Center for
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Congressional Town Halls and Legislative Effectiveness

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Abstract

American lawmakers have held over 23,000 town hall meetings with constituents in the last eight years. These unscripted and often raucous gatherings provide the public with a direct line of communication to their representatives. While lawmakers and activists clearly think these events are meaningful, there are almost no systematic studies on town hall meetings. In this article, we present new data on every congressional town hall meeting from August 2013-December 2021 and provide a descriptive analysis of the relationship between lawmaking and town hall representation. Contrary to our expectations, we found no evidence that high-performing lawmakers neglected their district. Instead, we found that legislators with few legislative accomplishments also chose to hold fewer town hall meetings. In addition, members of the party not in the White House hold substantially more town halls. These findings contribute to a growing body of research on congressional representation, lawmaking, and democratic accountability.

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At their best, congressional town hall meetings illustrate the remarkable promise of American democracy. Over thousands of meetings each year, constituents gather in coffee shops and local community buildings to speak directly to their lawmaker. Town hall meetings give citizens space to petition their government for a redress of grievances and speak truth to power in a public forum. Each gathering can offer a beacon of civil conversation in the midst of deep, partisan conflict and growing populist anger at political elites. Legislators can offer in-depth defenses of their positions and personally engage with constituents in a highly localized setting. From this perspective, town hall meetings may serve as a welcomed salve to today's fractured and contentious national political climate.

Of course, town hall meetings can also be raucous and overtly hostile. Take, for example, the meeting held by the late Rep. John Dingell (D-MI) on August 6, 2009, which was recorded and uploaded to YouTube by audience members. As Representative Dingell attempted to begin the meeting over a cacophony of boos and heckles, a man approached with his son in a wheelchair to scream accusations from three feet away:

> *Under the Obama health care plan, which you support, this man would be given no care whatsoever because he is a cerebral palsy handicapped person [...] You voted a death sentence for this young man if that health care plan goes through [...] You've never read the bill. You are a fraud, and you are sentencing this person to death under the Obama plan.*[1]

After a prolonged argument, the man was escorted out by police officers. Other audience members cried "we're not in Nazi Germany" as Congressman Dingell pleaded for more civil discourse in the remainder of the meeting.

[1] You can watch this interaction at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJyMpAcLVV8

Why do lawmakers risk uncontrolled exposure to such confrontations? Elected representatives are neither constitutionally nor legislatively required to hold town hall meetings, and yet American lawmakers have held more than 23,000 such events over the past eight years – even at the risk of embarrassing headlines and viral video baggage. While political scientists have long devoted their attention to the "home style" (Fenno 1978) of lawmakers, we set out to make two distinct contributions to our broader understanding of American legislative affairs.

First, we provide a systematic, observational analysis of congressional town hall events over time and across members. To our knowledge, this study is the first of its kind. Political scientists have constructed a vast literature on casework (Lowande, Ritchie, and Lauterbach 2019), constituency correspondence (Grimmer, Messing, and Westwood 2012), and many other forms of legislative representation (Miler 2010; Kaslovsky 2020). By contrast, there is nearly no existing research on congressional town hall meetings. Fortunately, researchers have recently executed a series of experiments evaluating the consequences and costs of town hall events (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018), and we aim to supplement this work by analyzing every town hall meeting held by every senator and representative from August 2013 to December 2021.

Second, we build upon Bernhard and Sulkin (2018) to examine the direct relationship between legislative politics and district representation. This work stands apart from a long body of earlier research (Fiorina and Rohde 1991; Cover and Brumberg 1982; Cover 1985) that focused primarily on the electoral benefits and incentives of district politics. Given the structural imperatives of constrained official congressional resources and prior research on the subject, we investigate the possibility of a zero-sum trade-off between work done in Washington, DC and work done in the electoral district. We find, contrary to our expectations,

that good lawmakers do not stand out as particularly negligent of their district. Instead, the elected officials most likely to hold fewer town hall meetings are also those that accomplish little on Capitol Hill. Our findings speak to key questions in the study of congressional representation and lawmaking.

DISTRICT PRESENCE AND AMERICAN LAWMAKING

Constituents ask a lot of their elected representatives. At least implicitly, novice lawmakers are expected to become masters of policymaking. Constituents expect their representatives to block bad bills, amend imperfect proposals and bend national policies towards district interests. For newly elected senators and representatives, lawmaking is demanding, frustrating, and central to the position. But national policymaking is merely one component of the job description. Citizens also expect members of Congress to remain embedded in the political communities that propelled them to public office, and opponents are eager to brand incumbents as distant lawmakers that have lost touch with local affairs.

This imperative – the never-ending need to be seen as present in the state or district has grown increasingly difficult over the last century. On average, the number of constituents that each lawmaker must represent has more than tripled since 1910. Members of Congress face the impossible task of connecting to hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people – a staggering task even if we discount all other official responsibilities.[2] It is no wonder, then, that lawmakers divert scarce resources away from legislating in an attempt to better represent their district.

[2] https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-the-house-got-stuck-at-435-seats/

Today, individual House members are given an opportunity to craft their own political operations through the use of the Members' Representational Allowance (MRA).[3] Crucially, reforms to the MRA in 1999 effectively broke down the barriers to spending across three specified categories – clerk-hire, franked mail, and official office expenses (Brudnick 2022). Money not spent on franked mail, for example, could be redirected to bonuses for legislative staff, office renovations, or any number of other expenses. Similarly, the Senators' Official Personnel and Office Expense Account (SOPOEA), established in 1986, provides near-complete discretion in how each Senator may spend official resources. Whatever their intention, the reforms created a zero-sum relationship between money spent in D.C. and the district.

While scholars have long evaluated the importance of district politics to electoral outcomes, relatively little research has evaluated the relationship between district presence and legislative outcomes. This is surprising, in part, because studies of district politics invariably turn to Fenno (1978) to establish the significance of a "home style" in congressional politics, but they rarely investigate one of the three key ingredients articulated in that seminal study: the allocation of personal and official resources. For Fenno, the decision to spend time and deploy staff in the district is central to an individual's home style, but the appeal of district investments sets up an absolute tradeoff with the legislative domain.

> *The allocative problem, therefore, comes with the job. And this built-in strain between the need to attend to Washington business and the need to attend to district business affects the work of each individual and the work product of the institution. The strain is both omnipresent and severe. Members give up the job because of it. Congressional reforms are advocated to alleviate it.*
> *(Fenno 1978, 33)*

[3] The MRA was first established in 1996, following a long string of reforms aimed at increasing the flexibility of office operations dating back to at least the 1970s (Brudnick 2022)

Beyond the official funds and employees allocated to each office, lawmakers have a finite amount of time to achieve their political objectives and an exhausting list of tasks to accomplish. For example, members are expected to be present for key votes, attend committee and party meetings, interface with the media, and regularly phone donors. The decision to fly home and hold a potentially hostile town hall meeting creates both proximate resource costs and the risk of political backlash.

In this research, we intend to focus narrowly on the relationship between lawmaking and one form of district presence: town hall activity. While we have little prior research on town halls to inform our expectations, we can build upon the considerable research done on other forms of district politics. Each subsection that follows is intended to help us better understand the relationship between district presence and lawmaking, before proceeding to our exploratory analysis of the data.

Town Hall Meetings

Town hall democracy has a long tradition in America. Tocqueville described town hall meetings as giving attendees knowledge and investment in local government unparalleled in other political systems. These early American town halls - recorded as early as 1633 in Dorchester, Massachusetts - were not symbolic public meetings or discussions of the actions of representatives but legally binding assemblies for "inhabitants to... settle such orders as may tend to the generall (sic) good" (Mansky 2016). These events "re-emerged" in the 20th century after a period of absence (Rountree 2019). Today, congressional town hall meetings are public gatherings (typically in a local municipal building) that provide an opportunity for direct and open dialogue between constituents and national lawmakers.

The organization and funding of town hall meetings are reimbursable components of congressional expense accounts like many of the other forms of district presence. However, town hall meetings stand out as distinct in several ways. First, lawmakers are required to spend their incredibly scarce time actually executing this form of district politics; this personal opportunity cost stands in contrast to the many delegated alternative forms of district presence. Second, town hall meetings require lawmakers to concede some measure of control over event circumstances, which in turn raises the risk of a costly blunder or embarrassing response turned viral video.

Until recently, there was almost no systematic research on congressional town halls. This changed with a trailblazing set of field experiments designed to understand if deliberative democracy could flourish in a virtual town hall setting (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018). In those studies, researchers found that members of the public randomly assigned to participate in an online town hall with their senator or representative expressed a strong increase in support for their elected officials (e.g., trust, approval, intent-to-vote) and seemed persuaded by lawmakers' key positions on salient public policies of the day (Minozzi et al. 2015). More recent experiments using telephone town hall models similarly found that participation in these events enhanced the public's view of the Member of Congress hosting the event (Abernathy et al. 2019). Finally, Kielty, Lee, and Neblo (2022) flip the focus of earlier experimental designs and evaluate the motivations for lawmakers to participate in co-hosted deliberative town hall meetings. They find, in short, legislative offices were nearly twice as likely to positively respond to

such town hall events if the focus of the event was *learning from constituents* rather than *justifying* the lawmaker's position.[4]

Collectively, this research suggests that lawmakers are genuinely interested in learning from and listening to constituents in these meetings. Moreover, well-constructed field experiments provide some causal evidence of individual benefits to incumbent lawmakers that choose to engage in deliberative town hall events. Despite these notable studies, we lack even a basic descriptive understanding of the scope of this seemingly important legislative behavior. Moreover, we are unable to draw upon a large body of theoretical or observational studies to inform our investigation of town hall meetings and legislative politics. Consequently, we turn to research on other forms of district politics to better inform our expectations on the topic.

Congressional Casework

Every year, congressional offices field thousands of requests for assistance with immigration processes, social security benefits, veterans' programs, and, more generally, support in navigating a large and complex federal bureaucracy. Lawmakers have conducted congressional casework of this sort since the very first days of the American republic. Casework presents an opportunity both to garner deeper political support among grateful constituents and identify public policies in need of legislative reform (Petersen and Eckman 2021).

