

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

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Abstract: Today's news media environment incentivizes gatekeeping practices that lead to a bias toward content containing partisan conflict and ideological extremity. Using a content analysis of 38,430 cable and broadcast television news transcripts from the 109th through 112th Congresses, we examine the frequency with which members of Congress appeared on cable and broadcast news. When we model on-air statements by members of Congress as a function of legislator and institutional characteristics, we reveal a gatekeeping function that vastly overrepresents extreme partisans on both sides of the aisle. The effect is largely consistent for network and cable outlets alike, suggesting that gatekeeping processes under both market and advocacy models bias content towards the extreme and conflictual. This finding is particularly important in light of recent evidence linking media-driven misperceptions about polarization to partisan-ideological sorting and negative political affect in the electorate.

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Today's media environment rewards partisan conflict and ideological extremity. Changes to the media marketplace, brought about by the arrival of cable and the internet, enabled the re-emergence of partisan news and intensified existing *structural* biases in the news (Hamilton, 2004). One consequence of these changes was a shift from a predominately market-driven media environment, in which most mainstream news outlets in the U.S. operated according to a market-based model of journalism, to one in which many emergent outlets followed an advocacy model (Schudson, 1998). Despite the fact that the U.S. press operated under the advocacy model for most of its history as a partisan press,¹ the partial reversion back to party-based advocacy in the newsroom sparked criticism and controversy grounded in concerns about echo chambers and the polarizing effects of partisan bias in the news (e.g. Baum & Groeling, 2008; Stroud, 2010; Levendusky, 2013). In the time since, these concerns grew in tandem with rising levels of political polarization among partisan elites in Congress and increasing dislike of partisans on the other side in the mass public (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Lelkes, Sood, & Iyengar, 2017).

The organizational and institutional structures underlying both advocacy and market-based models of news media can foster media bias and political polarization. Bias in news content may be a product of the economic incentives underlying market-based models or an advocacy orientation adopted by individual journalists or news organizations (Cook, 1998). "Gatekeeping" practices of news selection (Althaus et al. 2011; Soroka 2012; Searles et al. 2016), among other journalistic routines driven by market-based models of news, distort the information received by the public (Hamilton, 2004; Cook, 2005). Elite polarization leads to mass polarization by clarifying distinctions between the parties and empowering ordinary citizens to determine which party they prefer (Hetherington, 2001; Levendusky, 2009, 2010). For

most, however, exposure to political elites occurs primarily through mass-mediated products created through well-documented norms and routines (Ahler, 2014; Althaus et al., 2011; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Prior, 2013). Congressional elites seek media coverage to win elections and inform the public about policy (Arnold, 2004; Groeling, 2010), while news outlets view government officials as indispensable sources who “officiate” the news (Althaus, 2003; Wagner & Gruszcynski, 2018). Media preferences for partisan content may amplify elite polarization, encouraging audiences to adopt more extreme positions (Stroud, 2010; Ahler, 2014) and feel more hostile toward the opposing party (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016).

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

We extend studies of gatekeeping to broadcast and cable television news portrayals of U.S. House members. Using a content analysis of 38,430 cable and broadcast news transcripts, we assess media representations of U.S. House members by comparing the ideological distribution of all members of the House to the distribution of members who made televised comments (Wagner & Gruszcynski, 2018).² Controlling for legislator and institutional

characteristics, we investigate whether ideology and extremity explains cable and broadcast news appearances during the 109th through 112th Congresses (2005 to 2013), a particularly polarizing period in recent history characterized by a rapidly expanding media choice environment.³ We include both mainstream and partisan outlets to examine economic (i.e. under the market model) and political (i.e. under the advocacy model) gatekeeping practices across news organizations. We compare the ideological distribution of the members featured most often on television to that of the entire chamber (Carroll et al., 2001). We expect news media to air more statements from ideologically extreme members of Congress, leading to systematic differences between the ideologies of elites portrayed in the news and their actual ideological distribution in Congress.

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

Gatekeeping as Structural and Political Media Bias

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

Gatekeeping under market constraints

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

Hypothesis 1: On broadcast news networks, ideologically extreme House members have more opportunities to speak on-air relative to their moderate counterparts.

Gatekeeping may function differently for those cable news networks that operate under the market model, such as CNN, due to higher demand for news content (Hamilton, 2004; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010) and a more limited market share (Webster, 2014). Cable outlets run on a 24-hour news cycle, which intensifies the demand on journalists to find news and to manufacture it when there is none to be found (Kuypers, 2002; Cook 2005). These dynamics also incentivize political elites to attempt to control the news cycle (e.g. Kioussis & Strömbäck, 2010;

Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2018), amplifying adversarial relations between the parties as well as between politicians and the press. Cable capitalizes on criticism and controversy more intensely than broadcast news, inviting opportunities for on-air conflict through personality-based programs and talking-head debates. The bias toward ideologically extreme members of Congress should therefore be more evident among cable news outlets relative to the broadcast networks.

Hypothesis 2: The gatekeeping effect on ideological extremity should be stronger for market-model cable outlets than broadcast networks: cable channel depictions of House members should reflect more polarization relative to broadcast network depictions.

Gatekeeping in the advocacy model

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

Hypothesis 3: Partisan outlets will portray an array of out-party elites reflecting an ideological distribution more extreme than the distribution in the real-world chamber.

Explaining the Distributional Approach

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

The gatekeeping functions of broadcast and cable news outlets should therefore distort media depictions of the ideological composition of Congress in systematic ways, as formalized in Soroka's (2012) description of the gatekeeping effect, $M = RW * G$, where (M) represents media content, (RW) represents real-world indicators,⁵ and (G) is the gatekeeping function. We are interested in comparing the real-world (RW) and the mediated (M) distributions of House member ideology and ideological extremity. Partisan and mass market preferences should lead to a gatekeeping function (G) that, in most cases, prefers ideological extremity to moderation. We use the distributional approach to assess H1, examining whether the gatekeeping function will

shift the bimodal distribution of House member ideology toward the extremes on the three major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC). We assess H2 by examining whether the gatekeeping effect is stronger for market-model cable outlets relative to the broadcast networks, and we assess H3 by examining how advocacy-model cable networks (Fox News and MSNBC) portray politicians from the opposing ideology.

