more likely to share similar words with committee chairs, at a rate of 0.005 (0.12 of the standard deviation) compared to other rank-and-file members—equal to an increase of over 10 words for a 250-word press release.

Democratic legislators as a whole are statistically more likely to rely on committee chairs than other rank-and-file members, but this effect is small (0.0009). Like Republicans, freshmen Democrats are 0.0023% less likely to rely on committee chairs over rank-and-file

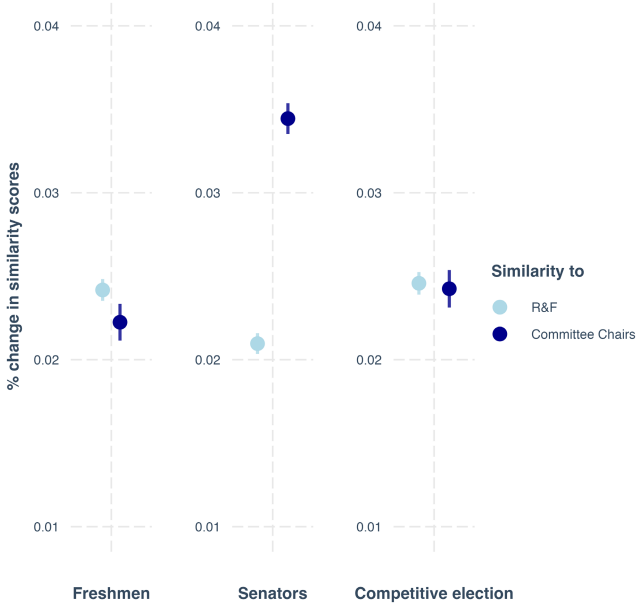

FIGURE 5 Predicted percentage change in similarity scores between Democratic committee chairs and rank-and-file members. Standard errors are clustered by member.

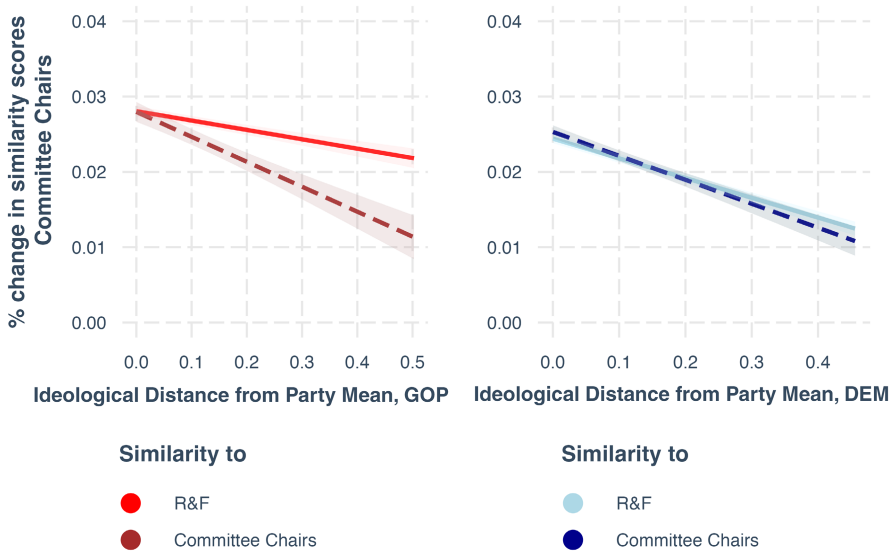

FIGURE 6 Predicted percentage change in similarity score, given members' ideological distance from the party mean—committee chairs and rank-and-file members. Standard errors are clustered by member.

members (0.005 standard deviation). Democratic senators are more likely to have an increased similarity score with committee chairs than other rank-and-file members, at an even higher rate of change than Republican senators—0.0131% (0.33 of the standard deviation of Democratic similarity scores), resulting in a median score of 0.019 (compared to 0.014 between senators and rank-and-file members). For both parties, the senatorial connection with committee chairs for both Republican and Democratic senators indicates that committee chairs provide different benefits than party leaders—likely, information about detailed policy proposals rather than partisan talking points.

Like the relationship with party chairs, Republicans who are ideologically distant from the party men are less likely to rely on committee chairs for press release inspiration (a decrease of 0.021 for every unit increase in ideological distance; 0.5 of the standard deviation). There is a very slight, negative effect on the similarity score between ideologically distant Democratic

members and committee chairs, but as illustrated in Figure 6, this effect is consistent with the similarity of rank-and-file members as well.

