

# Using Newspapers To Measure Power, With An Application to U.S. State Parties, 1877-1977

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## Abstract

Power is difficult to measure. We propose using press coverage—the relative amount of space devoted to different political actors—to measure the relative power of political actors. We use a new dataset containing over 60 million historical newspaper pages from 3,023 local U.S. newspapers over the years 1877–1977. First, we validate our measure by studying a variety of cases for which other plausible indications of power exist. In all cases we find strongly positive relationships between our measure and the alternatives. We then apply the idea to measure the power of state and local political party organizations. We find evidence that key institutional reforms—specifically the Australian ballot and primary elections—significantly reduced the power of party organizations.

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# 1 Introduction

Political science is, at its core, the study of power. But actually measuring power is difficult. We propose using press coverage—the relative amount of space devoted to different political actors—to measure the relative power of political actors. We use a new dataset containing over 60 million historical newspaper pages from approximately 3,000 local U.S. newspapers over the years 1877–1977 to study the roots of local and national political power in the United States. We validate our measure by comparing it to existing measures and by studying changes in its value during times when we know, for other reasons, that the balance of power is shifting. In all cases, we find strong evidence that the measure is valid. We then apply the idea to measure the power of state and local political party organizations. We find evidence that two important institutional reforms—the Australian ballot and direct primary elections—significantly reduced the power of party organizations.<sup>1</sup>

Our idea is based on the following type of thought experiment. First (if you live in the U.S.), ask yourself: How many state or local party leaders can I name? How many do I read about regularly in the newspaper? The answers, in all likelihood, are zero and zero. Why? Because these positions are not powerful in contemporary U.S. politics. Now imagine you were a voter in late 1800s rather than the early 2000s, asking the same questions. If you lived in New York it is likely that you would have read about men such as Roscoe Conkling, Thomas C. Platt, John Kelly, or Richard Croker. Similarly, it is likely that you would have read about Simon Cameron or Matthew Quay if you lived in Pennsylvania, Zachariah Chandler if you lived in Michigan, John “Black Jack” Logan if you lived in Illinois, and Oliver P. Morton if you lived in Indiana. Why? Because these people mattered. They were powerful “bosses,” who controlled access to many elected and appointed political offices in their state, and also had a significant impact on which laws were passed and which were defeated, both nationally and in their states. As a result, they appeared regularly in newspaper stories.

Previous scholars have observed that media coverage is positively associated with power. ? identified a number of key factors that affect the “news value” (newsworthiness) of a potential story. Two of these factors are the size or impact of the story, and the prominence of the actors involved.

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<sup>1</sup>We do not find a significant effect of another reform—civil service laws that reduced the number of patronage jobs available in a state. This could be due to measurement error, since we do not have a comprehensive list of civil service laws affecting cities and counties.

Events and actions that have the potential to affect a large number of people have greater news value, as are stories involving elite actors—powerful nations, people, and organizations. Almost by definition, actors with more power have more opportunities to take actions that affect a large number of people, and are therefore more likely to generate newsworthy events.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, other factors affect news values. For our purposes, the most important is probably the inherent “entertainment value” of the story or actors involved. Since we want to use media coverage to measure power, we must make sure not to include stories that are mainly covering actors or events because of their special entertainment value.<sup>3</sup> This obstacle places bounds on the applicability of our idea. Using media coverage to measure power is best for actors who are inherently boring to most citizens. For example, except perhaps to a small number of political junkies, political party organizations and congressional committees are not entertaining. This is probably true even for congressional party leaders and mayors of all but the largest cities. Who really cares about the personal life of House Speaker John Boehner, majority leader Kevin McCarthy, or mayor Thomas Leighton of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania? Almost no one. The vast majority of citizens care about these individuals only in their role as powerful politicians who can affect public policies. As a result, the media probably covers these actors mainly when they are exercising their power.<sup>4</sup>

The paper is organized as follows. First, we describe the dataset we have collected and the steps we have taken to process the raw text for analytic purposes. Next, we describe the process of constructing our measure of political power. Subsequently, we validate the measure using a variety of cases. As noted, the cases are: congressional leaders vs. rank-and-file members, congressional committees, cities that change from a “strong mayor” (mayor-council) to a “weak mayor” (council-manager) form of government, and tariff policymaking authority before and after the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act. Following validation, we apply the measure to study the effect of several reforms on state party power. Finally, we conclude.

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<sup>2</sup>Many others have made this point, even those critical of the media. See, e.g. ? : 75: “Big ‘names’ make news not only because they tend to know more than lesser names but also because they usually do more that concerns many people. Sources thus become newsworthy as they wield more power... the biggest ‘name’ of all for the American press and its mass audience is the president of the United States, holder of the most powerful, as well as the most visible, office in the United States.”

<sup>3</sup>Other factors that ? identify are proximity, recency, currency, continuity, uniqueness, simplicity, personality, predictability, exclusivity, and negativity.

<sup>4</sup>Relatedly, using media coverage to measure power is best for the types of actors and events for which “routine” factors dominate coverage decisions, rather than individual, reporter-specific factors. Shoemaker et al. (2001) present evidence that this is the case for the coverage of congressional bills.

## 2 Data: Newspaper Text

The newspaper text is from Newspapers.com. This archive contains images of millions of newspaper pages, together with text of the pages generated via optical character recognition (OCR).<sup>5</sup> Currently, the Newspapers.com archive has almost 93 million pages from over 3,500 newspapers (they are constantly adding new material). Of these, Newspapers.com has a large amount of material—at least 10,000 pages covering five or more years—for about 700 newspapers. In this paper we use a stratified sample of 70% from the archive. We focus on the period 1877-1977, which contains the bulk of the data.<sup>6</sup>

The OCR text is messy and requires considerable cleaning. Common errors are: “c” read instead of “e” and visa versa, “a vs. u”, “t” vs. “l” vs. “i”, “g” vs. “q” vs. “y”, and “m” vs. “rn.” Hyphenation is also a serious issue—since newspaper columns are narrow many words must be split and hyphenated. Extra spaces and stray marks are also common. We deal with these by using regular expressions in our search strings and text processing. Though the remaining text surely contains errors that prevent us from perfectly capturing word frequencies, the validity tests below indicate that the remaining errors are not overly problematic.

## 3 Validating the Measure Using Powerful Actors

### 3.1 Congressional Committees

In this subsection, we use congressional committees to test our power measure on institutions. Committees are not equally powerful. The Committee on Ways and Means, with its responsibility over taxation, tariffs, and other revenue-raising actions, has more jurisdiction, controls more money, and wields greater influence—all in all, more power—than for example the (now defunct) Committee on Merchant Marine. This power differential is also reflected by committee transfer requests. Some committee assignments are more desirable than others, due to committees’ differences in power and

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<sup>5</sup>In this draft of the paper we use only data from Newspapers.com. We will add data from Newspaperarchive.com in future drafts.