Political scientists have extensively studied constituent requests for help and attempts by lawmakers to serve as ombudspersons for their concerned citizenry. For

[4] Beyond this series of targeted field experiments, Henderson et al. (2021) find some qualitative evidence that staffers note issues raised in town hall meetings, which may suggest a connection to lawmaking priorities.

example, experimental work has documented both the electoral (Dropp and Peskowitz 2012) and racial context (Butler, Karpowitz, and Pope 2012) for response rates to (fictitious) constituency requests,[5] and recent observational work has meticulously collected official records of informational requests made by congressional offices to executive agencies.[6] This latter approach has provided breakthrough findings in our understanding of how casework can affect inter-branch oversight (Lowande 2018, 2019) and offered empirical evidence of both descriptive representation and shared experiences as key causal mechanisms in effective constituent-advocacy work (Lowande, Ritchie, and Lauterbach 2019).

Casework is often described as an individualized, congressional customer service process, but recent findings also suggest that casework can be used as a means of policymaking. Lawmakers can use inter-branch correspondence of this sort to attempt a novel form of distributive politics and mold public policy by lobbying key executive branch agencies (Mills, Kalaf-Hughes, and MacDonald 2016; Ritchie 2018). Building on these landmark studies, Judge-Lord, Grimmer, and Powell (2022) provide compelling new evidence that lawmakers do indeed prioritize policy over casework after securing positions of formal power, but they are also able to maintain prior levels of district work by capitalizing on the additional resources that accompany these influential positions. While casework may flag a problem in existing programs or executive agencies, prior research on this form of district politics suggests a complex trade-off. Legislative success may correspond with district neglect – unless lawmakers can secure offsetting staffing resources through formal positions of power.

[5] Note that these studies focus on state legislative offices, rather than congressional casework.
[6] Geras and Crespin (2019) take a different approach by blending internal congressional records with an interview of the Member of Congress.

District Staff

Staffing is a critical resource in legislative politics and district representation, and yet Congress has enacted policies that make it very difficult to meet this dual set of obligations. Most research on congressional personnel has focused on legislative aides and the First Branch's troubling lack of institutional capacity (LaPira, Drutman, and Kosar 2020). We know that, at an individual level, staffers provide Members of Congress with valuable networks useful in legislative affairs (Montgomery and Nyhan 2017; Burgat 2020), [7] and retaining highly experienced staff can lead to greater legislative effectiveness (Crosson et al. 2018). At an aggregate level, senior committee staff members with greater experience improve the effectiveness of their committee (Cottle N.d.), and leaders of legislative organizations can see a meaningful reduction in their legislative influence after sharp reductions in staffing resources (Clarke 2020).

Without question, Congress has made it more difficult to be a representative today than ever before. Despite a booming population, the U.S. House is capped at 435 voting members. Population growth creates an annual increase in representational strain built into the job description. Compounding this problem, Congress placed a cap on personal staff in 1975. Since staff limitations went into effect, the number of constituents per House member has grown by around 240,000, and recent estimates suggest that House offices received a nearly sevenfold increase in messages over a recent five-year period alone (Szpindor 2021). While lawmakers are facing extraordinary constituency demands, congressional policymaking authority has been increasingly centralized in the hands of

[7] Consistent with this finding, well-connected staffers are better compensated when they choose to leave Capitol Hill to pursue a career in lobbying (McCrain 2018)

party leadership (Curry 2015). Lawmakers are thus presented with a tempting opportunity to free-ride on party leadership policymaking while they tend to the district demands that remain uniquely placed upon their desk.[8]

Consequently, individual House and Senate offices have responded by diverting resources away from legislative positions at an alarming rate (Crosson et al. 2021). [9] In fact, recent research on congressional capacity has documented a notable (12-19 percentage point) increase in district staff positions from 1979-2016; flipping through an office directory, you are much more likely to see district-DC parity in staffing allocations today than in earlier decades (Reynolds 2020).[10] These patterns are also not unique to backbenchers shut out from party leadership positions; leaders and electorally secure lawmakers actually spend more on district staff (McCrain 2021).[11] While staff clearly play a vital – if imperfect – role in facilitating information for lawmakers (Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger, and Stokes 2019; Furnas 2019), investing in greater district or state office staff does not clearly improve a lawmaker's perception among constituents (Parker and Goodman 2009, 2013). Moreover, there is a clear cost to diverting legislative staffing resources away from DC; offices see higher turnover and lower levels of experience in policy staff when they invest a relatively large share of their MRA in constituency service personnel McCrain (2021). In short, lawmakers face a pretty severe staffing constraint in running their small fiefdoms on Capitol

[8] District presence is a bit more complex in the case of the Senate (see Parker and Goodman (2013), but the point stands.
[9] The shift away from legislative staff positions may impact congressional politics and policymaking in other, more subtle ways. For example, Ritchie and You (2021) persuasively document existing gender gaps in promotion and compensation among congressional staffers, and as their appendix shows, women make up around 60% of staff positions in district and state off positions.
[10] Schiff and Smith (1983) provide some evidence consistent with this pattern in even earlier cohorts of lawmakers.
[11] Consistent with Judge-Lord, Grimmer, and Powell (2022), McCrain argues that there is a plausible substitution effect at play in these patterns.

Hill. However, those lawmakers that hire additional district staff at the cost of retaining or recruiting highly experienced legislative staff will likely become less effective policymakers. According to this research, establishing a strong district presence should correspond with a reduction in legislative capacity.

District Offices and Community Events

Of course, the work conducted in Senate state and House district offices includes a much broader category of activities and constituency services than casework. Legislators and their local staff offer internship opportunities for students, make nominations for the U.S. service academies, assist in the development of federal grant proposals, facilitate tours to the Capitol and White House, and organize a variety of other federal competitions and challenges for young constituents (Eckman 2021). As former Rep. Cass Ballenger (R-NC) put it, "A Congressional office is essentially the Customer Service Department for the federal government" (Ballenger 2005).

Relatively little political science research has been conducted on the importance of district offices for representational or lawmaking outcomes. Grose (2011) uses a cross-sectional analysis of twenty-seven district office locations in seventeen congressional districts to conclude that a member's race is a key predictor of office location (i.e., Black legislators are more likely to locate their offices in predominantly Black communities). Niven, Cover, and Solimine (2021) present novel evidence that gerrymandered legislative districts can lead to concerning problems of access to district office locations; this is unfortunate, as district offices may also play an integral role as clearinghouses of community event information. In a novel study on Senate state offices, Kaslovsky (2022) traces the movement of lawmakers within states by analyzing the details of per diem

spending in official congressional expense accounts. By combining this incredibly granular data with a geographic mapping of Senate staffers, Kaslovsky (2022) provides a compelling case *against* conventional wisdom that suggests a strong local presence increases voter support and mollifies fierce opposition.[12]

While the literature on district offices is quite sparse, recent work has begun to link the distribution of offices to lawmaking more directly. Bernhard and Sulkin (2018) combine employment data on district staff and offices to identify a cluster of lawmakers they title "district advocates." This measure, in turn, is used to draw some pretty stark conclusions about the alleged DC-District trade-off:

> *these MCs often focus on reelection at the expense of contributing to lawmaking in a substantial way. Perhaps as a result, district advocates do not stand out in terms of legislative effectiveness, are less likely to attain their preferred committee assignment, and are less prone to rise to leadership positions. Thus, from the perspective of representation, devotion to the district can be a doubleedged sword, as it often comes at the expense of distinction in Washington, D.C. (Bernhard and Sulkin 2018, 208)*

Taken together, these studies further advance the argument that a strong district presence and legislative success pull in competing directions on finite time and resources.

Franked Mail

Members have been able to send franked mail since the late 1700s, and over the course of the ensuing centuries, the privilege has been the subject of regular debate (Sellers 2010; Porro and Ascher 1973; Wasmund 1972). While the ability to send mail to constituents on the government dime is as old as the Republic (Glassman 2015), the rules of the modern House afford legislators greater flexibility today in how franking allowances may be spent.

[12] In earlier work, Parker and Goodman (2009) find evidence that within-district travel and franking expenses correspond with positive constituency impressions.

Simply put, legislators may divert money nominally allocated to franked mail towards other ends, such as hiring an additional legislative aide. This sets up a direct trade-off between using mailed correspondence to establish a strong representational presence and using that money, instead, towards policymaking efforts. [13]

Existing franking research has focused on the relationship between electoral security and franking activity (Edwards, Stephenson, and Yeoh 2012; Hall, Nesbit, and Thorson 2012; Hassell and Monson 2016; Lapinski et al. 2016; Peskowitz 2018). For example, Cover and Brumberg (1982) conduct a pair of randomized field experiments on the impact of franked messages from representatives and estimated a significant increase (up to 29%) in the salience of the elected official in the minds of constituents. This finding is consistent with conventional wisdom passed on through generations of lawmakers; take Speaker William B. Bankhead's advice to a class of newly elected representatives: "Give close and prompt attention to your mail. Your votes and speeches may make you well known and give you a reputation, but it's the way you handle your mail that determines your re-election" (Butler 1966). The House has expanded, constrained, and even temporarily abolished the ability to send franked mail, but legislators continue to spend considerable sums of money to communicate with constituents on a massive scale.

By contrast, the link between franked mail and legislative activity has been relatively understudied. In a direct investigation of the district-DC tradeoff, McCrain (2021) presents evidence that [1] members substitute franked mail for personnel spending in competitive electoral environments, [2] franked mail declines with the number of terms served in Congress, and [3] franked mail serves a substitution for constituency service

[13] Even though there are caps for member staff, there is room for greater investment in legislative staffers in many if not all congressional offices. Certainly, most legislative personnel could be paid a higher salary.

salary allocations. On the other hand, Goodman and Parker (2010) found a positive relationship between franking activity and bill sponsorship. While the results here are somewhat mixed, funds allocated for franked mail expenses remain theoretically transferable to other official expense categories like pay raises for legislative staffers.