Data and Methods

We rely on two main data sets. The first contains data about each of the voting members of the 109th ($n = 440$), 110th ($n = 448$), 111th ($n = 445$), and 112th ($n = 445$) U.S. Houses of Representatives. These data include DW-NOMINATE ideological scores based on members' vote history (Carroll et al., 2001). The second dataset captures the distribution of congressional ideology on television, created from a content analysis of transcripts from national broadcast and cable television news programs occurring between January 3, 2005 and January 3, 2013, the full terms of these four Congresses.⁶ We collected data on each member's aired statements on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, using a content analysis of news transcripts in LexisNexis. Using a search string for each member in the sample, we performed 1,777 searches yielding a total of 91,083 transcripts: 19,749 for the 109th, 17,640 for the 110th, 26,209 for the 111th, and 27,485 for the 112th.⁷ The results for each member were saved in .html format and analyzed using BeautifulSoup, an open source html scraping program.

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

if more than one speaker with the same last name is present) and a colon, and first and subsequent identifications are presented in all capital letters.

Analysis of the 91,083 identified transcripts, automated using a commissioned Python script that provided the html scraper with relevant parameters, proceeded in two stages. First, the transcripts for each member were examined for speakers by last name, and the first names associated with each speaker with that last name were identified. First names that clearly referenced the member were recorded, while ambiguous ones were checked manually and then recorded. For example, analysis for Rep. Rahm Emanuel returned four first names associated with a speaker with the last name Emanuel: “Rep.,” “Rahm,” “Michael,” and “Mike.” Both “Rep.” and “Rahm” meant Rep. Emanuel, while “Michael” and “Mike” referenced a Fox News correspondent; only the first names “Rep.” and “Rahm” were recorded for second-stage analysis. By excluding all transcripts in which no member spoke, this first stage analysis winnowed the total number of transcripts in the analysis to 38,430, including 8,656 for the 109th Congress, 9,908 for the 110th Congress, 13,238 for the 111th Congress, and 14,416 for the 112th Congress.

In the second stage, the relevant first names were included in the script parameters and the transcripts for each member were reexamined, analyzing only the statements made by the actual representative. The Python script directed the html scraper to record the speaker’s name, the date of the statement, and the network on which the statement appeared. Data corresponding to a total of 243,205 statements (45,545 for the 109th Congress, 47,981 for the 110th Congress, 68,420 for the 111th Congress, and 81,259 for the 112th Congress). Once these files were combined, the data were transformed from the unit of observation, the individual statement, to the unit of analysis—the individual member in each Congress ($N = 1,778$).

Applying the Distributional Approach

We begin by comparing the real-world distribution of member ideology to the mediated distribution of member ideology. There are two main distinctions between other distributional approaches and ours. First, we examine gatekeeping effects at the member level, examining selections about which member statements, not stories or topics, are aired on news programs. Focusing on the members depicted empowers us to explore coverage of Congressional polarization using a distributional approach, allowing us to avoid our own selection biases (Soroka 2012; Althaus et al. 2011). Our distribution of information from the mediated world is comprised of a subset of the same set of actors underlying our “real-world” distribution of information. Journalists select which members to feature on-air based on what they know about the member. Any expectations about the particular statements members will make are based on that knowledge and particular member traits (e.g. party, ideology, past positions).

Our first measure of interest is members’ on-air “statements” on broadcast and cable news programs. This measure captures media standing (Tresch 2009): coverage that confers the recipient with a voice to explain, address, or justify his or her policies, issues or actions. Representatives “made a statement” on television when their statements were covered on-air.⁸ Next, we assess member ideology and ideological extremism using dynamic, weighted nominal three-step estimation (DW-NOMINATE) scores (Carroll et al. 2001), which score members’ ideologies on a continuum from -1 (extremely liberal) to +1 (extremely conservative) based on analysis of their roll call votes. Scores for member ideology were converted into quintiles, where the most liberal members are in the first quintile, moderates are in the third quintile, and the most conservative members are in the fifth quintile. We operationalize extremity by taking the absolute value of the ideology score. These extremity scores were also converted into quintiles: the first quintile contains the most moderate and the fifth contains the most extreme members.

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

[Insert Figure 1 About Here]

The ideological distribution of Congress, portrayed by the grey line in each distribution graph in Figure 1, is bimodal with a left peak around the ideology score of -0.4 and a right peak around 0.6. The height of the distribution denotes the amount of members of Congress with that score. The left-side peak is higher across most networks, as in Congress as a whole, but the right-side peak is wider: in other words, there are more liberals concentrated around one point on the ideological scale, but more conservatives are located further from zero.

Members in the top quintile (i.e. the top 20 percent) of televised statements are portrayed by the black line in each graph. Those who speak most often on television are more extreme than Congress overall, as shown by the fact that the left and right peaks of the black line are further from the center than Congress as a whole (the grey line). There are more televised statements by extreme members, and fewer statements by moderate members, across all networks and network types. The similarity between networks is striking, particularly across the three broadcast networks. CNN's distribution resembles the broadcast networks more than the other cable networks. The left-side peak for MSNBC is much taller than other networks, indicating more quotes from liberals. The opposite is true of Fox News, whose right-side peak is higher than its left-side peak uniquely among the networks, and in contrast with the House distribution.