<sup>6</sup>The Copyright Act of 1976 and Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998 (also known as the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act, the Sonny Bono Act, or, to critics, the Mickey Mouse Protection Act) extended the life of copyrights significantly. Newspaper articles are typically defined as “works made for hire.” The term of copyright protection of a work made for hire is 95 years from the date of publication or 120 years from the date of creation, whichever expires first. As a result, most newspaper articles published after January 1, 1978 will be under copyright protection until most of us are dead.

prestige. As ? observes, members typically strive to obtain assignments to committees they regard as stronger, and give up assignments they regard as weaker.

During the time period of our data, both parties deemed the Committees on Ways and Means, Appropriations, and Rules as the “exclusive” committees of the House. In general, members of exclusive committees cannot also serve on nonexclusive committees.<sup>7</sup> The “exclusive” committee designation further reflects the desirability and power of these committees. These three committees, then, should rank at or near the top of any power ranking of Congressional committees.

We use the ? rankings as an alternative measure to validate our power measure. Their method, building on the techniques used by ? and by ?, constructs rankings based on the value members place on committees as reflected by committee transfers. Groseclose and Stewart do not claim to measure power, but instead aim to measure the “value” of committees. We would imagine the two are correlated, but not perfectly (e.g. some members may place a high value on a committee for pork-barreling reasons even through other committees have more “power” due to broader jurisdictions or jurisdictions over policies that affect more people). While their transfer-based ranking is not a direct measure of power, desirability tends to reveal power, and so this is a close measure that we can use to test our coverage-based power measure.

For this analysis we study newspaper coverage of 19 committees across our time period, 1877–1977. These 19 committees are the ones from the set analyzed by ? that are active throughout this period. For each committee, we collect the total number of mentions of each of these committees and standardize by dividing each count by the total number of mentions of all 19 committees.<sup>8</sup> That is, letting  $Committee_i$  be the total mentions of committee  $i$ , we define:

$$Relative\ Coverage\ of\ Committee_i = \frac{Committee_i}{\sum_{j=1}^{19} Committee_j}.$$

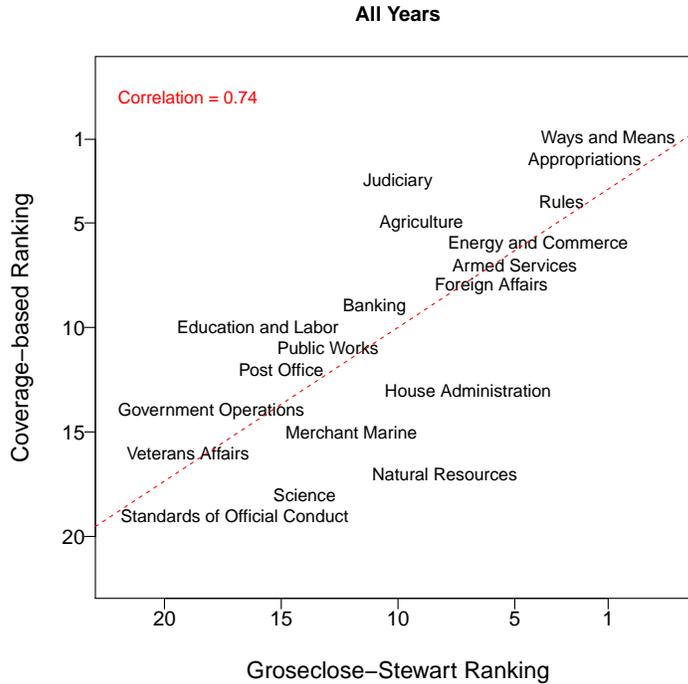
Figure ?? shows the Groseclose–Stewart ranking against our coverage-based ranking, calculated across the entire time period. Most all of the committees lie around the 45 degree line, showing a close match between our ranking and the Groseclose–Stewart ranking. Indeed, the correlation

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<sup>7</sup>Exceptions for Democratic members include the ability to also serve on the Budget or House Administration Committee. Republican members can serve on the Rules committee as well as another standing committee if they take “leave with seniority”.

<sup>8</sup>In order to accurately capture the number of mentions of each committee, we use regular expressions for every possible naming configuration of each committee, and account for committee name changes across time.

**Figure 1 – Committee Rankings, 1877–1977.** Overall, the newspaper-based ranking of Congressional committee power accords well with the Groseclose-Stewart ranking based on member preferences.

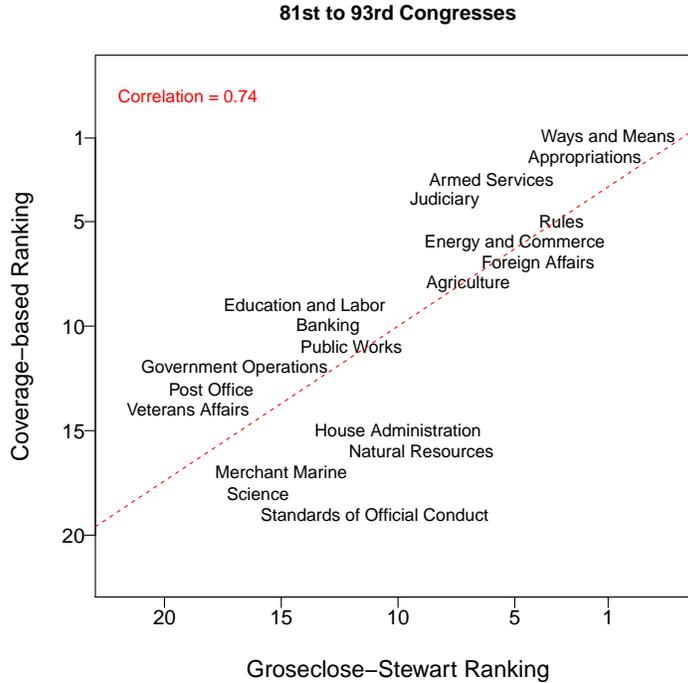


between the two rankings is 0.74. Ways and Means, Appropriations, and Rules are ranked at the top as the top three, confirming their place as the most powerful and valued committees.

we also calculate their rankings in two different Congressional eras: first, the “pre-reform” era of the 81st to 93rd Congresses (1949–1974), and second, the “post-reform” era of the 94th to 102nd Congresses (1975–1992). These two time periods are divided by the year 1974, in which Congress passed various reforms affecting the committee system. Since our newspaper coverage data ends in 1977, we focus on the first period, shown in Figure ???. Again we find that the two rankings correspond well.

Figures ??? and ??? show that our coverage-based power measure, when applied to Congressional committees, is highly correlated with the Groseclose–Stewart ranking. While we reiterate that the Groseclose–Stewart ranking is based on measuring the desirability of committees, as discussed previously we believe that this is a relevant alternative measure with which we can compare our coverage-based power measure. Furthermore, we believe that several of the “outliers” go in our favor. For example, the Committee on House Administration is ranked higher in the Groseclose–

**Figure 2 – Committee Rankings, 1949–1973.** Focusing on the time period where the two measures overlap, we again see that the newspaper-based ranking of Congressional committees corresponds closely to the Groseclose-Stewart ranking based on member preferences.



