

# The News and the Accountability of Agencies: Information Provision and Fire Alarms

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# News Coverage and Bureaucratic Accountability

- **Question 1:** Does news provide information to enable political accountability of bureaucrats?
  - 1 20 years of newspaper coverage, every U.S. agency
  - 2 **Finding:** More presidential power, more association with the president
  
- **Question 2:** What is the effect of news as a fire alarm for Congress?
  - 1 IV Design: Newspaper coverage of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), disasters, Congressional oversight
  - 2 **Finding:** News coverage of FEMA increases Congressional oversight

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# Understanding News Coverage of Agencies

- Powerful bureaus, unelected bureaucrats
  - 1 Long concern with political accountability of agencies (Wilson 1887)
  - 2 Voters must navigate complex, hierarchical bureaucracy. Who is to blame?
  - 3 Solutions: Presidential and Congressional control
  
- Theoretical Motivation
  - 1 **Presidency:** Political control increases accountability (*Federalist*, *Chevron vs. NRDC.*, Kagan 2001)
  - 2 **Congress:** Greater focus on interest groups, citizens as watch-dogs (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984)
  - 3 **Mass Media:** Coverage increases voter **knowledge** and politician **effort** (Prat and Strömberg 2011)

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# News Coverage and Presidential Power

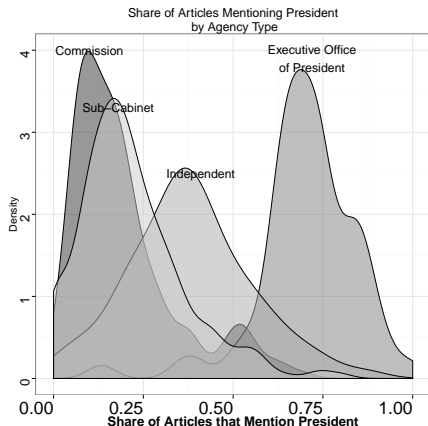
- 1 *New York Times*: 1987 - 2007
- 2 Approximately 175,000 newspaper articles, every U.S. government agency.
- 3 Sort articles by agency institutional design.
- 4 Match news coverage to data on agency political appointees, size, etc (Lewis 2008)

Dataset of Agency News. Types in **decreasing order** of presidential control

| Agency Type                       | Agencies | Articles |
|-----------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Executive Office of the President | 4        | 7,081    |
| Sub-Cabinet Agency                | 49       | 66,674   |
| Independent Agency                | 10       | 14,450   |
| Regulatory Commission             | 13       | 45,692   |

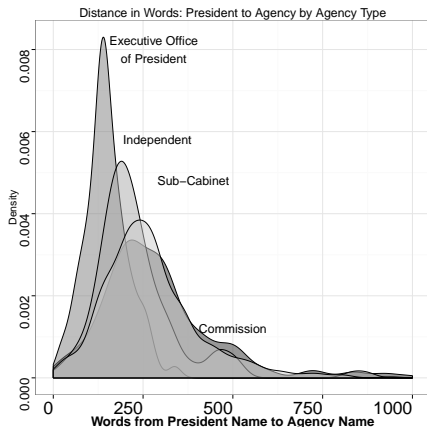
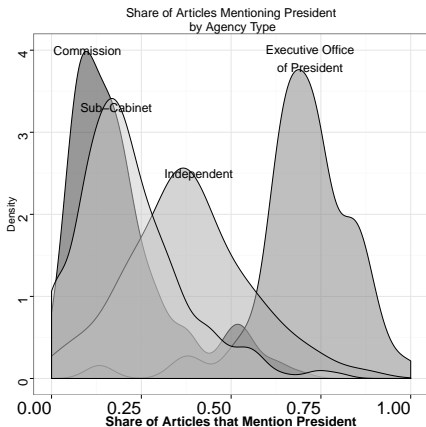
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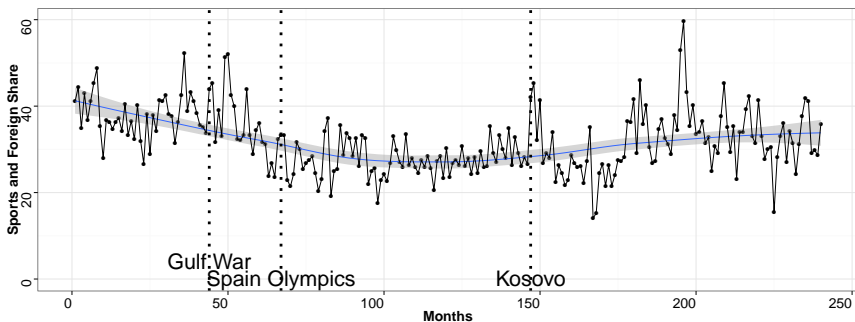
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- Does news coverage of FEMA increase Congressional oversight hearings?
  - 1 20 years of FEMA coverage, U.S. natural disasters, Congressional oversight hearings
  - 2 Instrument for FEMA coverage: share of front page articles devoted to Foreign Affairs and Sports coverage

# Crowding-Out FEMA Coverage

Share of front-page coverage given to Sports and Foreign Affairs reporting (“news pressure”).



# Does news affect Congressional oversight?

Two-stage least squares model:

$$\#news_i = \beta_1 news\ pressure_i + \beta_2 \theta_i + \omega_i \quad (1)$$

$$\#hearings_i = \beta_1 news_i + \beta_2 \theta_i + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

- 1 Availability of newsworthy events **predicts FEMA news** coverage during disaster (F statistic > 10)
- 2 Congressional oversight **driven by news coverage**, controlling for disaster-specific covariates (e.g. cost)
- 3 Conclusion: news operates as a fire alarm for Congress

**Thank you!**