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

[Insert Figure 2 here]

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

Modeling Member Statements

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

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

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

News outlets assign news value on the basis of familiarity, distinctiveness, novelty, timeliness, negativity, and sensationalism (Arnold, 2004; Hamilton, 2004; Iyengar et al., 2004; Soroka, 2012). Name recognition due to running for higher office or involvement in a scandal therefore adds news value to members (Arnold, 2004). We include dichotomous indicators for members running for *higher office* and under *ethics* investigations to account for other explanations for member on-air statements.¹² Finally, Congress is characterized by an institutional history of overrepresentation of white males, making traits such as sex, race, and ethnicity associated with novelty and therefore newsworthiness (Lawrence & Rose, 2009). We include dummy variables for *female* representative and *minority* representative.

Results: Ideology

Poisson regression is used for our count-based dependent variable of *member statements*. We present nine models, each estimating the number of televised statements per member as a function of members' ideology while controlling for leadership status, seniority, legislative activity, media effort, seeking higher office, involvement in an ethics scandal and female and minority status. The models present estimates for (1) total number of member statements across all broadcast and cable outlets examined, (2) total number of statements on the three main cable networks, (3) total statements across the three major broadcast networks, and each of the individual networks: CNN, Fox, MSNBC, ABC, CBS, and NBC, respectively (4-9).¹³

[Insert Table 1 About Here]

Model 1 in Table 1 provides the estimates for total counts of member statements across all six cable and broadcast networks combined. Compared to those in the most liberal (first) quintile, only being in the fifth quintile (most conservative) is positively and significantly related

to number of on-air statements. Since poisson regression coefficients are difficult to interpret, we present these results as marginal predicted probabilities in Figure 3.

[Insert Figure 3 About Here]

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

For CNN (Model 4), being in the most conservative quintile is positively and significantly associated with higher rates of on-air statements. The positive effect of being in the fifth quintile is stronger than for all but the effect of being in the most liberal quintile, providing some support for H2: more polarization on CNN than the broadcast networks. We observe a similar general pattern for Fox News: the effect of being in the most conservative ideological quintile on member statements is positive and significant. For Fox News, the predicted number of statements for members in the most conservative quintile are more than double those of moderates. The effect of member ideology and statements on Fox News and CNN is asymmetric: being in the most liberal quintile does not gain as much coverage as being in the right-most category. Though more liberal members are most likely to get more airings, the effect of being far left is not the same as being far right. If CNN is considered a left-leaning outlet, this could be seen as an effort to highlight out-party views as extreme.

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

Among the broadcast networks, results for ABC (Model 7) reveal a familiar pattern in favor of statement opportunities for members on the polar ends of the left and right. The effect of being in either the left most or right most quintile is positive, significant and substantially large. Quintiles for the far left and right have higher expected counts than all three more moderate ideology quintiles. On CBS (Model 8), the gatekeeping preference for members on the fringe of ideology is less clear. The estimates for both the second and fifth quintiles are positively and significantly related to statement counts compared to the baseline quintile representing left-most ideological positions. Members on the far-right have more statements relative to right-leaners and moderates, but do not earn more statements relative to far left or left leaning members. Members on the far-left do not earn significantly more statements than left-leaners, though they have more speaking opportunities relative to moderates. On NBC (Model 9), being in the second quintile of ideology (somewhat liberal) is significantly related to more statements, though the coefficient for the fifth quintile is larger (though not significant, due to a large standard error).

Results: Ideological Extremity

We are interested in whether ideological extremity is rewarded by television networks. We re-estimated Models 1-9 using ideological extremity (the distance from zero of their DW-

NOMINATE score) as the dependent variable, with poisson regression results displayed in Table 2 and marginal predicted probabilities in Figure 4, below. Model 3 tests H1, while comparing the results from Models 4-6 allows us to test H2.

[Insert Table 2 About here]

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

[Insert Figure 4 About Here]

The predicted marginal effects in Panel 1 of Figure 4 demonstrate that, even when holding other legislator characteristics constant, the most extreme members of Congress get the most speaking opportunities. Model 2, across all three cable news organizations, shows nearly identical results to Model 1. Model 3, across the broadcast networks, reveals some differences relative to cable: members in the highest quintile of ideological extremism make more statements on broadcast than other quintiles, but the relationship is weaker ($p < 0.05$). These results provide some support for H1. We again observe the influence of more traditional indicators of newsworthiness as applied to legislators: legislative and press effort, seniority, seeking higher office, and those holding leadership positions. Even on these mainstream news outlets, extreme members are granted more frequent speaking opportunities relative to moderate members.

Providing more support for H2, the differences between the most and least extreme quintiles are much larger on CNN (Model 4) than broadcast (Model 3), though the patterns are similar across these non-partisan, ostensibly objective news outlets. However, Fox News (Model 5) and MSNBC (Model 6) also reward extremity, with only the fifth quintile being statistically significant. The effect is substantially larger for Fox News (4.861, $p < 0.001$) than for MSNBC

(2.008, $p < 0.05$) or CNN (2.967, $p < 0.001$). MSNBC and Fox News also are the only networks for which being the subject of an ethics investigation is related to number of statements.

There are also similarities and differences between the broadcast networks. Model 7 shows that the most extreme receive more coverage on ABC. The predictions displayed in Panel 7 of Figure 4, show that most extreme members are significantly more likely to appear on ABC than all but members in the second quintile. The estimates in Model 8 (CBS) also favor the most extreme. Panel 8 of Figure 4 shows that the marginal effect of being in the highest quintile of extremity relative to the other quintiles is weaker for CBS. The estimates for NBC (Model 9, Panel 9) show that those in the second and fifth quintiles are predicted to make higher numbers of statements, though the fifth quintile is not statistically significantly different in Table 2.

