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The Calculus of Compromise: Analyzing Legislative Behavior in the Shadow of Constant Media Coverage

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Author

Moeini, Helia

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**The Calculus of Compromise: Analyzing Legislative Behavior in the Shadow of Constant
Media Coverage**

Helia Moeini
University of California, Berkeley
Department of Political Science
Advised by Professors Eric Schickler and Amy Gurowitz
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Transparency is the bedrock of democracy. It fosters trust in governmental institutions, ensures elected officials are held accountable, and empowers the public to participate in politics. Without transparency, it would be difficult for citizens to root out corruption in government and ensure that government actions align with the public good (Alessandro et al. 2021; Greenberg 2025). But what if one of the costs of government transparency in the 21st century is constant gridlock in the United States' legislative branch? What if transparency has shrunk safe spaces for debate and discussion among legislators, hampering the legislative process? This thesis investigates the real possibility that this might be the case.

An analysis of recent decades reveals two parallel, salient trends: exponential growth in media coverage of political affairs and a sustained rise in legislative gridlock. Examining the evolution of political media coverage requires returning to the founding of the United States government, a period when newspaper coverage of congressional deliberations was the established norm. Many decades later, in the 1920s-1930s, radio became a household staple, which meant that when Congress considered legislation, citizens could receive the news through newspapers or radio. Then came the post-war boom in television news in the 1950s, with household ownership of television sets surging from 9% in 1950 to 65% by 1955 (United States Census Bureau 2023). As television news became rapidly popular, so did political coverage, such as CBS's *Douglas Edwards with the News*, a nightly news program. This medium became extremely important to politicians, as seen in the 1960 debates between John F. Kennedy (JFK) and Richard Nixon, which allowed viewers to see JFK as youthful compared to incumbent Vice President Nixon. This debate is often cited as one of the reasons JFK won his presidential campaign, highlighting the importance of television. The evolution of media coverage

accelerated drastically during the 1990s and into the 21st century with the advent of 24/7 news cycles and the transformative influence of the internet and digital communication. Today, information dissemination is constant and multifaceted, spanning broadcast, digital, and social media platforms, reaching millions within seconds. The 24/7 news cycle and the accessibility of modern technology (e.g., iPhone, computer, internet), paired with C-SPAN (a news platform that provides live coverage of congressional proceedings and other political events), expanded political news coverage into previously unobserved legislative domains.

Researchers have found that the introduction of C-SPAN has had real effects on legislators' behavior: more emotional language started being utilized in the House of Representatives compared to the Senate, where cameras were introduced 7 years later in 1986, and an increase in filibusters in the Senate once cameras were finally implemented (Gennaro & Ash 2022; Mixon 2003). The introduction of cameras also increased the number of mentions legislators received on the evening news (Cook 1986).

Today, memorable moments from congressional hearings (from C-SPAN) are quickly turned into short news clips by political “clippers” who isolate key moments, turning brief instances into viral content that spreads rapidly on social media platforms. Sometimes the surrounding context is unnecessary, and the political figure’s original message gets through, but more often, clippers omit necessary context, leading to deceptive posts. This new media strategy is used to both hurt the opposing party with deceptive posts and to paint their side in a favorable light. For example, in 2021, Representative Pramila Jayapal was seen saying “we’re going to have an open border” in a short clip, making it seem like she championed open borders. In the full context of the committee hearing, she was actually criticizing a Republican amendment that was poorly drafted and was against the idea of open borders. This example illustrates how easily

clippers can alter the meaning of what legislators are trying to convey, hurting legislators' reputations and threatening their re-elections. The use of social media has also transformed congressional hearings into political theater, with legislators becoming actors for the sake of a viral moment. The public spectacle created keeps the legislative branch in the public eye while simultaneously delegitimizing the legislature by eroding its credibility as a well-functioning, productive branch of government (Guitar et al. 2022).

Concurrent with this media expansion, which has shifted politics into more of a performative art than ever before, legislative gridlock began to increase rapidly around the 1970s, when television sets were in virtually every home (Binder 2003). The rise in gridlock has prompted political scientists and the general public alike to worry about the effectiveness of the federal government and its ability to function as intended, through compromise and discourse across different political ideologies, values, and policy stances. Today, the public has little faith in Congress's ability to pass meaningful legislation, resentment over the federal government's ineffectiveness has mounted, and disengagement from politics is at an all-time high.

Considering the temporal alignment of the expansion of political media coverage and legislative gridlock, the central proposition of this thesis is that a direct link exists between the media coverage and legislative outcomes. Two mechanisms for how this might be the case are: 1) as a response to polarization, legislative gridlock has become a rational strategy for legislators and is mediated by media coverage, and 2) media coverage itself is contributing to gridlock by making voters more likely to oppose their legislator's compromising, forcing legislators to respond in kind to their constituents. Either way, media coverage provides an unprecedented level of transparency into legislators' actions and policies, thereby influencing the behavior of key political actors: general election voters, primary voters, interest groups, and financial donors.

Consequently, the calculus that individual legislators employ when determining whether to pursue compromise or perpetuate gridlock has fundamentally shifted. This is consequential because, in a polarized climate, compromise is needed to secure the majorities and supermajorities (in certain cases, such as defeating a filibuster in the Senate) necessary to legislate. Therefore, impediments to compromising on legislation that arise from legislating in the shadow of media coverage are costly to the proper functioning of our government.

To determine whether a relationship between media coverage and legislative outcomes exists, I used statistical analysis and two case studies in the health care and education issue areas to test the following hypotheses: 1) more media coverage correlates with increased legislative gridlock, and 2) legislation that gets a vote and receives less media coverage will be more bipartisan in the vote. My statistical results, especially in the education sector, and the case study in the health care sector, provide substantial support for my first hypothesis. My statistical results, especially in the health care sector, provide substantial support for my second hypothesis, while the case study in the education sector offers support consistent with my second hypothesis. Overall, there is enough evidence to support the correlational link between media coverage and legislative outcomes. This means that the media might be one factor contributing to the current stalemate in congressional activity. Ultimately, my thesis aims to prove that legislative gridlock and the lack of compromise in Congress are no longer just about polarization or policy differences but the cost of legislators having to fear being publicly perceived as weak or disloyal to their base party – a dynamic that is directly mediated by constant media coverage.

In Chapter 2, I will conduct a literature review exploring the effects of current political media coverage on the political landscape and how this relates to the two mechanisms linking media coverage and legislative outcomes. My literature review will also lead to the explanation

of my hypotheses. From there, in Chapter 3, I will explain the rationale for my data and media source selections, my research design for each hypothesis, the statistical analyses used, and the case studies explored. In Chapters 4 and 5, I will detail the results of my statistical analysis and case study for my first and second hypotheses, respectively. Finally, Chapter 6 will synthesize my findings from Chapters 4 and 5, along with their implications, the limitations of my research, and possibilities for future exploration.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Section 1: Political Media Coverage's Effect on the Landscape of Politics

The current 24/7 news cycle and modern technology have both positive and negative effects on the political landscape. One big positive effect is that the public can stay informed about political news and ensure that their representatives are working towards the campaign goals they promised their voters and upholding the values their constituents believe in. In fact, a study by Snyder and Strömberg found that House representatives who were least covered by the local media in their constituents' home districts were less likely to serve their constituents' interests (2010). It has been shown that transparency through media coverage creates an information-rich environment, leading voters to feel an increase in their internal political efficacy and be more likely to vote to hold their elected representatives accountable (Schäfer & Schemer 2024; Snyder & Strömberg 2010).

Other studies have shown positive effects of media on increasing political engagement. For example, a 61-million-person experiment showed that social media could not only be used to mobilize people to vote but also influence those with close relationships to the people being mobilized, meaning everyone within a social network was affected (Bond et al. 2012).

On the other hand, the 24/7 news cycle has made media outlets more focused on the “game” of politics (i.e., which party is going to “win”) rather than the “stakes” of politics (i.e., policies that affect lives). Since media coverage of legislation often focuses on the policymaking process as it moves through committees and hearings, the American public tends to link partisan conflict to negative perceptions of the policy itself because they interpret the visible presence of intense partisan discord as a heuristic signal that the legislation is substantively flawed or ideologically extreme (Atkinson 2017). This may result in backlash against policies that were

beneficial at the outset. Furthermore, media outlets that focus more on the characteristics and motives of political figures than on the policies they support or oppose create cynicism among audiences who consume this content and train the public to distrust politicians who act only in their own interests (Cappella & Jamieson 1997).

Studies have also shown that affective polarization, the dislike of the opposing party, has increased with constant exposure to partisan media (Levendusky & Malhotra 2016; Iyengar et al. 2019). The trend in affective polarization is dangerous, as Americans are now more likely to prefer losing themselves if it means the “other side” loses more than they do. This is a zero-sum game that leads to no beneficial results.

Along with these negative effects on politics, the 24/7 news cycle has also led two-thirds of Americans to experience news fatigue, which is exhaustion caused by sustained exposure to a constant flow of news (Gottfried 2020). Additionally, the increase in media coverage, paired with social media, has enabled misinformation to reach millions of people in seconds (Larson 2023). Both news fatigue and the rise of misinformation, or “fake news,” have served to disengage audiences from consuming political news in ways that allow for accuracy and proper exposure to dissenting viewpoints.

In summary, transparency does have the positive effect of enforcing accountability on representatives, but the 24/7 news cycle, the internet, partisan media, and social media also erode trust in our government, increasingly turn politics into a zero-sum game, and perpetuate false information that can have a significant impact on how the public views and interacts with politics, political parties, and elected representatives.

Section 2: Gridlock Explained By Polarization and Compounded by Media Coverage

Current political media coverage has a significant effect on the political landscape, but the issue is compounded by polarization (affective and ideological), making the passage of legislation in Congress especially difficult. One reason involves legislators fearing that televised or publicized compromises will incite condemnation from co-partisan primary actors, thereby putting their re-election prospects in peril and leading them to reject compromise (Anderson et al. 2020). In essence, when a compromise is televised, it provides proof of “betrayal” to co-partisan primary actors who have significant power in deciding who wins a primary and remains in an election. This creates an environment where a legislator’s safest move is to avoid compromise altogether.

Polarization also breeds an environment ripe for the “blame game.” To gain more support from constituents, politicians will often blame the opposing party, through news outlets and social media, for gridlock to gain more loyalty from supporters and avoid personal responsibility. In this environment, it is more beneficial to sway emotions rather than share credit with the opposing party, which incentivizes politicians to reject compromise and perpetuate gridlock (McCarty 2021).

Alternatively, one study argues that politically engaged and informed voters might be more polarized than elected legislators, leading legislators to become more polarized as they respond to their most active constituents (Abramowitz 2010). As explained in the next section, the polarization of the engaged voter may be partly due to media coverage.

Another explanation for why the televised floor debates are not constructive is that legislators do not actually participate in the debate with the goal of passing laws, but to draw clear lines for voters on where they stand on an issue. Essentially, the incentive to perform for the “theater” (party base) outweighs the incentive to negotiate and make concessions to actually

pass laws (Lee 2009). These debates and hearings, which almost always have live coverage on C-SPAN, are important to legislators because they are visible not only to their constituents but also to party elites, donors, and interest groups, who ensure that legislators do not budge on issues that matter to them. One study found that party elites and donors use the primary process to filter out candidates willing to compromise, so elected legislators are already primed not to compromise and aware of the risks of falling out of line (Hassell 2018).

