Congressional Town Halls

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Members of the U.S. Congress held over 25,000 town hall meetings over the last eight years, and yet we know very little about the role that these events play in American politics. In this article, we present new data on congressional town hall meetings held in the 114th to 117th Congresses (2015-2022) to explore why politicians hold such meetings. In short, we do not find consistent evidence that electoral vulnerability drives legislators to their districts. Nor do we find support for claims of a zero-sum tradeoff between lawmaking and district representation. However, members of the president's opposition party clearly and consistently host more town hall meetings, suggesting that party messaging may be at the heart of this often-overlooked congressional behavior.[3]

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INTRODUCTION

At their best, congressional town hall meetings illustrate the remarkable promise of American democracy. Over thousands of meetings each year, constituents gather in venues ranging from gyms and theaters to city office buildings to speak directly to their representatives. 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 amid partisan conflict and growing populist anger at political elites. Legislators offer in-depth defenses of their positions and personally engage with constituents in a highly localized and nominally non-partisan setting. Town hall meetings may serve as a welcome 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.[4] Representative Dingell attempted to begin the meeting over a cacophony of boos and heckles, but before he could, a man approached shouting that he was complicit in "sentencing [his son] to death" because "under the Obama health care plan [his son] would be given no care whatsoever because [his son] is a cerebral palsy handicapped person." Other audience members cried, "We're not in Nazi Germany" and "shut up, you idiot" as Congressman Dingell pleaded for more civil discourse. Police officers eventually had to escort the man and his son out of the town hall meeting.

Given the divisive nature of American politics today, legislators reasonably worry that the mere act of hosting a town hall event could pose a real danger to themselves, their staff, and their constituents. This concern, unfortunately, is not merely hypothetical. In 2011, Rep. Gabby Giffords (D-AZ) was shot in the head, over a dozen people were severely injured, and six people (including a nine-year-old girl) tragically lost their lives at a "Congress on Your Corner" event in Tuscon, AZ (Lacey and Herszenhorn 2011). While the vast majority of town hall events remain non-violent, legislators must grapple with the real risks and non-trivial

[4]The Dingell confrontation, like so many other town hall events, was recorded by constituents in the audience and uploaded to YouTube. You can view the video here: `https://youtu.be/GJyMpAcLVV8`

costs associated with this personal form of political representation.[5]

From this perspective, we might ask why elected officials hold town hall meetings at all. Members of Congress are neither constitutionally nor legislatively required to host such events, and, in fact, many do not. And yet, legislators of the U.S. House and Senate have held *more than 25,000 town hall meetings over the past decade*. Perhaps, as Rep. Giffords (D-AZ) put it, town hall meetings are viewed as "civic obligations" and "the most basic and core tenet of the job" (Berman 2021). While many American lawmakers undoubtedly feel that town halls are simply a part of their official responsibilities, a more systematic investigation of the political correlates of town hall activity is both warranted and, in our view, overdue.

In this article, we present new, observational data on congressional town hall events over time and across members. Political scientists have constructed a vast literature on casework (Lowande, Ritchie, and Lauterbach 2019), constituent 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. That said, a few scholars have recently employed experimental methods in coordination with legislative offices to directly test the benefits of town hall activity (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018; Wuttke and Foos 2022). To our knowledge, only one observational study of town hall events has been conducted to date; Bussing et al. (2022) analyzed in-person Republican town hall meetings between January 3rd and May 4th, 2017 in their study of constituency pressure and health care repeal efforts. We hope to build on this growing area of research with a new and comprehensive investigation of town hall meetings held by every elected member of the U.S. Congress from 2015-2022.

We use this dataset to explore three plausible explanations of town hall variation and frequency: [1] electoral vulnerability, [2] legislative productivity, and [3] partisan oppo-

[5]The Giffords shooting – coupled with an increase in town hall protest events – almost certainly had a chilling effect in American politics. As Rep. Louie Gohmert (R-TX) put it, "When the threat of violence at town hall meetings recedes, we can go back to having the civil town hall meetings I've had in the past" (Office of Congressman Louie Gohmert 2017). We do not, however, have town hall data from 2011 to investigate this possibility.

sition to the president of the United States. Surprisingly, we do not find clear evidence that electoral threat motivates this unique form of political representation. We also find no consistent support for claims of a zero-sum tradeoff between district presence and legislative activity in D.C. We do, however, find that opposition to the party of the president is clearly associated with increased town hall frequency - a finding we believe highlights an important mechanism through which members counteract the messaging advantages of the presidency. Taken together, these findings speak to key questions in the study of congressional representation.

THE CONGRESSIONAL POLITICS OF TOWN HALL MEETINGS

The tradition of holding town hall meetings in America pre-dates the founding of the United States. The earliest recorded town halls, such as those held in Dorchester, Massachusetts in 1633, were not symbolic public meetings or discussions of the actions of representatives; instead, these events were loci of direct democracy, with citizens personally involved in policymaking (Mansky 2016). Tocqueville went so far as to claim that "town-meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science...they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it" (de Tocqeville 2003). However, the New England model did not spread throughout the republic as a common, enduring form of political representation. Today, congressional town hall meetings are forums for constituents to scrutinize and speak directly to their elected officials, and this modern form – stripped of direct policymaking opportunities – only reemerged as recently as the 20th century (Rountree 2019).

Today, the organization and funding of town hall meetings are reimbursable components of congressional expense accounts. Like other official representational activities, incumbent lawmakers can use official resources to speak directly to constituents at their own discretion. Unlike other forms of district representation, however, town hall meetings are costly in distinct ways. For example, lawmakers must spend their incredibly scarce time executing this form of district politics. Citizens generally expect access to lawmakers themselves, not legislative assistants at these events, and this personal opportunity cost stands in contrast

to the many delegated alternative forms of home style. Moreover, town hall meetings usually require lawmakers to concede some measure of control over event circumstances. Unlike constituency mail, for example, town hall meetings raise the possibility of a more unexpected and publicly hostile exchange with voters.

Until recently, few scholars have conducted systematic research on congressional town halls. This changed with a novel 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 (e.g., trust, approval, intent-to-vote) for their elected officials 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). Kielty, Lee, and Neblo (2022) flipped the focus of earlier experimental designs and evaluated the motivations for lawmakers to participate in co-hosted deliberative town hall meetings. They found, 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.[6]

Finally, Bussing et al. (2022) provides the first analysis of observational data on town hall activity in Congress in their study of approximately four months of in-person Republican town hall events. Interestingly, they did not find a clear and consistent relationship between legislative behavior and town hall activity; instead, their findings suggest that "few [Republican] members were persuaded by the constituents who showed up at the town halls to express their desire to keep the ACA" (Bussing et al. 2022, p. 166). Importantly, their results may suggest that lawmakers hold events to *distribute* persuasive messages to constituents instead of hosting such events to seek out new information that might impact the way they cast their votes on Capitol Hill. Put differently, the findings in Bussing et al.

[6]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.

(2022) seem to suggest a motive more consistent with the experimental findings in Minozzi et al. (2015) than those in the more recent experiments conducted by Kielty, Lee, and Neblo (2022).[7]

In the coming section, we review how the literature on town halls and related forms of home style informs our expectations of which members of Congress are most likely to hold town halls. As we will discuss, we choose to investigate electoral vulnerability, legislative productivity, and opposition to the incumbent president as plausible explanations for the considerable variation in town hall activity because each of these lines of inquiry connects to at least one defining feature of congressional politics.

Electoral Vulnerability and Town Hall Meetings

First, we intend to explore the possibility that electoral vulnerability drives increased town hall frequency. For decades, political observers have understood district representational activities as strategic behavior intended to offset or preempt some electoral threat (Fenno 1978). Town hall meetings exist as one tool in a broader toolbox available to concerned incumbents, and, as such, each gathering plausibly serves as an opportunity to shift the attitudes of potential voters, a claim supported by a growing body of experimental evidence (Minozzi et al. 2015). In fact, experimental evidence dating back to Cover and Brumberg (1982) has shown that strong engagement with one's electoral community – e.g., a creative and personal application of franking privileges – can improve an incumbent's standing with their electorate. Town halls, from this perspective, are a part of a long tradition of publicly funded, nominally non-partisan, electioneering activities.

For better or worse, town halls also generate media coverage. A well-run town hall meeting promises positive name recognition among voters and a sense that their representative is present – even if voters choose not to personally attend the events. Conversely, members who fail to hold any town hall meetings quickly attract negative attention. For example, one

[7]Interestingly, this result may actually suggest a change from prior town hall practice, as skeptical legislators assume confrontational attendees are "astro-turf" protesters – and discount opinions they might otherwise have seriously considered (Bussing et al. 2022). Unfortunately, we lack a long enough time series to test this shift directly.

editorial board wrote that it was "frustrating and mystifying that U.S. Rep. John Rutherford refuses to hold town hall events."[8] Another local outlet amplified the voice of protesters claiming that Rep. Tom Kean, Jr. (NJ-07) was hiding from his constituents and failing to do his job as an elected official.[9]

These possible media effects may also travel by word of mouth; consequently, members who neglect their district risk political disaster.[10] Consider the case of Eric Cantor, a highly adept legislator and party leader, poised to become Speaker of the House. Cantor did not hold a single town hall meeting during his last full year in office, and 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).[11]

Finally, town hall meetings may keep lawmakers from drifting too far from the preferences of their district. Establishing a strong district presence is an old and often-cited tenet of traditional approaches to congressional representation. Such claims go back at least as far as the debates surrounding the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. For example, Connecticut delegate Roger Sherman claimed that, "Representatives ought to return home and mix with the people. By remaining at the seat of Govt. they would acquire the habits of place that might differ from those of their Constituents."[12]

District presence is a strong political norm, in part, because even well-intended representatives may struggle to identify public policies in need of legislative reform if they spend too much time away from their electoral communities (Petersen and Eckman 2021). Attentive lawmakers may be better positioned to make policy-specific adaptions to preserve their electoral fortunes (Feigenbaum and Hall 2015), while those that neglect the district risk becoming "out of step" with their most active and engaged constituents (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002).

[8] "Hold Real Town Halls." The Florida Times-Union Editorial Board. February 2, 2020.
[9] "'Where is Junior?' Protestors Descend on Kean Country." InsiderNJ.com. April 18, 2023.
[10] To our knowledge, political scientists have not experimentally evaluated the impact of positive or negative town hall coverage.
[11] Given the high-profile case of Cantor, we include both general and primary elections in our analyses since it is plausible that electoral threat in either election could motivate increased town hall frequency.
[12] https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/debates_621.asp

Town hall meetings thus offer plausible electoral advantages, but this relationship is far from certain. There are many reasons an electorally focused legislator might choose to opt out of town halls altogether. For example, the time and resources dedicated to town hall meetings could be redirected towards more overtly electoral activities, such as political fundraising. Moreover, each town hall event raises the specter of politically damaging encounters with constituents. It may be best to play it safe if you believe political opponents will use the meeting to provoke an embarrassing viral video. From this perspective, electorally vulnerable and risk-averse representatives may have the most to lose in holding town hall events.[13]

Recent empirical studies of congressional representation suggest that this relationship is far from simple. For example, the findings presented in McCrain (2021) suggest that lawmakers may continue to invest resources in the district *without* an imminent electoral threat, and a growing body of research makes the case *against* the conventional wisdom that strong local presence increases voter support and mollifies fierce opposition (Kaslovsky 2022; Parker and Goodman 2013, 2009). Taken together, we view our analysis of town hall activity as a small step towards a more systematic analysis of the complex relationship between elections and district political behavior.

Legislative Productivity and Town Hall Meetings

We next consider the possibility that more productive legislators are less likely to hold town halls. Members have finite resources, and the many duties of a member compete in a zero-sum game for attention from a representative and their staffers. As such, members who devote scarce and fungible resources to proposing and passing laws might reasonably devote fewer resources to the unique and direct costs associated with town hall events. Simply put, elected officials interested in both district representation and legislating run into what Fenno (1978) calls the "allocative problem" in congressional behavior:

> *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*

[13]We might expect that electorally vulnerable members are precisely those most likely to have disaffected constituents or to be targeted by hostile activist groups

> *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)*

From this perspective, the decision to spend time and deploy staff in the district is not only central to an individual's home style; it also establishes an absolute trade-off with legislative representation.

Prior research on congressional staff suggests that Fenno's articulation of a district-DC tension may persist today. Members of Congress face growing representational burdens due to staffing caps, overall budget limitations, and the fixed size of the House in a growing nation (Szpindor 2021). These constraints, in turn, can force difficult choices as lawmakers establish their personal offices. On the one hand, legislative staff provide valuable political networks (Montgomery and Nyhan 2017; Burgat 2020), may improve their members' legislative effectiveness (Crosson et al. 2018), and can contribute to the efficiency of congressional committees (Ommundsen 2023).[14] On the other hand, many legislators devote relatively large shares of their (finite) Member's Representational Allowance (MRA) in constituency service personnel – despite evidence that this sort of district evidence can lead to higher rates of staff turnover and lower levels of experience among policy staff (**?**). Lawmakers can make personnel decisions to establish a strong district presence or strengthen their policymaking capacities – but these priorities appear to pull in competing directions.