Stewart ranking than in our coverage-based ranking. House Administration is probably quite weak rather than powerful, in the sense that its jurisdiction, revenue-raising ability, and influence over policy outcome is limited, though it may be more “desirable” to members of the House since, after all, it deals with House matters (and people care about themselves). Another outlier worth mentioning is the Judiciary Committee. Judiciary ranks high based on our coverage-based measure, but ranks near the middle in the Groseclose-Stewart ranking. A possible contributor to this divergence is Watergate, which was highly covered in the press. This represents one of the limitations of our measure – since our measure is based on relative press coverage, any “sensational” event that temporarily increases press coverage of a political actor or group even though the underlying power of that actor or group remains the same would result in measurement error. In the case of Judiciary, was the increase in coverage exclusively due to the sensational nature of Watergate, or did the Judiciary Committee at that time truly hold a significant increase in the amount of power,

since they held much power over the impeachment of a president? This question also reflects the difficulty in defining “power” as a concept.

All in all, we carefully take the comparison of committee rankings as a first piece of evidence validating our idea that press coverage can measure relative political power – specifically, the relative political power of institutions.

### 3.2 Congressional Party Leaders

In this subsection, we use the news coverage of Speakers of the U.S. House to validate our power measure for political actors. Political leaders are not randomly selected from the pool of legislators. Presumably leaders are selected because of their skills and qualities, and these in turn probably help them attract media attention. A simple comparison of the news coverage of leaders and rank-and-file legislators would pick up many systematic differences between the two groups that are not necessarily reflecting their power.

Instead we use a simple *within-legislator* design to validate our power measure. We focus on the group of legislators who serve as party leaders at some point in their career, and compare how they are covered in the newspapers before, during and after the period in which they are in power. If news coverage is a good measure of power, we would expect to see a substantial increase in the coverage of individual members of Congress in the periods during which they serve as party leaders.

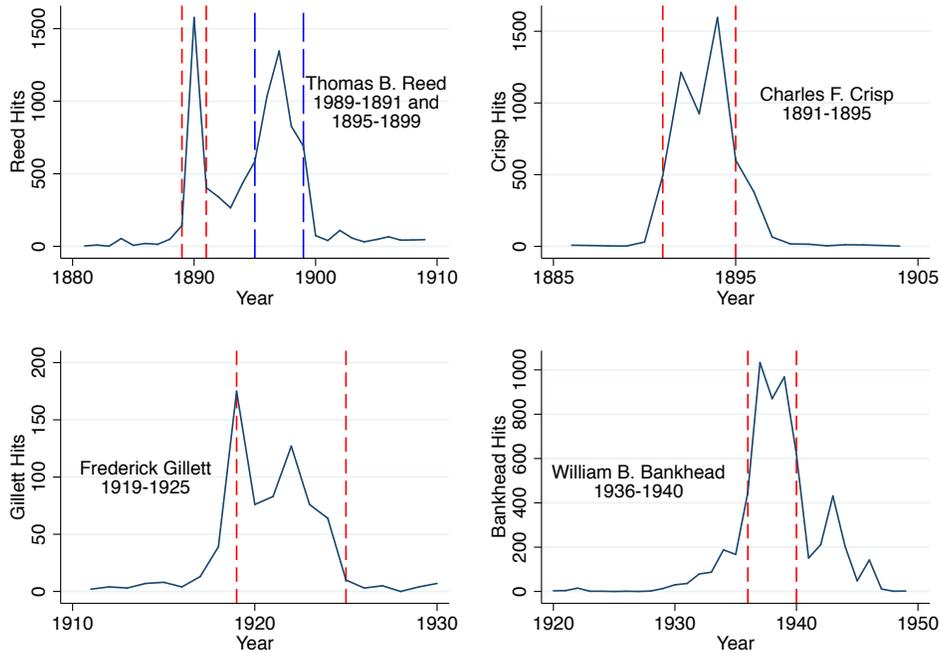
To implement this test, we search our newspaper database for the surnames of Speakers of the House and minority leaders from 1877-1977, and count how often they are covered in the news before, during and after their leadership term. To reduce the number of false positives, we only count cases in which the word stem “congress” appear within a window of 5 words from the surname, as well as cases in which one of the words “representative,” “rep.,” “hon.,” “speaker,” or “leader” appears immediately before the surname, and cases in which either of the party identifiers “(D)” or “(R)” appears immediately after the surname.<sup>9</sup>

Figure ?? illustrates the main results. In the four figures, we plot the news coverage of four Speakers of the House (Reed, Crisp, Gillett, and Bankhead) before, during and after they served as Speakers. The figures all reveal the same clear pattern: The news coverage dramatically increased

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<sup>9</sup>We only include the first part of the expression when searching for party identifiers because reporting practices vary across newspapers—e.g., some papers refer to Democratic representatives using “(D)” while other newspapers use “(Dem.)” or “(D-Congressional District).”

**Figure 3 – News Coverage of Speakers of the House.** Newspaper coverage clearly increases sharply during times when members are in positions of power.



*Note:* Each panel shows the total mentions of one individual, before, during and after his term as Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

when a congressman was appointed to the Speaker position and substantially decreased when he no longer served as Speaker. The figure in the upper left plot, which shows the news coverage of the Republican Speaker Thomas Reed, is particularly interesting since Reed served as Speaker in two non-consecutive periods. The number of articles mentioning Reed significantly increases in his first period, then drops sharply when the Democrats took control of the House from 1891 to 1895, and substantially increases when Reed became Speaker once again in 1895. Overall, these figures suggest that news coverage is systematically reflects the power of the Speakers.

To examine the pattern more systematically, we count the number of hits for all Speakers and minority leaders during the period 1877-1977. In Table ??, we report the average yearly number of hits five years before, during and five years after the leadership period.<sup>10</sup> Two things are worth noting. First, similar to the results presented in Figure ??, Panel A shows that on average the news coverage of Congressmen increases by an order of magnitude when they serve as Speakers. Second,

<sup>10</sup>For the party leaders who served in several non-consecutive periods, we classify the hits from the “middle” period (when they were not in power) as belonging to the post-leadership period. None of the results are sensitive to this classification.

**Table 1 – News Coverage before, during and after Leadership Term.**  
 Serving as party leader substantially increases the news coverage of members of Congress.