Hypothesis

We build on these recent studies to reevaluate the relationship between district presence and lawmaking. Modern legislators are given a flexible set of official funds to spend as they please, and those that shift a disproportionate amount of their time and political resources away from the legislature might plausibly suffer in legislative affairs. Strapped for resources and understaffed, district-focused members should be hindered in their ability to negotiate compromises, craft careful policy proposals, and navigate the complex legislative environment in which they operate.

Trade-Off Hypothesis: Effective lawmakers will hold fewer town hall meetings.

This claim may seem intuitive, but there are at least some reasons to doubt that this pattern holds. Anecdotal evidence suggests that neglecting the district can be disastrous for even powerful lawmakers.[14] It is also possible that resources spent in one arena may provide benefits in others. Lawmakers may use their experience in town hall meetings to refine a legislative agenda that is more tightly focused on their state or district's needs – an approach similar to those described by (positive) outliers in legislative effectiveness (Volden and Wiseman 2014). Nevertheless, the majority of research on district politics

[14] Consider the case of Eric Cantor, a highly adept legislator and party leader, poised to become Speaker of the House. As one Virginia strategist put it, "People talk. And they talk about Eric Cantor. "Where is he?" His constituent services suck. He was never in the district." (Newton-Small 2014). Cantor did not hold a single town hall meeting during his last full year in office.

suggests incumbent members face an inherent tension between legislative and district facing work.

PATTERNS IN CONGRESSIONAL TOWN HALL MEETINGS (2013-2021)

To better understand the scope of town hall meetings in American politics, we use a comprehensive record of every town hall meeting held by every member of the House and Senate. Our source data comes from Legistorm, which begins by assessing "thousands of sources of news about town halls - including Facebook, Twitter, newsletters, press releases and official web sites - to provide a comprehensive list of all town hall events."[15] Legistorm began providing nearly real-time town hall data in August 2013, and we completed our data collection on December 31, 2021. Legistorm provided addresses, which we geocoded to coordinate positions and then merged with data on the topics and hosting member of each town hall.

In total, we collected information on 23,068 town hall meetings hosted by 793 different members of the U.S. Congress. There is extraordinary variation in the dataset. Town halls happen throughout the year, hosted by members of both parties, across both chambers and throughout all regions of the United States. To our knowledge, our study is the first to analyze the frequency of town hall events over time and the first to use the Legistorm data in a systematic way. Over 67% (15,600) of recorded town halls are in-person events, while the rest take a varied form of remote formats.

[15] As Legistorm itself acknowledges, this list may not be fully comprehensive, it is possible, for example, that some remote town halls occur with no prior announcement. However, given the commercial incentives Legistorm faces and the necessarily public nature of these events, we believe that their database is incredibly accurate. Spot-checking archived websites and other, less systematic sources gave us further confidence in this belief.

Members held around 8 town hall meetings, on average, per Congress, but as Figure 1 and Figure 2 demonstrate below, we can observe considerable variation in our dataset. The standard deviation for town halls per Congress is 14.76, and many lawmakers held no town hall meetings in a two-year period. In the last full Congress for which we have data (the 116th), 74 representatives and 34 senators held zero town hall meetings.

FIGURE 1. The Distribution of Town Hall Meetings Held by U.S. House Members Per Year

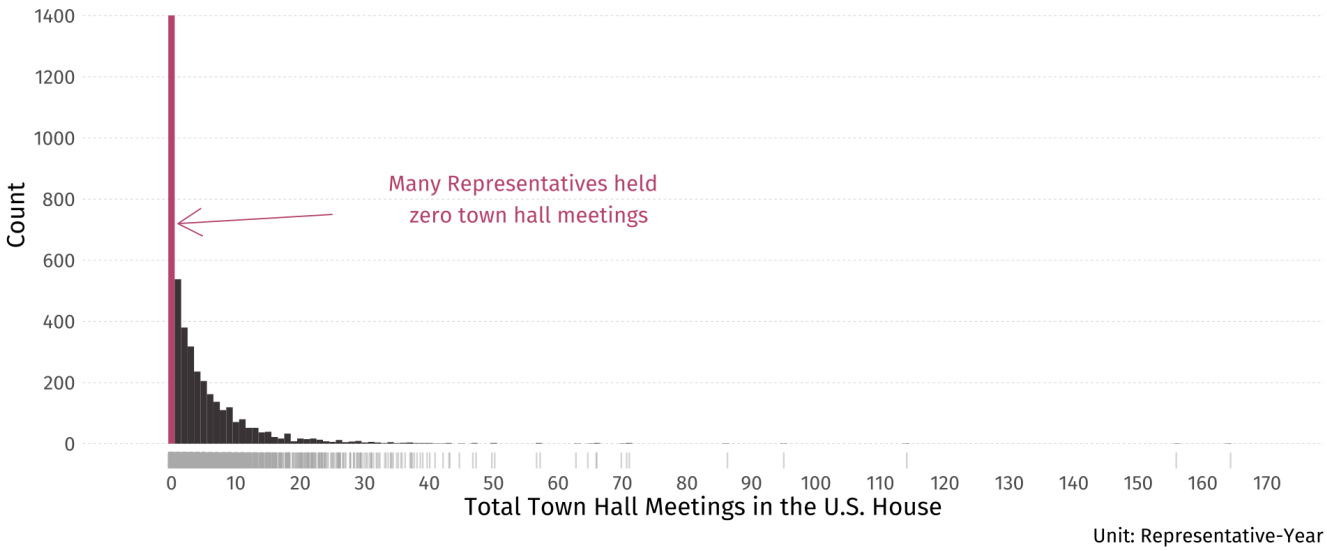
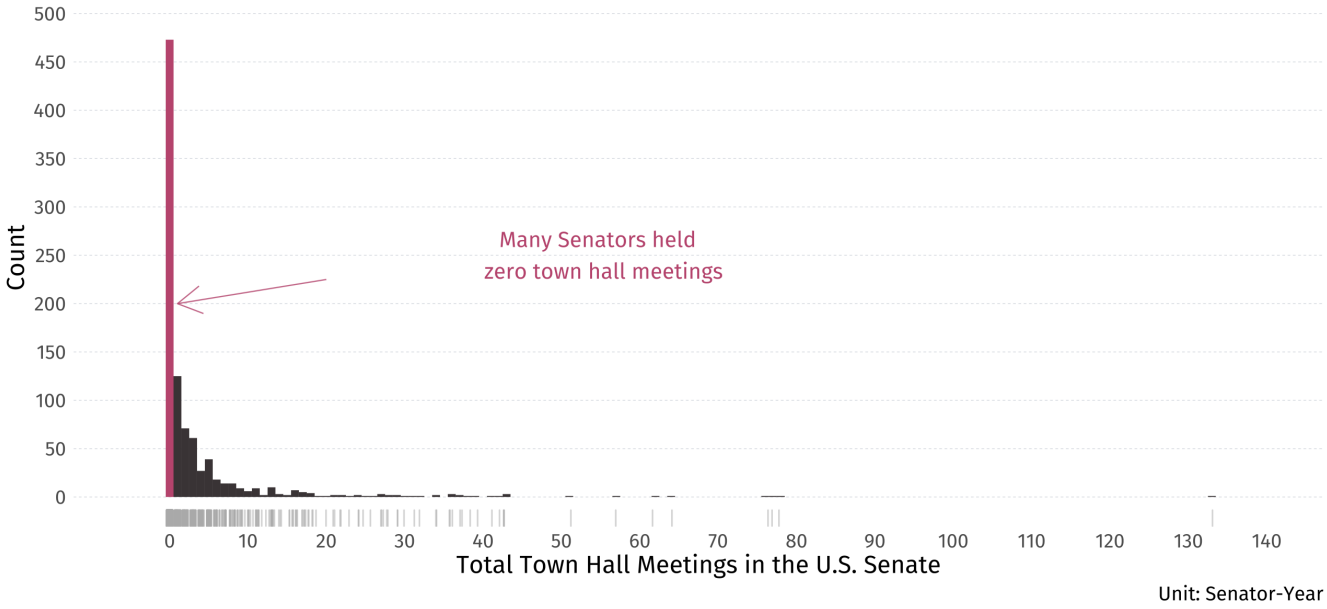


FIGURE 2. The Distribution of Town Hall Meetings Held by U.S. Senators Per Year



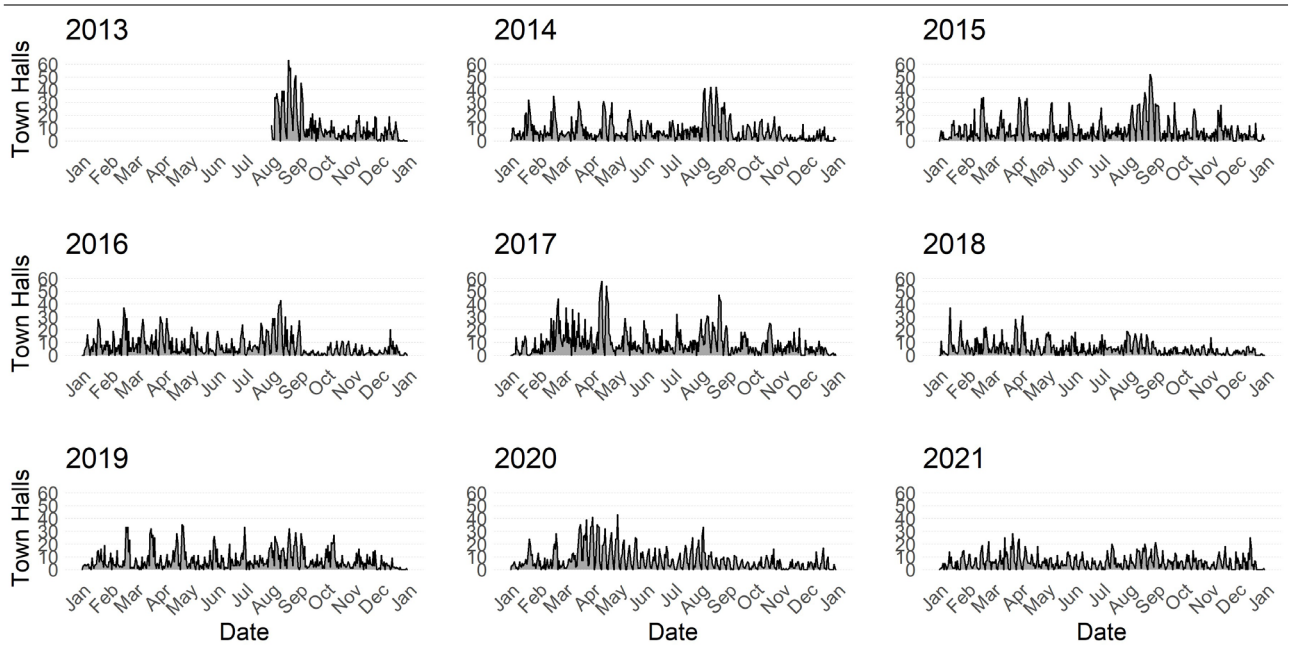
We do, however, see some differences across chamber. The average House member holds around 9 town hall meetings while the average senator holds only 7; the average senator held fewer town hall meetings than the average representative in 39 out of 50 states – a pattern that is remarkably consistent across all congresses and for the vast majority of states. In fact, 83.5% of the town halls in our sample were held by members of the House. For the most part, when we say that town halls give citizens access to lawmakers we mean access to members of the House, the branch designed to be more directly connected to the mass electorate.