Bernhard and Sulkin (2018) offers what is arguably the most comprehensive review of Fenno's "allocative problem" to date. By combining employment data on district staff and offices, they identify a cluster of lawmakers they title "district advocates." This measure, in turn, is used to draw some pretty stark conclusions relevant to our consideration of town hall activity:

> *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,*

[14] Conversely, reductions in staffing resources can contribute to sharp declines in legislative influence (Clarke 2020).

> *from the perspective of representation, devotion to the district can be a double-edged sword, as it often comes at the expense of distinction in Washington, D.C. (Bernhard and Sulkin 2018, 208)*

We should expect frequency of town hall activity and legislative productivity to move in competing directions if the costs of town hall activity resemble other indicators of Bernhard and Sulkin (2018)'s "district advocate" typology.

We think that a legislative-district tradeoff perspective – coupled with the scholarship on staff investment and other forms of district presence – provides an intuitive and compelling way to think about town hall behavior. However, some research on constituency service suggests that town halls may generate positive impressions in the electorate *and* serve as an instrument of public policy. For example, legislators seem to use inter-branch correspondence througth casework to attempt a novel form of distributive politics, mold public policy by lobbying key executive branch agencies, and engage in meaningful descriptive representation (Mills, Kalaf-Hughes, and MacDonald 2016; Ritchie 2018; Lowande, Ritchie, and Lauterbach 2019). In some ways, the informational motives expressed in Kielty, Lee, and Neblo (2022)'s town hall experiments support the idea that town halls can be a boon to policy-focused lawmakers, and recent work by Judge-Lord, Grimmer, and Powell (2022) finds that newly empowered legislators (e.g., committee chairs) can maintain a strong district presence *and* increase their legislative productivity.[15]

We might also question the modern applicability of the "allocative tension" articulated by Fenno in the 1970s. Today, legislators spend extraordinary time and resources commuting home to their electoral communities on a regular basis, and, coupled with a highly centralized lawmaking environment (Curry 2015), it is possible that legislators simply hold town hall meetings when they have no realistic opportunity to legislate. Given the rise of confrontational party messaging in the modern Congress (Lee 2016), we might further wonder if today's "allocative tension" has changed at a more fundamental level. Legislators today may consider the time they might allocate to town hall events as an action in direct

[15] Judge-Lord, Grimmer, and Powell (2022) make the point that these positions of congressional power often are accompanied by new political resources (e.g., committee staff).

tension with overt *campaign* activity – instead of policymaking endeavors on Capitol Hill. So, while the Fenno-era back-bencher was faced with the district-D.C. tradeoff, it is possible that the faithful party messenger of the present political era instead must choose between a town hall event and a targeted campaign fundraiser. From our perspective, this possibility both underscores the need for systematic analysis and sets up our final theoretical perspective of interest in this article.

Opposition Messaging and Town Hall Meetings

Finally, we explore the possibility that opponents of the president's party hold more town hall meetings to counteract the rhetorical advantages of the presidency. Presidents receive unparalleled news coverage in American politics,[16] and political scientists have provided evidence that presidential approval matters to presidential (Abramowitz 1988) and congressional election outcomes (Jacobson 1990). Because presidents can exercise powerful elite opinion leadership (Lenz 2013), opposition legislators must consider creative ways to provide countervailing elite messaging.[17]

The rhetorical power of the presidency is by no means a new development (Tulis 2017), but the current political climate may be particularly well-suited to White House communication operations. Modern American politics is defined by incessant party messaging; lawmakers must run a "perpetual campaign" to secure electoral victories in an extraordinarily competitive context (Lee 2016). While elected officials can attempt to counteract the White House in many ways (e.g., op-eds, social media), town hall meetings may provide a particularly effective means of distributing the opposition party's message for several reasons.

First, the risk of contentious town hall events may become an advantage for legislators looking to distinguish themselves from the party controlling the White House. As Lee (2016) puts it, "party conflict is necessary for party messaging" (45), and "the rhetoric deployed

[16] Bump, Philip. 2022. "Who Attracted the Most Attention in the Political World in 2022." *The Washington Post*, December 21.

[17] Presidents are particularly well-situated to mold public opinion by serving as the dominant source of "considerations" available to voters forming opinions on important issues of public policy (Zaller 1992).

in party messaging is also characteristically blunt and harsh" (51). From this perspective, town hall meetings offer a potentially valuable forum for non-legislative party messaging. Legislators can both rail against the president's governing agenda and rebuke aggressive opposition protesters physically present at such events – all of which is done in a location and format chosen by the incumbent lawmaker. Consequently, town hall meetings may become more appealing after losing the White House because "the party not controlling the presidency has a stronger incentive to focus on messaging" (Lee 2016, p. 61).

Second, leading research on political persuasion suggests that time-intensive, empathetic exchanges of personal narratives offer a costly but meaningful way to affect policy preferences (Broockman and Kalla 2016), and such persuasion effects are possible through both in-person and phone conversations (Kalla, Levine, and Broockman 2022). In-person and telephone town halls thus provide political parties with a distributed means of connecting with voters in persuasion-friendly conditions. Elected officials can look constituents in the eye and sympathize with their personal troubles, concerns, and aspirations. They can lay out their own experiences and motivations for taking key votes with a level of nuance not possible in short TV or social media ads - while still receiving positive media coverage. Put differently, town halls offer an opportunity for elected officials to engage in a unique, government-sponsored form of "deep canvassing" at scale, and scholars have at least some experimental evidence the persuasive effectiveness of town halls (Minozzi et al. 2015).

These persuasive effects may also be strongest for members of the party opposed to the president, as new information from the president's co-partisans are less likely to convey information not already communicated by the White House in major news outlets. Because so many voters view the presidency as the epicenter of American government, each message distributed through opposition party town hall events has the potential – at least from a quasi-Bayesian learning framework – to update relatively weak priors, a pattern echoed in work finding opinions are more malleable for lesser-known candidates (Broockman and Kalla 2023).

At the same time, the president's co-partisans in Congress may be more likely to face

angry, well-organized opposition groups if they choose to hold town hall meetings. Presidents in the modern era of partisan polarization are extraordinarily unpopular with the opposition party and often with independents. For example, nearly 83% of Democrats held a "very unfavorable" view of Donald Trump in 2021, while 73% of Republicans held the same view when asked of Joe Biden.[18] It should not come as a surprise, then, that many of the most notable examples of town hall incivility have occurred when incumbent legislators have tried to defend the platform of a co-partisan president. In the Obama administration, legislators routinely faced organized opposition from conservative groups, and as the *National Review* noted, progressive groups, such as Indivisible, appeared to learn from their political opponents once they faced a president of the opposing party:

> *In that summer of the Tea Party, conservative activists packed the town-hall meetings of Democratic congressmen and peppered them with hostile questions. … Now, progressive activists are tearing a page from that playbook. The scenes are highly reminiscent of 2009, with Republican officeholders struggling to control unruly forums and leaving their town-hall meetings early or not holding them in the first place (Lowry 2017).*

Consequently, the president's co-partisans in Congress may avoid town hall meetings to forestall a significant risk of public embarrassment[19] – all while the opposition party ramps up a decentralized counter-messaging campaign in an attempt to regain political power.[20]

Summary of Expectations

To our knowledge, this is only the second systematic analysis of observational data on town hall meetings in the United States, and it is the first to analyze congressional town halls held by both parties over time. While relatively little research has studied this common and costly form of congressional behavior, our review of political science research and routine political observations suggest three important patterns we might expect to see in the data:

[18] Smith, Matthew. 2021. "The Most and Least Popular US Presidents, According to Americans." YouGov. July 27.
[19] Our evidence further underscores Bussing et al. (2022)'s finding that many legislators hold few – if any – town hall events, albeit with some interesting outliers. They provide a plausible explanation for this pattern worth greater investigation. In short, legislators may hold a sort of reactionary skepticism to what they perceive as "astroturf" protests organized by hostile, out-of-district partisan groups.
[20] We explore this possibility with descriptive in Appendix Figure A3.

1. *Electorally vulnerable legislators hold more town hall meetings.*
2. *Effective lawmakers hold fewer town hall meetings.*
3. *Legislators opposed to the president hold more town hall meetings.*

In this article, we focus on only three simple predictions. The granular nature of town hall data and the relative dearth of research on the subject suggests that political scientists have many interesting lines of social science inquiry in this context. However, we believe that without reasonable scope conditions, our analysis risks saying nothing in an attempt to analyze everything potentially related to town hall behavior.

We have chosen these three particular hypotheses because each addresses a defining feature of legislative politics in the United States today. We are interested in electoral vulnerability, in part, because legislative behavior and electoral outcomes remain linked in the minds of elected officials and the results of scholarly analysis (Mayhew 2004; Treul et al. 2022). Similarly, we evaluate legislative effectiveness, because scholars and overworked staffers alike have long called attention to the extraordinary and often competing pressures to establish a physical presence in their district and advance legislative initiatives on Capitol Hill (Fenno 1978; Bernhard and Sulkin 2018). Finally, the current era of congressional politics is largely driven by fierce partisan competition. Legislators spend considerable resources attempting to communicate clear and divergent messages from one another as they strive for unified control of the United States government (Lee 2016).

DATA

To better understand the scale 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 during the 114th, 115th, 116th, and 117th Congresses (2015-2022). 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." We include all town hall events that occurred

in every complete Congress for which we have data.[21]

In total, the dataset includes 25,875 town hall meetings hosted by 862 different members of the U.S. Congress. Town halls happen throughout the year, hosted by members of both parties, across both chambers and throughout all regions of the United States. While town halls are far from rare or obscure congressional activities, legislators vary tremendously in their decisions to host these events. Over 66% (17,199) of recorded town halls are in-person, while the rest take a varied form of remote formats. Members held around eight town hall meetings, on average, per congress.[22] As Figure 1 and Figure 2 demonstrate below, many held no events at all in a given congress.[23] In the last full congress for which we have data (the 117th), 75 representatives and 39 senators held zero town hall meetings, and the standard deviation for town halls per congress is nearly 15.[24]. So, while town halls are ubiquitous in the aggregate, individual legislators may simply opt out of the activity altogether, depriving many Americans of the opportunity to engage directly in this form of political representation.

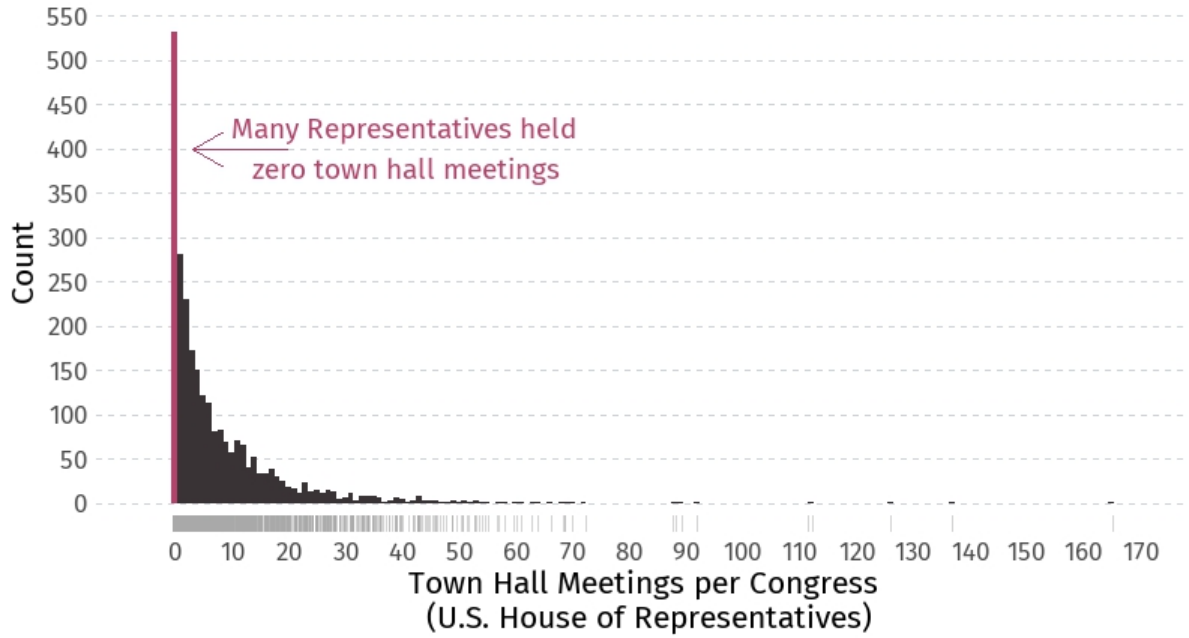
[21] Legistorm's town hall event data begins in August 2013, but we use a Congress-Member unit of analysis throughout this manuscript. Consequently, we [a] do not include any town hall events that exist in partial-Congress time periods and [b] do not include any legislators that were sworn into Congress late or left Congress early. Taken together, this approach allows for an interpretation of full-term member behavior during a complete two-year period of legislative time. As Legistorm itself acknowledges, however, their list be imperfect. It is possible, for example, that some remote town halls occur with no prior announcement. However, given the commercial incentives that drive Legistorm data gathering efforts and the necessarily public nature of these events, their list seemed to be the most accurate and comprehensive available. Spot-checking archived websites and other less systematic sources gave us further confidence in the exhaustive nature of Legistorm's underlying town hall event records.