<b>Panel A: Speakers</b>			
	Before	During	After
Hits	42.94 (61.00)	315.31 (502.41)	42.92 (88.32)
Difference	-272.37		-272.39
P-value	0.00		0.00
N	86	113	98

<b>Panel B: Minority Leaders</b>			
	Before	During	After
Hits	23.75 (31.96)	139.67 (106.14)	47.74 (75.72)
Difference	-115.92		-91.93
P-value	0.00		0.00
N	20	30	23

Standard deviations are reported in parentheses. The pre and post-Speaker periods are based on 5 years before and after the Speaker term.

we see a similar pattern for minority leaders.<sup>11</sup> When a Congressman is appointed to leader of the minority party, he is systematically covered more in the newspapers. However, the media boost for minority leaders is not quite as big as the boost enjoyed by Speakers. This difference probably reflects that Speakers are more powerful than minority leaders. Overall, the results presented in Table ?? further supports the idea that power is reflected in the newspaper coverage.

### 3.3 Strong vs. Weak Mayors

We now turn to the analysis of “strong” vs. “weak” mayors. Traditionally, cities in the U.S. operated under the mayor-council form of government. In this form the mayor and city council are separately elected offices, and the mayor is the head of the executive branch, with broad powers to appoint and dismiss department heads, prepare and administer the city budget, and so on. This is the “strong mayor” form. Beginning in the early 20th century and continuing through today, many

<sup>11</sup>We only include minority leaders who did not serve as Speaker 5 years before and after he served as minority leader.

cities switched to the council-manager form of government. In this form the city council is the only directly elected body, and it appoints a city manager to oversee the operation of the executive branch. The mayor may be separately elected or selected by the city council from within its ranks, but has little or no executive authority. Some directly elected mayors have veto power, and some mayors have agenda-setting power inside the city council, but in many council-manager cities the position is largely ceremonial.<sup>12,13</sup> According to the *Municipal Year Book*, in 1984 about 56% of cities with populations over 2,500 operated under the mayor-council form of government and about 35% operated under the council-manager form.<sup>14</sup>

For this analysis we study newspaper coverage of three local offices: mayor, city council, and city manager. For each newspaper  $i$  we collect the total number of mentions of each of these offices in each year  $t$ .<sup>15</sup> Denote these by  $Mayor_{it}$ ,  $Council_{it}$  and  $Manager_{it}$ , respectively. We then construct three variables:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Relative Coverage of } Mayor_{it} &= \frac{Mayor_{it}}{Mayor_{it} + City\ Manager_{it} + City\ Council_{it}}, \\ \text{Relative Coverage of } City\ Manager_{it} &= \frac{City\ Manager_{it}}{Mayor_{it} + City\ Manager_{it} + City\ Council_{it}}, \\ \text{Relative Coverage of } City\ Council_{it} &= \frac{City\ Council_{it}}{Mayor_{it} + City\ Manager_{it} + City\ Council_{it}}. \end{aligned}$$

We also identify the year in which the home city of each newspaper switched its form of government from the strong mayor (mayor-council) form to the weak mayor (council-manager) form. Some cities never switched, or switched in a year outside the period for which we have local newspaper coverage. These are not included in the figures, although they can be included in the panel regressions (to help estimate the year fixed-effects).

For each city, define year 1 as the first year the city operated under the council-manager form of government rather than the mayor-council form. Figure ?? shows the average values of the

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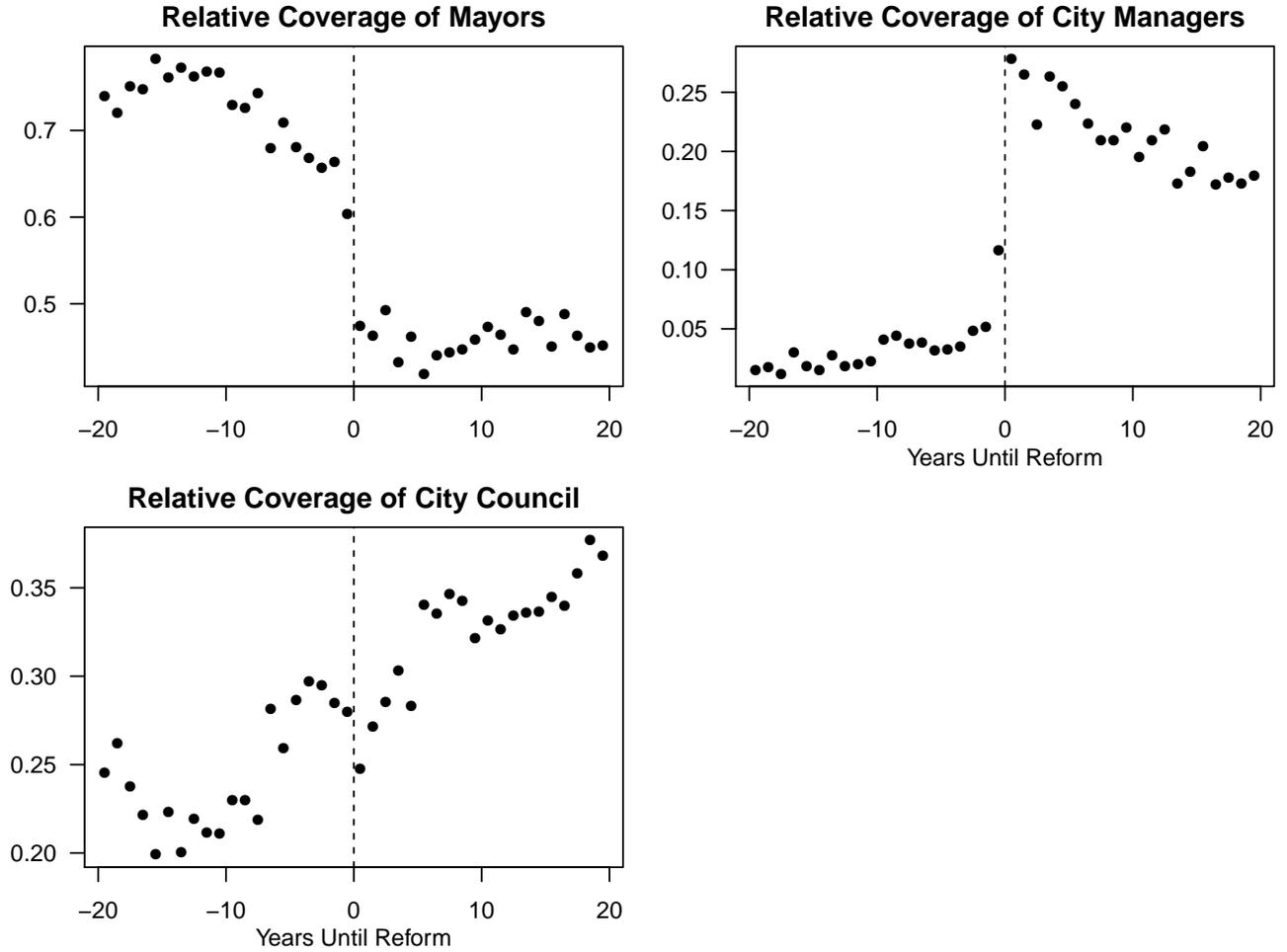
<sup>12</sup>The mayor's powers also vary across mayor-council governments, and some are weak relative to others. However, most observers agree that when cities switched to the council-manager form of government, the office of mayor in those cities almost always lost power relative to what they enjoyed under the from the mayor-council form.