Overall, Republican rank-and-file members have a statistically significant, positive relationship with party leaders, reusing more text from party leaders than other peers. On the other hand, Democratic members have slightly stronger bonds with committee chairs. Interaction effects also indicate congressional capacity may impact whether or not members reuse text from party or committee leaders: Freshmen Republicans have higher rates of text similarity with party leaders rather than committee chairs, perhaps indicating a lack of familiarity with less prominent and proactive offices. While senators from both parties do not share similar messaging with party leaders, they do turn to committee chairs—indicating that senators are still reliant on policy experts for some constituent communication, but do not require as much assistance or have as much need for partisan messaging. Negative and largely insignificant results on the impact of electoral competitiveness on text reuse patterns illustrate well-known findings regarding the limits of party when facing district pressures (Grimmer, 2013b; Mayhew, 1974). However, as noted above, given the inclusion of all in-cycle senators in this vulnerability measure, this is likely a conservative estimate of the impact of electoral fortune on similarity scores. Future work could consider more detailed electoral pressures when evaluating textual similarity.

For both parties, the most substantively distinct finding is the relationship between party leaders and members who are ideologically distant from the party mean. Republican members who deviate from their party ideologically have particularly low levels of text similarity with party leaders compared to rank-and-file peers, yet ideological distance has little effect on the similarity scores of Democratic members. Although the relationship between ideologically distant Democratic members and party leaders is positive, the effect is small and consistent with the similarity score changes with other rank-and-file members. While the absolute measure of distance from ideology prevents us from comparing members who move in a liberal versus conservative distance (instead capturing members who are ideologically distant in either direction from the party mean), this finding for Democratic members is unexpected and perhaps indicates that ideological branding matters more for Republicans than it does for Democratic members, echoing prior work on the importance of ideological division within the Republican party (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016).

Overall, while statistically significant shifts are slight—particularly for Democratic members, who are already starting at low levels of text similarity and fail to surpass Republican similarity scores under any interaction or institutional condition—these shifts hint at strategic communication decisions, particularly given the brevity of congressional press releases. Even a change of 0.05 can translate to over 10 shared words in a 250-word press release. And when policy framing can be distilled into catchy phrases and slogans, even slight word changes carry political meaning (Bayram et al., 2019; Gelman & Wilson, 2022).

5 | INTERVIEWS WITH MEMBERS OF CONGRESS AND STAFF

Given the inherent limitations of text-based analysis (particularly regarding the causal direction of textual similarities), interviews with members of Congress and their staff supplement measures of text similarity and shed further light on several of the statistically significant findings above. Additionally, because much of the development and distribution of constituent communication occurs behind the scenes, this type of analysis is essential to understanding whether text similarities can be explained by party messaging processes and leadership differences between the two parties.

From fall 2021 to spring 2022, I conducted over 30 anonymous interviews with members of Congress and their staff.[11] Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was initially granted for in-person interviews, and following the COVID-19 pandemic, was expanded to include remote and telephone interviews. The majority of the interviews were performed over video chat software, while the remainder occurred over the phone and in person in Washington, D.C. Interviews were open-ended, ranging from 30 minutes to two hours, with the median interview being one hour long. Respondents were recruited through cold-call email requests and snowball sampling, in which sources either provided me with contact information to potential subjects or passed along my contact information to them. The response rate was around 70%, with a higher success rate for those that were referred from other subjects.

The number and variation of respondents allow me to consider the insight gathered as generalizable (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). In total, I interviewed 31 respondents, capturing a representative sample of the population in question: members and staff on Capitol Hill. The partisan breakdown was split nearly even (16 Republicans and 15 Democrats), and respondents represented both chambers, with a slight bias toward the House (17 House respondents, 11 Senate respondents, and four who served in both chambers).

Respondents also varied in important factors such as expertise and electoral vulnerability. The majority of respondents represented relatively safe districts (or states), but several were from “toss-up” districts (or states). Studying both chambers also presented helpful variation in electoral costs and tenures, as senators face higher electoral stakes and more expensive elections. Respondents also varied in their committee

of jurisdiction and personal expertise. The most well-represented area of expertise was Judiciary Committee proceedings, but references tRo this work might have been prompted by an ongoing Supreme Court vacancy and nomination.[12] The respondents' tenures collectively spanned the entire course of the dataset. Given the high turnover rate of congressional staff, current staff members did not have insight into the earlier years of the dataset. However, I sought out long-serving former staff that could speak to these earlier years. Among members, my sample was representative of both junior members and more senior members. Given the long tenure of most congressional members, member insight was reflective of several decades of collective experience. More about the interview process and methodology can be found in the Appendix.