[22] The median number of town hall events is four.

[23] The distributions we present in Figure 1 and Figure 2 are strikingly similar to those presented in Bussing et al. (2022), despite differences in sample (in-person Republican town hall events from Jan. 3, 2017 and May 4, 2017) and data source (the Town Hall Project).

[24] Several members held an unusually large number (e.g., ten lawmakers hold 100+ meetings in a two-year period) of town hall meetings, but these appear to be legitimate instances of lawmakers with strong district presence, rather than a coding error. For example, Sen. Kevin Cramer (R-ND), who held 320 events in the 114th Congress, holds at least four regular weekly town halls, according to his official website (`https://www.cramer.senate.gov/news/weekly-town-hall-schedule`). Similarly, Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR) advertises the extraordinary number of town hall meetings he hosts on his website: "Senator Wyden pledges open-to-all town meetings in each county in Oregon each year he serves in the Senate. Wyden has held 966 meetings where he refrains from speeches, listens to the concerns of Oregonians, and answers questions" (`https://www.wyden.senate.gov/town-halls`).

FIGURE 1. The Distribution of Town Hall Meeting per Congress by U.S. House Members



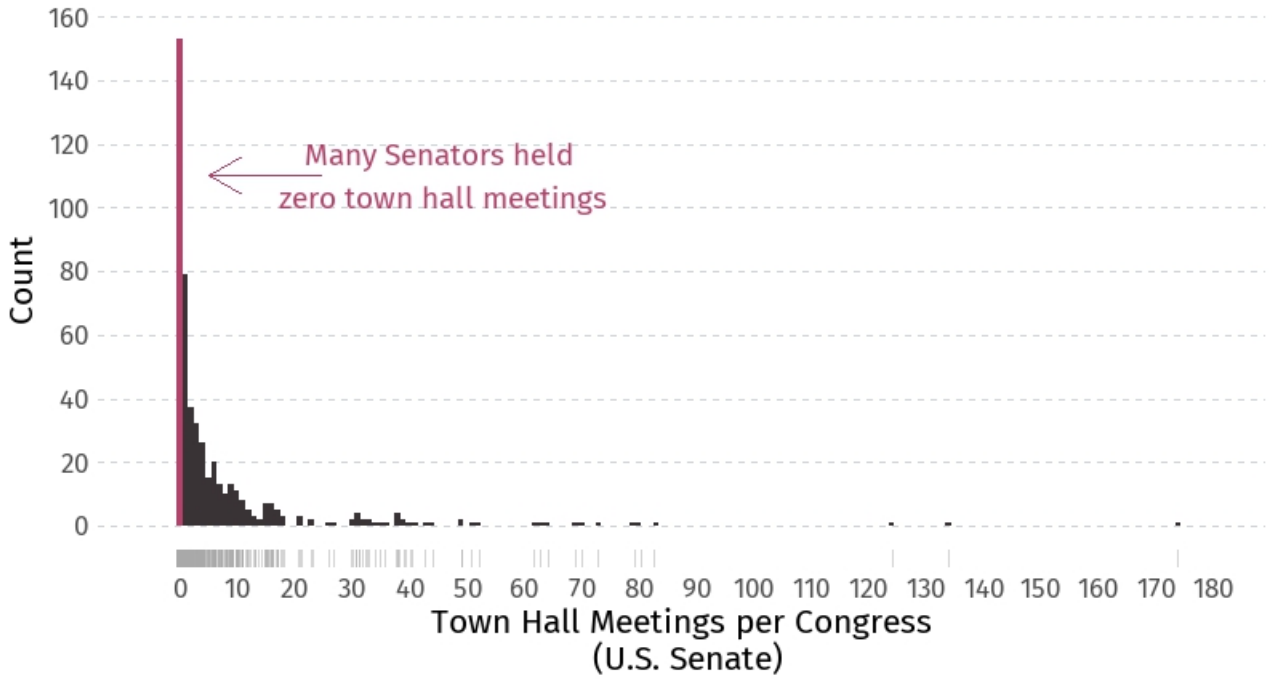
Note: Histogram of all town hall frequencies in the House of Representatives from 2015-2022 (114th-117th Congress). Unit of Analysis: Representative-Congress.

We see further differences across the two chambers of Congress. The average House member holds around 9.8 town hall meetings, while the average senator holds only 7.6.[25] According to our data, the average senator held fewer town hall meetings than the average representative in 38 out of 50 states – a pattern that is remarkably consistent across all congresses and for the vast majority of states. In fact, 84.1% of the town halls in our sample were held by members of the House. These numbers suggest that the legislative chamber designed to be most responsive to the public is, at least in our time series, providing citizens with much greater access to their elected officials.

The relative infrequency of senator-sponsored town hall meetings is in many ways still surprising, however, because senators typically have far more constituents than those of a single congressional district. In fact, we looked at the seven states with one-member delegations in the House and found and even sharper divide; Representatives from those

[25]The median number of town hall events in the House was four, while the median Senate town hall events was two.

FIGURE 2. The Distribution of Town Hall Meetings per Congress by U.S. Senators



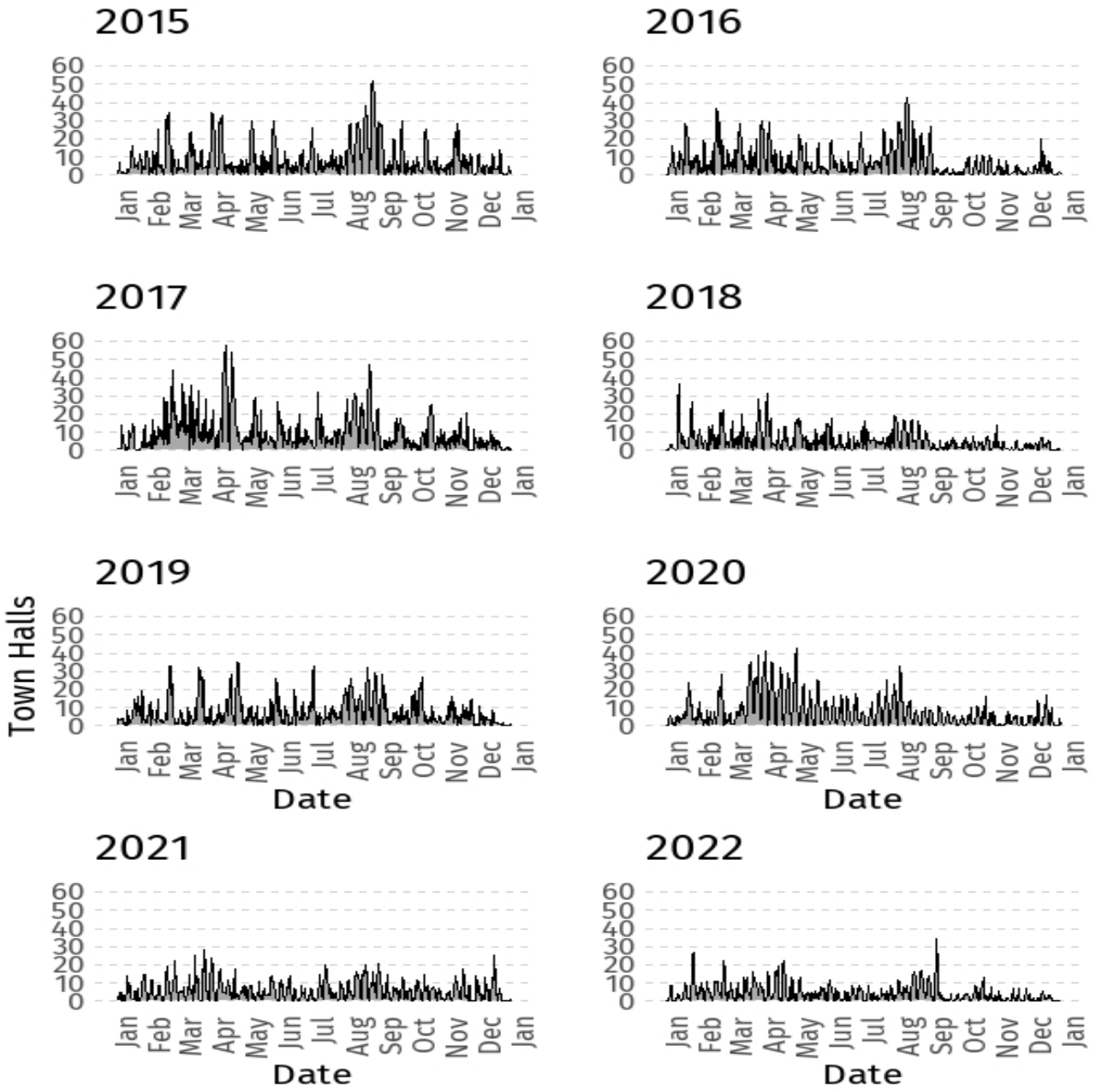
Note: Histogram of all town hall frequencies in the Senate from 2015-2022 (114th-117th Congress). Unit of Analysis: Senator-Congress.

states held around 24 town hall meetings per congress compared to 5 for Senators from the same states.[26] 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 in both election and non-election years.[27] While they occur throughout the calendar year, we can identify something of an uptick in town halls during periods of relative inactivity on Capitol Hill. Note, for example, that there are typically around 13 town halls held per day in August – substantially higher than the 10 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 four and three town halls per day, respectively. While the August recess and weekend trips back to the district may drive some notable spikes in our dataset, it is worth noting that only 16% of town hall events occur on weekends, and 15.6% of these gatherings take place during August. In fact, a clear majority of all town hall meetings (69.4%) in our time series occur on a weekday outside of the August recess.

[26]The seven states were Alaska, Delaware, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Wyoming.
[27]Around 44% of town halls in our dataset occurred during election years.

FIGURE 3. Trends in Town Hall Meetings Over Time

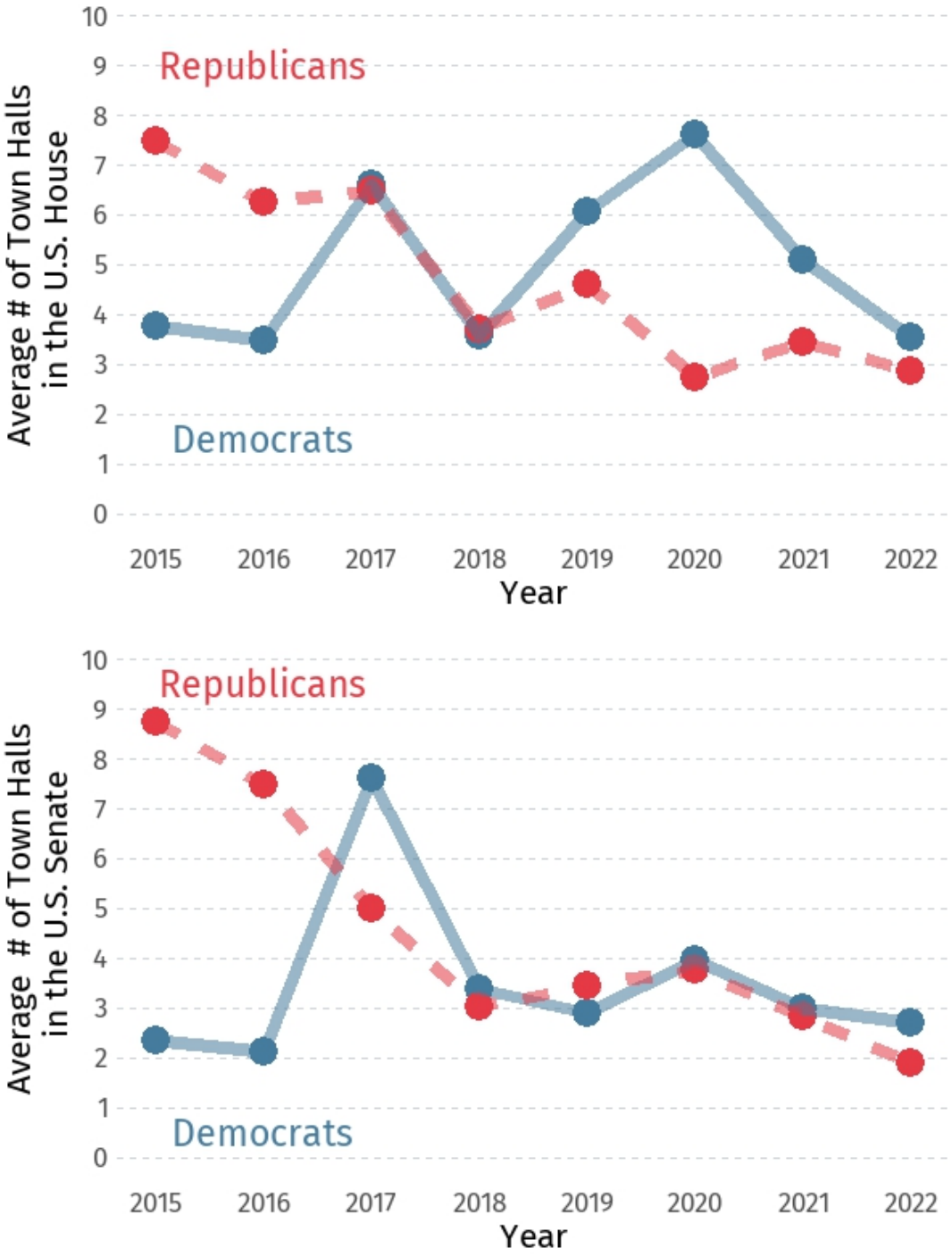


Note: This figure presents a year-by-year breakdown of trends in town hall activity over time for the full duration of our time series (2015-2022). Note that, while there are considerable spikes in August in several years, town hall events effectively occur throughout the year in each year of our dataset.