<sup>13</sup>According to a 1996 survey by the National Civic League, 61% of council-manager cities have popularly elected mayors, and in 11% of these the mayor is granted veto power. See <http://www.citymayors.com/government/council-managers.html>.

<sup>14</sup>The main other city government forms are commission, town meeting, and representative town meeting.

<sup>15</sup>Again we searched for regular expressions that take into account some of the errors in the OCR,

**Figure 4 – Relative Coverage of City Offices Over Time.** City government reforms are seen to reduce the measured power of mayors and increase that of city managers and city council members.



*Relative Coverage* variables over the 20 years before and after the changes in the form of government, pooling over all cities that switched. Evidently, there is a dramatic change in coverage due to the change in the form of government. We confirm this below in regression analyses.

The *Relative Coverage of Mayor* variable, plotted in the top left panel, falls sharply, from about 80% of the mentions to only about 50%. This is a large drop, and we are likely understating its magnitude due to several features of the data. First, some reforms occur earlier or later in the calendar year, so that the last year before “treatment” may be a combination of pre- and post-reform coverage. This is a likely reason why the final pre-reform point in the plot is somewhat lower than those before it. Second, though we have been careful to use contextual words to avoid

too many false positive hits for “mayor,” we are likely to still be including a fair number, and these are more likely to present a higher proportion of this after reform than before it.

The *Relative Coverage of City Manager* variable, plotted in the top right panel increases sharply, from only about 5% of the mentions to more than 25%. This is as expected, since after the change to the council-manager form the power of the mayor falls, and the power formerly held by the mayor flows mainly to the (new) city manager. Again, we are likely understating the magnitude of this increase. The final pre-reform point, like in the previous plot, appears to be anticipating some of the effect of the reform—likely due in part to anticipatory coverage of the reform itself, but also because of the remaining errors of timing and false positives discussed in the previous paragraph.

It is less clear what to expect regarding *Relative Coverage of City Council*, although we might expect to see an increase in coverage since the city council is the body with the power to appoint and dismiss the city manager. The bottom left panel of Figure ?? shows that mentions of the city councils trend upward over the years before and after the switch to the council-manager form of government, although there is no discontinuous jump around the year the switch took place.

Of course, many of the mentions in a given city’s newspaper refer to the mayors, city managers, and city councils of *other* cities. This is one reason that *Relative Coverage of Mayor* remains at a rather high level even after a city switches to the council-manager form of government. Unfortunately, filtering out these mentions is difficult. One possibility is to limit attention to mentions in which the name of the newspaper’s home city appears near the relevant search string (“mayor” or “city manager” or “city council”).

We pursue this strategy in Figure ?. The basic patterns are the same as above, and the sizes of the discontinuities around year 0 are even a bit larger. Note that this misses a large number of “correct” mentions. For example, newspapers often give the name of the mayor or city manager near the relevant search string, rather than the name of the city. A better idea is to limit attention to mentions in which the name of the newspaper’s home city or the name of the mayor (or city manager) appears near the relevant search string. This, however, requires lists of all of the mayors serving during the relevant time periods for all cities in our sample. We are currently compiling these lists, but do not have them yet.

**Figure 5 – Relative Coverage of City Offices Over Time: Filtering Results by City Name.** Here we replicate the analysis from Figure ??, but we filter mentions of mayors to only include those where the name of the mayor’s city is mentioned nearby in the text. Again, city government reforms are seen to reduce the measured power of mayors and increase that of city managers and city council members.

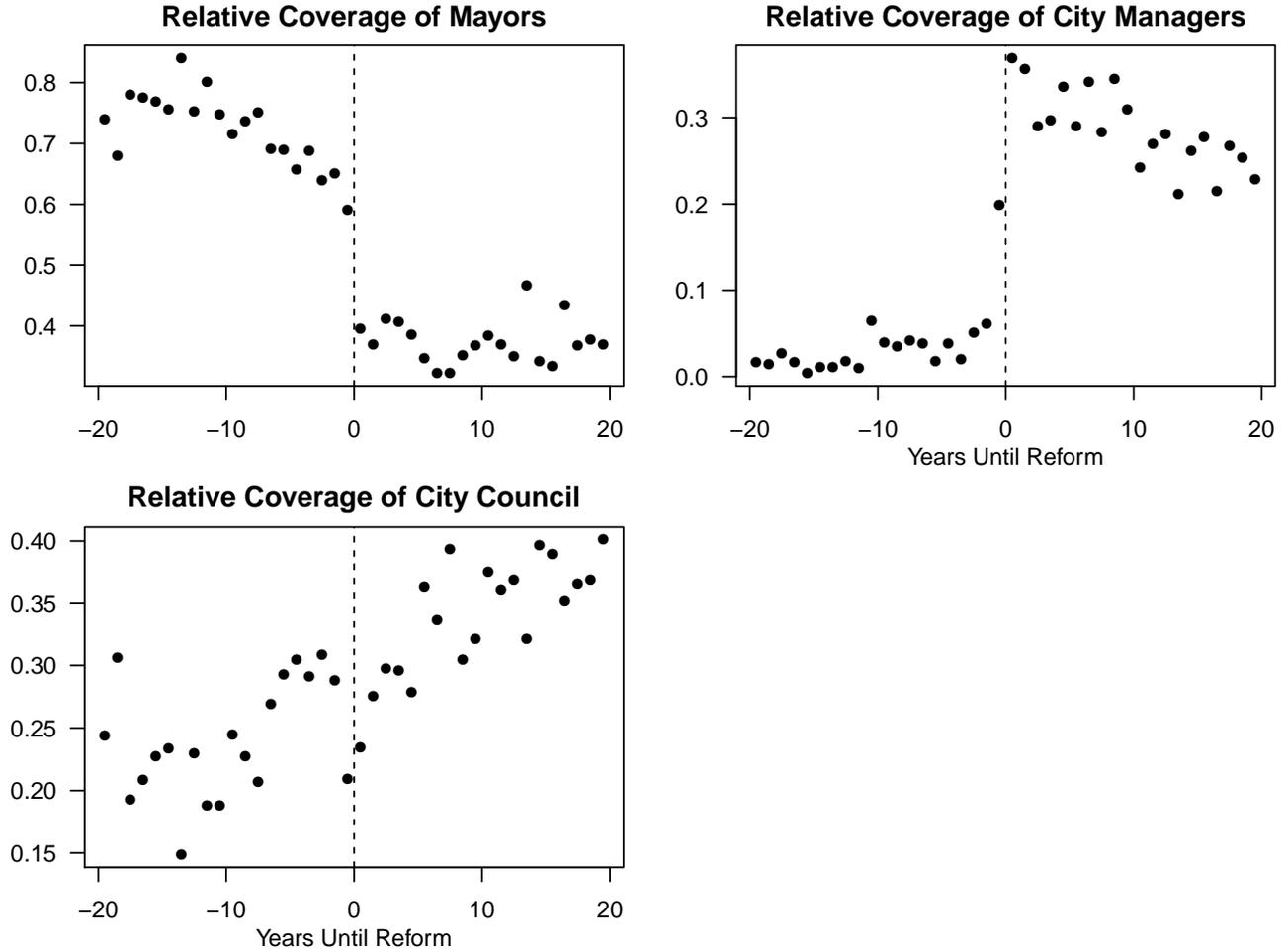


Table ?? presents regression results for the full set of cities in our sample (not just those that changed government form).<sup>16</sup> Let  $Council-Manager Govt Form_{it}$  be 1 if city  $i$  operated under the council-manager form of government in year  $t$  and 0 if city  $i$  operated under the mayor-council form. We exploit the panel structure of the data, and the fact that different states adopted the reforms in different years, using a difference-in-differences approach. More specifically, we include