5.1 | Results

First, interview respondents made clear that congressional leaders guide constituent communication. Both parties in both chambers have entire leadership offices dedicated to developing party messaging: the House and Senate Republican Conference ("Conference") and the House and Senate Democratic Policy and Communications Committee (DPCC). These offices contain dozens of staff dedicated to preparing party-specific communications materials for rank-and-file members and distributing these materials via in person, member-level meetings, email listservs, and staff-level correspondence. As one Republican leadership communications director said, party materials should provide a helpful resource when responding to constituents: "While we would like to think and expect all of our member are doing their homework, we like to make it as easy as possible and lead by example. One of the reasons we do so many press releases is that, ideally, we want them to copy, paste, and send them out to their own districts."[13]

Yet even for relatively resource-rich party leaders, coordinated information and messaging is costly, and not all legislation receives this concerted effort. For one, the overwhelming majority of legislation that rank-and-file members introduce is not even voted on in committee, much less on the House or Senate floor. Of legislation that does move forward, district-specific legislation (such as renaming a post office) does not pertain to the entire chamber or party, and thus, party leaders do not need to expend time and resources on it. Instead, party leaders focus their efforts on major legislation: legislation that has a significant policy impact, legislation that is receiving media attention, and/or legislation that serves as a major messaging tactic (Lee, 2016). As one Democratic leadership respondent said, "When something is the Speaker's move—Build Back Better, COVID relief…the committees are driving, but they're getting a lot of coaching, a lot of direction compared to other bills."[14] The Iraq War, Obamacare, Supreme Court nominations, and the Trump tax cuts were cited as major votes that leadership felt necessary to assist members with. This insight guided my decision to focus on Key Votes for the empirical analysis.

To develop these materials, party leaders utilize their extensive staff to collect materials from committees, think tanks, interest groups, or experienced members and reframe them for widespread adoption. The goal is to create materials that are easy to understand *and* fit a party narrative. One former Republican member recalled the Republican discussion of the 2009 Affordable Care Act: "John [Boehner] told us, we need everyone speaking on this. But then he realized members didn't know how to speak about health care at all. So, it was like, Health Care 101 at first. Then we focused on the attack."[15]

After developing talking points, sample graphics, press releases, floor speech ideas, or other materials, party leaders distribute them to rank-and-file members. Distribution mostly occurs through email and in-person member and staff-level meetings. However, just because party leaders are developing and distributing these messages does not mean that rank-and-file members are adopting them—and interviews revealed that expectations of adoption varied across chamber and party. In the Senate, committees, and party leaders were seen as helpful reference point, but not proactive content creators. As expected, senators are more likely to rely on their larger and more expert personal office staff than committee or leadership staff. As one Republican Senate staffer said, "Although I'm not an expert—press people really know the inch of a lake, several lakes—I know our legislative staff knows the whole, deep lake."[16]

Conversely, House respondents consistently discussed how committees and party leaders worked closely together with rank-and-file offices, proactively sharing information and encouraging members to discuss things in certain ways. As one staffer who served in both chambers said, "In the House, it's much more a team sport—there are fewer staff and fewer resources, so you need to work together."[17] In fact, no House respondent discussed a purely in-office process to develop constituent communications. Rather, they discussed a deluge of information and guidance from party leaders: one-pagers accompanying bills, daily emails and messaging guidance, accompanying graphics, and "recess packets" for the August work period.

Importantly, respondents noted striking differences between the parties. Republicans in both chambers described a concerted effort by party leaders to develop, distribute, and encourage members to stay on message. For both House and Senate Republicans, communications staff detailed an extensive process that included a party-wide weekly meeting with every

rank-and-file office, a well-defined "weekly message,"[18] and layered communication materials ranging from social media graphics to sample floor speeches. One Republican leadership staffer said, "If we're going to vote on infrastructure in a few weeks, then every week leading up to it we send out talking points, graphics, and videos."[19] The communications strategy even dictated the bill introduction: "It was often a point to have someone on theme introduce the bill. In the GOP, lacking in women, if it's a bill related to 'women's issues,' the leader would point to the women in the room and say, 'This is a child tax bill, one of you do it.'"[20]

House Republican respondents in particular discussed the pressure from party leaders to adopt their messages. One long-serving staffer said, "Conference, I know, took stock of who was pushing out the message and who did not, and they highlighted that… And you know, the more you're on the team, the more you're a team player, the more you get."[21] Republican respondents discussed a near obsession with catchy phrases, and one respondent even bemoaned the obsession with developing hashtags. House Republicans reported weekly and monthly competitions for "top communicators" and email listservs that provided strict guidance on floor messages. In short, all House Republican respondents shared an acknowledgement of the pressure and expectation to use party resources when communicating with constituents.