As Figure 4 indicates, town hall events are hosted by elected officials in both political parties. While we observe considerable variation in the dataset (both between members and within a member's career), we identify only minor partisan differences in town hall meetings between 2015 and 2022. The average Republican legislator held around nine town

halls per congress, while the average Democrat held eight. However, these ratios seem to vary with political headwinds.

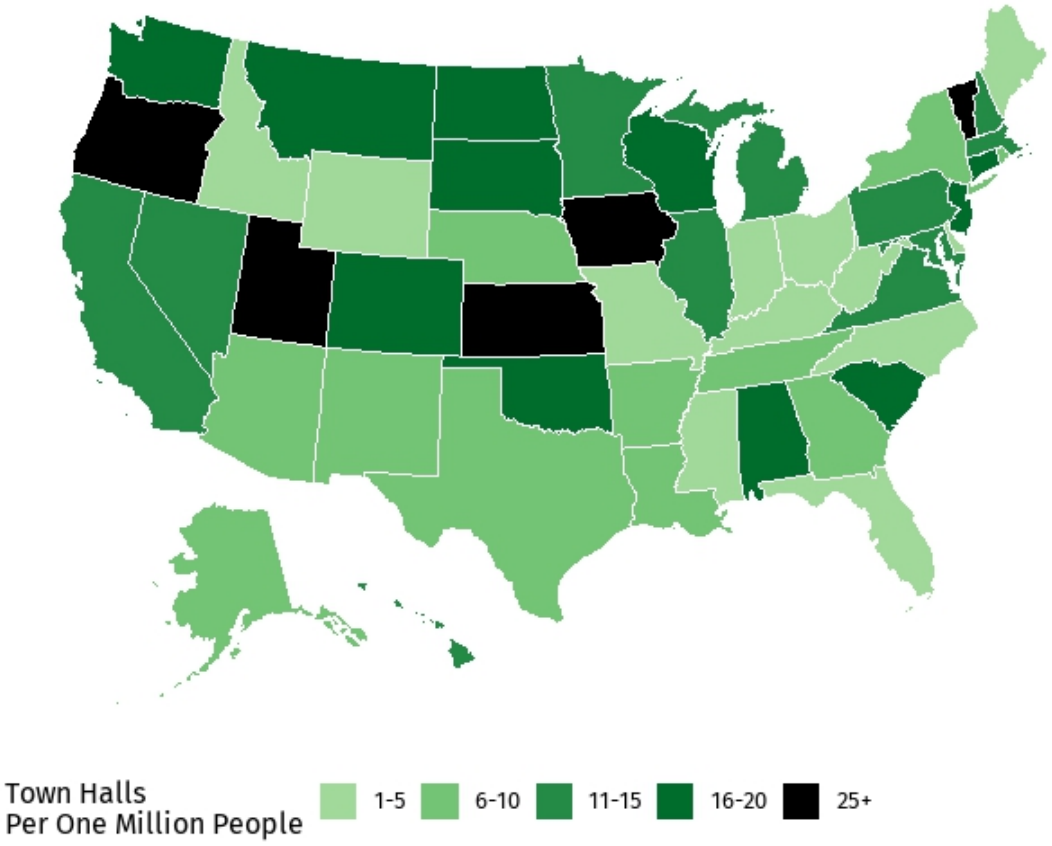
FIGURE 4. House and Senate Patterns in Town Hall Activity, by Party



Note: This figure presents the average number of town hall meetings hosted by elected officials from both parties. The top panel shows that, while there are some gaps between the two parties, House members from both parties host regular town hall events. The bottom panel, similarly, shows that for most periods in our dataset senators from both parties host town hall meetings at roughly comparable rates.

Town hall events also do not display distinctive regional patterns. As we can see from Figure 5, the distribution of town hall meetings per 100,000 people in the 117th Congress displays no clear geographic concentration. Here, darker shades of green represent higher concentrations of town hall access, and while a few states – e.g., Oregon, Iowa, New Hampshire, Kansas, Utah – stand out as places full of direct democratic engagement, these patterns seem to change from year to year. We also do not observe any obvious pattern in distance from the capital, suggesting that town hall frequency is not merely a function of convenient travel.[28]

FIGURE 5. Town Halls per Million People in the 117th Congress



Note: Total town hall meetings held in the 117th Congress (2021-2022) per 100,000 state residents. Brighter shades of green represent more frequent per capita town hall events in that state.

In short, the town hall data we analyze in the following section presents a range of

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

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.[29] Having introduced some very general descriptive patterns in town hall occurrence, we turn next to an investigation of the descriptive relationship between town hall meetings and three plausible correlates: electoral vulnerability, legislative productivity, and partisan opposition to the president.

RESULTS

For all analyses in this section, our outcome of interest is a simple count of town hall events in a given congress. As previously discussed, all town hall event data was hand-coded and cleaned from Legistorm's comprehensive and proprietary records. Our unit of analysis is legislator-congress. Each count included both remote and in-person events, and we include both House and Senate data. (Differences by chamber and meeting format may be found in Appendix Tables A1 and A2, respectively.) To complete our analyses, however, we need to use several other measures of congressional behavior and context.

Measuring Electoral Vulnerability

Our preferred measure of electoral vulnerability is a dichotomous indicator, where legislators are coded as "1" if they receive a "toss up" or "leans" Cook Score at any time during the electoral cycle concurrent with a given two-year period. To construct this measure, we began with the "race ratings" by directly accessing the Cook Political Report API.[30]. Cook ratings are produced by the Cook political reports' staff and are updated

[29]For example, while we prefer to focus on the three exploratory hypotheses that we argue connect to key elements of congressional politics today, there are likely stark differences in the mode of town hall meetings across members 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 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.

[30]To get a sense of what these ratings look like visit `https://www.cookpolitical.com/ratings/senate-race-ratings` While public House ratings include only those that are less secure that "solid" the

regularly throughout an electoral cycle, taking advantage of information about national and district polling as well as candidate-specific factors like scandals. The typical cycle features several dozen updates to ratings, with some updates featuring shifts to the rating of an individual district and others shifting tens of races in response to secular shifts in the national political environment. We prefer this measure, in part, because political candidates regularly use these scores to gauge political headwinds; put differently, we feel that Cook Scores are an imperfect measure of "true" vulnerability – but they most closely resemble the dynamic *feeling* of electoral vulnerability among political operatives.

As an alternative, we also provide a more cautious measure of electoral vulnerability that codes any legislator that the Cook Political Report says is not in a "solid" (i.e., safe) district as vulnerable ("1"), and all others as safe ("0"). While we prefer the more narrowly focused "toss up" or "leans" indicator described above, we include this alternative specification as an acknowledgment that our measure may exclude legislators that feel electorally vulnerable despite being assigned a "likely" category. The two measures based on Cook Scores are used in the first two model specifications in Table 1 below.

We also include several additional measurement approaches using prior election vote history. Ultimately, we prefer Cook Scores over pure election-history measures of electoral vulnerability because dramatic and consequential changes in a legislator's probability of future success may occur after ballots are cast in the prior cycle.[31] Unlike the vaguely defined process for calculating Cook Scores, however, vote-based measures begin with high-quality, administrative data, a transparent process for estimating threat, and a typically intuitive interpretation of coefficients.

We thus include three alternative measures of electoral threat calculated from the most recent electoral outcomes. First, we include a dichotomous indicator for legislators that received *either* 55% or less of the general election votes cast in the previous election cycle *or* 55% or less of the primary election votes cast in the prior election. This measure is

ratings accessed through the API include a rating for every seat for every ratings update.

[31] For example, an incumbent may defeat a high-quality challenger in one year, leading that challenger – and other high-quality opponents – to avoid a future challenge. A candidate could also suffer a scandal that imperils a previously safe re-election

meant to capture the idea that facing a tough primary opponent can plausibly drive a legislator to shore up their standing with voters in the same way that a tough opposing partisan challenger might. Second, we include the raw general vote percentage from the prior election cycle. And finally, we include the raw primary election vote percentages from the last round of elections. Our general election data is included in the Center for Effective Lawmaking dataset, and our primary election data comes from Miller and Camberg (2020). Unfortunately, our primary election data is limited to the 2012-2018 time period and excludes California and Washington; models including primary variables will have a smaller sample of town hall events to consider.

Taken together, we present five different approaches to measuring electoral vulnerability.[32] These measurements include both dichotomous and continuous measures, and we use both Cook Scores and election history data to construct these variables.

Measuring Legislative Effectiveness

Next, we rely upon the data provided by the Center for Effective Lawmaking (CEL) to evaluate the relationship between legislative productivity and town hall activity. The CEL data provides a detailed record of every bill proposed by every member of the House and Senate between 1973-2022 – along with a wealth of valuable covariates relevant to 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 the success of a bill at each stage of the daunting legislative process: committees, the originating chamber, and ultimate passage into law. Taken together, these inputs contribute to a summary "Legislative Effectiveness Score" (LES) 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).[33]

[32] In Appendix Table A4, we expand upon these robustness checks with even more versions of this vote-based measure.

[33] Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LES) are normalized to an average value of "1" within each Congress to

We prefer to use a categorical version of the LES measures. More specifically, we use the variables provided by the Center for Effective Lawmaking that identify legislators with effectiveness scores "above expectations" (i.e., those that have a particularly high ratio (1.5+) of their observed LES relative to their predicted LES after accounting for seniority, majority party status, committee chair positions, and subcommittee chair positions). 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." This "meets expectations" is our omitted reference category in all models to follow.

In Appendix Table A3, we present alternative specifications that include our preferred benchmark measurement approach, a continuous measure of how legislators perform relative to a benchmark, and the raw, continuous effectiveness scores. Nevertheless, we prefer the categorical benchmark measures because they provide an intuitive interpretation of legislative performance, incorporate a variety of would-be confounding variables (e.g., majority party status) that capture the constrained lawmaking environment of the U.S. Congress, and appear in public-facing analyses of important congressional developments. For example, *The Washington Post* used the categorical measure in their reporting on the race for the next Republican Speaker of the House in late 2023.[34] Like the continuous measures, we adopt the Center for Effective Lawmaking estimates for "above" and "below" expectations lawmakers without any manual adjustment.

Measuring Opposition to the President

Finally, we include a straightforward, dichotomous indicator for membership in the party opposed to the president of the United States. This measure varies both across individuals and over time in our dataset. Because our dataset runs from 2015-2022, both parties experience a loss in control of the White House in our analysis.

Model Specification

simplify cross-sectional comparisons among lawmakers.

[34]The document used by *The Washington Post* can be found here: https://www.washingtonpost.com/documents/41488d71-d7e0-4d88-9676-d9444e0f8503.pdf?itid=lk_inline_manual_65.