<sup>16</sup>We restrict attention to cities that operated either under the mayor-council or council-manager form of government, and for which we have at least 10 years of newspaper coverage.

**Table 2 – Impact of Switch from Mayor-Council to Council-Manager City Government.**

	All Mentions		Using City Name Filter	
	Relative Coverage of Mayor	Relative Coverage of City Manager	Relative Coverage of Mayor	Relative Coverage of City Manager
Council-Manager Govt Form	-0.19 (0.02)	0.19 (0.02)	-0.24 (0.04)	0.28 (0.02)
N	4471	4471	3220	3220

City and year fixed-effects are included in all specifications. Standard errors, clustered by city, are in parentheses.

city and year fixed-effects in all specifications, and estimate models of the form:

$$Relative\ Coverage\ of\ Mayor_{it} = \alpha_i + \theta_t + \beta Council - Manager\ Govt\ Form_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$$

Not surprisingly, the estimates in Table ?? confirm the patterns shown in Figures ?? and ??, and also show that the estimated changes in *Relative Coverage* are highly statistically significant. The *Relative Coverage* variables appear to capture rather well the clear change in relative power associated with the changes in city government structure.

### 3.4 The Reciprocal Trade Agreement Act

In 1934 Congress passed and President Roosevelt signed the Reciprocal Trade Agreement Act (RTAA). This law gave the President the authority to negotiate reciprocal tariff agreements with other nations. These agreements could increase or a decrease import duties by up to 50 percent, and

did not require congressional approval. There is widespread agreement that this act represented a substantial transfer of power over tariff policy, from Congress to the President.<sup>17,18</sup>

As another check on the idea that media coverage can be used to measure power, we examine whether coverage of tariff policymaking shifted away from Congress and toward the President after the passage of the RTAA. More specifically, to measure the coverage of Congress in tariff policymaking we include all cases where “congress” or “house” or “senate” appeared within five words of “tariff”—call this *Congress*. Similarly, to measure the coverage of the President in tariff policymaking we include all cases where “president” or “administration” appeared within five words of “tariff”—call this *President*. We then make the share of coverage devoted to Congress in each time period  $t$ :

$$\text{Relative Coverage of Congress}_t = \frac{\text{Congress}_t}{\text{Congress}_t + \text{President}_t}.$$

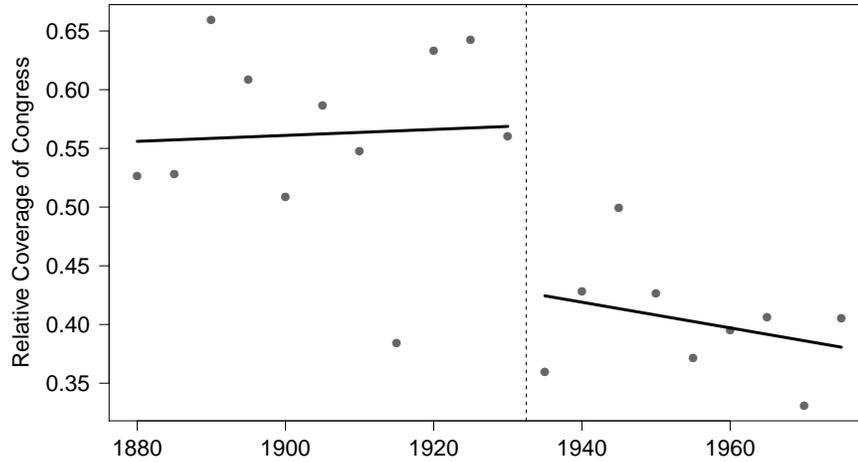
Figure ?? shows a graph of *Relative Coverage of Congress* over time. We average over 5-year periods, so the point labeled 1930 covers the years 1930-1934, the point labeled 1935 covers 1935-1939, etc. The figure shows clearly that newspaper coverage of Congress relative to the President fell sharply after 1934. Before the RTAA Congress had about about 55% of the mentions, while

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<sup>17</sup>The following quotes are illustrative. ? : 112: in passing the RTAA “the most important issues at stake in 1934 were institutional, centering on the transfer of authority from Congress to the executive.” ? : 325: “From the Civil War up to the Smoot-Hawley tariff of 1930, Congress retained exclusive authority over U.S. tariffs, which for the most part consisted of a single-column schedule of nonnegotiable, nondiscriminatory import duties... [With the RTAA], Congress granted the president the authority to reach tariff reduction agreements—agreements that did not require congressional approval—with foreign countries.” ? : 45: “the RTA Act would significantly reduce the power of Congress in the tariff-making process.” ? : 56: “Why after controlling trade policy since the founding of the republic, did Congress agree to delegate considerable trade policy authority to the president?” ? : 417: “In the 1934 Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act, Congress delegated its constitutionally granted power to set tariffs to the President. Trade agreements negotiated under the RTAA required no ex post congressional approval. Instead, the broad authority conferred upon the President was subject to congressional renewal every three years... The RTAA dramatically altered the governance structure that had controlled U.S. trade policymaking for over a century... It also is an unusual case of congressional delegation of policymaking authority to the President.” ? : 121: With the RTAA, “Congress transferred to the president much of its power to set tariffs. In effect, Congress pre-approved any president’s trade agreements reached with other nations as well as gave the president the power to reduce existing tariffs by up to 50 percent in exchange for agreements by foreign governments to reduce their tariffs.” ? : 221: “When Congress delegated tariff negotiating power to the chief executive, it effectively gave up the ability to legislate duties on specific goods... the RTAA delegated authority and agenda-setting power to the president...”

<sup>18</sup>Congress did not cede permanent authority to negotiate tariffs to the President, but set the RTAA to expire every three years or less. However, as many scholars point out, extending the RTAA was quite different than passing bills containing the entire schedule of tariffs for all imported goods across the entire country. The RTAA was renewed in 1937, 1940, 1943, 1945, 1948, 1949, 1951, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1958. In 1962 Congress passed the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, granting the President authority for five years to enter into agreements that negotiated the reduction or elimination of tariffs. That act also expanded Congress role in the negotiating process, by requiring the President to submit for congressional review a copy of each concluded agreement and a presidential statement explaining why the agreement was necessary.” See, e.g., ? and ?.