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

Discussion

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

We find an additional way that media may polarize, beyond persuasion or attitude reinforcement. How the news can polarize remains unresolved in previous work, given that news

rarely shifts strongly held beliefs among those who consume it and rarely reaches the inattentive (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Arceneaux, Johnson, & Cryderman, 2013; Prior, 2013; Peterson et al. 2019). News media's preference for quotes from partisan representatives on the polar ends of the ideological continuum may distort perceptions of elite polarization in the mass public by sending biased information cues (Hetherington 2001; Levendusky, 2009; Wagner & Gruszczyński, 2018). When elites seem more polarized and partisan distinctions are clearer (Ahler, 2014), mass polarization follows (Hetherington, 2001; Levendusky, 2009; 2010; Darr & Dunaway, 2016). We also advance the literature by moving beyond partisan news and revisiting structural biases in news media that produce systematic biases in coverage. Even objective news can polarize if gatekeeping leads to a preference for extremity (Wagner & Gruszczyński, 2018).

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

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

partisan outlets outlets, while ostensibly following the advocate model, cannot separate completely from the constraints of the market or the professional ideal of the trustee.

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

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

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

Another limitation is that our study is U.S.-centric, both theoretically and empirically. This raises questions about the generalizability of our findings. Our U.S. focus and narrow selection of news outlets came from our interest in identifying mechanisms that would address lingering puzzles in existing work on media and polarization in the U.S. We started with questions about: 1) how polarization among elites trickles down to the mass public via the media, and 2) how coverage inflates perceptions of polarization beyond its actual levels. Specifically, we wanted to identify how (and whether) media, outside of simply partisan news, could exacerbate mass polarization. While the findings we present achieve these aims, they are of limited value to our understanding of the broader influence of gatekeeping and mediatization across cultural and institutional contexts. In future work, we will incorporate cross-national variation to see if these patterns hold across media systems and institutional configurations.

Our analyses also do not actually assess the influence of ideological gatekeeping on public perceptions. With respect to this point, it is important to note that even as we point to recent studies demonstrating the effects of media-fed misperceptions about polarization (Ahler 2014; Ahler & Sood 2018; Levendusky & Malhotra 2016), we do not assume massive media effects from the trend we observe here. For this question to be answered, we rely on future research, using experiments or observational studies.

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

The Congress that people see on their televisions is not the same one, ideologically, that exists in the Capitol Building. While this dynamic may polarize voters, as described above, we are also concerned about its effects on political elites. The media's prioritization of partisan extremity incentivizes legislators to be ideologues, along with other changes in the media environment. The decline of local newspapers and nationalizing news consumption weakened House members' ability to cultivate a personal vote based on service to the district (Trussler, 2018), which shifts the basis of democratic accountability to national, partisan criteria (Darr, Hitt, & Dunaway, 2018; Hopkins, 2018; Trussler, 2018; Martin & McCrain, 2018). Considering that legislators shifted their voting behavior rightward in response to Fox News entering their district (Arceneaux et al., 2016; Clinton and Enamorado, 2014), and that moderates are unlikely to run for Congress if they perceive a lack of fit with the national party (Thomsen, 2017), the implications of our findings are especially distressing. The media's rewards for ideological extremity in Congress could prove self-reinforcing by encouraging extreme voting behavior and discouraging moderates from running for office.

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Tables

Table 1. Statements on television from members of Congress, by quintiles of ideology. Poisson regression.

	(1) All	(2) Cable	(3) Broadcast	(4) CNN	(5) Fox	(6) MSNBC	(7) ABC	(8) CBS	(9) NBC
Ideology (liberal to conservative)									
(1 st quintile omitted)									
2 nd quintile	0.962 (0.074)	0.922 (0.077)	1.356* (0.158)	0.987 (0.124)	0.896 (0.090)	0.846 (0.164)	0.935 (0.226)	1.376+ (0.181)	1.718** (0.201)
3 rd quintile (moderate)	0.813 (0.203)	0.786 (0.205)	1.115 (0.210)	1.055 (0.278)	0.851 (0.082)	0.486 (0.234)	1.052 (0.282)	1.148 (0.345)	1.153 (0.261)
4 th quintile	0.936 (0.215)	0.938 (0.246)	0.897 (0.151)	1.334 (0.254)	1.120 (0.182)	0.471 (0.275)	0.865 (0.309)	0.996 (0.277)	0.844 (0.377)
5 th quintile (most conservative)	2.296** (0.346)	2.252** (0.347)	2.714** (0.758)	2.805** (0.560)	3.571** (1.082)	0.981 (0.220)	2.341** (0.112)	3.410* (1.403)	2.459 (1.186)
Seniority	1.026* (0.010)	1.024+ (0.011)	1.042** (0.005)	1.034** (0.009)	1.019 (0.012)	1.014 (0.013)	1.040** (0.005)	1.052** (0.010)	1.033** (0.003)
Leadership position	5.118** (0.350)	4.713** (0.259)	9.325** (1.426)	4.574** (0.303)	5.615** (0.556)	4.115** (0.296)	9.432** (2.218)	7.603** (1.190)	11.286** (2.655)
Legislative activity	1.021** (0.006)	1.022** (0.006)	1.014* (0.004)	1.025** (0.006)	1.019* (0.007)	1.018 (0.012)	1.013 (0.007)	1.016** (0.003)	1.013 (0.007)
Press releases sent	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.004** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.002** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.001)
Seeking higher office	1.929* (0.389)	1.873* (0.431)	2.554** (0.274)	1.705* (0.279)	1.734* (0.302)	2.302 (0.999)	1.336 (0.479)	1.976+ (0.536)	4.068** (1.167)
Female	0.829 (0.127)	0.834 (0.136)	0.772+ (0.086)	0.781 (0.102)	0.649** (0.085)	1.082 (0.274)	0.903 (0.087)	0.840 (0.194)	0.637 (0.177)
Minority	1.146 (0.155)	1.163 (0.170)	0.949 (0.147)	1.269 (0.216)	1.447 (0.431)	0.865 (0.118)	0.964 (0.170)	0.936 (0.147)	0.945 (0.259)
Ethics investigation	1.735 (0.538)	1.763 (0.525)	1.468 (0.731)	1.418 (0.415)	2.060 (0.768)	2.016+ (0.671)	2.139 (1.183)	1.132 (0.483)	1.307 (0.671)
Constant	50.759** (8.402)	47.516** (8.937)	3.525** (0.482)	14.587** (1.770)	11.747** (2.485)	23.924** (11.025)	1.100 (0.419)	1.027 (0.154)	1.404 (0.591)
Observations	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777

Note. Robust standard errors (clustered by Congress) in parentheses. ** p<0.001, * p<0.01, + p<0.05.