We evaluate the relationship between town hall activity and each of these measures (electoral vulnerability, legislative effectiveness, and opposition to the president) in a series of fixed-effects linear regression models.[35] The results from this analysis are presented in Table 1 below. We use legislator fixed effects to control for unobserved, time-invariant characteristics of individual legislators that may influence town hall frequency during our analysis, such as personal style or partisan affiliation. We include congress fixed effects, by contrast, to account for time-varying factors affecting all legislators in a given Congress. Including fixed effects in our estimation strategy allows us to address significant omitted variable concerns, and we provide a variety of alternative fixed effects specifications in Appendix Table A5. All regression models include standard errors clustered by lawmaker.

We discuss the results of our investigation into each of the three exploratory hypotheses in the subsections that follow. In the discussion of our results, we primarily focus on our preferred model specification (Column 1), which utilizes the more restrictive Cook Scores measure of vulnerability. Please see the appendix tables and figures for a variety of additional extensions and robustness checks.

Electoral Vulnerability Results

We find, at best, inconsistent evidence linking electoral vulnerability and town hall events. In the first column of Table 1, the coefficient for our preferred measure of electoral vulnerability was in the expected direction, but we cannot confidently attribute this relationship to anything other than random variation. Our second Cook Scores measure – identifying vulnerable lawmakers as any that did not receive a "solid" (i.e., fully safe) rating – provides a stronger indication that town hall activity may correspond with electoral concerns. This is reinforced by the coefficient on a dummy variable for receiving less than 55% of the vote in *either* primary or general elections. However, the remaining vote-based measures all fail to reach standard levels of statistical significance as well. Taken together, the results here may suggest a possible electoral link, but we do not have clear and consistent evidence in at least four of the five model specifications in Table 1.

[35]See Appendix Table A9 for the results of our results from a set of zero-inflated negative binomial models.

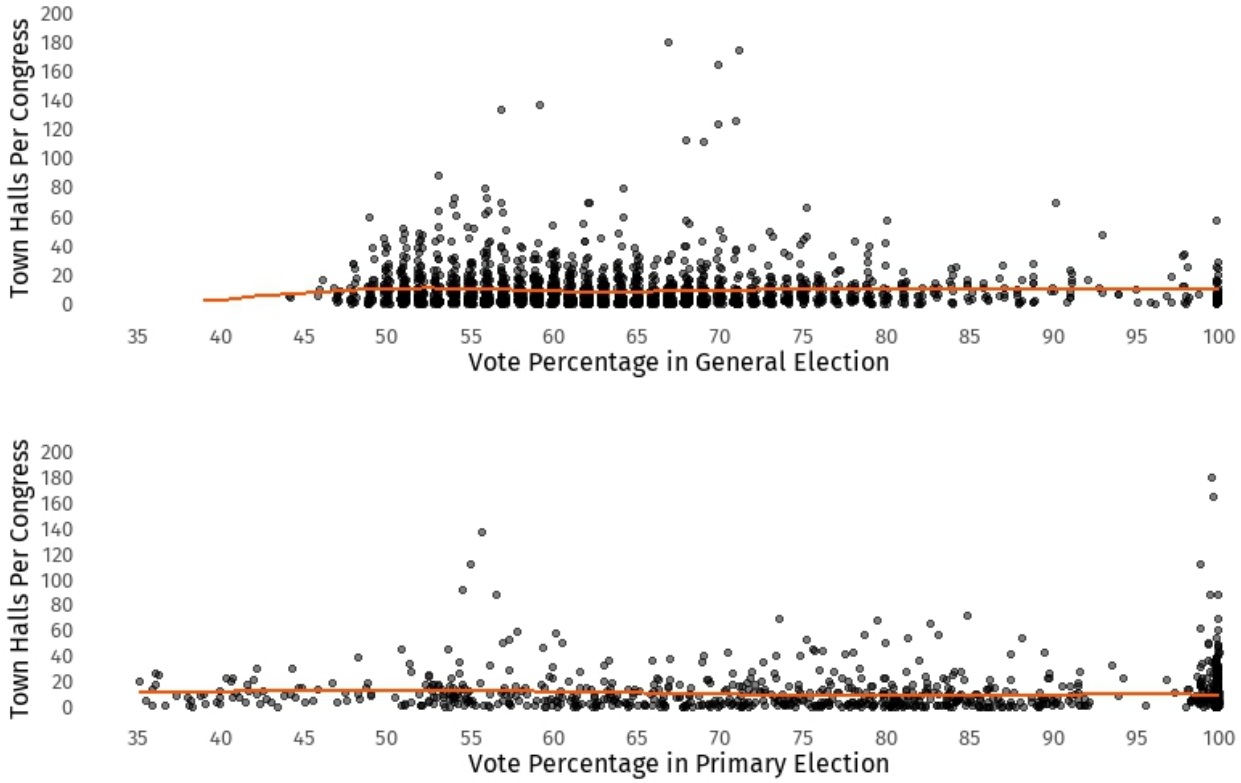
TABLE 1. Analyzing the Politics of Town Hall Events in the U.S. Congress

	DV: Total Town Halls				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
LES Above Expectations	-0.05	-0.09	0.66	-0.03	0.74
	(0.92)	(0.92)	(1.3)	(0.92)	(1.3)
LES Below Expectations	-2.1*	-2.1*	-0.62	-2.1*	-0.58
	(1.2)	(1.2)	(0.59)	(1.2)	(0.60)
Opposed to the President	2.6***	2.7***	3.4***	2.5***	3.4***
	(0.43)	(0.42)	(0.48)	(0.40)	(0.49)
Cook Scores (Toss Up or Lean)	1.0				
	(1.0)				
Cook Scores (Any But Solid)		1.5**			
		(0.70)			
$<$ 55% of General *or* Primary Election			2.0*		
			(1.1)		
General Election Vote %				-0.01	
				(0.04)	
Primary Election Vote %					-0.01
					(0.02)
Congress FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lawmaker FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,086	2,086	1,376	2,085	1,376
R^2	0.70	0.70	0.81	0.70	0.81
Within R^2	0.02	0.02	0.06	0.02	0.05

Legislator-clustered standard errors in parentheses; p<0.01 = ***, p<0.05 = **, p<0.1 = *
Columns 1, 2, and 4 include complete data from the 114th, 115th, 116th, and 117th Congresses (2015-2022). We lack primary election data after 2018 and for California and Washington, which reduces our sample size in Columns 3 and 5. All models include in-person and remote town hall events from both chambers, with two-way fixed effects. See appendix tables for a variety of alternative modeling specifications.

To further explore this result, we present simple bivariate graphs showing the relationship between vote share in the prior general and primary elections and town hall frequency.[36] Figure 6 graphs town halls per congress against primary and general election vote percentages in the election prior to the given congress. Again, we see that general election vote share and town hall frequency are not strongly correlated. It does not appear to be the case that only electorally vulnerable members, or members in any specific range of electoral threat, place a special emphasis on town halls.[37]

FIGURE 6. Town Hall Activity Looks Similar Among Secure and Vulnerable Elected Officials



Note: This figure presents a jiittered two-way scatter plot with a Locally Estimated Scatterplot Smoothing (LOESS) trend line mapping the relationship between election results and town halls per Congress. Uncontested primary or general election incumbents are scored as receiving 100% of the vote. Each dot indicates the town halls per congress for a given member-congress observation with the vote share received in the prior election on the x-axis.

Taken together, the results from these models – and an even more expansive look at the election data in Appendix Table A4 – seem to provide, at best, inconsistent support for

[36]Because of the incumbency advantage in primaries, our analysis includes only the primary results a member has experienced as the incumbent, which significantly reduces our observations in this plot.

[37]Uncontested members at both electoral stages are scored as receiving 100% of the vote.

the electoral vulnerability hypothesis. Interestingly, these results seem broadly consistent with recent findings by Byers and Shay (2023) that cast doubt on the relationship between electoral threat and heightened district attention. At a minimum, town hall events do not appear to be a direct function of electoral pressure.

Legislative Productivity Results

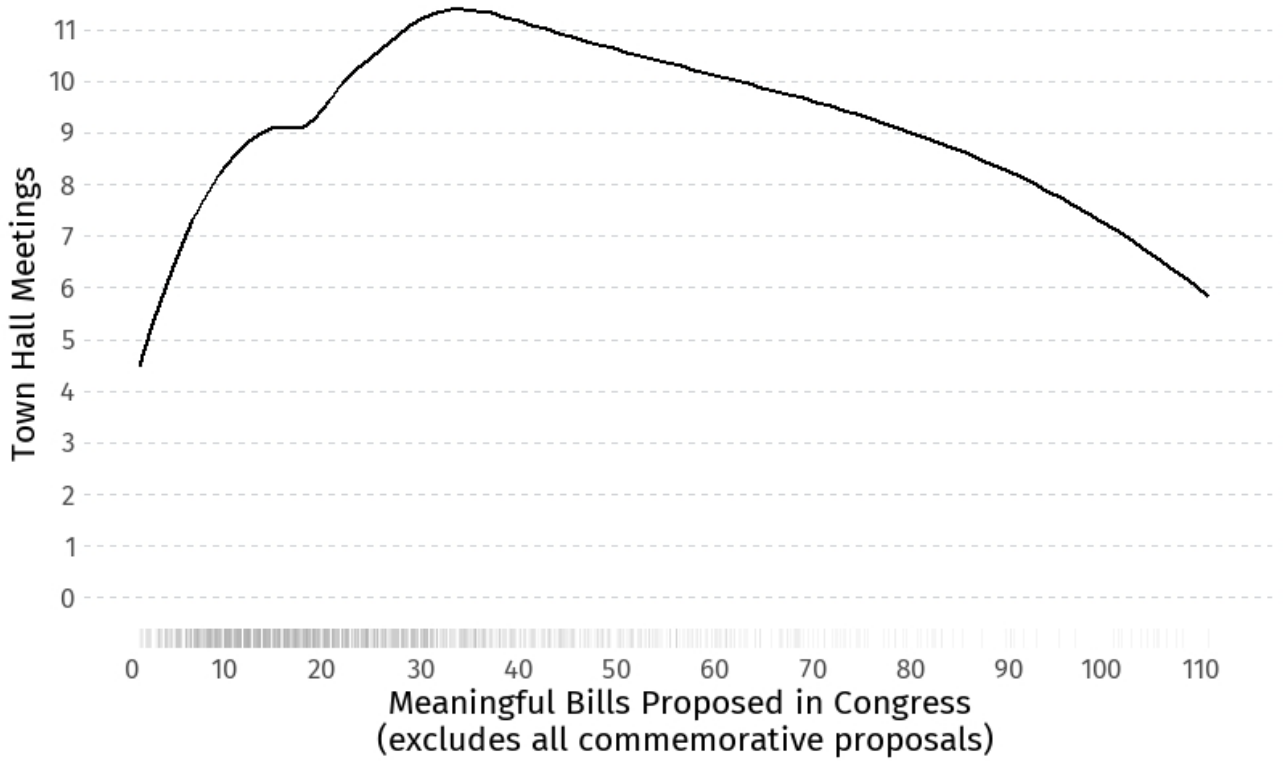
We also find little support of a zero-sum tradeoff between lawmaking and town hall activity. Across all five columns of Table 1, extraordinarily productive lawmakers – i.e., those with legislative records "above expectations" according to the Center for Effective Lawmaking – do not clearly hold fewer town hall meetings than their colleagues with fewer policy accomplishments (i.e., those that simply "meet expectations" given their political circumstances). If anything, our results at least suggest that under-performing legislators (those "below expectations") may also hold *fewer* town hall meetings in the district – although these results do not meet traditional measures of statistical significance.

To further illustrate these findings, we show the bivariate relationship between meaningful bill proposals and town hall activity.[38] Figure 7 includes a Locally Estimated Scatterplot Smoothing (LOESS) trend line with a rugplot on the x-axis to provide information about the density (or sparsity) of observations used to estimate the regression.[39]

[38]We measure "meaningful bill proposals" as any "substantive" or "substantive and significant" (i.e., non-commemorative) legislative initiatives sponsored by a Senator or Representative.

[39]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. Relatively few lawmakers, for example, introduced more than 40 pieces of meaningful public policy in a two-year period.

FIGURE 7. Productive Lawmakers Do Not Seem to Hold Fewer Town Hall meetings



Note: We measure "meaningful bill proposals" as any “substantive” or “substantive and significant” (i.e., non-commemorative) legislative initiatives sponsored by a Senator or Representative. To highlight the overall trend, we omit the full scatter plot, which would include a handful of extreme outliers and obscure the scale of the overwhelming majority of our dataset.

If anything, the patterns in Figure 7 suggest a positive association between legislative productivity and town hall activity for the region of the x-axis with the greatest number of observations used to estimate the trend line. Similarly, this simple, descriptive plot suggests again that those holding the fewest town hall meetings also propose fewer meaningful bills in Congress. This pattern runs contrary to the expectation that district and D.C. politics exist in direct tension with one another.[40] Some elected officials can clearly work through the “allocative problem” detailed by Fenno decades ago (assuming such a tension persists); others, on the other hand, appear to under-perform at multiple aspects of representation.