**Figure 6 – Relative Coverage of Congress in Tariff Policymaking.** The measured power of Congress in the realm of tariff policy decreased abruptly after the passage of the RTAA.



after the RTAA this fell to only about 40% of the mentions. This is what we expect if relative newspaper coverage is a reasonable proxy for the relative power of the two branches over tariff policy.

The outlier in the pre-1935 period, covering the years 1915-1919, covers the years in which the U.S. was directly involved WWI and during which the Wilson administration fought for the League of Nations. It is possible that these events contributed to the exceptionally high relative coverage of the president during this period. Finally, we should note that an OLS regression shows that the change is highly significant statistically as well as substantively.

### 3.5 Summary

In this section, we have presented a variety of analyses that suggest that we can use newspaper coverage to measure the relative power of political actors. First, newspaper coverage of Congressional committees appears to offer an accurate view of which committees are more powerful, and more sought after by members of Congress, than others. Second, newspaper coverage of members of Congress increases markedly when those members become Speaker of the House, and falls when they stop being Speaker. Third, city government reforms that reallocate power from the mayor to the city manager and city council appear to cause a sharp decrease in newspaper coverage of mayors and a simultaneous rise in the coverage of the newly empowered actors. Finally, we also

showed that the passage of the RTAA appears to correspond with a sharp decrease in newspaper coverage of Congress in tariff-related discussions. Taken together, these four validity tests suggest, first, that newspaper coverage is a meaningful indicator of political power and, second, that it is applicable to a broad set of political offices and contexts.

## 4 The Power of State and Local Party Committees Over Time

Having validated our newspaper-based measure of power, we now apply it to study the power of state and local party committees across U.S. history. To measure the relative power of state and local party committees, we proceed as follows. First, for each state  $i$  and year  $t$ , define *Party Mentions* $_{it}$  as the total number of times, summing across all newspapers in the state, that the following occurs: the word “committee” appears after either the word “Democratic” or “Republican” or “GOP” (within 5 words), and after one of the words “state” or “county” or “district” or “local” or “central” or “executive” or “regular” or “organization” (within 5 words).<sup>19</sup> This is designed to capture all references to committees such as the Illinois Democratic state central committee, the Montgomery county Republican executive committee, the 7th congressional district Democratic committee, and so on.

Next, for each state  $i$  and year  $t$ , define *Election Word Mentions* $_{it}$  as the total number of times at least two words from the following list appears in a newspaper in the state, within 5 words one another: “Democrat” “Democratic,” “Republican,” “GOP,” “vote,” “election” “elected,” “campaign,” “incumbent,” “ballot,” “turnout,” and “party.” We include common variants—e.g., for “vote” we also include “voter” and “voted.”

We then define:

$$\text{Relative Party Mentions}_{it} = \frac{\text{Party Mentions}_{it}}{\text{Election Word Mentions}_{it}}$$

For some purposes (e.g. making figures) we further normalize this measure so that it has a mean of 1 in each state.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Also, we drop all cases where the word “national” appears in the 5 words prior to the word “committee.”

<sup>20</sup>Since our premise is that newspaper coverage should generally be used to measure *relative* power, we believe a better measure would be the following: Let *Candidate Mentions* $_{it}$  be the total number of times, summing across all newspapers in the state, candidates for major offices (governor, U.S. senator, and U.S. representative) are

## 4.1 Overall Patterns in the Relative Party Mentions Measure

**Correlation with Mayhew TPO Scores.** On the basis of an exhaustive reading of secondary sources, ? assigns “traditional party organization” (TPO) scores for each state on a scale from 1 (weak) to 5 (strong). As he notes, these scores are meant to capture the organizational strength “in the late 1960s” (? : 6). If we consider the period 1966-1970, the correlation between *Party Mentions* and TPO is relatively high, 0.56. If we focus just on the years 1968-1970 the correlation is even higher, 0.63. This gives us some initial confidence in our measure.

**Patterns Over Time.** Most scholars argue that state party organizations were especially powerful in the late 19th century. For example, Reichley (1992, 129-130) notes that in the late 1800s: (i) under the leadership of Matthew Quay, the Pennsylvania Republican state party committee received 2% of the salaries of all patronage workers, giving the organization a budget of about \$24 million per year to pay about 20,000 full-time and part-time party workers; (ii) similarly, the state Republican organization built by Thomas C. Platt raised about \$20 million per year and funded about 10,000 workers; (iii) similar state Republican organizations were built in Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin; (iv) smaller organizations were also maintained in some of the great plains states.

Many city and county-based organizations continued as powerful patronage machines much longer—in some cases through the 1950s and even into the 1960s. Powerful urban party organizations existed in New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Baltimore, Cleveland, Memphis, New Orleans, Albany, Pittsburgh, Kansas City (MO), Jersey City, Hartford, New Haven, and a host of others; strong suburban organizations existed in Nassau and Suffolk counties (NY), Bucks, Delaware and Montgomery counties (PA), and elsewhere.<sup>21</sup>

Some states had powerful state or local organizations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that collapsed during or shortly after the progressive era. In California, for example, the Southern Pacific Railroad controlled both of the major state parties in the late 1800s, and Abe Rouf ran a

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mentioned. Then, define:

$$Relative\ Party\ Mentions_{it} = \frac{Party\ Mentions_{it}}{Party\ Mentions_{it} + Candidate\ Mentions_{it}}$$

We have not yet constructed this measure, because we have not yet figured out how to accurately make *Candidate Mentions*. Many candidates have very common names. We are currently working on ways to eliminate false positives for such names, by requiring that words such as “election,” “vote” or “campaign” appear near the name.

<sup>21</sup>See, e.g., Josephson (1963), Kehl (1981), (?).

powerful party machine in San Francisco in the early 1900s (by far the largest city in the state at the time). As (?: 198) put it, “California has long been classed with Pennsylvania as a State ruled by the Republican machine.”<sup>22</sup> By the late 1960s, however, the situation had changed dramatically. ?: 185 could confidently write: “There is no point in dwelling on California’s well-known Progressive tradition, which is demonstrated in its hostility toward parties, lack of patronage, nonpartisan city elections in form and ordinarily in fact, weak or nonexistent precinct and ward organizations, and assertive individual candidacies.”

Figure ?? shows scatterplots of *Relative Party Mentions* over time in 9 states. Overall, the measure seems consistent with many salient patterns identified in the literature. The general decline over time is clear, but in some states—e.g. New York, Ohio, and Illinois, three states with ? TPO scores of 5 in the late 1960s—the decline is much less pronounced.