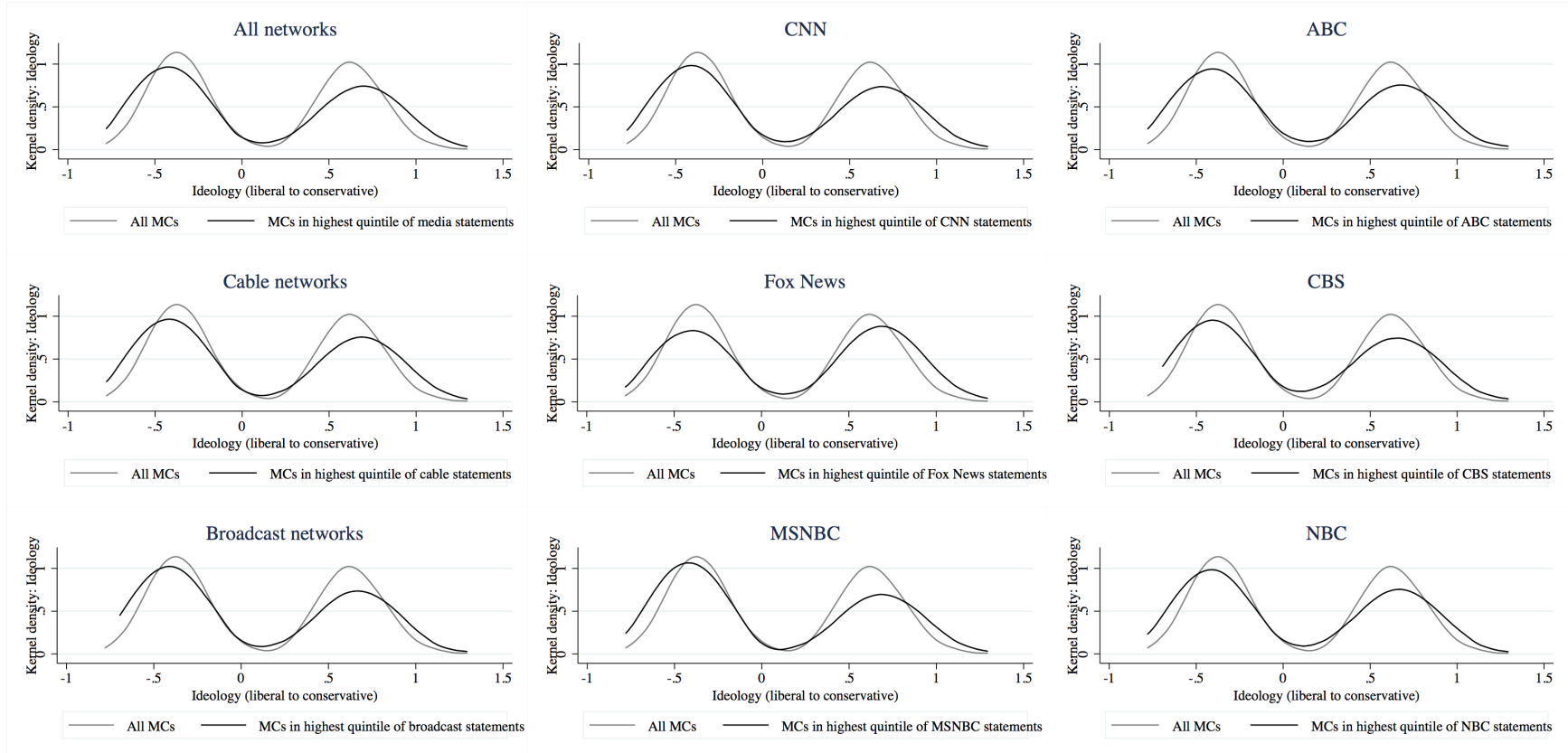
Table 2. Statements on television from members of Congress, by quintiles of ideological extremity. Poisson regression.