Democratic respondents detailed a different approach. Unlike Republicans, Democrats interviewed did not discuss weekly meetings or consistent email guidance. As one Democratic staffer said, their party's position was more similar to "sheep-herding rather than micromanaging."[22] Some words used to describe Democratic party messaging were "decentralized,"[23] "haphazard," and even "rookie,"[24] with "too many cooks in the kitchen."[25] Yet, Democratic respondents did not express disdain with this analysis—rather, they emphasized that while some materials were provided, the use of party messaging was up to the discretion of each office. Compared to Republican caucus meetings—which were described as a top-down directive of communication marching orders—a Democratic committee chairman said their discussions were more akin to a "family meeting."[26]

For example, although leaders—particularly Speaker Pelosi (D-CA)—were cited as being "hands on" in the bill development process, respondents did not see her (or Sens. Schumer [D-NY] and Reid [D-NV]) as central to rank-and-file members' constituent communications. One long-serving Democratic staffer said, "I don't think she cares what people talk about…Once her office shares materials, that's it, there's not much follow up."[27] Similarly, Democratic Senate respondents described a process not entirely absent serious coordination for large party priorities, but still relatively informal. As one Democratic communications staffer said, "I get a bunch of emails from Schumer's office, and they'll say, 'Hey this is what Schumer is talking about on the floor,' or, 'This is suggested talking points for Dem agenda.'" However, the staffer emphasized party materials were simply a resource, not a requirement.[28]

Some respondents did find the Speaker's own press releases and speeches helpful when evaluating an ongoing policy debate. One Democratic communications director said, "A lot of times we would be looking for our position. We'd look around and say, 'Okay Pelosi says this, other senior Dems say this, so we should be in that sandbox.'"[29] But, more so than Republicans, Democratic rank-and-file members in both chambers found the caucus materials generally unhelpful given district pressures. One Democratic House member said, "I don't use everything. I would say 70% of the caucus emails I hit delete on. That's not to say that I don't find it useful, it's just not going to work for my district all the time."[30]

For both parties, electoral concerns impacted the likelihood of message adoption. One House member from a moderate district discussed a more fine-tuned approach to messaging on major legislation: "On these bigger bills, you need to communicate from the vantage point of what is relevant to your district. Otherwise, you're out of touch."[31] A Republican Senate office from an electorally "safe" state also discussed how messaging changed as they neared an election: "Our biggest threat to our political future is a primary challenge, so yeah, we politically skew it, but we have done it more so this year than ever before because we're in cycle."[32]

As reflected by the higher likelihood of message similarity for parties in the majority, the institutional position also influenced member adoption. A Senate communications director commented, "It's always easier to be in the minority. Much easier to point fingers than accept responsibility."[33] A former member in the House said the same: "In the minority, it's a lot easier to operate. You can vote no, and it's easy to explain in most cases. And you can have your three bullet points and that's it. In the majority, it's harder because you have to explain what you're passing."[34] When messaging from a majority position, respondents discussed being more reliant on party leaders for information and party-specific messaging.

Overall, interview data revealed an institutional asymmetry in the development, distribution, and adoption of party-specific messaging that echoes—and explains—many of the findings of the above empirical analysis. While both parties have large, experienced staff dedicated to constituent communication—and the leadership structure appears largely the same on paper—respondents revealed notable differences in how the offices operate. Between the two chambers, House rank-and-file offices were more reliant on party leaders for messaging guidance, and between the two parties, Republicans discussed a more centralized and proactive approach to partisan communication.

Republican respondents were more likely to pay attention to (and more likely to use) party-specific messaging. Although Democratic respondents discussed resources from Democratic leaders, rank-and-file members did not receive the same degree of pressure to use them. However, as expected, the decision to use a party message also depended on the individual needs of the rank-and-file member, including challenges of capacity, electoral vulnerability, and institutional status.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While similar language alone does not confirm causal direction, when paired with information from interview respondents, it is a meaningful indicator that communication is developed with the assistance of party leaders. Computational text analysis highlights overall trends of message development, and interview respondents shed light on the behind-the-scenes aspect of party messaging, citing member-level meetings, internal emails, and conversations between staff as major sources of guidance when developing constituent communication.

Furthermore, quantitative and qualitative evidence indicates this reliance on party leader messaging is asymmetrical. Republicans are more centralized in their development, proactive in their distribution, and unified in their rank-and-file adoption. This is reflective in the statistically significant, positive effect on similarity scores between Republican party leaders and rank-and-file members in the House and among Freshmen. Interview results further illustrate the proactive nature of Republicans in maintaining and encouraging centralized communication. And while the empirical evidence makes clear that not all members will adopt party messaging—particularly those distant from the party's ideological average—the interviews illustrate how party messaging has become an institutionalized responsibility for Republican party leaders in the U.S. Congress.