Opposition Messaging Results

Finally, we find a strong and positive correlation between opposition to the president

[40]This pattern also appears consistent with Appendix Figure A1.

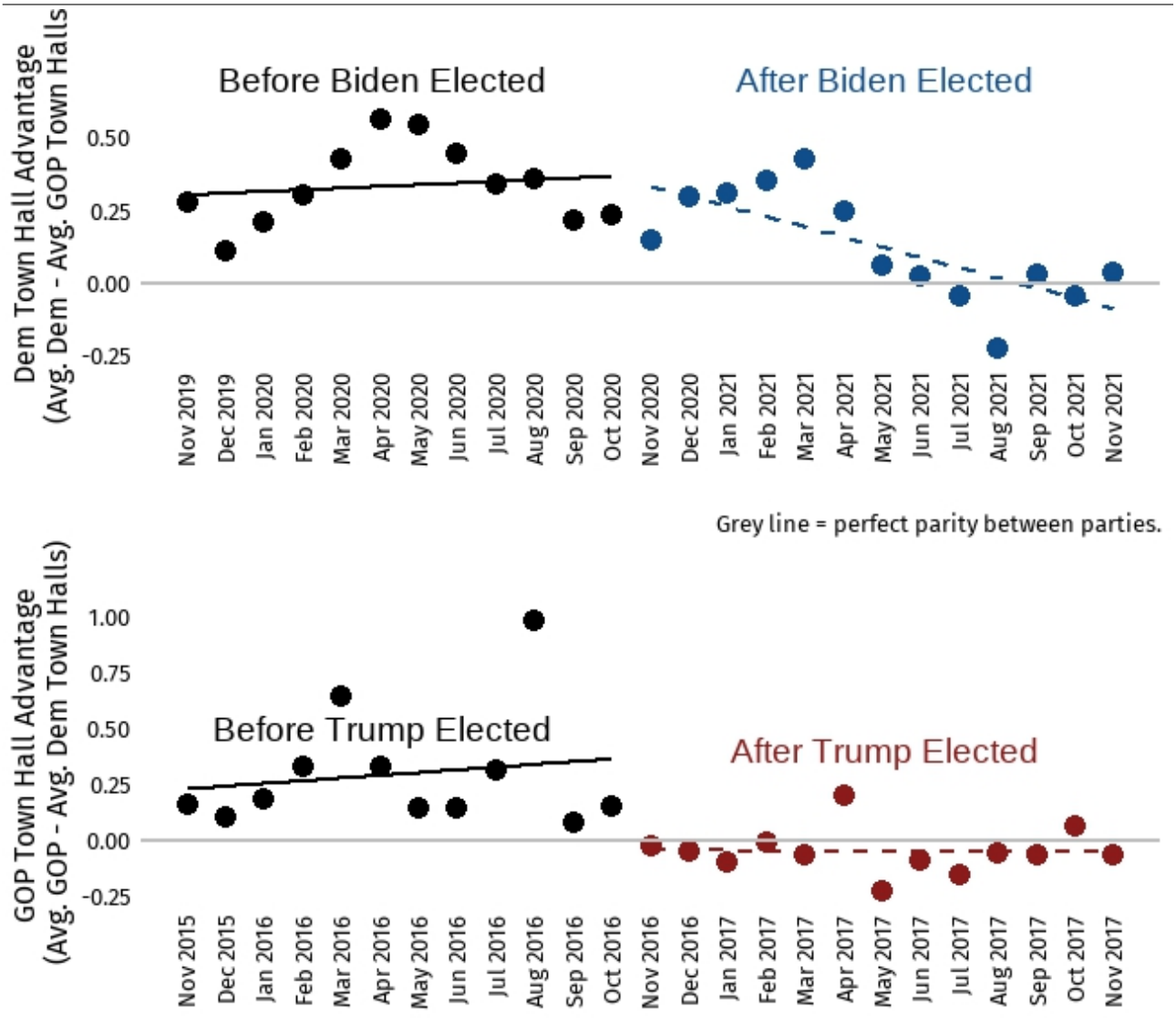
and town hall frequency. Table 1 shows that legislators hold more than two additional town hall events after their party loses control of the White House ($p<0.01$). To put that coefficient in context, the median number of Senate town halls in our dataset was two, while many legislators in both chambers chose not to hold any town hall meetings at all. As we show in the appendix, this pattern remains if we split our data by chamber, vary our inclusion of fixed effects, and use employ a variety of alternative modeling specifications.

We further illustrate this finding by analyzing the 12 months before and after the November 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. In Figure 8 we show how the party that gains the presidency tends to experience a relative decline in town hall frequency. The bottom pane of Figure 8 illustrates the net Republican advantage – which is simply the average Republican town halls minus the average Democratic town halls – for the two-year period surrounding the 2016 presidential election.[41] In the year leading up to the 2016 election, the average Republican hosted more town hall meetings than the average Democrat in *every* single month. After Donald Trump was elected president, however, the average Republican held more town hall meetings in only two of the twelve months to follow. The top pane of Figure 8, conversely, shows the net Democratic advantage (i.e., average Democratic town halls - average Republican town halls) before and after Democrats elected Joe Biden to the White House. Here, again, Democrats held more town halls than Republicans every month in the lead up to the 2020 presidential elections; this advantage vanishes within a few months of reclaiming the White House. In short, the plot reveals the gap in average town halls between the two parties over critical periods of time in which the power of the executive branch shifted from one party to another.[42]

[41] The results in Table 1 do not, however, help us understand if this relative gap is due to the president's co-partisans avoiding confrontational and politically costly town hall meetings, the opposition party engaged in a decentralized party messaging campaign, or both. In Appendix Table Figure A3 we plot the total town hall meetings, by party and month, during our time series. The most dramatic increases in town hall frequency appear to occur by Republicans during the Obama administration and by Democrats towards the end of the Trump administration, these trends drive our opposition party effects and may be explained by mobilization against incumbents during particularly contentious periods like the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic

[42] This finding continues to emerge if we evaluate lawmaker communications through official email correspondence. For example, we obtained congressional email data from DCInbox, which tracks all official emails from incumbent members of Congress (Cormack 2017). Again examining a 12-month window around the 2016

FIGURE 8. Exploring Which Party Holds More Town Halls on Average Before and After Presidential Elections



Note: Each dot indicates the difference between the average number of town halls held by each party in a given month. We describe a positive difference in average town hall events as a "town hall advantage." The top pane illustrates the Democratic town hall advantage before and after President Joe Biden (Democrat) was inaugurated as the president of the United States. The bottom pane shows the Republican town hall advantage before and after former President Donald Trump (Republican) was sworn into office.

Scholars have long considered district political activity as a collection of behaviors that contribute to a favorable reputation among constituents for individual legislators. However,

election, we find that while Republicans consistently advertise town halls more than Democrats, the gap shrinks dramatically following the 2016 election. In the year before the election, Republicans send 53.9 more emails mentioning town halls than Democrats per month, a gap that drops to 29.4 in the year following the election.

the results in this section suggest that town halls are associated more strongly with party messaging incentives in a shifting and highly competitive national political climate.[43]

Summary of Results

- *We do not find clear and consistent evidence that electoral vulnerability correlates with town hall activity.*
- *We do not find clear and consistent evidence of a zero-sum trade-off between legislative productivity and town hall activity.*
- *Our results consistently suggest that legislators opposed to the president hold more town hall events.*

DISCUSSION

Congressional town halls are, at their best, remarkable reminders of the American principles of self-government and republican representation. In the midst of deep partisan polarization, lawmakers gather with their constituents – both supporters and opponents – to hear the public out, showcase their work in Washington and explain how their community is represented on Capitol.

However, town halls depend upon scarce staffing resources and require that lawmakers spend personal and incredibly scarce time hosting each of these events. Each event risks exposure to politically damaging encounters with organized protesters or hostile constituents. In extreme, though fortunately uncommon, cases, town hall events can even turn violent.

Despite these costs and risks, lawmakers have hosted tens of thousands of town hall events in the modern Congress, and yet, this long-standing tradition of American political representation has largely been ignored by political scientists. Scholars have only recently begun to consider the importance of town hall events in American politics (Neblo, Esterling,

[43]Another possibility is that individuals choose to host town hall meetings as a function of their ideological extremism. For example, an extremely conservative or progressive lawmaker may wish to use town hall events to signal their (divergent) position to a supportive base. The results in Appendix Table A6 provide mixed evidence related to this consideration.

and Lazer 2018; Bussing et al. 2022) We set out to advance this area of research with a new observational analysis of town halls in American politics.

Towards this end, we analyzed a new dataset of over 25,000 town hall meetings to evaluate this largely unexplored form of congressional politics. After a brief exploration of descriptive patterns in the data, we found that neither electoral vulnerability nor legislative productivity strongly correlates with town hall activity. We did, however, find a strong correlation between opposition to the president and town hall frequency.

These findings may suggest that the "allocative problem" described by Fenno more than a half-century ago needs to be revisited. Town hall events, instead, may exist as yet another instrument of party messaging in the perpetual struggle to regain and retain control of the American government. Incumbents may consider town hall meetings as an institutionally funded means of counter-messaging the White House in a highly decentralized, local, and personal manner. From this perspective, town hall meetings may provide both a means of accomplishing collective partisan ambitions and a subtle means of checking the advantages of presidential power.

That said, this article analyzes town hall activity without taking into account the full range of other, district-focused activities. Similarly, we do not consider the distinct possibility that town halls are in direct tension with more overt electoral activity (e.g., a campaign fundraiser). Political scientists may soon combine comprehensive measures of district presence with detailed campaign finance data to reveal more than we have been able to show with the preliminary town-hall-focused analysis in this article. To our knowledge, no such index of district behavior exists, but as new data on casework, district staffing, and constituency communication continues to emerge in the literature on congressional politics, we may soon be able to both reevaluate the three expectations discussed above and consider other, new lines of social science inquiry.

The highly granular nature of the underlying town hall dataset presented in this article sets up an extraordinarily broad avenue of future research. Following the work of Bussing et al. (2022), researchers might also investigate the politics surrounding particularly im-

portant legislative initiatives. Appendix Figure A2, for example, 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.[44] Lawmakers held a staggering number of highly contested town hall events during this time – many of them expressly focused on health policy – and the granular nature of this dataset suggests future paths for research relating to local economic and geographic conditions as scholars ponder issues of access and representation.[45]

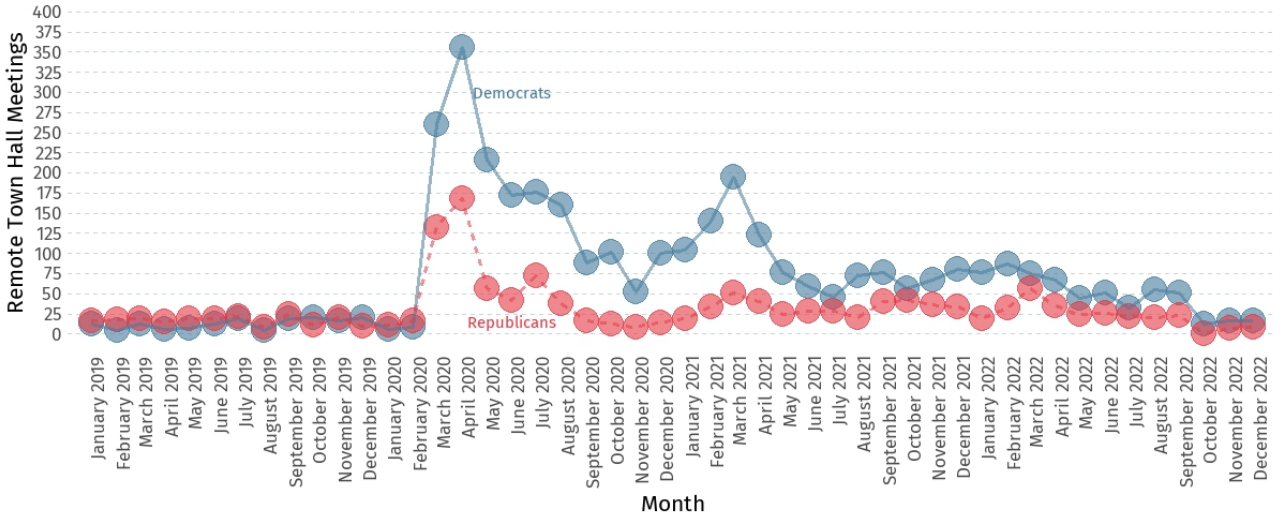
Similarly, Figure 9 illustrates the potential to evaluate rapid shifts in American political representation. This image shows how the emergence of COVID-19 corresponded with a dramatic change in the technology used to connect with constituents. Lawmakers – especially Democratic lawmakers[46] – threw themselves into the tasks of testing new modes of communication with greater opportunities for vast audiences, heightened control, and reduced cost. The impact of these shifts – and the staying power of "remote" district presence – warrants additional research.