Lastly, the job of politicians is meant to be about representing constituents, but everyone has personal interests and for a politician, re-election tends to be their top priority. The pressure to get re-elected, compounded by the 24/7 news cycle and constant live coverage of the ins and outs of Congress, forces legislators into a state of constant campaigning. Legislators who have taken advantage of this coverage to push their own messaging in Congress have found an increase in vote share (Part 2023). Having a constant campaign mindset, however, makes legislators avoid concessions as that would make them appear “weak” and be seen as “surrendering” to the opposing party in front of their constituents (Mann & Ornstein 2012). Consequently, compromise is not in the best interest of legislators.

Ultimately, the way current political media coverage is conducted in conjunction with the polarized atmosphere makes gridlock likely and rational from the perspective of a career politician.

Section 3: Gridlock Explained By Media Coverage

A second way to view gridlock is to consider that media coverage itself is making voters less moderate, and legislators are responding by shifting to the electorate. For example, consumers of partisan media, especially right-wing media, were found to have greater aversion

to political compromise and to be more politically engaged than the general public (Suh et al. 2025; Levendusky 2013). Principally, consumers of partisan media are often the same people who vote in primaries and donate to campaigns. As politics has evolved, voters have come to see their partisan identity as an essential part of who they are, much like religion and race. Accordingly, when the party that voters belong to loses an election or faces a setback, voters view it as a personal attack. As explained in the previous section, this rise in affective polarization, which frames policymaking as a competition, creates a zero-sum game in which legislators are still rewarded even if they do not compromise but make the opposing party “lose worse” (Mason 2018). The increase in partisan politics has led Americans to “privilege victory over the greater good” (Mason 2018). For all the reasons explained, legislators are reasonably afraid of engaged voters and will not compromise, even if the policy would benefit their constituents, because this demographic cares only about winning the political game, not about policies that would benefit them. As a result, legislators have no room to compromise, even though the two-party system is designed so that compromise is often necessary to pass laws.

Additionally, “viral misinformation and algorithmic amplification disproportionately target moderate voices” because social media is designed to maximize engagement, and extremist stances tend to incite more engagement than moderate voices, which tend to be more complex and less viral-worthy (Azgin & Kiralp 2024). By shrinking moderate voices, voters are more exposed to extremism, making compromise harder and costlier for legislators as people take more extreme stances.

There are also fewer moderate voters than in the past because accidental news consumption through broadcast television kept the moderate voter informed but the structure of modern media (high-choice and fragmented environment) has led to large numbers of people

constantly consuming a little bit of news and fewer people actually consuming large amounts of news that would make them better informed (Prior 2007).

Lastly, voters actively seek out media that affirms their views (Stroud 2011) and social media algorithms keep voters from encountering differing viewpoints (Samuels 2012); both increase the gap in how different voters perceive reality. Without a shared factual basis, constructive discussion and compromise are not possible, making it less likely that legislators will engage in compromise as they answer to their constituents. Although literature on this subject is divided, research suggests that polarization is higher for older adults, the demographic least likely to use social media (Boxell et al. 2017). Some experiments that removed users' access to social media also found no reduction in polarization, suggesting that social media and algorithms reinforce existing social drivers rather than produce them (Di Tella et al. 2021; Metzler & Garcia 2024).

Overall, media coverage itself might be perpetuating gridlock by making voters less moderate and more averse to political compromise as it endangers their partisan identity.

Section 4: Conclusion and Hypotheses

My literature review highlights two plausible mechanisms by which media coverage might correlate with legislative outcomes. The first mechanism is that in an already hyperpolarized environment, contemporary media practices transform legislative gridlock into a rational survival strategy for legislators seeking re-election. The second mechanism is that compromise is perceived as an existential threat to a voter's partisan identity, and the media exacerbates this by cultivating an electorate increasingly hostile to moderation, prompting legislators to perpetuate gridlock in response.

While existing literature provides the theoretical framework for how media might correlate with legislative outcomes, my thesis investigates the existence and strength of that correlation. Since the literature shows that media coverage transforms the legislative process into a high-stakes performance in which compromise is penalized rather than rewarded, my first hypothesis is that greater media coverage correlates with increased legislative gridlock.

If, as the literature suggests, media coverage makes gridlock more likely, less media coverage should theoretically enable more compromise. Hence, my second hypothesis is that legislation that receives a vote and less media coverage will be more bipartisan in its vote. The second hypothesis is narrowed to only include legislation at the voting stage to make testing it more conservative, as bills at this stage must have enough support to be brought to the floor. The recorded votes also support the theory that less media coverage is associated with greater compromise, since bipartisan support for a bill can serve as a proxy for compromise.

Chapter 3: Research Design

Section 1: Selection of Issue Areas and Media Data Sources

Selection of Issue Areas

To conduct my statistical research, I chose the health care and education sectors because during the 115th-118th congressional terms, the executive branch of the federal government had limited involvement in these policy areas. This makes the chosen policy areas ideal as it allows more legislative action by Congress, which often requires compromise. For example, the immigration sector saw more changes made by the executive branch during the 115th Congress than by Congress, so I ruled it out as a potential policy area. The health care and education sectors both involve fiscal expenditure, making the passing of most legislation in these areas significant. Both sectors also have a variety of types of legislation that could be proposed. For example, both policy areas include a mix of policies that fall into partisan divides; in health care, attempting to repeal the Affordable Care Act or pass the Medicare for All Act divided the Republican and Democratic parties and in education, the topic of school choice vouchers and parent involvement in schools led the parties to fall into ideological divides. On the other hand, there were also lower salience policies in both sectors, including telehealth services and improving seniors' access to care in the health care sector, and ensuring that students learn about the negative effects of communism and that K-12 institutions are protected from cyberattacks in the education sector. The mixture of high- and low-salience policies allows for greater range in the data. Lastly, health care and education were chosen because they both have significant effects on the lives of virtually all American citizens in some way, shape, or form. This means that most engaged voters would care about changes to health care or education, and media outlets were likely to report on such policies. For all the stated reasons, health care and education were ideal

sectors to code a variety of legislation for multiple congressional terms to determine whether media coverage was correlated with legislative gridlock or compromise.

Media Data Source Selection

I researched media coverage from both traditional (legacy) and partisan media outlets. The traditional media outlets I considered were the *New York Times* (NYT), the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ), the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* (LA Times), and the *Chicago Tribune*. All of these media outlets were founded at least 137 years ago (as of 2026) as newspapers and are considered part of the current mainstream media (U.S. Major Dailies). For partisan media outlets, I chose *Fox News* and the *Daily Wire* to represent right-wing media and the *Cable News Network* (CNN) and *HuffPost* to represent left-wing media. I determined what was right-wing media versus left-wing media by looking at a Media Bias Chart that depicted *Fox News* and the *Daily Wire* as ultra-right-leaning, *CNN* as left-leaning, and *HuffPost* as ultra-left-leaning (AllSides 2019).

I decided to include partisan media outlets in my thesis based on my literature review. As mentioned previously, studies have found that partisan media might lead voters to exhibit greater aversion to political compromise, especially when consuming right-wing media, and that such media are also associated with greater political engagement among viewers than the general public (Suh et al. 2025; Levendusky 2013). As a result, I found it important to examine whether partisan media coverage had a different correlational relationship with legislative passage and bipartisan voting on votes than traditional media coverage did.

An index created at Harvard University has tracked the views that each of my chosen media outlets received every month (time-stamped on May 11, 2021): NYT received 89,757,000;

WSJ received 54,100,000; *Washington Post* received 82,500,000; *LA Times* received 30,000,000; *Chicago Tribune* received 75,000,000 (includes multiple tribunes); *Fox News* received 833,000,000 (includes all of FOX); *Daily Wire* received 19,910,000; *CNN* received 482,000,000; and *HuffPost* received 63,600,000 (includes *Buzzfeed*). The traffic for each news outlet shows that the highest monthly views are on *Fox News* and *CNN*, suggesting that partisan media likely reach more viewers than traditional outlets.

Section 2: Data Collection for Hypotheses One and Two

First Hypothesis

To test my first hypothesis that greater media coverage makes gridlock more likely, I used Congress.gov to compile a list of legislation. First, I filtered my data to select either the health or education policy area for the 115th-118th congressional terms. Second, I limited the search to legislation and only bills, meaning no amendments or resolutions were included. Finally, I excluded legislation that was only introduced into Congress, meaning anything that was successfully assigned to a committee, given floor consideration, passed one chamber, passed both chambers, went to the president, and became law was included in my list. The legislation that was only introduced into Congress was excluded because

I then filtered the entire list again by conducting a first-pass sweep of how much media coverage each piece of legislation received during the appropriate congressional term. Keeping only the legislation that had more than one media outlet either directly mentioning the bill or indirectly by discussing its components.

Afterward, I split the list of legislation into the “Pass/No Pass” category. “Pass” meant that the legislation met the minimum requirement of passing either the House or the Senate. “No

Pass” meant that the legislation was only introduced and considered in committee or on the floor but did not pass either chamber of Congress. Lastly, if there was any piece of legislation in the same congressional term that was identical because one bill was in the “No Pass” list and the other was in the “Pass” list, I only kept the bill in the “Pass” list because Congress would never pass 2 identical bills and technically, both bills did indeed pass as they had identical measures.

For each bill on my list, I went to all nine media outlets I had previously selected (as previously explained in Section 1 of the current chapter). Within the relevant date range, I searched for direct mentions of the bill using Ctrl+F, entering the bill name, its acronyms, and sometimes the bill number. I would also review articles addressing the bill’s broad topics to find indirect mentions by discussing one or more measures the bill aimed to accomplish. Therefore, the scope of what I call “mentions” in my data analysis is broad. The reason I included indirect mentions is that any coverage of what a piece of legislation aims to achieve would still affect the thoughts of viewers who engage with the material. This data gathering allowed me to observe the direct correlation between media coverage and passage rates.

Second Hypothesis

To test my second hypothesis that less media coverage allows for greater bipartisanship, I used the same filtered list of legislation and applied additional reductions. Bills that received a roll call vote, voice vote, or passed with unanimous consent (all combined to be referred to as “votes”) were included on the list for my second hypothesis. If the bill had multiple votes, I used the most recent one. To determine which bills had bipartisan support, I created a category called “party split” by taking the absolute value of the percentage difference between Democrats and Republicans voting in favor of a bill. So, the larger the percentage point in the “party split”

category, the more partisan a vote for a bill was and vice versa. Votes from Independents were combined with Democrat votes since they caucus together, and voice votes were treated the same as the legislature giving unanimous consent since opposition in a voice vote is always minimal. Everything else was kept the same from hypothesis one and the media coverage research from hypothesis one was reused.

Section 3: Explanation of Statistical Analysis

Since both my hypotheses only required correlation, not causation, I started my analysis by coding simple bar charts in R to show the difference in average total media coverage between legislation that passed and that which did not pass in each congressional term for hypothesis one. For hypothesis two, I ran scatterplots with trend lines to visualize the effect of total media coverage on bipartisanship or lack thereof for each congressional term. To examine whether there was a difference in correlation between traditional and partisan media coverage, I also created bar charts and scatterplots to visualize the data when separating out those two forms of coverage.

I ran regression models to assess the magnitude and direction of the effects of coverage on the passage of legislation and on the likelihood of partisanship. For hypothesis one regarding health care, I ran bivariate logistic regression models on the dataset for each congressional term separately and on the combined dataset (146 observations total) for a more robust analysis. For hypothesis one regarding education, I ran Firth's logistic regression models on the dataset for each congressional term separately because Firth's method reduces bias in maximum likelihood estimates and is especially well-suited to small sample sizes, which is the case here (>20).