This might be somewhat surprising as many senators have far more constituents than those of a single congressional district. In fact, we looked at the seven states with single-member delegations in the House and found an even sharper divide; Representatives from those states held around 22 town hall meetings on average compared to 5 for Senators from

the same states.[16] Given the different term-lengths and official resources available to these legislators, the disparity in town hall meetings is particularly noteworthy.

As Figure 3 shows, legislators hold town hall meetings throughout the year. Consistent with a trade-off perspective, we see a simple up-tick in member town halls during periods of relative inactivity on Capitol Hill. Note, for example, that there are typically around 15 town halls held per day in August – substantially higher than the 11 or so town halls held per day in April, the next highest month. By contrast, November and December are low-points in town hall activity, featuring an average of 4 and 3 town halls per day, respectively.

FIGURE 3. Town Hall Meetings Over Time

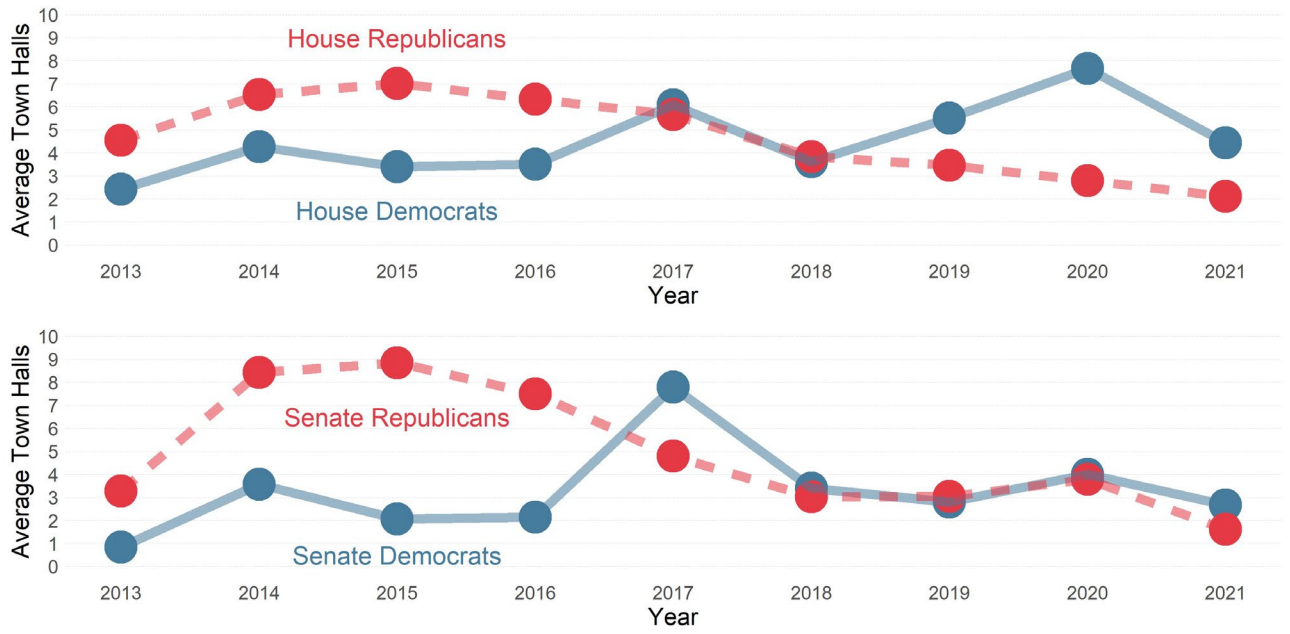


Simply put, there is a lot of variation – both between members and within a member's careers – in how many town halls a member holds in a given Congress. For

[16] The seven states were Alaska, Delaware, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Wyoming.

example, we do observe some minor partisan differences in town hall meetings; the average Republican legislator held around 9 town halls per Congress while the average Democrat held 8. However these ratios seem to vary with political headwinds. For example, Figure 4 shows a spike in Democratic town hall meetings after Democrats regained power in the House. In general, however, both parties and both chambers continue to hold town hall meetings throughout our time period.

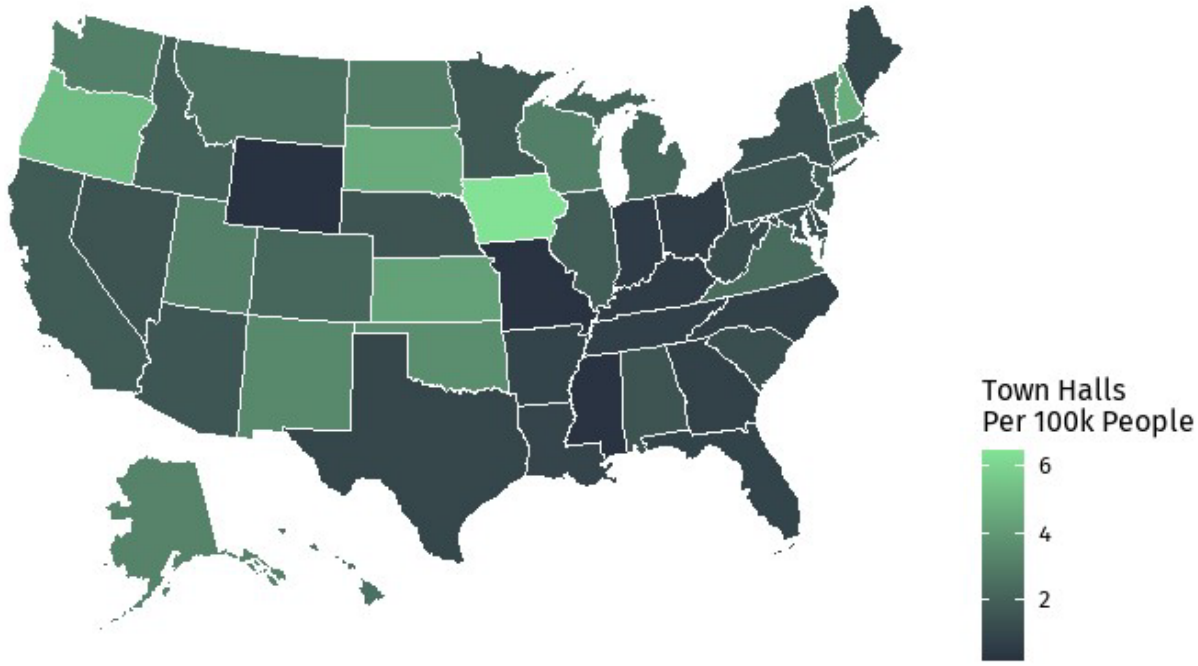
FIGURE 4. House and Senate Patterns in Town Hall Activity, by Party



There is also broad variation in access to town hall events across the Republic. As we can see from Figure 5, the distribution of town hall meetings per 100,000 people follows no obvious regional pattern. (Brighter shades of green represent higher concentrations of town hall access.) A few states – Oregon, Iowa, New Hampshire – stand out as places full of direct democratic engagement, but these patterns change from year to year. We see variation within states and regions in where town halls are available to constituents. We do not

observe any obvious pattern in distance from the capital, suggesting that town hall frequency is not merely a function of convenient travel.[17]

FIGURE 5. Town Halls per 100k People in the 116th Congress



In short, the town hall data we analyze in the following section presents a range of opportunities for future political science investigation. While we note some descriptive patterns, most differences we highlight – between parties, chambers, etc. – are surprisingly small (one or two town hall increments). However, many other questions are sure to reveal larger gaps. For example, while it is beyond the scope of this paper, there are likely stark difference in the mode of town hall meeting across members and over time. Some members prefer in-person gatherings, which offer less control and more direct (and arguably authentic) interactions with political communities. On the other hand, other

[17] While the cost of additional travel *time* is unevenly shared, it is worth noting that representational allowances for lawmakers incorporates distance in their formulas.

lawmakers seem far more willing to experiment with new technologies within the categories of remote meetings (e.g., radio vs. TikTok). Consequently, some elected officials were far better prepared to maintain a virtual district presence once the COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States. Having introduced some very general descriptive patterns in town hall occurrence, we turn next to an investigation of the relationship between district presence (or neglect) and national policymaking.

DOES EFFECTIVE LAWMAKING CORRESPOND WITH DISTRICT NEGLECT?

We next turn to evaluate the Trade-off Hypothesis more directly. In our interpretation, the most relevant findings from existing studies suggested something of a zero-sum trade-off between district and DC affairs; elected officials work with an inherent tension between their need to act as a legislator and as a local representative of a geographically bound political community. Because of absolute time constraints and finite, fungible expense accounts, we expect that the most effective lawmakers would be less likely to host high numbers of town hall meetings.