The statistically significant, negative relationship between Democratic leaders and rank-and-file members similarity scores is echoed in the interview results: Democratic respondents described a casual disconnect between rank-and-file offices and party leader communications. However, Democratic members' positive connection to committee chair language indicates some reliance on leadership—perhaps for more complex information rather than partisan messaging. This research indicates that the "messaging problem" Democratic members are often charged with could at least be partially explained by an imbalance of institutional effort.[35]

Findings also indicate that partisan messaging habits are also affected by challenges of congressional capacity in a centralized congressional setting. Not only did Republican freshmen and House members have higher rates of similarity with party leaders, both parties had their highest levels of partisan similarity when serving in the majority, and this effect was substantive for Republicans in the 115th Congress, when the party controlled both chambers and the White House. As one interview respondent noted, messaging is "always easier… in the minority."[36] Obstruction toward an out-party's agenda is certainly easier for rank-and-file members to discuss—but legislating typically requires delicate explanation.

This work provides a behind-the-scenes look at how centralized messages are developed and distributed. Future work should more directly explore how variation in the topic and content of press releases impacts message adoption, as well as individual member-level analysis. Given what we know about party leaders' goals, as well as the fact that there is very little cross-party emulation, we should assume that these messages are party specific. But it would be a worthwhile endeavor to consider more detailed differences in adoption across policy areas and district- or state-level preferences (Rodden, 2010). Part of the asymmetry observed here could also be explained by the messages the two parties are sending: the easy-to-comprehend ideological message of Republican conservatism versus the proactive policy changes and coalition-building Democratic members are often responsible for (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016). However, future work should disentangle the effects of messaging on those who are moderate versus conservative strays.

Furthermore, while not studied explicitly here, the empirical data indicates there are some cross-party text similarities; understanding which types of members are more likely to use out-party messaging in their work is an area for future research. Political communication and linguistics is a robust field, and directly considering partisan message adoption as a type of constituent service could provide researchers with a unique perspective to observe how the parties are responding to changing constituencies. Lastly, as politics and media coverage increasingly become nationalized, understanding the direct impact of the White House on a congressional party's messaging decisions is an area for exploration.

This research has important takeaways, particularly for our understanding of asymmetric polarization and the centralization of Congress. Interview respondents detail an institutional effort, particularly by Republicans, to speak about issues in a partisan way—further encouraging the permeation of partisan polarization among Congress members and their constituents. While researchers have accepted that members are reliant on party leaders for guidance through the legislative process, these findings illustrate the depth of that dependence. Both qualitative and quantitative results indicate that reliance on leadership-provided messaging is correlated with congressional capacity. As autonomy and resources for rank-and-file members continue

to decline (particularly in the House), understanding how members are gathering information to communicate with constituents is of increasing importance. Unfortunately, these results indicate that reliance on party-led messaging is not merely for information gathering, but a process that maintains, and in some cases encourages, partisan polarization. As members increasingly turn to party and committee leaders for help explaining major decisions to their constituents, powerful leaders are further emboldened while partisan and asymmetric constituent communication becomes institutionalized.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The Reapportionment Act of 1929 capped the number of seats in the House of Representatives at 435. As the country's population increases, so does the population of congressional districts.

[2] More information about the CQ Key Votes can be found here. A distribution of topics for all Key Votes in the 113th to 116th Congress and Key Votes that generated the most press releases can be found in the Appendix (Figure A1 and Table A1).

[3] Press releases were collected in 2022 and retrieved by their associated bill number and name. However, as of November 2023, press release collection is no longer offered by the ProPublica API service. Press releases collected by the author are available on request. More information about the ProPublica API process can be found here: https://projects.propublica.org/api-docs/congress-api/. Additionally, as a robustness check, I also collect newsletter data of all Key Votes via DCInbox (Cormack, 2016), which allows me to search via Key Term and bill number. Although there are some discrepancies (such as higher newsletter usage in earlier congressional sessions), results are consistent between the two mediums, indicating the API retrieval process was successful. See Appendix, Figures A2 and A3.

[4] For example, members are far less likely to discuss issues pertaining to chamber dynamics (e.g., the Senate vote "ordering Elizabeth Warren to sit down," 2/7/2017).

[5] See Figure A3 in the Appendix for the rate and the partisan distribution of press releases.

[6] Prior to this analysis, I performed pre-processing to remove stopwords and symbols from the scraping process, as well as information from the header of the press release that could inadvertently increase text-based similarities (dates, Washington, D.C. office locations, member names, states, etc.). I do not "stem" the words, because I am interested in specific word usage and phrasing (Denny & Spirling, 2018). This pairwise analysis method is ideal for comparing the phrasing of words, as well as "medium size" text analysis, compared to common computational text analysis approaches that rely on "big data" (Mullen, 2015). This approach also allows for directional comparison, further detailed in the text.