However, I still used bivariate logistic regression models on the combined dataset for education because there were more observations (44 total).

I used the bivariate logistic regression model because it was the best way to analyze the relationship between a binary dependent variable (Pass/No Pass for hypothesis one and Yes/No to bipartisan support for hypothesis two) and one independent variable (total media coverage, traditional media coverage, and partisan media coverage). For datasets with a small number of observations, I used Firth's logistic regression model because it adds a penalty to reduce coefficient bias, yielding more accurate p-values.

For hypothesis two regarding health care, I ran linear regression models (Ordinary Least Squares, OLS) for both the dataset for each congressional term and the combined dataset of observations (69 total). Lastly, for hypothesis two regarding education, I ran linear regression models for the combined dataset because the 115th Congress had only 4 observations, and there were only 25 observations in total. I used linear regression models for hypothesis two because my dependent variable (party split) is a continuous measure instead of a binary one, like the first hypothesis.

Section 4: Explanation of Case Study Selection

I conducted one case study for the first hypothesis on health care legislation and another for the second on education legislation. The case studies were selected to further make a causal claim for the relationship between media coverage and legislative outcomes (gridlock or compromise).

I chose my specific case studies by first conducting research to examine the inherent controversiality that pieces of legislation in each congressional term might possess. To try to

make a causal claim, I had to control for inherent controversiality because a real risk of making a causal claim for either of my hypotheses is reverse causality. Reverse causality in this case means that it is hard to determine whether media coverage is affecting legislative outcomes or whether legislative outcomes (or the legislation itself) is affecting the media coverage. It is possible that media attention is simply a byproduct of a bill's controversial nature, suggesting that the underlying political friction, rather than the media coverage itself, is the true driver of legislative failure. Therefore, controlling for inherent controversiality in my case studies was imperative.

To determine whether legislation would be inherently controversial and unsuitable for a case study, I used information published by consulting groups, nonprofits, interest groups, and media outlets that predicted the policies the upcoming congressional term might address. To be specific, I considered only policy predictions for the health care and education sectors made up to 6 months before the start of each congressional term. The policy predictions included legislative topics that the Democratic or Republican party had signaled they would pursue in the upcoming term, and hence, they would fall along partisan lines and be inherently controversial. However, some predicted legislative topics seemed to have greater bipartisan support or more room for compromise, making them more suitable for case studies. Policy topics that were not predicted to arise in the upcoming congressional term were also suitable for case studies because they were deemed not to be significant enough for a prediction, and thus, not inherently controversial.

For my first case study on health care, which concerned drug price negotiation using international price benchmarks, my research on its inherent controversy had already predicted that such legislation would surface during the 116th Congress. In fact, allowing Medicare to

negotiate drug prices based on international price benchmarks was specifically predicted to be a measure that both Democrats and Republicans could agree on (Pear 2018). This was mainly because both parties had long expressed the desire to bring high-cost drugs under control and Donald Trump, who was the president during that time, had repeatedly proposed using international price benchmarks during his 2016 campaign for president. Therefore, the potential for bipartisan support for legislation addressing this issue made it less inherently controversial than other health care measures, leading me to conduct a case study on the Medicare Drug Price Negotiation Act of 2019.

In my second case study on education, a few policy predictions were made about potential education legislation that might be proposed for the 118th Congress. Most of the policy predictions were about what would not happen; for example, the highly anticipated Higher Education Reauthorization was predicted not to pass Congress (Fansmith & Hartle 2022). In light of legislative measures predicted to pass with bipartisan support, I reasoned that the case study I chose on the FAFSA Deadline Act was not inherently controversial.

After deciding on my case studies, I considered the background and context of the legislation, tracked its trajectory in Congress, and examined the direct and indirect mentions of those pieces of legislation in all nine media outlets. By examining the specifics of media coverage in my case studies, I could make a more definitive claim about its effect on legislative outcomes.

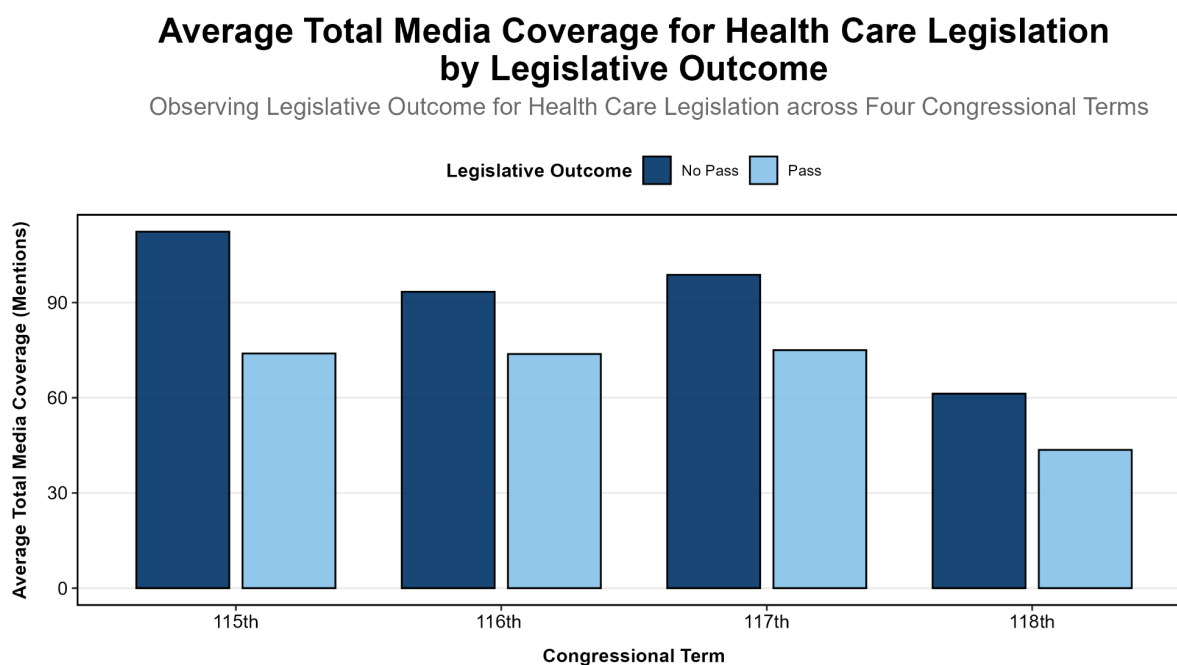
Chapter 4: Results for Hypothesis One

Section 1: Explanation of Statistical Findings

Health Care Legislation

For my first hypothesis, I examined the average total media coverage relative to the legislative outcome for health care legislation over the past four congressional terms. Figure 1 depicts how the average total media coverage across all four congressional terms was higher for health care legislation that did not pass compared to legislation that did pass with the difference being 20+ more mentions across the board. This supports my hypothesis that greater media coverage of legislation correlates with a higher risk of the legislation failing to pass.

Figure 1



Note: Patterns hold when testing medians.

Even though the trend of legislation that did not pass received more media coverage across the 115th to the 118th Congress, it is fruitful to consider why health care legislation in the 118th Congress received less media coverage to understand how the outside context and the

legislative focus during different congressional terms affect the amount of coverage a policy area receives. In this case, the reduced media coverage of health care legislation in the 118th Congress can be attributed to three main factors.

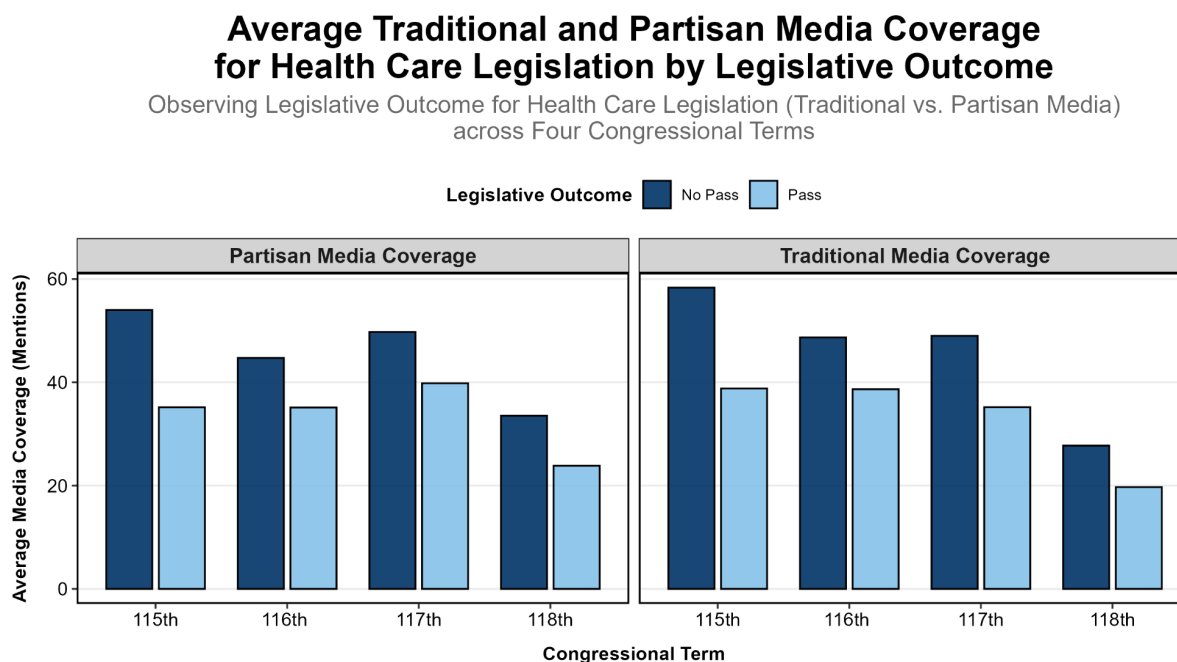
Firstly, in the 115th through the 117th congressional terms, health care was a primary concern for Congress. In the 115th Congress (2017-2019), the Republican party was trying to “repeal and replace” the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which was one of the cornerstones of former President Barack Obama’s presidency, and the repeal of the act was a campaign promise for the current President at the time, Donald Trump. The effort to repeal the ACA was a hot-button issue that drew significant attention to Congress's health care actions during that period. In the 116th Congress (2019-2021), health care matters related to the COVID-19 pandemic were in full swing, and other measures, like the No Surprises Act, which aimed to ban surprise medical billing, were in the spotlight for media outlets. In the 117th Congress (2021-2023), there were common hot topic issues discussed in Congress, like the Right to Contraception Act, which tried to protect access to birth control in the wake of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (1973), and the Medicare Drug Price Negotiation Act, which aimed to reduce out-of-pocket costs for seniors and government spending. In contrast to the 115th-117th congressional terms, the 118th Congress (2023-2025) included a variety of “extender” legislation to reauthorize existing programs for community health centers, diabetes research, and opioid treatment. These renewals usually draw less attention than the previously discussed actions Congress was trying to pass. Therefore, it stands to reason that the 118th Congress received less media attention for its health care legislation.