	(1) All	(2) Cable	(3) Broadcast	(4) CNN	(5) Fox	(6) MSNBC	(7) ABC	(8) CBS	(9) NBC
Ideology, least to most extreme (1 st quintile omitted)									
2 nd quintile	1.409 (0.302)	1.433 (0.324)	1.232 (0.272)	1.249 (0.238)	1.578 (0.485)	1.616 (0.411)	1.030 (0.216)	1.174 (0.512)	1.421** (0.148)
3 rd quintile	1.171 (0.183)	1.205 (0.209)	0.927 (0.094)	1.316 (0.298)	1.257 (0.236)	1.007 (0.207)	0.811 (0.144)	0.906 (0.099)	1.032 (0.152)
4 th quintile	1.378+ (0.191)	1.452+ (0.213)	0.854 (0.072)	1.252 (0.193)	1.946 (0.674)	1.416 (0.298)	1.103 (0.112)	0.941 (0.160)	0.608** (0.029)
5 th quintile (most extreme)	2.996** (0.874)	3.082** (0.887)	2.350+ (0.873)	2.967** (0.930)	4.861** (1.799)	2.008+ (0.546)	2.367* (0.700)	2.787+ (1.298)	1.972 (0.747)
Seniority	1.025* (0.009)	1.023+ (0.009)	1.040** (0.005)	1.031** (0.008)	1.014 (0.011)	1.018 (0.012)	1.039** (0.005)	1.048** (0.009)	1.033** (0.004)
Leadership position	5.119** (0.431)	4.705** (0.340)	9.565** (1.476)	4.504** (0.374)	5.466** (0.644)	4.242** (0.260)	9.283** (2.070)	7.734** (1.448)	11.934** (2.442)
Legislative activity	1.021* (0.007)	1.022* (0.007)	1.014* (0.005)	1.024** (0.006)	1.019* (0.006)	1.021 (0.012)	1.014+ (0.007)	1.015** (0.004)	1.013+ (0.006)
Press releases sent	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.001)	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.002** (0.000)	1.003** (0.000)	1.003** (0.001)	1.002** (0.001)
Seeking higher office	2.002** (0.362)	1.943* (0.400)	2.658** (0.250)	1.783* (0.315)	1.811** (0.285)	2.362+ (0.821)	1.339 (0.475)	2.044+ (0.595)	4.356** (1.144)
Female	0.822 (0.120)	0.827 (0.126)	0.759+ (0.089)	0.730* (0.087)	0.613** (0.067)	1.205 (0.337)	0.907 (0.093)	0.812 (0.178)	0.623+ (0.148)
Minority	1.180 (0.105)	1.206+ (0.111)	0.908 (0.190)	1.142 (0.148)	1.433 (0.307)	1.143 (0.112)	1.028 (0.212)	0.883 (0.173)	0.838 (0.206)
Ethics investigation	1.710+ (0.440)	1.746+ (0.428)	1.382 (0.613)	1.415 (0.360)	2.047* (0.563)	1.952+ (0.574)	2.042 (1.065)	1.053 (0.394)	1.241 (0.578)
Constant	38.565** (5.671)	34.436** (5.269)	4.011** (1.106)	14.332** (3.042)	8.668** (2.625)	11.092** (1.095)	1.081 (0.358)	1.257 (0.249)	1.687 (0.572)
Observations	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777

Note. Robust standard errors (clustered by Congress) in parentheses. ** p<0.001, * p<0.01, + p<0.05.

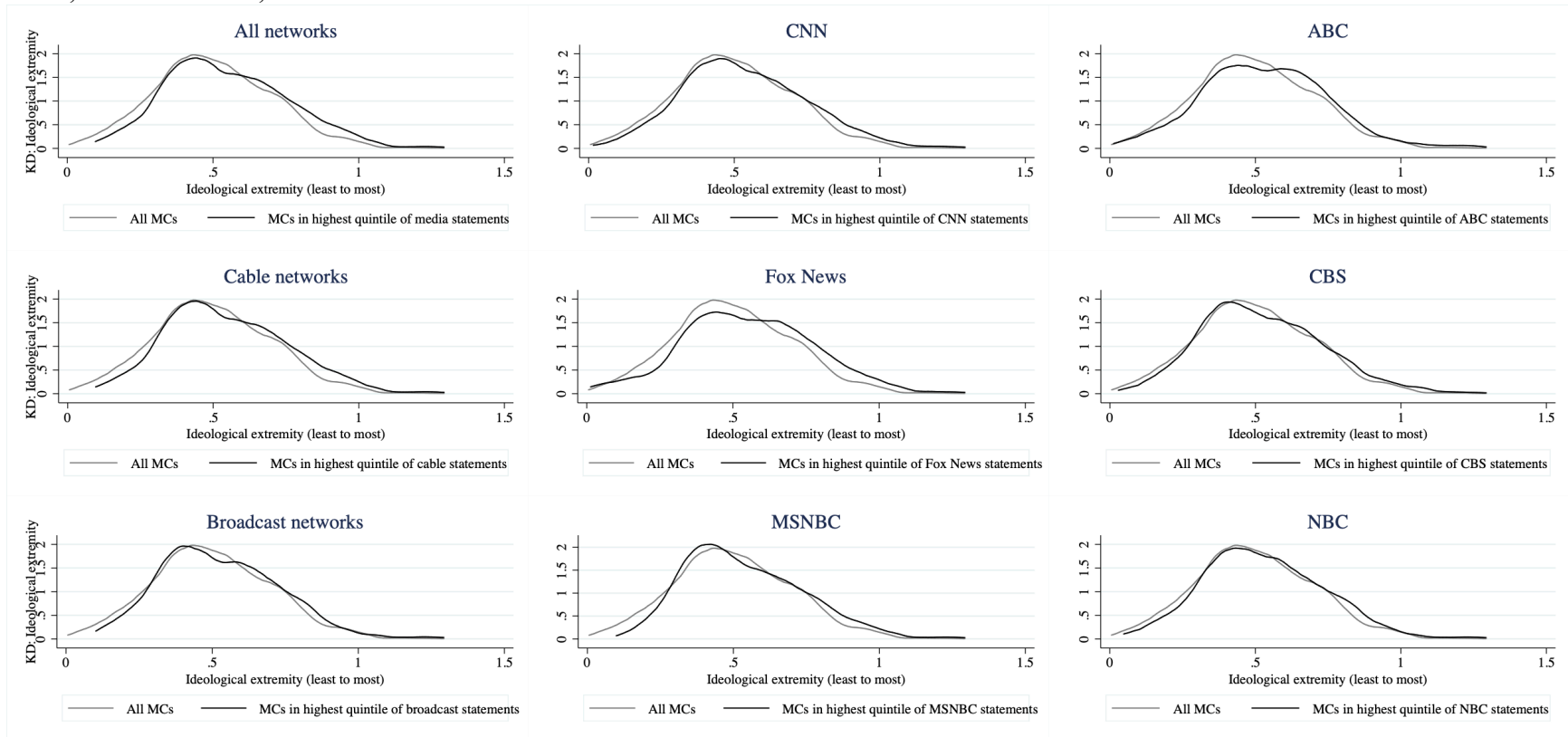
Figures

Figure 1. Distributions of number of televised statements by DW-NOMINATE ideology score: totals, cable networks, and broadcast networks.