[7] The results are consistent across nonlogged and log-plus-one transformation [$y' = \log(y+1)$] data. Given both the rightward distribution of the data and the presence of true zeroes, using standard deviation to evaluate substantive effects presents an inflated measure of variability (Boulton & Williford, 2018; Smith, 2012). Thus, difference in medians is more appropriate for comparison, and is presented in the text alongside the effect's impact in relation to standard deviation.

[8] For example, this occurs with former Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA). She often sends multiple press releases for a given vote (usually a formal press release and the transcript of a related press conference), and under this analysis, she would be rated as very similar to herself (given she is often reusing quotes across the two press releases). Cases, in which Member A is the same as Member B, are removed from the dataset. However, the pairwise approach means that Pelosi's texts still remain in the dataset—capturing the degree to which other rank-and-file members are using her language (or the degree to which Pelosi borrows from other members).

[9] Party leaders include: Speaker of the House, minority and majority leader, party whips, and conference and policy chairs in both chambers (5.2% of members across all sessions/chambers). Committee leaders include both the chair and ranking member for all standing committees (14.2% of members).

[10] Pooled results for connections across both parties can be found in the Appendix.

[11] Institutional Review Board, University of Maryland, #1508784.

[12] As interviews were ongoing, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer announced his retirement and incoming Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson was confirmed by the Senate.

[13] Interview 6.

[14] Interview 18.

[15] Interview 9.

[16] Interview 11.

[17] Interview 30.

[18] Interview 7.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Interview 7.

[21] Interview 2.

[22] Interview 18.

[23] Interview 25.

[24] Interview 11.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Interview 23.

[27] Interview 25.

[28] Interview 30.

[29] Interview 30.

[30] Interview 14.

[31] Interview 23.

[32] Interview 7.

[33] Interview 7.

[34] Interview 9.

[35] Ex: Pfeiffer, Dan, "Why Do Democrats Suck at Messaging?" *Vanity Fair*, 2022; McIntire, Mary Ellen, "Democrats still divided over midterm messaging," *Roll Call*, 2022.

[36] Interview 7.

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APPENDIX A

FOLLOWING THE LEADERS, LSQ

A.1. | Overview of interview collection process

Interviews took place over the course of several months, from fall 2021 through spring 2022. Interviews were anonymous, and any identifying information has been removed. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was initially granted for in-person interviews, but following the COVID-19 pandemic, was expanded to include remote and telephone interviews. The majority of the interviews were performed over video chat software, while the remainder occurred over the phone and in person in Washington, D.C. Interviews were open-ended, ranging from 30 minutes to two hours, with the median interview being one hour long.

Respondents were provided a brief overview of the project: "I'm interested in understanding how members/you educate themselves/yourself about bill contents in order for constituent communication," and then asked to describe their experiences on Capitol Hill. Beyond these initial introductions, interview questions were adapted to their experience given their position or office, as well as information revealed during the interview. Questions about resources (e.g., "What materials do you use when crafting constituent communication?"), relationships with other offices and party leadership (e.g., "At what stage of the process do party leaders get involved?"), or strategy (e.g., "When do you decide to craft party-wide messaging?") were standard.

Per Beckmann and Hall (2013) I avoided questions about vague motivations behind their work, asking respondents to instead reflect on actions and lived experiences. Of course, several respondents were eager to theorize about congressional actions or differences between parties and chambers—these responses were always appreciated but not explicitly prompted (Kingdon, 19891981). However, I did conclude every interview with an open-ended question that allowed respondents some opportunity to speculate based on lived experiences: "What observations do you find interesting about how information flows through Congress, from leaders to rank-and-file members?"

Respondents were recruited through cold-call email requests and snowball sampling, in which sources either provided me with contact information or passed along my contact information to potential subjects. The response rate was around 70%, with a higher success rate of those that were referred from fellow subjects. In total, I interviewed 31 respondents, capturing a representative sample of the population in question: members and staff on Capitol Hill. The partisan breakdown was nearly split even (16 Republicans and 15 Democrats), and respondents represented both chambers, with a slight bias toward the House (17 House respondents, 11 Senate respondents, and four who served in both chambers). Respondents also varied in important factors such as expertise and electoral vulnerability.