Secondly, the 118th Congress had a very slim Republican majority in the House and a Democratic majority in the Senate, making the pursuit of major healthcare reforms unlikely to

succeed. Thirdly, media outlets were more focused on the chaos in the House due to the ousting of Kevin McCarthy and the scramble for another Speaker of the House, the near-misses with government shutdowns, and more focus on the spending of international aid for the war in Ukraine and the intensification of conflict in Gaza around 2023-2024. For all of the reasons stated above, it is reasonable for health care legislation in the 118th Congress to have fewer mentions in the media than in the other congressional terms.

After examining the average total media coverage, I considered whether my hypothesis would still be supported if I treated traditional and partisan media coverage separately. The resulting Figure 2 below shows that the trend of high average media coverage across the board for legislation that did not pass does hold when separated into traditional and partisan media. There does not seem to be a significant difference between traditional and partisan media coverage in this case.

Figure 2



In addition to visually examining the relationship between media coverage and legislative outcomes, I ran a logistic regression to assess how well media coverage predicted the passage of health care legislation. Figure 3 shows the results.

Figure 3

Logistic Regression Results: Media Coverage and Legislative Success for Health Care				
Bivariate models predicting legislative passage for health care legislation				
Media Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-Value	N
115th				
Total Coverage	-0.018	0.008	0.025**	43
Traditional Coverage	-0.029	0.014	0.038**	43
Partisan Coverage	-0.042	0.018	0.018**	43
116th				
Total Coverage	-0.006	0.005	0.232	53
Traditional Coverage	-0.010	0.009	0.267	53
Partisan Coverage	-0.014	0.011	0.199	53
117th				
Total Coverage	-0.014	0.014	0.324	15
Traditional Coverage	-0.027	0.026	0.304	15
Partisan Coverage	-0.025	0.030	0.397	15
118th				
Total Coverage	-0.010	0.011	0.356	35
Traditional Coverage	-0.016	0.021	0.429	35
Partisan Coverage	-0.020	0.021	0.335	35
* $p \leq 0.10$, ** $p \leq 0.05$				

As seen in Figure 3, total media coverage, traditional media coverage, and partisan media coverage across all four congressional terms have very small negative coefficients (ranging from -0.006 to -0.042). This negative relationship between media coverage and legislative outcomes

indicates that, as media coverage increases, the odds of passing health care legislation decrease slightly. However, the coefficients in the 116th-118th congressional terms are not statistically significant. The coefficients in the 115th Congress are all statistically significant, indicating sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between media coverage (total, traditional, or partisan) and legislative outcomes for the 115th congressional term.

Figure 4

Logistic Regression Results: Media Coverage and Legislative Success for Health Care				
Bivariate models predicting legislative passage for health care legislation (all terms combined)				
Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-Value	N
Total Coverage				
Total Media Coverage	-0.010	0.004	0.009**	146
Congress: 116th	-1.208	0.454	0.008**	146
Congress: 117th	0.018	0.689	0.979	146
Congress: 118th	-2.700	0.578	0.000**	146
Traditional Coverage				
Traditional Media Coverage	-0.017	0.007	0.015**	146
Congress: 116th	-1.199	0.452	0.008**	146
Congress: 117th	-0.036	0.688	0.958	146
Congress: 118th	-2.717	0.581	0.000**	146
Partisan Coverage				
Partisan Media Coverage	-0.022	0.008	0.006**	146
Congress: 116th	-1.212	0.455	0.008**	146
Congress: 117th	0.100	0.690	0.885	146
Congress: 118th	-2.655	0.576	0.000**	146
* $p \leq 0.10$, ** $p \leq 0.05$				

To improve the robustness of my regression model, I combined all of the congressional terms. The resulting Figure 4 above indicates a small but statistically significant negative relationship between media coverage and legislative success. This holds true for total, traditional, and partisan media, demonstrating that increased coverage decreases the likelihood of passage, independent of the specific congressional term. Partisan media, in particular, have a higher negative coefficient than traditional and total media coverage. Therefore, there is sufficient evidence to disprove the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between media coverage and legislative outcome.

The results shown in Figures 3 and 4 seem to support my hypothesis to a limited extent, in that there does exist a negative relationship between the amount of media coverage, especially partisan coverage, and a positive legislative outcome.

Education Legislation

I examined the average total media coverage relative to the legislative outcome for education legislation over the past four congressional terms. The resulting Figure 5 below depicts that the average total media coverage for education legislation in the 115th-117th congressional terms was much higher for legislation that did not pass than for legislation that passed. Specifically, legislation that did not pass in the 115th Congress received about 4 times as much total media coverage as legislation that passed. The large difference in media coverage can be attributed to the fact that the legislation that was passed was especially non-controversial, mostly involving funding for children involved in natural disasters or children of soldiers who passed away in the military.

The media coverage of legislation that did not pass in the 116th and 117th Congresses was also twice that of education legislation that did pass. This trend was reversed in the 118th Congress, with passing legislation receiving an average of 10+ more total media coverage mentions than legislation that did not pass. This is likely due to the Parents Bill of Rights Act (PBRA) that passed the House in the 118th Congress.

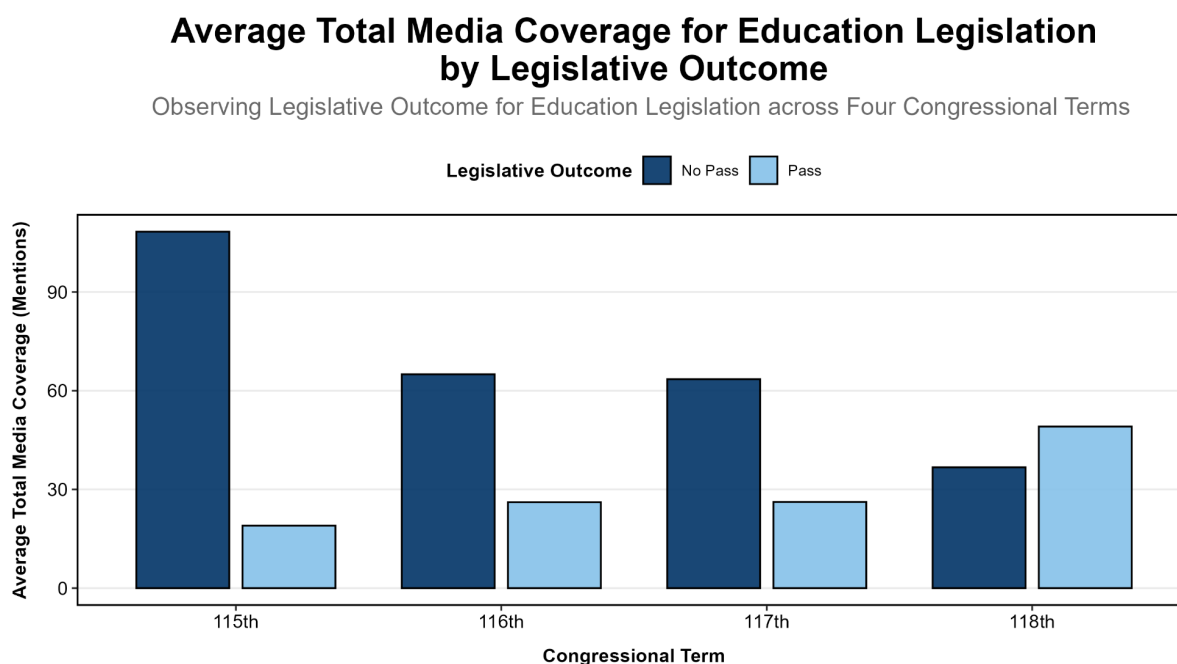
The PBRA aimed to allow parents to inspect school curricula, review budgets and reading materials, and receive information about violent activities occurring at school. The key to the controversy surrounding this legislation, however, is that it requires elementary and middle schools to obtain parental consent for sex-based accommodations and for changing a student's pronouns or preferred name (Sprunt 2023). Republicans also successfully included language that poses a threat to transgender rights by requiring schools to report transgender girls using girls' locker rooms and restrooms as well as becoming a part of a girls' athletics team (Groves et al. 2023). Additionally, parents' interference in reading materials and curricula poses a danger for censorship, especially amid the rise in school book bans (PENN America 2022). Therefore, this Republican-led legislation was seen as a win for Republicans who often decry that "woke politics" has infected schools.

The PBRA is an outlier in terms of media coverage due to its highly polarized rhetoric in the "culture war" between Republicans and Democrats. Not considering this Act, the legislation passed versus those not passed in the 118th Congress should more closely reflect the normal trend. It should also be noted that PBRA only passed the House due to a Republican majority but died in the Senate where Democrats aligned with Independents had a slim majority. Even with a Republican majority in the Senate, this Act would have a hard time passing a filibuster and it would be unlikely that it would become law. The PBRA depicts how institutional barriers (e.g.,

filibuster) and divided control of Congress make it difficult for high-coverage, high-controversy bills to reach the President’s desk and be enacted into law.

Overall, Figure 5 supports my first hypothesis, showing that more media coverage correlates with legislation failing to pass the Senate or the House.

Figure 5

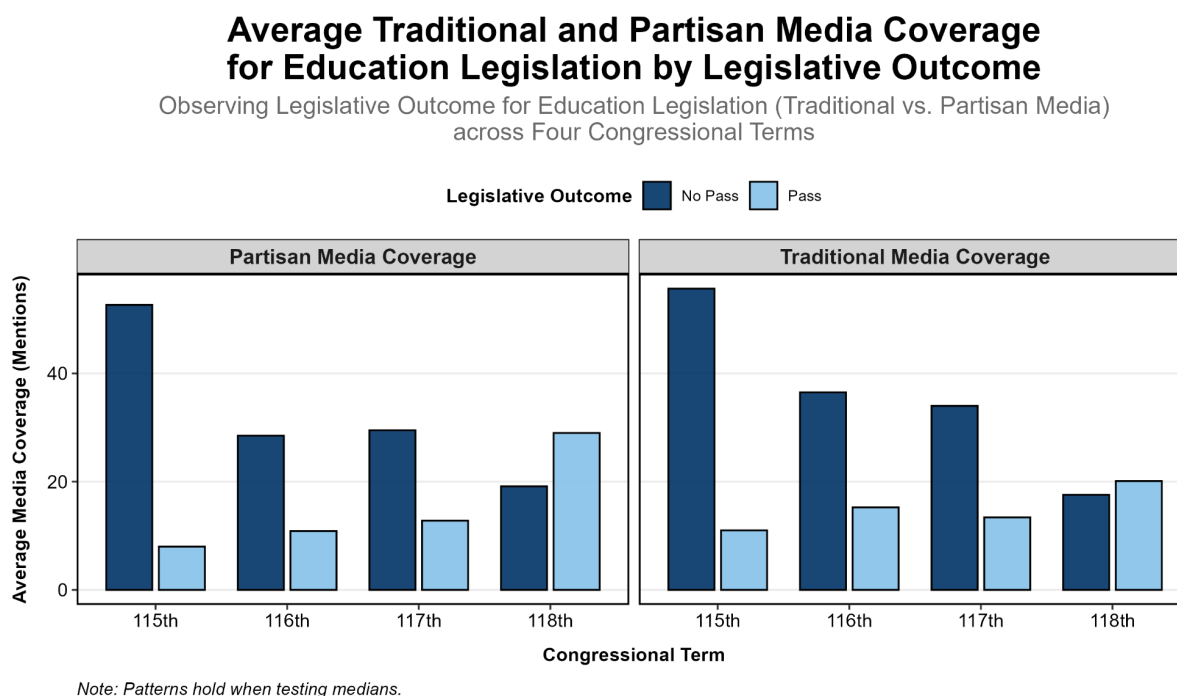


Note: Patterns hold when testing medians.