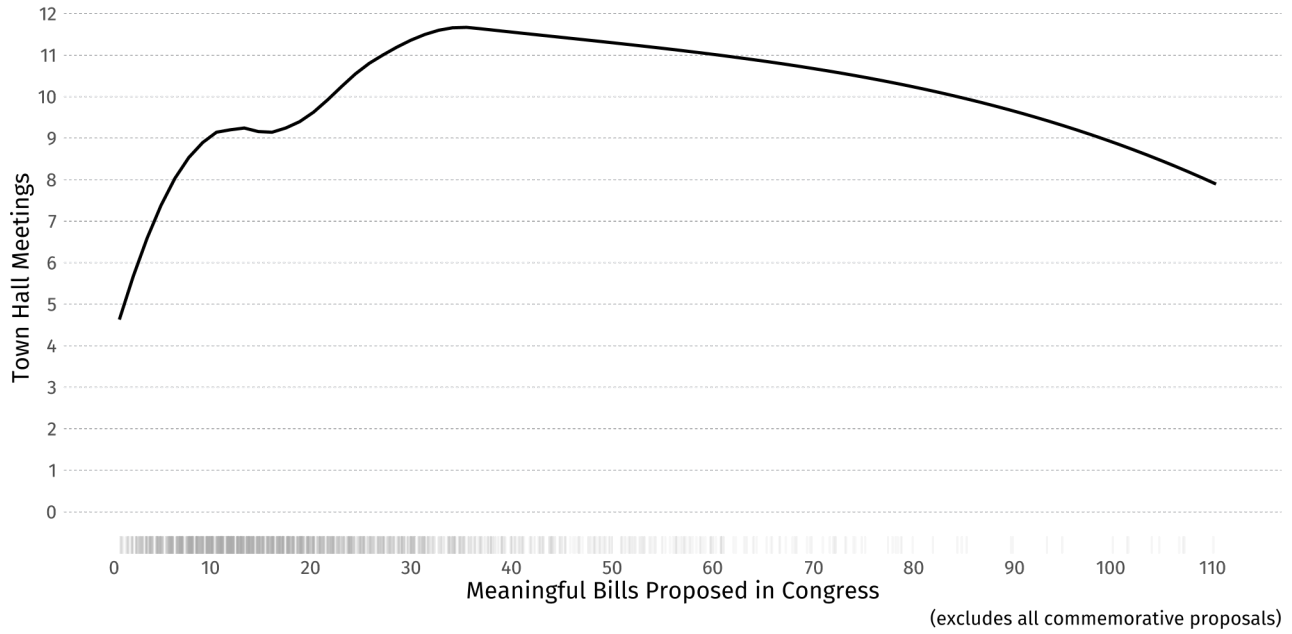
To conduct our analysis, we use town halls held per Congress as our main outcome variable. We also rely heavily upon the data provided by the Center for Effective Lawmaking (CEL). The CEL data provides a detailed record of every bill proposed by every member of the House and Senate between 1973-2020 – along with a wealth of valuable covariates relevant for our analysis. In their work, Volden and Wiseman (2014) code every proposal as "commemorative" (symbolic proposals, such as the renaming of post offices), "substantive and significant" (landmark proposals, such as the Affordable Care Act), and "substantive" (all other proposals). Next, they track how far each proposal progresses by recording a bill's success at each stage of the daunting legislative process: committees, the originating

chamber and ultimate passage into law. Taken together, they are able to construct a summary "Legislative Effectiveness Score" for each lawmaker in each Congress using a weighted average of fifteen bill-level indicators (five lawmaking stages including bill proposal X three levels of significance). Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LES) are normalized to an average value of "1" within each Congress to simplify cross-sectional comparisons among lawmakers.

To begin, we evaluate if those elected officials that simply propose a high volume of meaningful legislative initiatives are consequently pulled away from their responsibilities to connect to their state or congressional district. We measure "meaningful bill proposals" as any substantive or substantive and significant (i.e., non-commemorative) legislative initiatives sponsored by a Senator or Representative. In Figure 6, we visualize this bivariate relationship with a Locally Estimated Scatterplot Smoothing (LOESS) trend line.[18] The rugplot on the x-axis adds information about the density (or sparsity) of observations used to estimate the regression; relatively few lawmakers, for example, introduced more than 40 pieces of public policy in a two-year period.

[18] We omit the full scatterplot, as several extreme outliers in town hall frequency make it difficult to interpret the meaningful changes in the trend line.

FIGURE 6. Productive Lawmakers Hold More – Not Fewer – Town Hall meetings



The results from Figure 6 suggest that members holding the fewest town hall meetings generally propose fewer meaningful bills in Congress. This runs contrary to our expectation. Our results do not suggest two clear and divergent types of lawmakers: district-focused elected officials holding town halls and policy-focused elected officials drafting legislative initiatives. Instead, lawmakers that propose more meaningful bills also tend to hold greater numbers of town hall meetings. Even the most prolific policy proposers seem to make time and dedicate personnel resources to organizing more town hall meetings than those members that accomplish very little in the legislative domain.

In Figure 7, we reconsider the Trade-off Hypothesis after incorporating additional circumstances relevant to policymaking success. Here we plot the average number of town halls against an established, categorical measure of legislative success. More specifically, Volden and Wiseman (2014) estimate a benchmark score for each lawmaker based upon similar levels of congressional seniority, majority party status, committee chair positions,

and subcommittee chair positions. Members of Congress with an LES "Above Expectations" have a particularly high ratio (1.5) of their observed LES relative to their predicted LES given these important factor. Members of Congress with an LES "Below Expectations" have a particularly low ratio (<.5) of their observed LES relative to their predicted effectiveness. Finally, lawmakers with a ratio between .5 an 1.5 of their predicted effectiveness are considered to be "Meeting" expectations.

FIGURE 7. Underperforming Lawmakers Hold Fewer Town Hall Meetings than Their Peers in the House and Senate

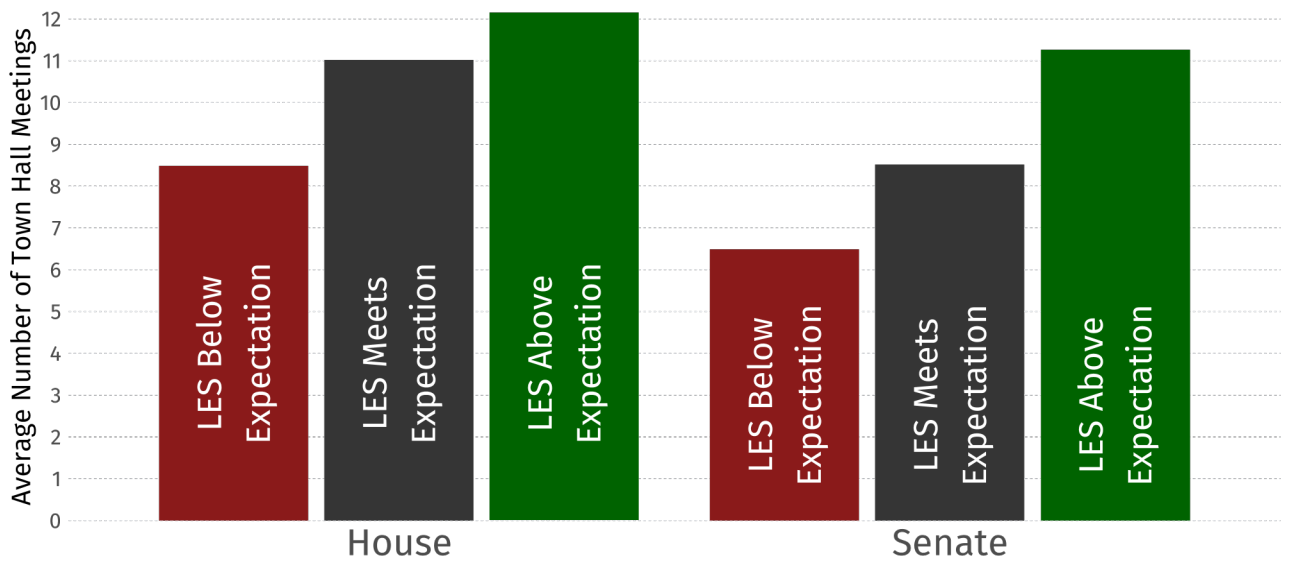


Figure 7 thus shows that highly effective lawmakers also hold the most town hall meetings. Contrary to the Trade-Off Hypothesis, those lawmakers unable to achieve legislative success hold fewer – not more – town hall meetings than those highly successful policymakers. These plots take into account important potential predictors of legislative influence (e.g., committee chairs, majority party status) and still find that some Senators and Representatives are able to succeed in D.C. without neglecting their constituents.

We continue to interrogate the relationship between legislative effectiveness and town hall meetings by incorporating additional factors that might both predict policymaking and town hall meetings. More specifically, we run a series of fixed-effects linear regression models. Our outcome variable remains the total number of town hall meetings held by an individual lawmaker. Our key explanatory variables are the binary indicators that a lawmaker either measures below expectations or above expectations for their legislative effectiveness score; "meets expectations" is our omitted reference category. As before, the benchmark measures also account for the lawmaker's seniority, majority party status, chair positions, and sub-committee chair positions in that two-year period. We also include a binary indicator for electorally vulnerable lawmakers by using scraped measures of Cook Political Record.[19] Any non-solid Cook rating is coded as an indication of electoral threat during that legislative period.[20] Finally, we control for membership in the party opposed to the President of the United States. Members of the party that lacks control of the White House may be unable to advance major legislative initiatives (due to the veto); at the same time, they face unique incentives to offer their constituents a high-profile alternative to the President's governing philosophy.