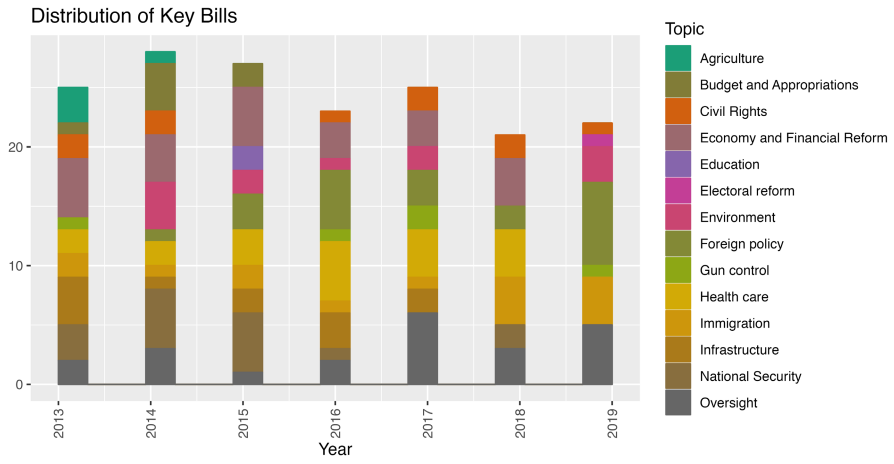

FIGURE A1 Topics of Key Votes, 113th–116th Congress.

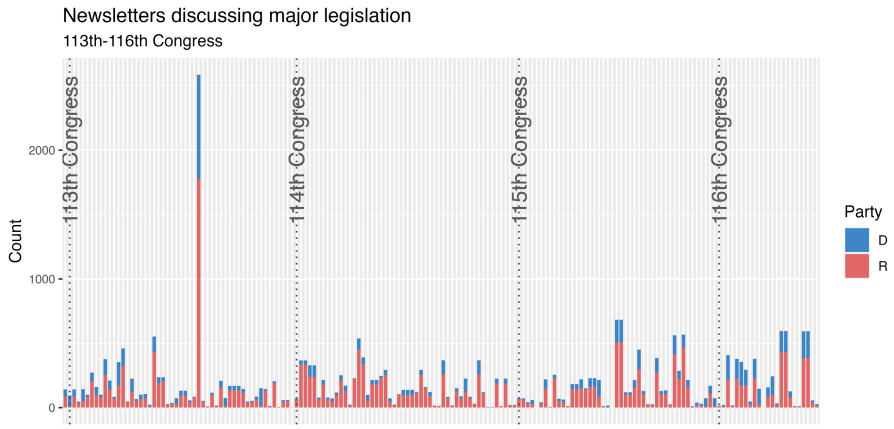

FIGURE A2 Frequency of Congressional Newsletters discussing Key Votes, 113th–116th Congress.

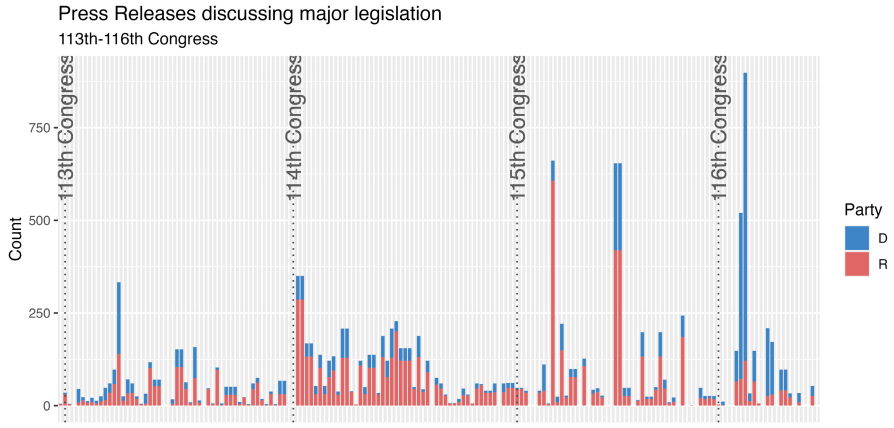

FIGURE A3 Frequency of Congressional Press Releases discussing Key Votes, 113th–116th Congress.

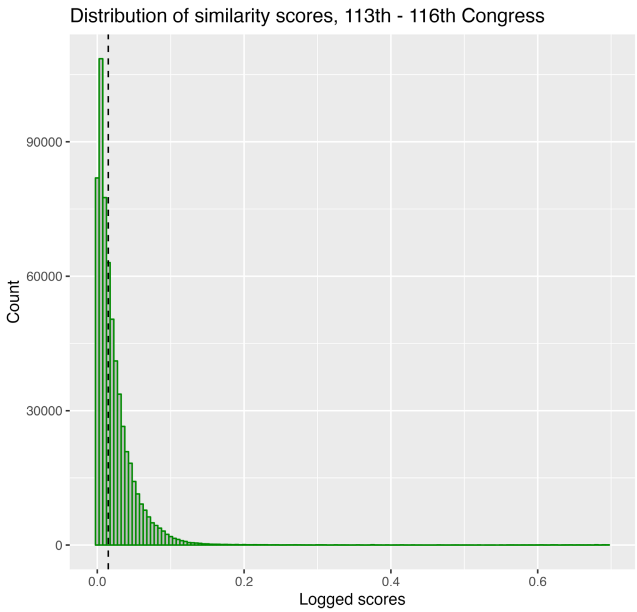

FIGURE A4 Distribution of word similarity scores, 113th–116th Congress. Dotted line represents the median similarity score for all members of Congress (0.015), standard deviation of 0.036.