I then considered whether there would be a difference between traditional and partisan media coverage of education legislation. The resulting Figure 6 below depicts the trend from Figure 5, holding even when media coverage is evaluated in terms of traditional versus partisan media. Although there is a 10+ increase in the average media coverage in partisan media for education legislation in the 118th Congress, which passed. My dataset suggests that the difference in media coverage is due to the Parents Bill of Rights Act being mentioned more times on *Fox News* and the *Daily Wire*. It is plausible that these right-wing media outlets focused on covering this Act because it was seen as a win for Republicans in the “cultural war,” and parents’

rights over their children and transgender issues provide lots of traffic for right-wing media outlets. Other than a slight increase in partisan media coverage of legislation that passed in the 118th Congress, there is not much difference between traditional and partisan media coverage.

Figure 6



I also ran a Firth's logistic regression to see whether media coverage predicted legislative passage of education legislation. As Figure 7 depicts, for the 115th-117th congressional terms, there is a negative relationship between media coverage (total, traditional, and partisan) and legislative passage. The media coverage (total, traditional, and partisan) in the 115th and 117th Congresses also has statistically significant p-values, so there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that media coverage and legislative outcomes are unrelated.

As shown in the bar charts, the 118th Congress is characterized by positive coefficients, with partisan media showing the strongest positive correlation between media coverage and

legislative passage. However, the results for the 118th Congress are not statistically significant, meaning they are likely due to chance.

Figure 7

Firth's Logistic Regression Results: Media Coverage and Legislative Success for Education				
Bivariate models predicting legislative passage for education legislation				
Media Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-Value	N
118th				
Total Coverage	0.010	0.016	0.507	16
Traditional Coverage	0.006	0.028	0.820	16
Partisan Coverage	0.042	0.042	0.253	16
117th				
Total Coverage	-0.086	0.053	0.028**	9
Traditional Coverage	-0.152	0.085	0.018**	9
Partisan Coverage	-0.121	0.083	0.070*	9
116th				
Total Coverage	-0.022	0.016	0.131	12
Traditional Coverage	-0.038	0.028	0.140	12
Partisan Coverage	-0.050	0.037	0.127	12
115th				
Total Coverage	-0.054	0.031	0.023**	7
Traditional Coverage	-0.108	0.063	0.024**	7
Partisan Coverage	-0.104	0.061	0.025**	7
* p ≤ 0.10, ** p ≤ 0.05				

Interestingly, when I ran a logistic regression with all congressional terms combined to increase the robustness of my model (Figure 8), I found that a statistically significant negative relationship between media coverage and legislative passage held across all models. Traditional media coverage seemed to have the largest negative relationship and the smallest p-value. This also correlates with traditional media coverage in the 115th and 117th Congresses having slightly

larger negative coefficients as well (Figure 7). This is surprising, as per my literature review, partisan media coverage seems more likely to produce a stronger negative relationship than traditional media due to its polarizing content. Although this is puzzling, it could be due to random chance as the difference in the coefficients between traditional coverage and partisan coverage is merely 0.012, which falls comfortably within the standard range of error (0.023) for both types of coverage.

Figure 8

Logistic Regression Results: Media Coverage and Legislative Success for Education				
Bivariate models predicting legislative passage for education (all terms combined)				
Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-Value	N
Total Coverage				
Total Media Coverage	-0.028	0.012	0.022**	44
Congress: 116th	-0.044	1.161	0.970	44
Congress: 117th	-0.476	1.170	0.684	44
Congress: 118th	-0.457	1.074	0.670	44
Traditional Coverage				
Traditional Media Coverage	-0.058	0.023	0.012**	44
Congress: 116th	0.053	1.171	0.964	44
Congress: 117th	-0.499	1.175	0.671	44
Congress: 118th	-0.715	1.100	0.516	44
Partisan Coverage				
Partisan Media Coverage	-0.046	0.023	0.043**	44
Congress: 116th	-0.045	1.112	0.968	44
Congress: 117th	-0.392	1.128	0.728	44
Congress: 118th	-0.170	1.023	0.868	44
* $p \leq 0.10$, ** $p \leq 0.05$				

In summary, the regression run for the 115th and 117th congressional terms supports my hypothesis. Running a robust regression with all terms combined has also supported my hypothesis that more media coverage is negatively associated with legislative passage.

Section 2: Case Study on Health Care Legislation

Background

To supplement my first hypothesis, I conducted a case study of the Medicare Drug Price Negotiation Act of 2019 (the “MDPN Act” or H.R. 448) to illustrate the difficulty of passing legislation that receives extensive media coverage. The MDPN Act was proposed in early 2019 by Representative Elijah Cummings (D-MD), as drug pricing was the top priority for the Democratic majority in the House (Rep. Cummings 2019). This bill was actually a measure championed by Democratic Representative Jan Schakowsky, who introduced the MDPN Act in 2017, 2021, and 2023. However, it was given to Rep. Cummings for institutional weight since he was the Chairman of the House Oversight Committee at the time.

The MDPN Act was designed to lower the cost of prescription drugs for people on Medicare by giving the government the power to negotiate prices with the pharmaceutical industry. In 2019, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) could not negotiate drug prices covered by Medicare. CMS could not even create an approved list of prescription medications or formularies covered by Medicare Advantage (MA) prescription drug plans (PDPs). Formularies are important because they ensure that prescription drug plans provide safe, affordable coverage, limiting excessive drug costs and unfair coverage practices (CMS 2026). The MDPN Act would repeal these restrictions and require CMS to negotiate the prices of covered drugs and either establish a formulary or require changes to PDP formularies to reflect CMS's negotiated prices. If CMS was unable to reach an appropriate price agreement for a drug,

the price would be set to the lowest of three specified options, one of which is based on the average price in other countries (Rep. Cummings 2019).

The MDPN Act was later folded into H.R. 3, known as the Elijah E. Cummings Lower Drug Costs Now Act, because it was more effective for House leadership to champion a single, high-profile package than to try to pass dozens of overlapping bills. The MDPN Act's main goal was to repeal the "non-interference" clause that prevented CMS from negotiating drug prices, and H.R. 3 gave it a path to do so by establishing rules and regulations. H.R. 3 specifically strengthened the MDPN Act by including a provision that the negotiated maximum price could not exceed 120% of the average price in other "developed" countries, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia (known as international price indexing). There was the exception that if the information for these international benchmarks was not available, the maximum price could not exceed 85% of the U.S. average manufacturer price (Rep. Pallone 2020).

Another reason why the MDPN Act was folded into H.R. 3 was that Elijah E. Cummings passed away soon after sponsoring the MDPN Act and H.R. 3 was named after him to give the legislation more significant emotional and political weight since it was tied to his long-standing legacy of fighting for lower healthcare costs (Stolberg 2019).

H.R. 3 eventually passed the Democratic-controlled House in 2020 but stalled in the Senate, as the Republican majority opposed the bill. This is not unusual as bills with high coverage can pass the House when the majority party is unified on the legislation but this coverage can also contribute to gridlock when the bill reaches the Senate because some bipartisan support is needed to bypass a potential filibuster.

The main provision of H.R. 3, drug price negotiation, was officially passed in 2020 by the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which allows Medicare to negotiate prices for certain high-cost drugs based on a “maximum fair price” that cannot exceed a specific percentage of the average market price (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2026). However, the international price index provision was not included.

Media Coverage and Framing

There was extensive coverage by both traditional and partisan media outlets, with direct mentions of the MDPN Act and H.R. 3, or indirect mentions through discussions of legislative measures such as drug price negotiation and the international pricing index. In my dataset, I coded 20 (the maximum) for all traditional and partisan media outlets based on these direct and indirect mentions. This piece of legislation received widespread attention because it was a high-stakes matter that both Democrats and Republicans cared about, and it was also one of the major ways Democrats leveraged the Republican Party’s inaction to boost their own political support. Additionally, President Trump’s previous support for drug price controls during the 2016 campaign and his involvement in this matter through an Executive Order brought the measure to the attention of media outlets.

While there was much attention given to H.R. 3 and drug price negotiation, the way that the legislation was framed by legislators and subsequently, the way news outlets reported on it could have had an impact on the passage of this legislation. Democrats characterized it as “negotiation” or “bargaining power” while Republicans called it “socialist style price caps” and “price control,” which would limit innovation in the U.S. The Republicans' main concern was that tying prices to lower international benchmarks would take away the profits that the pharmaceutical industries needed to cure cancer or Alzheimer’s. The framing used by

Republicans was influenced by powerful pharmaceutical-industry lobbying groups. The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) spent \$25.9 million lobbying against H.R. 3 (Open Secrets 2021). Lobbyists and industry leaders even used terms like “nuclear winter” to describe what would happen to the pharmaceutical industry (Kotch 2020). Subsequently, the media reported on H.R. 3 using the framing that legislators used.

Different media outlets, including traditional ones, reported on the framing used by legislators in the debate over H.R. 3 in different ways. Reporting from the *New York Times* (NYT) in early 2019 painted the picture that drug price negotiation and international price indexing would be supported by Democrats and unpopular with most Republicans but it did not rule out the possibility of compromise since President Trump had been a long-time big proponent of the very same measures that H.R. 3 had proposed. However, NYT did note that Republican opposition was mounting as the American Future Fund, a conservative advocacy group, was running ads “praising Republican members of the Finance Committee who voted against the bill, warning it would usher in ‘socialist price controls’” (Goodnough 2019).

In December 2019, the NYT reported that House Republicans proposed a more modest measure that excluded the Medicare negotiation provision, as H.R. 3 passed the House (Stolberg 2019). The NYT also reported that Republicans were calling H.R. 3 a socialist measure, even though it would help lower drug prices, a policy the Kaiser Family Foundation found was supported by over 80% of Americans (Steinhauer 2019). Throughout 2019-2020, the NYT focused much of its reporting on President Trump’s interactions with H.R. 3 and on lowering drug prices. The reporting consistently pointed out a clear dichotomy in President Trump's stance. Although he supported the provisions of H.R. 3 in theory and even signed a July 24, 2020, Executive Order aligning Medicare drug prices with European rates, he ultimately

threatened to veto the legislation (Stolberg 2020). The confusion caused by President Trump going against the grain of the majority of the Republican party was noted by other news outlets as well.

While the *NYT* reported on the concerns of Republicans regarding the risk to innovation with international price indexing, the *Wall Street Journal (WSJ)* was producing opinion pieces in February 2019, a month after the MDPN Act was proposed in the House, that equated Americans paying five times as much per dose for patented drugs in the U.S. compared to foreign markets with receiving early access to medications (Atlas 2019). While it is true that Americans gain access to new lifesaving medications for illnesses such as cancer earlier than in other countries, this does not mean that price controls will automatically result in the loss of this early access or limit innovation in new medicines. Studies have shown that market economies are actually not the best breeding grounds for innovation as private firms have financial constraints, even when charging high drug prices, and they do not invest their efforts in medicine that would have social benefits, can take a long time to develop without certain profits, and would only address illness that affect a small portion of the population (Nelson 1959; Loury 1979; Jones and Williams 1998). It is also being shown that public procurement of innovation in goods and services might be a better way to incentivize innovation and spur investment in research and development (R&D). This is because the government would be absorbing “the risks associated with deploying novel and unproven technologies” (Chiappinelli et al. 2025). Additionally, the *WSJ* does not address the fact that Democrats pledged to address the R&D concerns by allocating billions of dollars to the National Institutes of Health to advance medical innovation (Stolberg 2019). Thus, the *WSJ*’s reporting of drug price negotiations in the very beginning of the 116th Congress seemed to suggest that the trade-off for affordable drug prices was lifesaving innovation.