In the first model of Table 1, we also incorporate Congress fixed effects, which allows us to control for unit-invariant shocks that likely affected all lawmakers during a two-year period. This "between-effects" model asks, "which lawmakers hold town hall meetings?" By contrast, the second "within-effects" model asks, "when do lawmakers hold town hall meetings?" The use of lawmaker fixed-effects in this model also accounts for any other

[19] In Appendix Table A3, we include an alternative measure of vulnerability: the percentage of vote received in the prior general election. The findings reported in Table 1 remain consistent in that alternative specification.
[20] Data from https://www.cookpolitical.com/ratings/senate-race-ratings. If a race is not rated we code it as safe for the incumbent.

characteristics constant to that lawmaker throughout the 114th - 116th Congresses. Our final model includes both time- and unit-fixed effects.[21] Standard errors are clustered by lawmaker across all model specifications.

TABLE 1. Effective Lawmakers Do Not Hold Fewer Town Hall Meetings

	DV: Total Town Hall Meetings		
Above Expectations LES	1.6	0.66	0.53
	(1.4)	(1.2)	(1.1)
Below Expectations LES	-2.1**	-2.4*	-2.4*
	(1.1)	(1.3)	(1.3)
Electorally Vulnerable	0.43	1.2	1.7
	(1.1)	(0.98)	(1.1)
Opposed to President	4.3***	5.0***	4.9***
	(0.58)	(0.84)	(0.82)
Congress FE	Yes		Yes
Lawmaker FE		Yes	Yes
Observations	1,617	1,617	1,617
R_2	0.02	0.73	0.74
Within R^2	0.02	0.06	0.06

Lawmaker-clustered standard-errors in parentheses
****:p<0.01, **: p<0.05, *: p<0.1*

The Trade-Off Hypothesis suggested that lawmakers that invest time, personnel, and other resources into policymaking would have a smaller district footprint. We do not find support for that hypothesis. In our first model, a cross-sectional look at the data suggests that under-performing legislators also hold fewer town hall meetings when compared to those lawmakers that are able to secure a reasonable amount of legislative success. By contrast, high-performing legislators do not hold fewer town halls than their more average

[21] While two-way fixed effects models are often used to generalize the two-stage diff-in-diff estimation strategy with multiple treatment periods, we are not primarily interested in causal estimates here. Instead, we are primarily interested in observing the correlation between town hall meetings and legislative behavior after stripping out other possible predictive factors.

colleagues as the cost of policymaking. Instead, the number of town halls they hold is statistically indistinguishable from the "meets expectations" group. Interestingly, these results hold after including lawmaker fixed-effects. When lawmakers increase their legislative success, they do not reduce their town hall activity at a greater rate than colleagues, but lawmakers that begin to under-perform also become less likely to show up at a public gathering with constituents.[22]

In short, excellent lawmakers – relative to their institutional opportunities – do not seem to neglect their district or state representational responsibilities. It is true, however, that these models obscure important components of legislative power that may lead to district neglect. Benchmark legislative effectiveness scores cannot, for example, account for alternative forms of legislative influence that are both institutionally rooted and unmeasured by Legislative Effectiveness Scores. For example, members of a party's leadership team may need to skip a trip home in order to whip votes in D.C. Alternatively, a committee chair's calendar may be consumed by marking up another lawmaker's proposal, and a rank-and-file member of the Ways and Means Committee may need to maximize the personal staff available to assist with the complex work of overseeing proposed revisions to the federal tax code.

We evaluate these possibilities by estimating the linear probability that a lawmaker neglects their district (i.e., fails to hold even a single town hall meeting in a two-year period of time). In these models, we again rely upon data collected by the Center for Effective Lawmaking, but we account for legislative positions directly (rather than incorporating

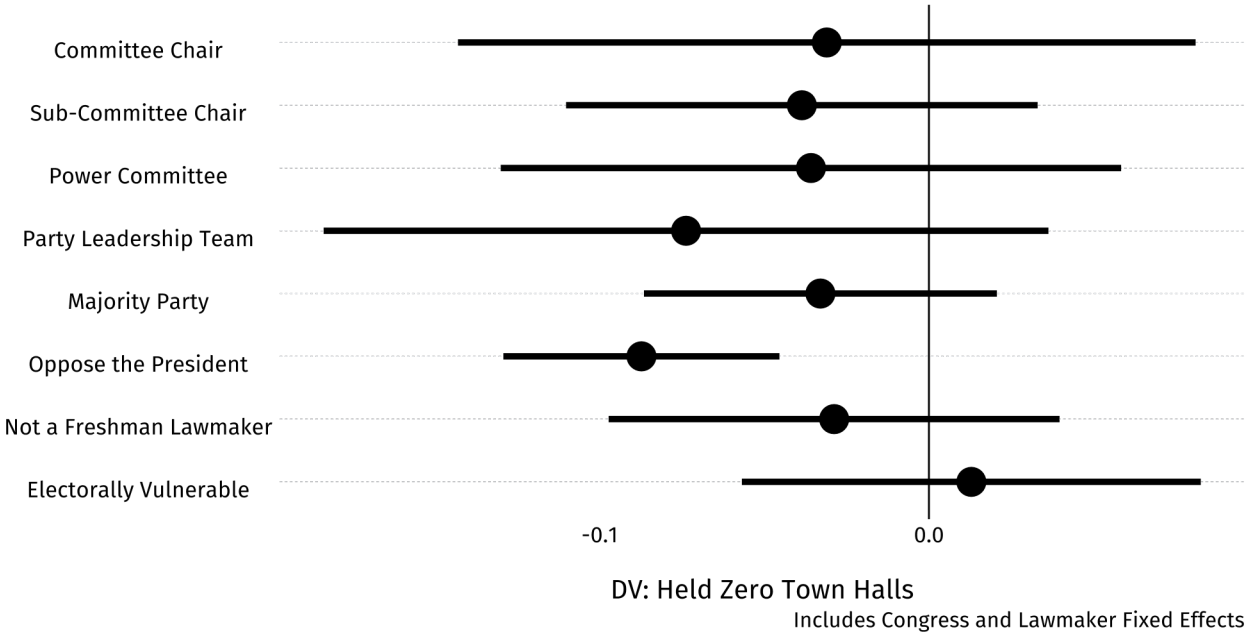
[22] We run a series of robustness checks in the appendix. In Tables A1 and A2, we disaggregate our dependent variable into in-person and remote town hall meetings, respectively, and in Table A4, we break our model out by legislative chamber. Across these models, our primary finding – that highly effective lawmakers do not neglect town hall events – remains consistent.

these into legislative expectation metrics). We include indicator variables for committee chairs, sub-committee chairs, party leaders, and members of the most powerful committees in the House or Senate (e.g., Appropriations). In keeping with our prior analysis, we continue to account for opponents of the president, majority party status, and electoral vulnerability. Similarly, we incorporate a binary variable for non-freshman lawmakers.[23]

The results of Figure 8 do not provide strong evidence that institutional power will lead to the neglect of town hall events. Members of the majority party, committee chairs, and every other indicator of legislative power in the model are less likely to hold zero town hall events in a two-year period - although the effect is imprecisely estimated. This runs contrary to the Trade-off Hypothesis. In short, the results of the full model – visually displayed in Figure 8 – do not provide strong evidence that elected officials turn their back on their constituents once they secure institutional positions of power.

[23] See Appendix Figures A1 and A2 for bivariate plots between town hall meetings and seniority or prior vote share.

FIGURE 8. Institutional Power Does Not Necessarily Lead to District Neglect



In summary, we did not find evidence of a district-DC trade-off in our analysis of town halls and legislative affairs. Lawmakers that introduce few or no meaningful bills also appear to be among the least present in local political gatherings. We also do not find evidence that effective lawmakers become so by diverting all of their resources towards policymaking; or at least, under-performing legislators generally manage to also hold fewer town halls than those with greater success on Capitol Hill. Additionally, holding a formal position of legislative influence in Congress does not predict periods of district neglect. Legislative leaders and members of influential committees are just as likely to pass on holding town halls for an entire term as rank-and-file peers (or compared to earlier periods in their own careers).

Beyond our hypothesis, two patterns stood out as noteworthy descriptive findings. First, we found evidence that partisan opponents of the incumbent president hold significantly more town halls. This effect is consistent across all of our statistical models;

members of the party opposed to the president hold (4-5) more town hall meetings per Congress, which is a substantially large effect given the 8.36 town halls per member per Congress average. Second, electoral vulnerability never strongly correlates with town hall activity. This is true across a number of model specifications that use the Cook Scores and remains consistent if we use vote share in the most recent election as an alternative measure of electoral threat.

DISCUSSION

Lawmakers and constituents certainly believe that town halls *matter* in American politics. These gatherings serve an apparently vital normative role that substantively differs from other forms of home style, but despite their apparent importance, town hall meetings remain surprisingly under-studied. While political scientists have recently executed a series of ambitious field experiments within individual town hall meetings (e.g., Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer (2018)), we believe this study is the first attempt to analyze systematic patterns of observed town hall events over time and across legislative offices. We set out to advance this hitherto limited literature in a few narrow, but important ways.

First, we considered the role of town halls in congressional politics after situating the topic in a much broader range of district (or state) political activities. With some notable exceptions (e.g., Bernhard and Sulkin (2018)), research on casework, congressional staff, office location, local travel, and franked mail tend to focus on the relationship between congressional home style and electoral politics. When studies do address the relationship between DC and the district, however, most studies suggested that lawmakers faced a terrible tension between two sets of impossible tasks. Senators and representatives could spend more on franked mail or state offices, but those investments

might come at the expense of pay raises for legislative staff. Building upon this work, we expected lawmaking and town hall representation to pull in competing directions.

Second, we presented a new dataset of over 23,000 town hall meetings to evaluate this otherwise untested form of district presence. In short, we found little support for a trade-off hypothesis. Legislative success and power did not correlate with reduced town hall activity. If anything, we discovered a striking pattern of district neglect among lawmakers that also seemed to be accomplishing little on Capitol Hill. Lawmakers do not appear to face a forked path in which they must choose between a strong presence among their constituents or colleagues on Capitol Hill.