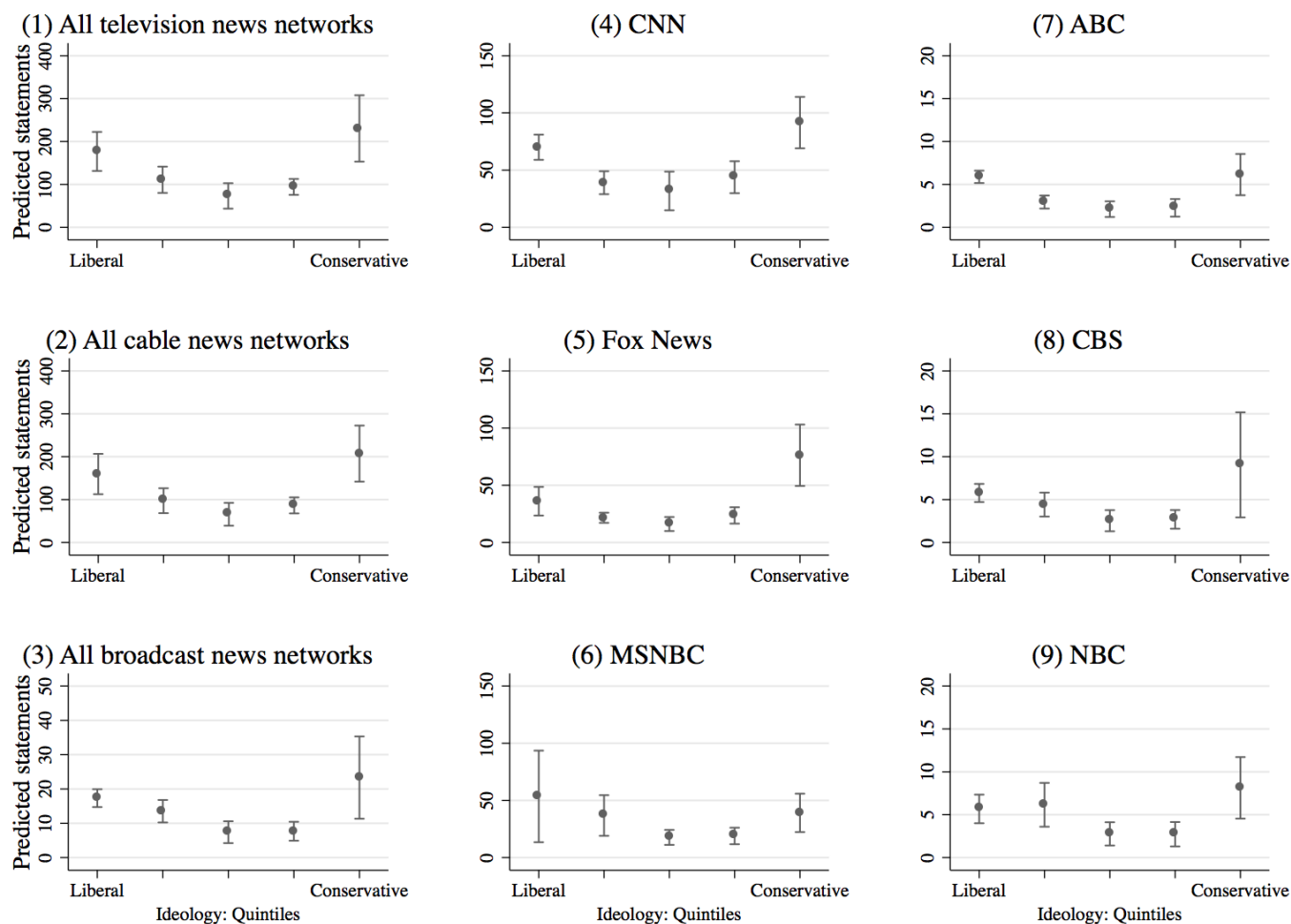
Note. Ideological scores on x-axis. Differences assessed by Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests, with full results in Table A1.1 of section 1 of the Supplemental Appendix.

Figure 2. Distributions of number of televised statements by ideological extremity (distance from zero, DW-NOMINATE score): totals, cable networks, and broadcast networks.