WSJ followed up its opinion piece with an “analysis,” which was just a report of what the CEOs of the biggest pharmaceutical companies had to say to the Senate Finance Committee about their drug prices. As anticipated, many CEOs were unhappy about the possibility of drug price controls being implemented and repeatedly warned that innovation would die if they were implemented (*WSJ* 2019). *WSJ* also published articles in 2019 about H.R. 3, which generally covered the bill’s provisions, Democratic support, and Republican opposition. Many of the articles focused on the criticism of the bill, which states that it would be catastrophic for “critical medical research dollars” (Armour 2019). Similar to the *NYT*, the *WSJ* made reports about how President Trump was reacting to H.R. 3 (Armour 2020) but an opinion piece was also published about how Trump’s stance on drug pricing would cause disruptions in R&D (*WSJ* 2020). Overall, there seemed to be less reporting on the Democratic perspective and more opinion pieces criticizing what H.R. 3 was trying to achieve than in the *NYT*.

The same divide in how much traditional news outlets used the framing provided by legislators was also evident in partisan media outlets, particularly right-wing outlets. *Fox News* focused mainly on Republican quotes arguing that the legislation was detrimental and more of a political tool used by Democrats for the 2020 election, suggesting that neither side actually believed the legislation would pass (*Fox News* 2019). While *Cable News Network (CNN)* did report more on what H.R. 3 consisted of and how both sides considered the legislation (Luhby 2019), it also criticized Democrats and Republicans for increasing drug prices in 2020 and explained the ways that Democrats were using the bill to win elections in 2020 (Luhby 2020; Luthra 2019). Lastly, *CNN* briefly reported on the bill’s passage in the House (Luhby 2019). When examining the differences between the right-wing *Fox News* and left-wing *CNN*, I observed that *Fox News* focused more on the negative framing that came from the Republican

side, while *CNN* seemed to focus less on the legislation itself and more on how the Democrats would utilize it, even criticizing the Democratic party for not doing enough to bring drug prices down.

Significance

While the reason H.R. 3 did not pass the Senate and become law was largely due to heavy lobbying by pharmaceutical companies and the framing that was adopted by legislators, I argue that media coverage and framing also had an effect on the ability of this piece of legislation to pass the Senate. Media reporting the pharmaceutical industry's "innovation" warnings with the same weight as the affordability crisis creates a false equivalency that benefits the status quo (not allowing Medicare to negotiate prices). This is because multiple Kaiser Family Foundation polls found that support for negotiation dropped from 83% to around 33% when respondents were told it could lead to "less research and development of new drugs" (Kirzinger 2021). With the increased attention brought about by H.R. 3 in the media and the way it was framed in reporting, it is highly likely that moderate voters, especially constituents of Republican voters, were paying attention to this issue. And they would be upset if Republicans were to compromise and pass H.R. 3 because even if they support lower drug prices and elected Donald Trump because of his 2016 campaign promise to lower drug prices, reporting during 2019-2020 could have changed their opinion about the benefits of such a measure. Thus, even if some Republicans were amenable to the passage of H.R. 3, they would not engage in compromise with the Democratic party, both because the issue was in the public eye and they knew their constituents would be watching and that their constituents would not like H.R. 3 to be passed because it would hamper U.S. exceptionalism in innovation and early access to new medicines.

Section 3: Conclusion

The statistical results of my first hypothesis support the conclusion that media coverage is correlated with legislative passage. The bar charts for the health care issue area showed that the average media coverage of health care legislation that did not pass exceeded that of legislation that did pass, with little difference found between partisan and traditional media in terms of coverage. While this supports my hypothesis that there is a correlation between media coverage and legislative success, regression analysis showed that this correlation was significant only in the 115th Congress and only for partisan coverage when combining all congressional terms.

The bar charts for the education issue area also showed that my hypothesis is supported for the 115th-117th Congresses and an outlier might have skewed the results for the 118th Congress. The correlation between media coverage and the passage of legislation was significant in the 115th and 117th Congresses, even when considering traditional and partisan coverage separately. Support for my hypothesis was further bolstered by a robust regression analysis that included all observations, as the negative relationship between media coverage and passage was statistically significant. In summary, there is some support for my hypothesis, particularly in the area of education.

The case study on health care legislation depicts how extensive media coverage could have made the passage of drug price negotiations more difficult in 2019-2020. Analysis showed that the media's framing of the legislation made gridlock even more inevitable by altering voters' perception of the benefits of pursuing drug price negotiations. Consequently, this change in voter opinion would make passing legislation harder when the measure is unpopular with voters. The case study showed that coverage, paired with its substance, could affect the difficulty of passing legislation.

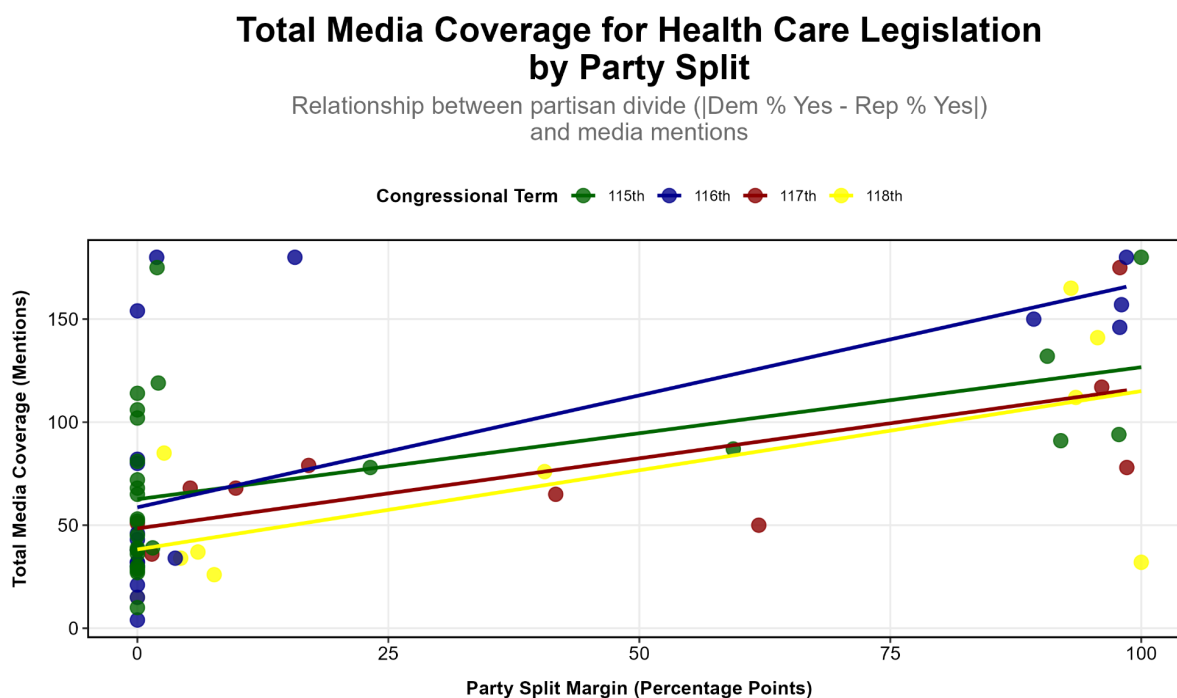
Chapter 5: Results for Hypothesis Two

Section 1: Explanation of Statistical Findings

Health Care Legislation

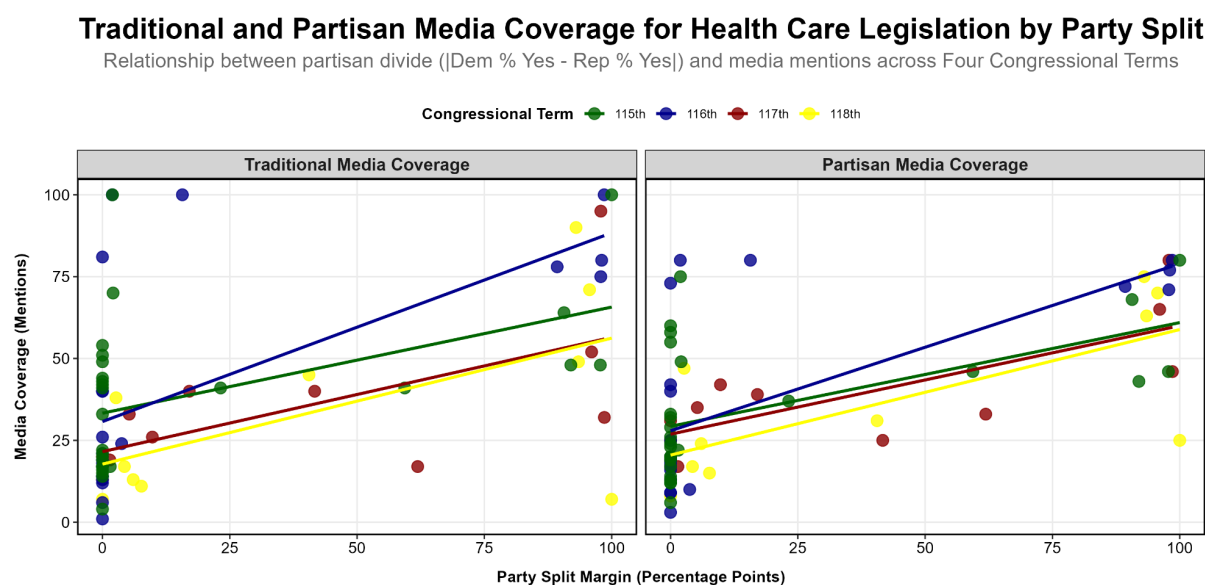
For my second hypothesis that bipartisanship will be more likely with less media coverage, I considered the total media coverage compared to the bipartisanship in health care votes across the past four congressional terms. The resulting Figure 9 below shows that as the total media coverage increases across all four congressional terms, the party split also increases. This relationship is particularly strong in the 116th Congress. Therefore, the scatterplot supports my hypothesis that legislation that receives a vote and less media coverage will be more bipartisan, meaning the parties will be less divided.

Figure 9



After examining the total media coverage, I ran separate scatterplots for traditional and partisan media coverage. The resulting Figure 10 below shows that the trend of legislation that gets a vote becoming increasingly more partisan as media coverage increases still holds for both traditional and partisan media. There is a sharper increase for the 116th Congress in the traditional media coverage category compared to partisan media coverage but this difference falls within the range of standard error.

Figure 10



I ran a linear regression to assess the relationship between media coverage and bipartisanship in health care votes. All congressional terms and media variables had statistically significant positive coefficients, indicating that as media coverage (total, traditional, and partisan) increased, the likelihood of partisanship also increased. In all congressional terms, partisan media coverage had the largest coefficient. This relationship is especially apparent in the 117th Congress, where for each additional mention in partisan media, the probability that the two parties (Democrats and Republicans) would become more split on the vote increased by 1.727.

This supports my hypothesis that as media coverage increases, the likelihood of bipartisanship decreases.