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

[45] More specifically, we evaluate the repeal attempt as measured by the time between the introduction of the American Health Care Act (March 6th, 2017) and 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.

[46] This is consistent with work showing differential partisan response to COVID at the mass level (Bisbee and Lee 2022) - the likely attendees of Democratic town halls were significantly more likely to curtail their daily behavior than their Republican counterparts

FIGURE 9. The Rise and Asymmetrical Fall of Virtual, Pandemic-Era Town Hall Meetings



Note: This figure shows the dramatic rise – and asymmetric fall – of new remote town hall meeting formats during the outbreak of a global pandemic.

More generally, congressional scholars might use town hall data to better understand lame-duck legislative sessions, redistricting periods, and dramatic shifts in the hierarchy of party leadership positions. New experimental work might, instead, isolate the impact of town hall news coverage for incumbent lawmakers. At the same time, text analysis methods may be used to more closely consider the coordinated nature of town hall party messaging.

Congressional town hall meetings are part of a long and largely overlooked tradition in American politics. It is our hope that this exploratory analysis encourages thoughtful reflection on the promise and peril of this imperfect, public, and persistent form of congressional representation.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1. Analyzing the Politics of Town Hall Events, by Congressional Chamber (2015–2022)

	DV: Total Town Halls		
	(House & Senate)	(Senate)	(House)
Variables			
LES Above Expectations	-0.05	1.0	0.04
	(0.92)	(3.6)	(0.82)
LES Below Expectations	-2.1*	-0.98	-1.1*
	(1.2)	(1.7)	(0.64)
Cook Scores (Toss Up or Lean)	1.0	0.94	0.93
	(1.0)	(1.5)	(1.3)
Opposed to President	2.6***	3.2***	2.5***
	(0.43)	(1.2)	(0.47)
Congress FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lawmaker FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,086	391	1,695
R^2	0.70	0.64	0.81
Within R^2	0.02	0.02	0.03

p<0.01 = ***, p<0.05 = **, p<0.1 = *

Note: Linear regression models with legislator-clustered std. errors in parentheses. Unit of analysis is legislator-congress. Time-series includes the 114th, 115th, 116th, and 117th Congresses. As with all of our analyses, we exclude any legislator who served a partial term (e.g., due to resignation, death, appointment, or special election victory).

TABLE A2. Analyzing the Politics of Town Hall Events, by Town Hall Format (2015–2022)

	DV: Total Town Halls	
	(Remote Town Halls)	(In-Person Town Halls)
LES Above Expectations	-0.29	0.24
	(0.40)	(0.83)
LES Below Expectations	-1.1	-0.96
	(1.1)	(0.60)
Cook Scores (Toss Up or Lean)	0.29	0.73
	(0.45)	(0.85)
Opposed to President	-0.05	2.7***
	(0.26)	(0.35)
Congress FE	Yes	Yes
Lawmaker FE	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,086	2,086
R^2	0.49	0.75
Within R^2	0.003	0.04

p<0.01 = ***, p<0.05 = **, p<0.1 = *

Note: Linear regression models with legislator-clustered std. errors in parentheses. Unit of analysis is legislator-congress. Time-series includes the 114th, 115th, 116th, and 117th Congresses. As with all of our analyses, we exclude any legislator who served a partial term (e.g., due to resignation, death, appointment, or special election victory).

TABLE A3. Analyzing the Politics of Town Hall Events, Alternative LES Measures (2015–2022)

	DV: Total Town Halls		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
LES Above Expectations	-0.05		
	(0.92)		
LES Below Expectations	-2.1*		
	(1.2)		
LES Benchmark Ratio		0.60	
		(0.47)	
LES			1.2***
			(0.40)
Opposed to President	2.6***	2.6***	2.7***
	(0.43)	(0.43)	(0.44)
Cook Scores (Toss Up or Lean)	1.0	0.95	0.85
	(1.0)	(0.99)	(0.99)
Congress FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lawmaker FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,086	2,086	2,086
R^2	0.70	0.70	0.70
Within R^2	0.02	0.02	0.03

p<0.01 = ***, p<0.05 = **, p<0.1 = *

Note: Linear regression models with legislator-clustered std. errors in parentheses. The unit of analysis is legislator-congress. Time-series includes the 114th, 115th, 116th, and 117th Congresses. As with all of our analyses, we exclude any legislator who served a partial term (e.g., due to resignation, death, appointment, or special election victory). While we find that more effective lawmakers – as measured by the continuous, original legislative effectiveness score (LES) – are moderately more effective, two points are worth noting. First, a one-point increase in LES is an extremely large increase, so the magnitude of the coefficient, at a glance, may suggest a larger potential effect than most individuals would experience for a meaningful but plausible improvement in their LES. Second, Figure 7 suggests that a linear analysis of the continuous measure obscures a non-monotonic relationship between effectiveness and meeting frequency.

TABLE A4. Analyzing the Politics of Town Hall Events with Additional Electoral Vulnerability Measures (2015–2022)

	DV: Total Town Halls						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
LES Above Expectations	-0.05	-0.09	0.74	-0.04	0.66	-0.03	0.74
	(0.92)	(0.92)	(1.3)	(0.92)	(1.3)	(0.92)	(1.3)
LES Below Expectations	-2.1*	-2.1*	-0.58	-2.1*	-0.62	-2.1*	-0.58
	(1.2)	(1.2)	(0.60)	(1.2)	(0.59)	(1.2)	(0.60)
Opposed to President	2.6***	2.7***	3.4***	2.6***	3.4***	2.5***	3.4***
	(0.43)	(0.42)	(0.49)	(0.40)	(0.48)	(0.40)	(0.49)
Cook Scores (Toss Up or Lean)	1.0						
	(1.0)						
Cook Scores (Any But Solid)		1.5**					
		(0.70)					
< 55% Primary Election			0.45				
			(1.1)				
< 55% General Election				1.1			
				(0.93)			
< 55% Primary *or* General Election					2.0*		
					(1.1)		
General Election Vote %						-0.01	
						(0.04)	
Primary Election Vote %							-0.01
							(0.02)
Congress	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lawmaker	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,086	2,086	1,376	2,085	1,376	2,085	1,376
R^2	0.70	0.70	0.81	0.70	0.81	0.70	0.81

p<0.01 = ***, p<0.05 = **, p<0.1 = *

Note: Linear regression models with legislator-clustered std. errors in parentheses. Our unit of analysis is legislator-congress. Time-series includes the 114th, 115th, 116th, and 117th Congresses. As with all of our analyses, we exclude any legislator who served a partial term (e.g., due to resignation, death, appointment, or special election victory). We lack primary election data after 2018 and for California and Washington, which reduces our sample size in all columns that incorporate primary election data.

TABLE A5. Analyzing the Politics of Town Hall Events with Alternative Fixed Effects Specifications (2015–2022)

	DV: Total Town Halls		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
LES Above Expectations	-0.05	1.8*	0.79
	(0.92)	(1.1)	(0.99)
LES Below Expectations	-2.1*	-1.5*	-1.1
	(1.2)	(0.88)	(0.94)
Cook Scores (Toss Up or Lean)	1.0	0.07	-0.05
	(1.0)	(1.0)	(1.0)
Opposed to President	2.6***	2.7***	2.6***
	(0.43)	(0.44)	(0.50)
Congress FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Legislator FE	Yes		
State FE		Yes	
State-District FE			Yes
Observations	2,086	2,018	2,086
R^2	0.70	0.17	0.55
Within R^2	0.02	0.01	0.02

p<0.01 = ***, p<0.05 = **, p<0.1 = *

Note: Linear regression models with legislator-clustered std. errors in parentheses. Our unit of analysis is legislator-congress. Time-series includes the 114th, 115th, 116th, and 117th Congresses. As with all of our analyses, we exclude any legislator who served a partial term (e.g., due to resignation, death, appointment, or special election victory). State-district fixed effects provide an indicator for each combination of state and congressional district (e.g., NJ-07) during our time period. Senators are given a statewide indicator common to both Senators (e.g., NJ-00). Our time series does not include any ordinary moments of redistricting, as the dataset begins after the post-2010 census apportionment changes go into effect and before the post-2020 changes are implemented (i.e., January 2023).

TABLE A6. Analyzing the Politics of Town Hall Events with Ideological Extremism Control Variables (2015–2022)

	DV: Total Town Halls				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Above Expectations LES	-0.13	-0.17	0.64	-0.11	0.73
	(0.90)	(0.90)	(1.3)	(0.90)	(1.3)
Below Expectations LES	-2.1*	-2.1*	-0.64	-2.1*	-0.59
	(1.2)	(1.2)	(0.59)	(1.2)	(0.60)
Opposed to President	2.6***	2.7***	3.4***	2.5***	3.4***
	(0.44)	(0.43)	(0.52)	(0.41)	(0.53)
Cook Scores (Toss Up or Lean)	1.2				
	(1.0)				
Cook Scores (Any But Solid)		1.6**			
		(0.71)			
< 55% General *or* Primary Vote			2.0*		
			(1.1)		
General Election Vote %				-0.01	
				(0.04)	
Primary Election Vote %					-0.01
					(0.02)
Abs(Nokken-Poole 1st-Dim)	10.5***	10.6***	-0.96	10.2**	-1.3
	(4.1)	(4.1)	(6.9)	(4.1)	(7.0)
Abs(Nokken-Poole 2nd-Dim)	3.2	3.2	1.2	3.2	0.88
	(2.3)	(2.3)	(2.5)	(2.3)	(2.5)
Congress FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lawmaker FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,086	2,086	1,376	2,085	1,376
R^2	0.70	0.70	0.81	0.70	0.81
Within R^2	0.03	0.03	0.06	0.03	0.05

p<0.01 = ***, p<0.05 = **, p<0.1 = *

Note: Linear regression models with legislator-clustered std. errors in parentheses. Our unit of analysis is legislator-congress. Time-series includes the 114th, 115th, 116th, and 117th Congresses. As with all of our analyses, we exclude any legislator who served a partial term (e.g., due to resignation, death, appointment, or special election victory). Including the absolute value of Nokken-Poole Scores (1st and 2nd dimensions) – a time- and unit-varying measure of ideological location – does not alter the coefficients for our variables of interest.

TABLE A7. Analyzing the Politics of Senate Town Hall Events and Election Cycles (2015–2022)

	DV: Total Town Halls		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Above Expectations LES	1.7	2.7	0.76
	(3.6)	(2.6)	(3.5)
Below Expectations LES	-1.1	0.18	-0.84
	(1.8)	(2.1)	(1.7)
Opposed to President	3.0**	3.1***	2.9***
	(1.1)	(1.0)	(1.1)
On Cycle	-0.09	1.8*	0.28
	(1.1)	(0.97)	(1.1)
General Election Vote %	0.37	0.02	0.32
	(0.31)	(0.15)	(0.29)
Lawmaker FE	Yes		Yes
Congress FE		Yes	Yes
Observations	390	390	390
R^2	0.63	0.03	0.65
Within R^2	0.03	0.02	0.03

p<0.01 = ***, p<0.05 = **, p<0.1 = *

Note: Linear regression models with legislator-clustered std. errors in parentheses. Our unit of analysis is senator-congress. Time-series includes the 114th, 115th, 116th, and 117th Congresses. As with all of our analyses, we exclude any legislator who served a partial term (e.g., due to resignation, death, appointment, or special election victory).

TABLE A8. Analyzing the Relationship Between Other Demographic Variables and Town Hall Activity (2015–2022)

	DV: Total Town Halls	
	(1)	(2)
Female	-1.4*	-1.2
	(0.81)	(0.82)
Republican	-2.4*	-2.5**
	(1.2)	(1.2)
African-American	-1.2	-1.2
	(1.1)	(1.1)
Latino	-4.9***	-4.7***
	(0.85)	(0.90)
Senate	-3.6*	-3.6*
	(2.0)	(2.0)
Committee Chair	-1.9	-1.8
	(1.4)	(1.4)
Sub-committee Chair	1.5	1.7
	(1.2)	(1.2)
Age	-0.20***	-0.20***
	(0.047)	(0.048)
State FE	Yes	Yes
Congress FE		Yes
Observations	2,026	2,026
R^2	0.186	0.194
Within R^2	0.040	0.039

p<0.01 = ***, p<0.05 = **, p<0.1 = *

Note: Linear regression models with legislator-clustered std. errors in parentheses. Our unit of analysis is legislator-congress. Time-series includes the 114th, 115th, 116th, and 117th Congresses. As with all of our analyses, we exclude any legislator who served a partial term (e.g., due to resignation, death, appointment, or special election victory). Unlike our other analyses, we do not use legislator FE because some of these demographic variables do not vary within legislator in our data.