Our study was designed as a descriptive exploration of an important measure in congressional behavior. While we attempted to isolate key patterns in analyzing the relationship between lawmaking and town halls, we did not propose a causally identified research design to rigorously explore the determinants of town hall frequency. Nevertheless, some interesting patterns are worth further investigation.

The suggestive relationship between under-performing lawmakers and town hall activity may also reveal new insights into political effort, competence, and accountability in democratic governments. If voters and parties seek candidates that are more competent (Bó et al. N.d.) or better across some other valence value (Dal Bó and Finan 2018), town halls may present a better opportunity to understand this dynamic. This is especially true in considering representational efforts; town halls are unique among forms of home style in that they require a member to personally engage with the community and be prepared to answer questions. A member could in theory rely on staff for nearly all aspects of his or her job - but not town halls.

Surprisingly, we found no meaningful evidence that electoral vulnerability corresponds with town hall activity. Legislators did not double down on home style when after receiving a non-safe Cook Score or relatively low prior vote share (see appendix Figure A2 and Table A3). While vulnerability is a control variable in our investigation of lawmaking behavior, future research might use geocoded town hall data to evaluate the possibility of more targeted shifts in representational activity.

Similarly, membership in the party opposed to the president is associated with a substantially greater number of town halls. This control turned out to be our most consistent finding across all of our statistical analyses. We are not well-equipped in this analysis to causally explain this effect – nor was it our focus here; nevertheless, this finding seems consistent with patterns of electoral mobilization (e.g., turnout, donations, activism) of the party not in the White House (Broockman and Skovron 2018). Town hall meetings should be considered in this broader constellation of out-party behaviors; though we are for now agnostic as to whether it is as a cause (such that angry elected officials help to stimulate activism) or effect (such that angry issue activists demand town halls).

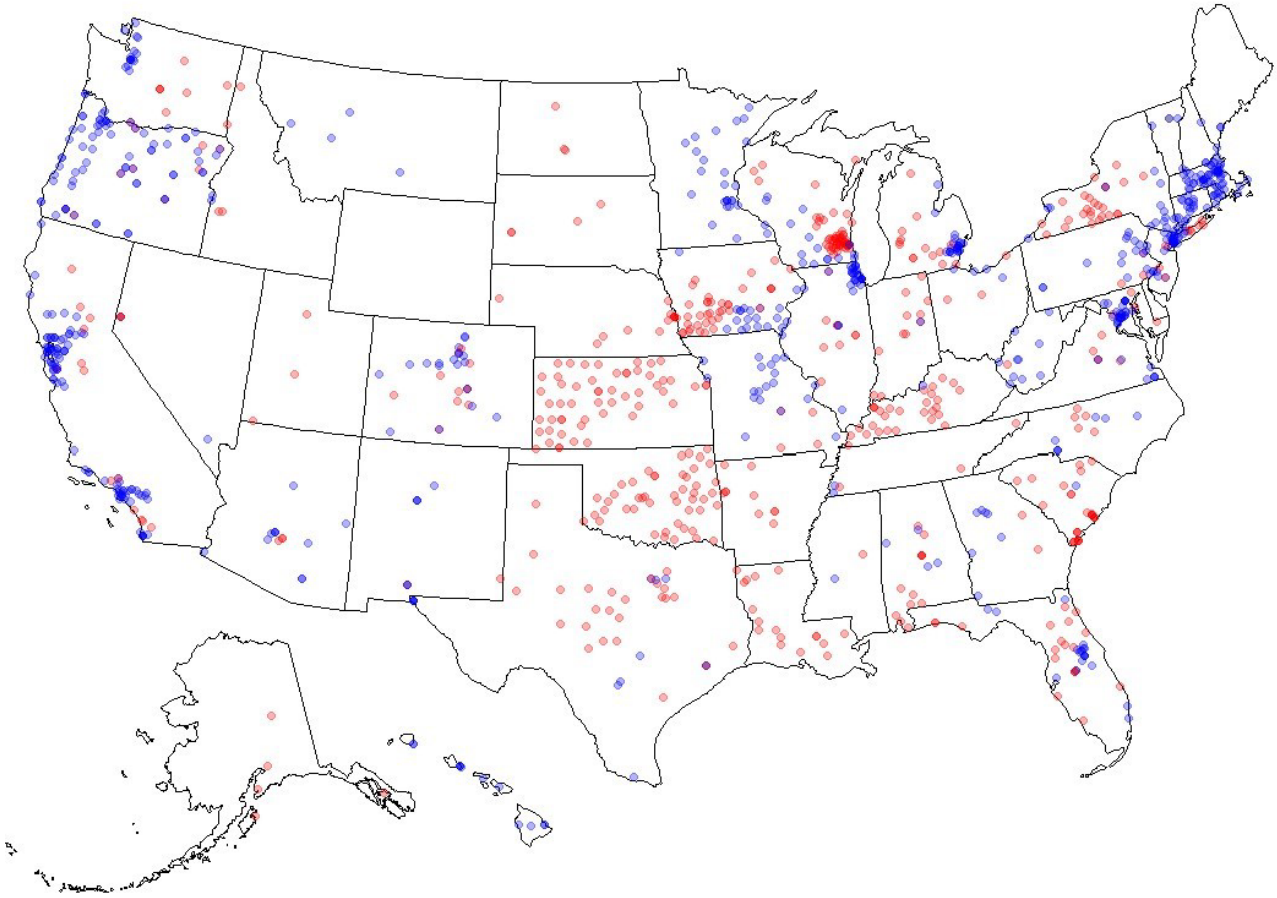
We expect that this exploratory study will generate more rigorous empirical research on congressional town halls more broadly. Does town hall activity correspond in any meaningful way with the politics of legislative redistricting? What sort of access to town halls are given to historically underrepresented communities within electoral districts? What is the relationship between town hall meeting attendance and campaign contribution patterns? How are town hall meetings weaponized for or against elected officials in congressional campaigns? We have focused on town halls from the perspective of legislative studies, but these data provide opportunities for a much broader range of insights in campaign and responsiveness research. We believe that town halls offer an

opportunity to help us understand the ways in which constituent contact can affect lawmakers' perceptions of their political communities (Fenno 1978; Miler 2010; Broockman and Skovron 2018).

The geographic and temporal granularity of our town hall data also allows for quick descriptive analysis of key moments in contemporary congressional politics. For example, Figure 9 provides a national map of town hall frequency during a particularly fraught time for some Representatives and Senators: the attempt to repeal The Affordable Care Act.[24]We measure this attempt as lasting from the introduction of the American Health Care Act (March 6th, 2017) to Senator John McCain's (R-AZ) famous thumbs down vote (July 28th, 2017). We map and color code each town hall held in this period by the party of the hosting legislator. Like the motivating example at the front of this paper, many of those events were chaotic events filled with shouts and accusations. Nevertheless, lawmakers from both parties volunteered to hold a staggering number of town hall meetings during this time period, many of which were specifically dedicated as "health care" town hall gatherings specifically to address the pending policy proposals in the U.S. Congress.

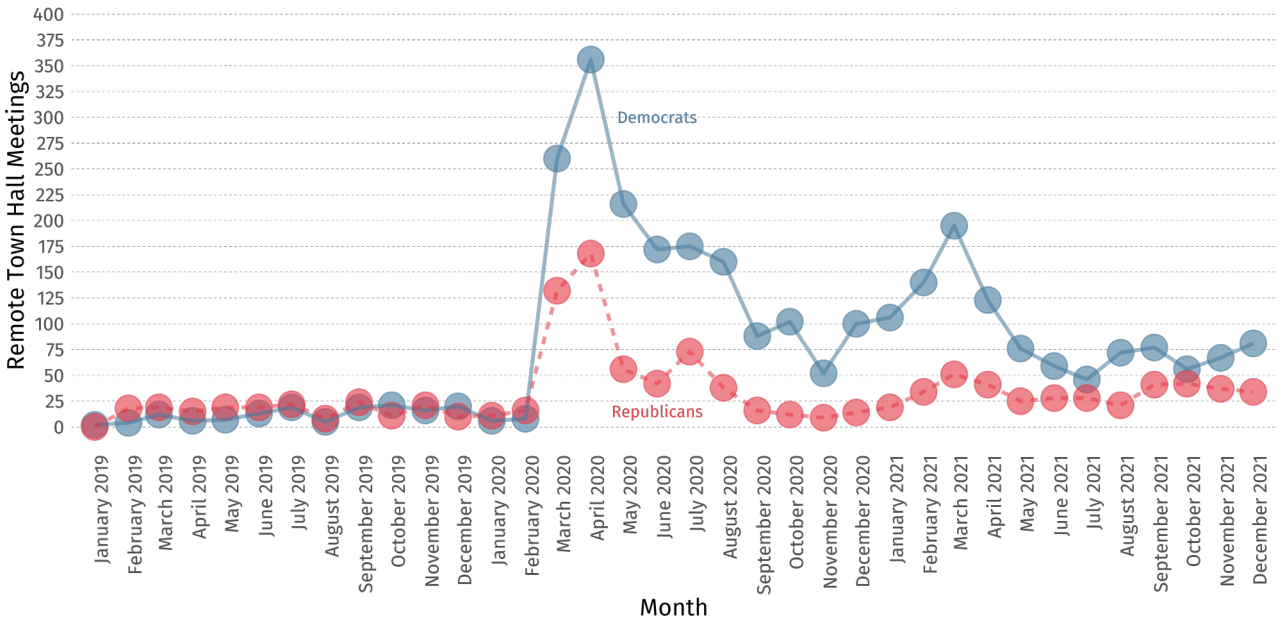
[24] https://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/republicans-obamacare-repeal-town-halls-234651

FIGURE 9. Town Hall Meetings Throughout the ACA Repeal Fight (March 6 - July 28, 2017)



Finally, as Figure 10 illustrates, the emergence of COVID-19 catalyzed a rapid shift in the technology used to connect with constituents. Lawmakers – especially Democratic lawmakers – threw themselves into the tasks of testing new modes of communication with greater opportunities for vast audiences, greater control, and reduced cost. The impact of these shifts – and the staying power of remote town hall meetings – is certainly deserving of additional research.