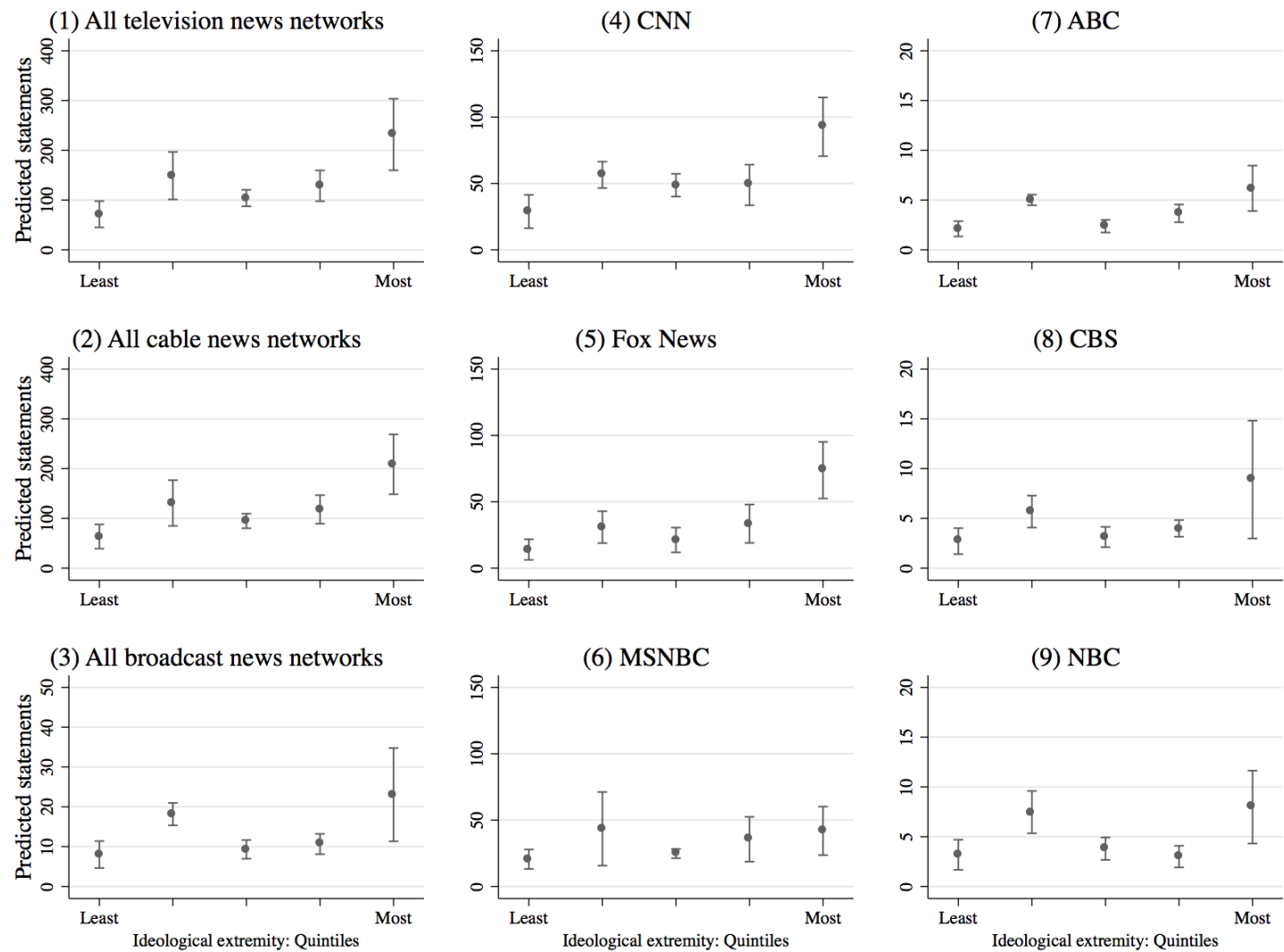
Note. Distance from zero of ideological scores on x-axis. Differences assessed by Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests, with full results in Table A1.1 of section 1 of the Supplemental Appendix.

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



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

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



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

¹ The dominance of market-based journalism in the U.S. began somewhat recently with the advent of the mass printing press (Hamilton, 2004), making this shift more reversion to the norm than transformational change (Groeling & Baum, 2013).

² Wagner & Gruszczyński (2018) explore a similar question, the prioritization of extreme partisans in news coverage, but use only the *New York Times*, CBS News, and NBC News, and do not compare the televised statements to the distribution of ideology in the House.

³ In 2000, Fox reached few viewers; by 2012 it reached 1.9 million in prime-time (Webster, 2014).

⁴ In the case of U.S. partisan cable news, a firm distinction between mass and partisan audiences is too simplistic (e.g. Webster 1998) because changes in market structure created the financial incentive to cater to niche partisan audiences (Hamilton, 2004). Fox News arose in response to market demand for an alternative to the “liberal” mainstream media. Similarly, MSNBC turned to the left partially in response to the financial success of Fox News, though without similar success in the marketplace (Webster, 2014). The partisan cable outlets have elements of the advocacy and market models: the market audience is also an advocacy audience. However, there is significant audience overlap between and across partisan and broadcast major news outlets (Webster, 2014).

⁵ Our “real-world” indicator is DW-NOMINATE scores, based on legislative voting histories, and the most commonly used measure of legislator ideology in political science (Carroll et al., 2001). Arguably, they less “real” than unemployment rates and casualty counts. See appendix section 5. We also note: news is not a perfect mirror; all news is selection by necessity (Hanitzsch, 2004).

⁶ These data were collected in 2014, following the conclusion of the 112th session of Congress, as part of a larger data collection. We opted to collect additional data for several sessions prior to the 112th to ensure that our findings are not specific to one session of Congress, but they were not deliberately chosen for the purpose of our analyses. We discuss possible limitations from this timing in the concluding section of the manuscript.

⁷ Full details of the search strings used can be found in the Supplemental Appendix. The sample included on-air speaking opportunities or aired direct quotes for all voting members of each session ($N = 1,777$), excluding only those who did not serve the entire term ($n = 84$).

⁸ The measure used does not capture the statements’ content. We present analyses in section 4 of the Appendix, utilizing the partisan phrases detailed in Gentzkow & Shapiro (2010) in the 109th Congress, to analyze the slant of the televised statements, finding that Democrats use more Democratic-aligned phrases and Republicans use more Republican-aligned phrases.

⁹ Figures displaying the gatekeeping function (Soroka, 2012) are displayed in Figures A1.1 and A2.1 of the Supplemental Appendix.

¹⁰ Full results from the K-S tests are available in Table A1.1 of the Supplemental Appendix.

¹¹ Distributions of the dependent variables are in section 5 of the Appendix. Distributions of the covariates by quintiles of ideology and ideological extremity are in section 6.

¹² *Ethics scandal* was operationalized a binary indicator based on whether the member was investigated by the House Ethics Committee.

¹³ Please see sections 3, 7, and 8 of the supplemental appendix for alternative model specifications accounting for effects by congressional session, member-state effects, and pooled across outlets. The substantive findings of our original models are consistent, though we note that the observed preference for extremity increases over time from the 109th through 112th Congresses.

¹⁴ We analyze PBS NewsHour for one Congress (112th); these results resemble other networks. Please section 9 of the Supplemental Appendix.