Figure 11

Linear Regression Results: Media Coverage and Party Split for Health Care				
OLS models predicting party split margin for health care legislation				
Media Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-Value	N
118th				
Total Coverage	0.577	0.229	0.036**	10
Traditional Coverage	0.947	0.442	0.065*	10
Partisan Coverage	1.329	0.461	0.020**	10
117th				
Total Coverage	0.750	0.245	0.014**	11
Traditional Coverage	1.163	0.469	0.035**	11
Partisan Coverage	1.727	0.498	0.007**	11
116th				
Total Coverage	0.389	0.104	0.001**	21
Traditional Coverage	0.690	0.195	0.002**	21
Partisan Coverage	0.872	0.223	0.001**	21
115th				
Total Coverage	0.407	0.137	0.006**	27
Traditional Coverage	0.671	0.255	0.014**	27
Partisan Coverage	0.911	0.286	0.004**	27
* $p \leq 0.10$, ** $p \leq 0.05$				

Since there are not many observations in this dataset, I also ran a linear regression with all congressional terms combined, found below as Figure 12. Figure 12 depicts similar results to

Figure 11 as there is a statistically significant positive coefficient in all of the models (total, traditional, and partisan). This positive relationship provides sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between media coverage and bipartisanship in the health care vote as every additional mention of a bill in the media makes the two parties more partisan by at least 0.455 (total coverage model).

Figure 12

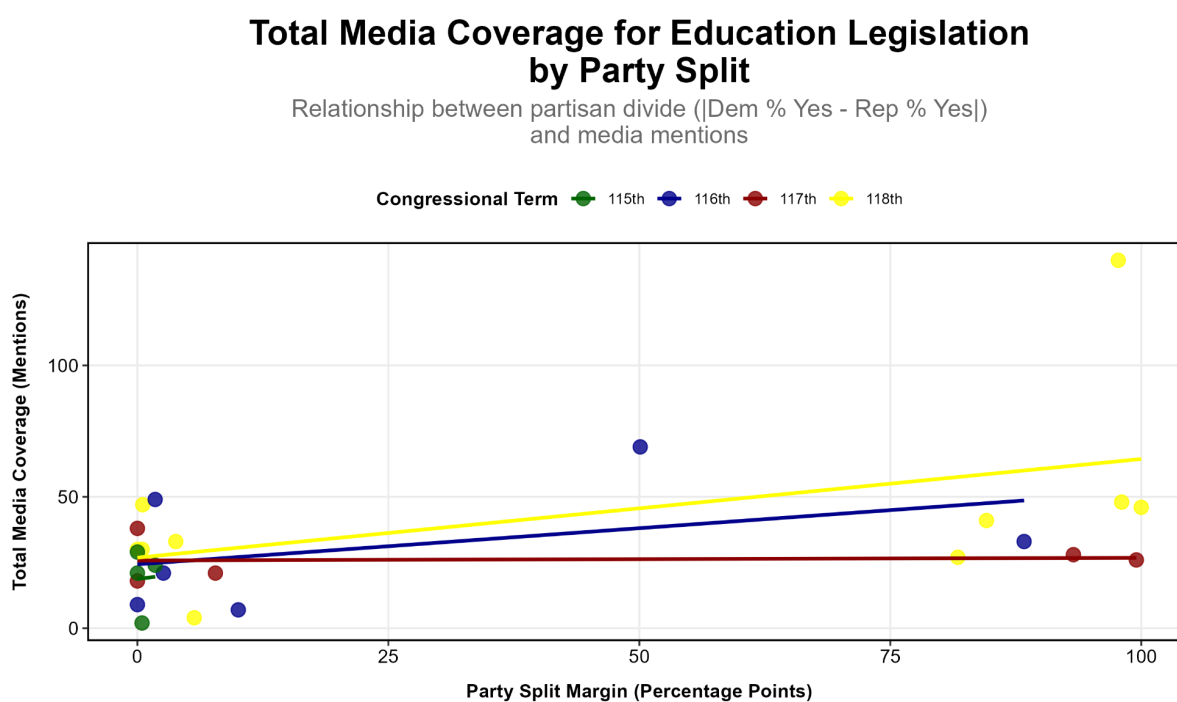
Linear Regression Results: Media Coverage and Party Split for Health Care (All Terms)				
OLS models predicting party split margins for health care legislation				
Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-Value	N
Total Coverage Model				
(Intercept)	-16.157	8.139	0.051*	69
Media Coverage Coefficient	0.455	0.075	0.000**	69
Congress: 116th	-0.752	9.068	0.934	69
Congress: 117th	21.115	11.135	0.062*	69
Congress: 118th	27.620	11.524	0.019**	69
Traditional Coverage Model				
(Intercept)	-12.571	8.266	0.133	69
Traditional Coverage Coefficient	0.769	0.140	0.000**	69
Congress: 116th	-0.316	9.394	0.973	69
Congress: 117th	24.582	11.550	0.037**	69
Congress: 118th	30.153	11.955	0.014**	69
Partisan Coverage Model				
(Intercept)	-18.402	7.985	0.024**	69
Partisan Coverage Coefficient	1.028	0.157	0.000**	69
Congress: 116th	-1.131	8.818	0.898	69
Congress: 117th	16.522	10.855	0.133	69
Congress: 118th	24.183	11.212	0.035**	69
* $p \leq 0.10$, ** $p \leq 0.05$. Note: One Congressional Term is excluded as the baseline category.				

Figures 11 and 12 both provide strong support for my second hypothesis that more media coverage is negatively associated with bipartisanship.

Education Legislation

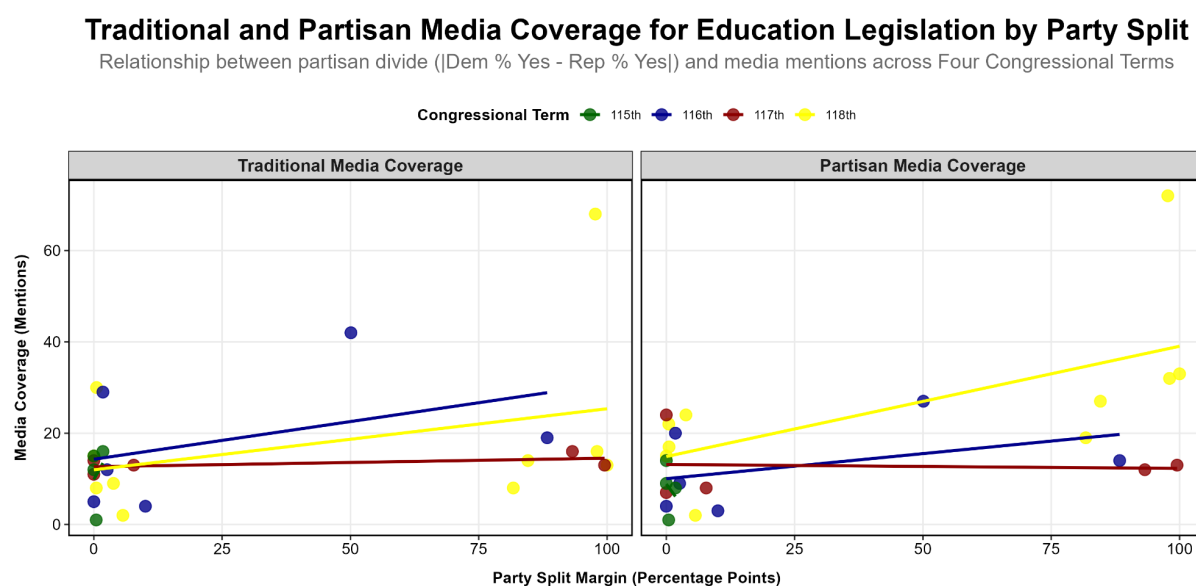
I examined the total media coverage relative to bipartisanship (level of party split) in education votes over the past four congressional terms. The resulting Figure 13 below depicts education votes in the 116th and 118th Congresses being slightly more partisan as they received more total media coverage. However, for the 117th Congress, there is no change in the level of partisanship or total media coverage. Additionally, the 115th Congress has only 4 votes and all are almost completely bipartisan with the same level of total media coverage. In short, Figure 13 depicts mixed results regarding bipartisanship relative to total media coverage.

Figure 13



I ran scatterplots for traditional and partisan media coverage separately to see whether there were similar or differing results as in Figure 13. The resulting Figure 14 below depicts almost the same results: bills with votes in the 116th and 118th Congresses are more partisan as they received more media coverage in both partisan and traditional media and there is a negligible difference for the 117th Congress. Although in the 118th Congress, more partisan media coverage has a stronger effect on partisanship. This is due to the partisan media, especially right-wing outlets, having a special interest in covering the Parents Bill of Rights Act, which fosters substantial engagement with these outlets, as previously discussed in Chapter 4, Section 1.

Figure 14



In addition to the scatterplots, I ran a linear regression across all congressional terms combined for education votes, given the small number of observations in each term. Figure 15 (below) shows that across all observations and coverage models, all coefficients are positive, but only the coefficients for total coverage and partisan coverage are statistically significant. This means that media coverage is likely negatively correlated with bipartisanship, especially in the

case of partisan media where each additional mention makes it around 1.5 percentage points more likely for the parties to differ in their voting behavior.

Figure 15

Linear Regression Results: Media Coverage and Party Split for Education (All Terms)				
OLS models predicting party split margins for education legislation				
Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-Value	N
Total Coverage Model				
(Intercept)	-11.505	20.833	0.587	25
Media Coverage Coefficient	0.635	0.323	0.063*	25
Congress: 116th	17.084	26.010	0.519	25
Congress: 117th	34.975	26.814	0.207	25
Congress: 118th	30.446	24.964	0.237	25
Traditional Coverage Model				
(Intercept)	-9.371	21.763	0.671	25
Traditional Coverage Coefficient	0.903	0.617	0.159	25
Congress: 116th	18.145	27.092	0.511	25
Congress: 117th	37.380	27.780	0.193	25
Congress: 118th	40.110	24.876	0.123	25
Partisan Coverage Model				
(Intercept)	-11.411	19.826	0.571	25
Partisan Coverage Coefficient	1.496	0.626	0.027**	25
Congress: 116th	17.683	24.950	0.487	25
Congress: 117th	32.365	25.912	0.226	25
Congress: 118th	19.320	25.423	0.456	25
* $p \leq 0.10$, ** $p \leq 0.05$. Note: One Congressional Term is excluded as the baseline category.				

Therefore, there is support for my second hypothesis: less total and partisan media coverage makes education votes more likely to be bipartisan.

Section 2: Case Study on Education Legislation

Background

To supplement my second hypothesis, I examined the FAFSA Deadline Act (the “Act” or H.R. 8932). This Act was chosen because it was a good depiction of a lack of media coverage on the Act’s measures themselves. It was proposed in September 2024 (118th Congress) by Representative Erin Houchin (R-IN). The Act would require the Department of Education (ED) to make the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) available starting October 1st of each year. In 2024, the law was that the ED had until January 1st to release the FAFSA but would try its best to have it released around October 1st. The Act would essentially remove the ED’s ability to wait until January. Additionally, the ED would have to certify whether they would have the FAFSA ready by September, with October as the target. If, in September, the ED notifies Congress that it cannot make the October deadline, the Secretary of Education would have to provide Congress a reason for the failure to meet the deadline and the impact it would have on students and their families (Rep. Houchin 2024).