TABLE A1 Most messaged bills by press releases, 113th–116th Congress.

Press release count	Congressional session	Bill number	Topic	Percentage democratic support
898	116th	HR1	Voting reform	86.5[b]
661	115th	S1094	VA oversight	8
654	115th	HR1	Trump tax cuts	33.4
520	116th	HR8	Firearm background checks	86.2[b]
350	114th	S1	Keystone XL pipeline	18.3
333	113th	S744	Immigration overhaul	58.2
243	115th	HR6	Opioid abuse support	23.9
228	114th	HR3762	Obamacare repeal	11.8
221	115th	HR2810[a]	Transgender rights in military	32.6
209	116th	HR9	Emissions reduction	87.6[b]

[a]Bill failed.

[b]Democratic Party in the majority.

TABLE A2 OLS regression of text similarity scores, all members.

	Similarity score
Member A: Leadership	−0.0003
	(0.0001)
Member A: Committee Chair	−0.0003
	(0.0002)
Member B: Freshman	0.003
	(0.002)
Member B: Competitive election	0.002***
	(0.0002)
Member B: Ideological distance	−0.016***
	(0.001)
Member B: Republican	0.001
	(0.002)
Member B: Senate	−0.002
	(0.002)
114th Congress	0.001***
	(0.0002)
115th Congress	0.009***
	(0.0002)
116th Congress	0.002
	(0.0002)
A Leadership * B: Freshman	0.0001
	(0.001)
A: Leadership * B: Competitive election	−0.001
	(0.0005)
A: Leadership * B: Ideological Distance	−0.002
	(0.005)
A: Leadership * B: Republican	−0.003***
	(0.0004)
A: Leadership * B: Senate	−0.002
	(0.005)
A: Committee Chair * B: Freshman	−0.002**
	(0.001)
A: Committee Chair * B:Competative race	−0.001
	(0.0004)
A: Committee Chair * B: Ideological Distance	−0.007***
	(0.007)
A: Committee Chair * B: Republican	−0.002
	(0.004)
A: Committee Chair * B: Senate	0.006
	(0.002)
Constant	0.022
	(0.079)
Observations	601,933
R^2	0.011

Note: Committee chairs include committee chairs and ranking members of all standing and select committees. Fixed effects for congressional session of each key vote. Standard errors clustered by member.
**$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

TABLE A3 OLS regression of text similarity scores, by party, with interaction effects for party leaders and committee chairs, 113th-116th Congress.

	Dependent variable	
	Similarity score	
	GOP model	Dem model
Leadership (A)	0.0028**	−0.0032***
	(0.001)	(0.0004)
Committee Chair (A)	−0.0001	0.0012**
	(0.001)	(0.0004)
Freshman (B)	0.0001	0.0028***
	(0.0005)	(0.0002)
Competitive election (B)	0.0002	0.0033***
	(0.0004)	(0.0002)
Distance from the party mean (B)	−0.0011***	−0.028***
	(0.005)	(0.001)
Senator (B)	−0.004	0.0006**
	(0.002)	(0.0003)
Leadership × Freshmen	0.0057***	−0.0023***
	(0.002)	(0.001)
Leadership × Competitive election	−0.001*	−0.0016**
	(0.002)	(0.001)
Leadership × Distance from the party mean	−0.0289***	0.0135***
	(0.008)	(0.003)
Leadership × Senate	−0.0039***	−0.0038***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Committee Chair × Freshman	−0.001**	−0.0029***
	(0.0001)	(0.001)
Committee Chair × Competitive election	0.002	−0.0016
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Committee Chair × Distance from the party mean	−0.020***	−0.005*
	(0.005)	(0.003)
Committee Chair × Senate	0.005***	0.013***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
114th Congress	0.002	−0.003***
	(0.0004)	(0.0005)
115th Congress	0.014***	−0.001***
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)
116th Congress	0.0004***	0.0048***
	(0.001)	(0.0003)
Constant	0.0285	0.0244***
	(0.079)	(0.0004)
Observations	114,169	281,087
R^2	0.022	0.009

Note: Committee chairs include committee chairs and ranking members of all standing and select committees. Fixed effects for congressional session of each key vote. Standard errors clustered by member.
*$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.