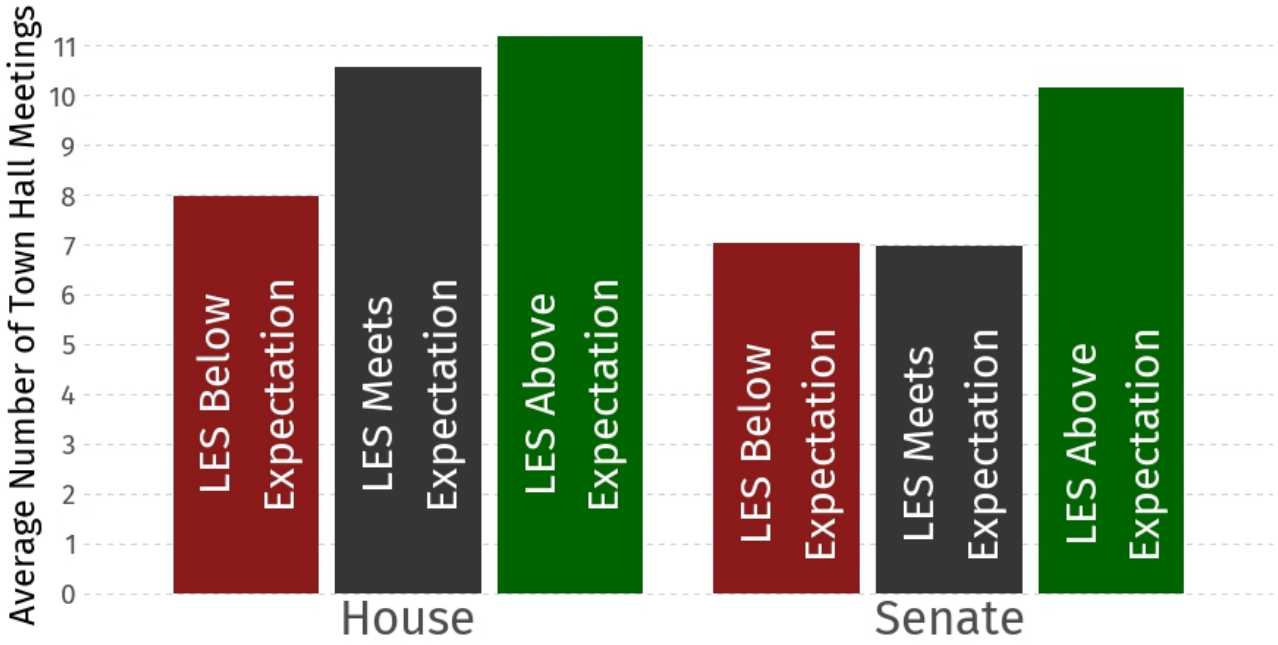
TABLE A9. Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial Models

	DV: Total Town Halls				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
LES Above Expectations	−0.07	−0.07	−0.01	−0.07	0.002
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.06)
LES Below Expectations	−0.17***	−0.17***	−0.08	−0.16***	−0.07
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Opposed to the President	0.22***	0.22***	0.41***	0.21***	0.40***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.04)
Cook Scores (Toss Up or Lean)	0.09				
	(0.06)				
Cook Scores (Non-Solid)		0.10*			
		(0.06)			
<55% of General or Primary Votes			0.17***		
			(0.05)		
General Election Vote %				0.001	
				(0.002)	
Primary Election Vote %					−0.001
					(0.001)
Congress FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lawmaker FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,086	2,086	1,376	2,085	1,376
Log Likelihood	−5,077.98	−5,077.90	−3,370.89	−5,075.15	−3,376.31

p<0.01 = ***, p<0.05 = **, p<0.1 = *

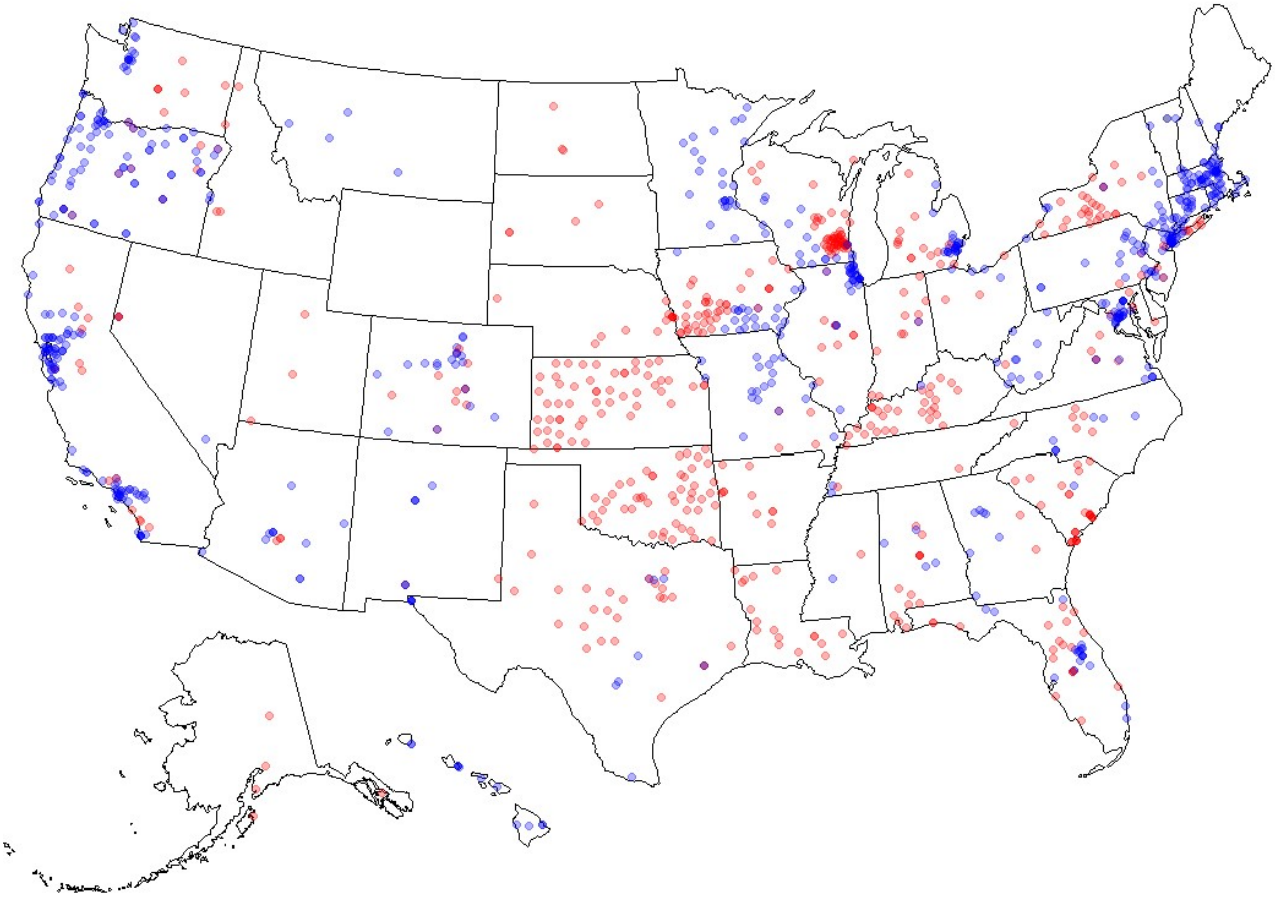
Note: Count model coefficients from zero-inflated negative binomial model. Standard errors are included in parentheses. The zero-inflated predictors (not shown here) include LES Above Expectations, LES Below Expectations, Opposition to the President, and Cook Scores (Toss Up or Lean).

FIGURE A1. Town Hall Meetings by Legislative Effectiveness Category



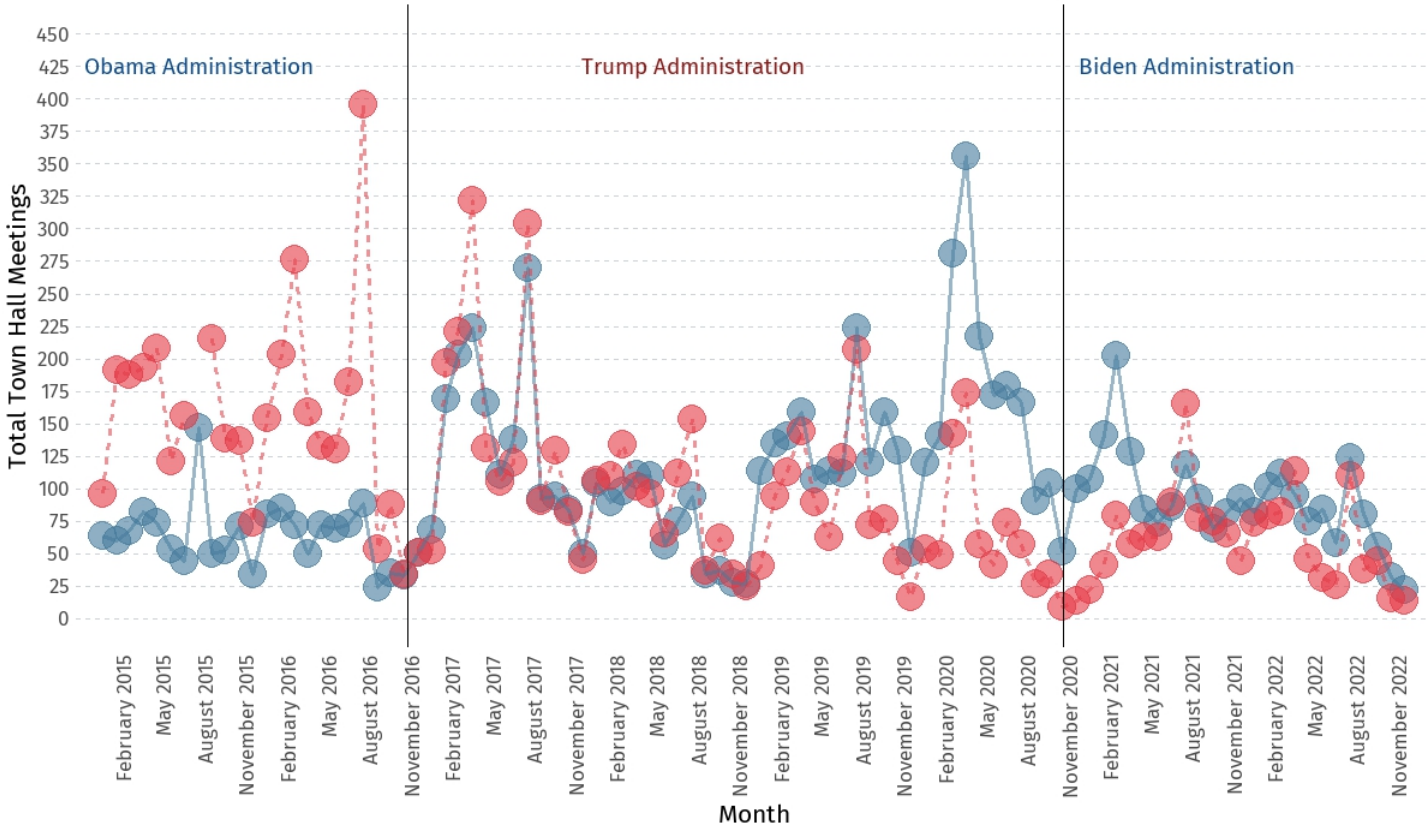
Note: This plot shows the average number of town hall meetings held by legislators in the three benchmark categories established by the Center for Effective Lawmaking: "Below Expectation," "Above Expectation," and "Meets Expectation" (the omitted category in our main statistical analyses). Legislators with effectiveness scores "above expectations" have a particularly high ratio (1.5+) of their observed legislative effectiveness score (LES) relative to their predicted LES after accounting for seniority, majority party status, committee chair positions, and subcommittee chair positions. Those 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 A2. Town Hall Meetings Throughout the ACA Repeal Fight (March 6 - July 28, 2017)



Note: The map displays all town hall meetings that occurred during the fight over the failed Republican effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act in early 2017. Each blue dot represents a town hall hosted by a Democratic member of the U.S. Congress; red dots indicate those hosted by Republicans.

FIGURE A3. Town Hall Events by Party and Month



Note: Monthly town hall data, broken out by party, for our time series (2015-2022). The most notable spikes in town hall frequency occur among Republicans at the end of the Obama administration and Democrats towards the end of the Trump administration. These patterns are consistent with the perspective that town hall serve as an opportunity to engage in party messaging – particularly given the tendency for large increases in close proximity to presidential election years. That said, we lack data for the end of the Biden administration and the beginning of the Obama administration, so these implications should be considered with some caution.