This Act was a response to the disastrous 2024-2025 application cycle, which was the ED’s first attempt to implement the FAFSA changes enacted by the FAFSA Simplification Act of 2020 (FSA). Some of its main provisions were to keep the need analysis formulas that help determine how much a student’s family must pay for higher education but amend the indicator’s name to “student aid index” (SAI) instead of the previous “expected family contribution” (EFC). The SAI formula differs in that it considers fewer questions than the previous version and allows some responses to be directly imported from a prior federal income tax return. Moreover, FSA made it easier for low-income students to automatically qualify for Pell Grants and eliminated prohibitions against certain student populations, like those with drug-related offenses

(Congress.gov 2022). Overall, the FSA was making a big change to the FAFSA program as a whole and its rollout was delayed from October 2023 to December 2023. Along with the late rollout relative to previous years, there were a host of technical glitches, many of which were caused by reliance on federal vendors (Rubin 2024).

The delays and problems with the FAFSA form led to a lot of confusion, causing many students to not submit a FAFSA form and to be unable to receive financial aid. In fact, it was estimated that 430,000 fewer students submitted the FAFSA application in this cycle, and the vast majority of these students were low-income and could have received aid. As a result, overall enrollment decreased by 5% (Committee on Education & Workforce 2024). Schools were also unable to put together financial aid packages for students when offering them admission due to the issues, and when they were able to, it was not in a timely manner. This resulted in some schools failing to meet prior enrollment levels, which is dangerous because schools that are not well-endowed risk closure if they cannot enroll the appropriate number of students each year to sustain their institutions (Rubin 2024). All of these problems for students and schools in the 2024-2025 application cycle prompted Congress to address the FAFSA deadline in the Act.

The Act moved quickly through the House after the Republicans agreed to compromise with the Democrats and push back the deadline for ED to implement the Act to the 2026-2027 application cycle. The concern for Democrats was that trying to force an October 1st deadline for the 2025-2026 application cycle, when it was only three months away, would cause more glitches and technical issues than in the previous year (Scott 2024). Five days after the Act passed the House, it passed the Senate by unanimous consent and was signed into law by President Joe Biden on December 11, 2024.

Media Coverage and Content

There was little media coverage of the Act itself or its measures; instead, coverage in both traditional and partisan media focused on the frustration of students and schools with FAFSA glitches and delays. In the *NYT*, there were reports about how schools were foregoing waiting for FAFSA determinations and using their own models to determine financial aid packages for students (Lieber 2024; Carrns 2024). Other reports by the *NYT* focused on advising readers on what to do as they wait for the FAFSA to be released, as well as on the damage that confusion about the FAFSA caused students' higher education prospects (Carrns 2024; Edmonds and Mokam 2024). Finally, the reports mentioned that the FAFSA would be delayed again for the 2025-2026 application cycle due to the Act but focused on the importance of the FAFSA no longer being delayed or having issues for the 2026-2027 cycle, as that would be even more disastrous with already falling rates of students submitting FAFSA applications (Montague 2024).

Similar to the *NYT*, the *WSJ* only reported on the frustration students and families felt with the FAFSA delays (Adedoyin 2024; Korn and Adedoyin 2024). There was also an opinion piece on the new FAFSA asking for race and ethnicity, even though that was not required in the old FAFSA form (Stoll 2024). The *Washington Post* reported on the FAFSA about three times in 2024, focusing on the chaos caused by the delays (Douglas-Gabriel 2024). One *Washington Post* report had an optimistic tone and explained to readers that the Act would stabilize the FAFSA application rollout and hopefully put a stop to issues with the form (Douglas-Gabriel 2024). The *Los Angeles Times (LA)* and the *Chicago Tribune* also reported on the FAFSA issue only once or twice.

Regarding the partisan media outlets, right-wing outlets like *Fox News* and the *Daily Wire* released around six reports that expanded upon the terrible harm the delays were having on

students and parents and made sure to blame the Biden Administration for the issues (Giggot 2024). *CNN* reported around four times and *HuffPost* reported once in 2024 on FAFSA but the reports were similar in nature to those of the *NYT*.

After considering both traditional and partisan media coverage, I found that the bulk of the reporting focused on the chaos of the FAFSA delays, and the Act was a small footnote in those reports.

Significance

The Act itself received little media coverage, and most outlets focused on the chaos caused by the delays rather than on what Congress was doing to fix it. A big part of the reason the legislation passed was that the Act itself was meant to further establish a measure that had already passed Congress (the FSA), but I argue that media coverage still played a small role in this legislation. Firstly, limited media coverage of the Act itself meant that legislators were free to compromise and work together to address FAFSA issues, since few constituents were paying attention to how it was being handled. I believe this is particularly because little could be done to fix the issues during the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 cycles, when most students were dealing with the problem. The Act itself focused on how it could address FAFSA issues in the future, and it is likely that most students and families were not thinking about FAFSA issues in future years after completing it in the current cycle. Secondly, reporting by media outlets focused on public frustration, helping to galvanize legislators to pass the Act because of how their constituents might be suffering. Therefore, the limited coverage of the Act and the coverage produced regarding the FAFSA deadline assisted in the passage of this education legislation.

Section 3: Conclusion

The statistical results of my second hypothesis support the conclusion that media coverage is correlated with bipartisan support or compromise. The scatterplots for the health care issue area showed that an increase in total media coverage of health care votes across all four congressional terms made bipartisanship less likely by widening the party split. The same trend was found when considering traditional and partisan media coverage separately. After running the linear regression, all congressional terms and media variables had statistically significant positive coefficients, indicating that media coverage increased the probability of partisanship. The results held even when all the congressional terms were combined. This analysis supports my second hypothesis that there is a negative relationship between media coverage and bipartisan support in votes.

The scatterplots for the education issue area supported my second hypothesis but only for the 116th and 118th Congresses, as the results for the 115th and 117th Congresses were negligible. While the linear regression I ran using the education vote observations across all four congressional terms showed statistically significant results only for total media coverage and partisan coverage, the traditional coverage variable also had a positive coefficient. Therefore, statistical support for my second hypothesis is rooted mainly in the health care issue area rather than the education issue area, especially due to the small number of vote observations.

The case study on education legislation provided support consistent with the hypothesis that less media coverage provides a safe space for bipartisan compromise. As I examined in the case study, the limited coverage, which did not focus on the Act, might have been beneficial in prompting legislators to pass the legislation more quickly than they would have without it. Since it is not possible to observe the counterfactual world in which there was more coverage of the

Act, the case study does not constitute a causal argument but is rather consistent with the idea that less coverage means the possibility of compromise is improved.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Section 1: Synthesis of Findings

My thesis supports the claim that media coverage correlates with legislative outcomes. Virtually all bar charts support my first hypothesis by depicting a negative relationship between average media coverage (whether traditional, partisan, or combined) and the likelihood that legislation passes the House or the Senate. All scatterplots also support my second hypothesis by depicting a negative relationship between media coverage and bipartisanship. However, the results are more mixed when conducting a regression analysis to determine if these correlational relationships are statistically significant. For the first hypothesis, the results were statistically significant across all media variables in the education sector when observations from all congressional terms were combined. For the second hypothesis, the results were statistically significant for all media variables in the health care sector across all congressional terms and when combined. Therefore, statistical analysis provides substantial support for the correlation between media coverage and legislative outcomes.

The case study I conducted for the first hypothesis also supports the idea that media coverage, along with the framing used in that coverage, affected the difficulty of passing the health care legislation. The case study for the second hypothesis provides support consistent with the idea that less media coverage makes bipartisan compromise easier. However, this does not provide enough evidence to make a strong causal connection since it is about the absence of media coverage and it is not possible to test the counterfactual in which there was lots of media coverage.

Section 2: Implications

My results imply that transparency provided by media coverage of legislators and congressional actions might be making compromise more difficult for legislators than it already is in the current polarized political climate. When media outlets shine a light on legislative issues, they leave no room for legislators to compromise without risking repercussions, making gridlock the default option because passing legislation without bipartisan support is difficult.

One step towards returning to the pre-gridlock era, when laws were being passed, the legislature was functioning relatively well, and the public was not dissatisfied with legislators' inability to actually legislate, might be to slightly lower the spotlight on legislators. For example, allowing legislators to hold more congressional hearings and debates that C-SPAN does not televise might free them to engage in more honest, uninhibited deliberation without fear of public backlash. In this way, general election voters, primary voters, interest groups, and financial donors are less likely to pressure legislators to stay within partisan lines while the legislation is still taking shape. Information about the deliberation will probably still be accessible to interest groups with lobbying power, but not televising all the sessions will help limit their interference. Even if negotiations going on behind closed doors are leaked to the press and publicized, not televising certain congressional sessions would allow legislators to worry less about their theater skills and making viral videos to boost their popularity, and hopefully focus on the policies being discussed instead.

Section 3: Limitations

There are many limitations to my thesis. First and foremost, while my statistical findings supported my hypotheses, I only tested media coverage, regardless of the framing, tone, or specific content discussed at each media outlet. This might be why I could not find a significant

difference between traditional and partisan media coverage. The different media types reported similar amounts for each piece of legislation, but that does not mean they have the same effect on legislative outcomes. It could also be because the *NYT* and the *Washington Post* are more left-leaning, while the *WSJ* is more center-right-leaning. This means there is not much of a difference between traditional and partisan media, because traditional media includes partisan bias, making their coverage the same in aggregate.

Another limitation was the small number of observations in the education sector, particularly for the second hypothesis. This means that statistical analysis is less likely to show real statistically significant trends with high confidence. I could not adjust my dataset of legislation to account for bills swallowed by other bills on the list, so some bills might have been coded as not having passed when they actually passed under a different name, along with other measures. Since I used indirect mentions as part of my metric, there was a lot of overlap in media coverage for each piece of legislation, especially when they resembled each other and had similar measures. Additionally, when researching media coverage from outlets that did not allow me to specify a date range, I could not go through every single page the inquiry produced, as there would be hundreds of thousands. Lastly, I found some articles that appeared on the media outlet a few months ago have disappeared, meaning the media coverage data I collected might not be a fully accurate representation of the coverage the outlets produced in congressional terms that have long since passed. This hinders the reproducibility of my data in the future.

Section 4: Current and Future Research

Future research could do any of the following: 1) explore the tonality and content of media coverage used in traditional versus partisan media to determine if there is any significant

difference between the two; 2) in addition to traditional and partisan media, investigating the effects of social media; 3) running the study with more observations, more congressional terms, and for more policy areas; 4) limiting the study to only direct mentions to see if there is a difference in the results; and 5) utilizing better tools for researching media coverage to avoid human error.

While conducting this thesis, an article was published examining the effects of implementing television coverage in 91 state chambers. Using a difference-in-difference design, the authors found that the adoption of live gavel-to-gavel coverage had little effect on the outcomes in state legislatures or the policymaking process as a whole (Lyons & Ryan 2026). Although these results are contrary to the findings of my thesis, there might be significant differences in the effects of television coverage for state-level legislatures compared to that of Congress. One reason is that representatives and senators in Congress are more widely recognizable and have bigger platforms. Many national legislators are frequently featured in local, state, and national news, helping them build their own brand or image and make an impression on their constituents. This is in contrast to state-level legislators who do not occupy large platforms and represent much smaller numbers of constituents. Thus, we would expect the effects of television coverage on legislators' actions and the ultimate policy outcomes to be less pronounced than those of congressional members. To continue building on this research, the authors and I recommend conducting in-depth interviews and case studies with legislators to understand how live coverage affects their actions and those of their colleagues.

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