FIGURE 10. The Extraordinary Rise of Virtual Town Hall Meetings in a Global Pandemic



Congressional town hall meetings provide political activists and operatives with direct opportunities to reach powerful lawmakers. They also present researchers with a new measure of congressional home style with a level of granularity and variation not often seen in the study of legislative politics. Most importantly, however, each meeting reflects a meaningful attempt to sustain the project of American self-government. It is our hope that this article encourages lawmakers, activists, journalists, and academics to continue digging deeper into the promise and peril of this imperfect, public form of civic communion.

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ONLINE APPENDIX

FIGURE A1. Seniority and Town Hall Meetings

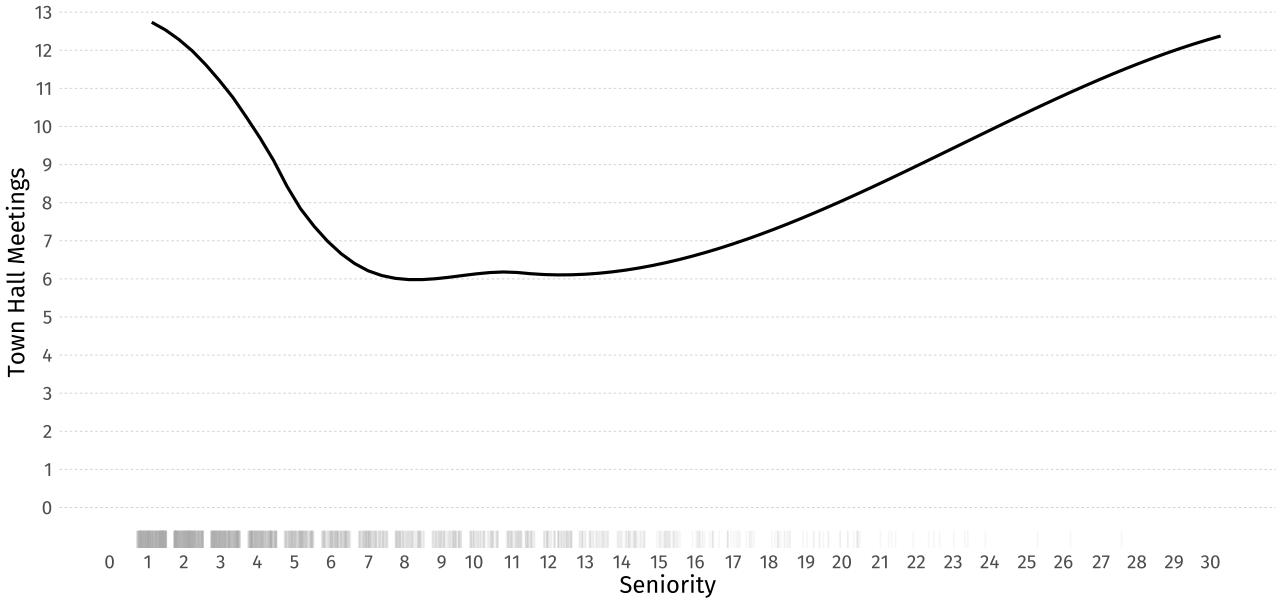

FIGURE A2. Vote Percentage and Town Hall Meetings

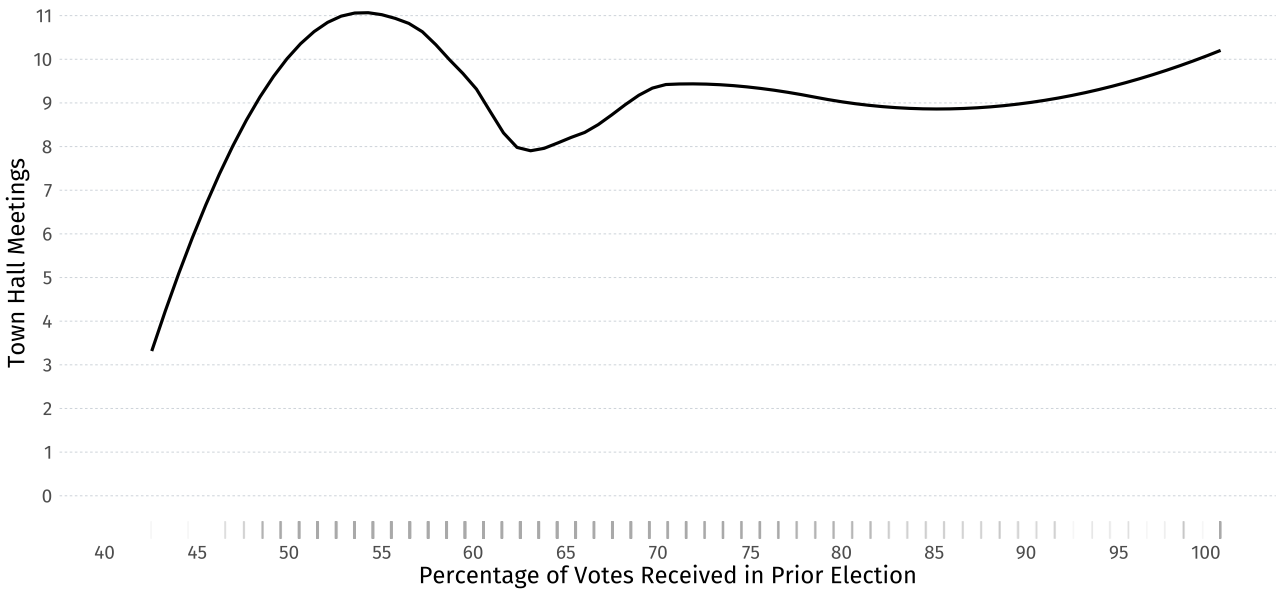

TABLE A1. Table 1 Analysis Subset to In-Person Town Hall Meetings

	DV: In-Person Town Hall Meetings		
Above Expectations LES	1.7	0.63	0.49
	(1.2)	(1.1)	(1.0)
Below Expectations LES	-1.1	-0.94	-0.85
	(0.85)	(0.79)	(0.76)
Electorally Vulnerable	-0.12	0.46	0.94
	(0.96)	(0.92)	(0.91)
Opposed to President	3.1***	3.9***	3.8***
	(0.48)	(0.60)	(0.57)
Congress FE	Yes		Yes
Lawmaker FE		Yes	Yes
Observations	1,617	1,617	1,617
R^2	0.03	0.77	0.79
Within R^2	0.02	0.06	0.06

Lawmaker-clustered standard-errors in parentheses
****:p<0.01, **: p<0.05, *: p<0.1*

TABLE A2. Table 1 Analysis Subset to Remote Town Hall Meetings

	DV: Remote Town Hall Meetings		
Above Expectations LES	-0.13	0.03	0.04
	(0.59)	(0.38)	(0.39)
Below Expectations LES	-1.0*	-1.4	-1.5
	(0.60)	(1.0)	(1.0)
Electorally Vulnerable	0.55	0.73*	0.78
	(0.38)	(0.39)	(0.53)
Opposed to President	1.2***	1.1**	1.1**
	(0.25)	(0.56)	(0.54)
Congress FE	Yes		Yes
Lawmaker FE		Yes	Yes
Observations	1,617	1,617	1,617
R^2	0.03	0.57	0.58
Within R^2	0.008	0.01	0.01

Lawmaker-clustered standard-errors in parentheses
****:p<0.01, **: p<0.05, *: p<0.1*

TABLE A3. Table 1 Analysis Using Alternative Electoral Vulnerability Variable

	DV: Total Town Hall Meetings		
Above Expectations LES	1.6	0.68	0.58
	(1.4)	(1.2)	(1.1)
Below Expectations LES	-2.0*	-2.3*	-2.3*
	(1.1)	(1.3)	(1.3)
% of Vote in Prior Election	-0.04	-0.01	-0.03
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Opposed to President	4.4***	4.9***	4.9***
	(0.63)	(0.84)	(0.80)
Congress FE	Yes		Yes
Lawmaker FE		Yes	Yes
Observations	1,613	1,613	1,613
R^2	0.02	0.73	0.74
Within R^2	0.02	0.06	0.06

Lawmaker-clustered standard-errors in parentheses
****:p<0.01, **: p<0.05, *: p<0.1*

TABLE A4. Table 1 Analysis Subset Broken Out by Chamber

	DV: Total Town Hall Meetings		
	(House & Senate)	(Senate)	(House)
Above Expectations LES	0.53	3.4	0.28
	(1.1)	(4.6)	(1.1)
Below Expectations LES	-2.4*	-0.20	-1.8**
	(1.3)	(2.6)	(0.83)
Electorally Vulnerable	1.7	-0.35	2.8*
	(1.1)	(1.5)	(1.5)
Opposed to President	4.9***	7.0***	4.4***
	(0.82)	(2.2)	(0.72)
Congress FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lawmaker FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,617	299	1,318
R^2	0.74	0.70	0.82
Within R^2	0.06	0.08	0.06

Lawmaker-clustered standard-errors in parentheses
****:p<0.01, **: p<0.05, *: p<0.1*

TABLE A5. Tabular Results from Figure 8 Analysis

	DV: Held Zero Town Hall Events		
Committee Chair	0.13***	-0.01	-0.03
	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Sub-Committee Chair	0.08***	-0.03	-0.04
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Power Committee Member	0.05**	-0.02	-0.04
	(0.02)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Party Leadership	0.01	-0.06	-0.07
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)
Majority Party	-0.06***	-0.04	-0.03
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Non-Freshman Lawmaker	0.06**	-0.002	-0.03
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.04)
Electorally Vulnerable	0.04*	-0.008	0.01
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Opposed to President	-0.10***	-0.08***	-0.09***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Congress FE	Yes		Yes
Lawmaker FE		Yes	Yes
Observations	1,617	1,617	1,617
R^2	0.06	0.60	0.61
Within R^2	0.05	0.04	0.04

Lawmaker-clustered standard-errors in parentheses
****:p<0.01, **: p<0.05, *: p<0.1*