## 4.2 Institutional Reforms and the Power of Party Organizations

Previous scholars have identified several reforms which, either by design or accident, might have significantly weakened the power of state and local party organizations. These include the Australian ballot (secret ballot), the direct primary, non-partisan local elections, and civil service laws.<sup>23,24</sup>

We measure the institutional reforms with simple dummy variables. More specifically, we define *Australian Ballot<sub>it</sub>* to be 1 if state *i* conducted elections using the Australian ballot in year *t*, and 0 otherwise. Similarly, we define *Direct Primary<sub>it</sub>* to be 1 if state *i* required parties to use direct

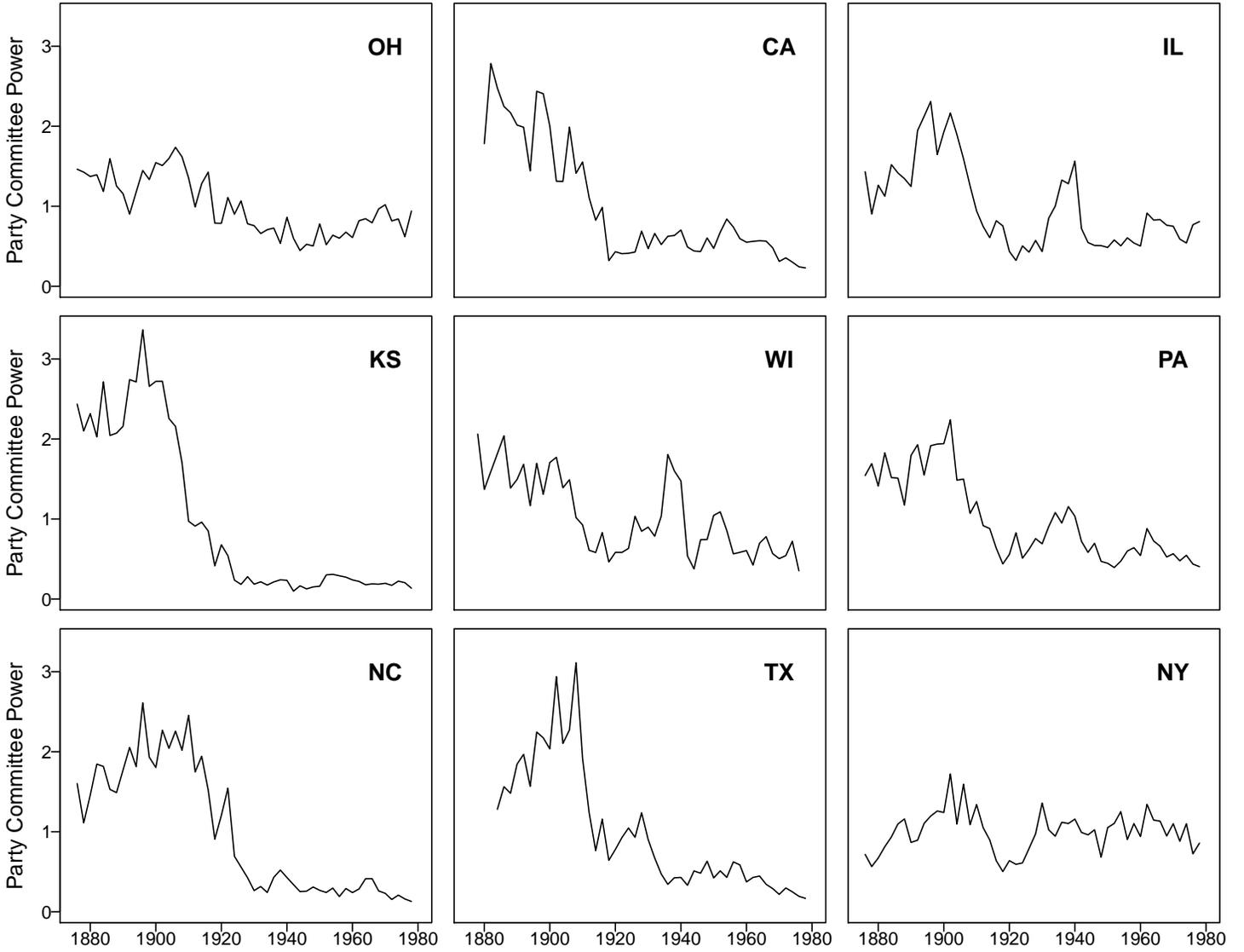
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<sup>22</sup> (?: 198) continues as follows: “In both states the machine developed according to the highly efficient one-man type, the type originated by corporation business experience. In both the unit of local government is the county, and county party committees are prominent. But the California machine was never a mere copy of that in the older State. In Pennsylvania the Republican party, organized and managed like a business corporation, has made all other corporations and the general public subject to its dictations. In California the political machine was originally created as auxiliary to the one controlling corporation, the Central, later the Southern Pacific Railroad. The railroad here has dominated political parties, other corporations and the general public. The machines of both parties in San Francisco and the State have been ruled from the political office of the Southern Pacific and have been so operated as first of all to guard its interests.”

<sup>23</sup>See, for example, the discussions in Rusk (1970), Galderisi and Ginsberg (1986), Reichley (1992), Katz and Sala (1996), Ansolabehere et al (2007), and Maisel and Brewer (2012).

<sup>24</sup>Some scholars argue that the social programs passed during the New Deal era undermined urban party organizations that has a “local monopoly” on providing informal assistance (food, temporary housing, money, jobs) to loyal constituents in need. Others argue the opposite—that local party leaders were able to claim credit for delivering New Deal assistance, at least for a while. Another argument is that increasing relative wages of private sector jobs reduced the value of patronage jobs (an implicit assumption is that some force such as taxpayer resistance prevented politicians from increases the wages of patronage jobs at the same rate), thus weakening patronage-based organizations. We do not have the data to test this hypothesis.

**Figure 7 – Party Committee Power Over Time in Nine U.S. States.** Plots our coverage-based measure of state party committee power over time for Ohio, California, Illinois, Kansas, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Texas, and New York.



primary elections to nominate candidates for governor, the state legislature, U.S. senator, U.S. representative in year  $t$ , and 0 otherwise.

The Australian ballot was mainly a reform of the period 1888-1896. Massachusetts was the first state to adopt the Australian ballot, in 1888. By 1896, more than 80% of the states had adopted the Australian ballot. The direct primary was mainly a reform of the period 1896-1916. In 1896 the South Carolina Democratic party began using direct primary elections to nominate its candidates for governor and other statewide offices and U.S. representatives. Oregon and Wisconsin were the first states to pass laws requiring all major parties to nominate candidates via direct primaries, in 1904. Almost 90% of states had adopted similar primary laws, or had party rules dictating the use of primaries for all major nominations. Three states—Idaho, Indiana and New York—substantially weakened their primary laws after 1915, and then strengthened them again later.

We exploit the panel structure of the data, and the fact that different states adopted the reforms in different years, using a difference-in-differences approach. More specifically, we include state and year fixed-effects in all specifications, and estimate models of the form

$$\textit{Relative Party Mentions}_{it} = \alpha_i + \theta_t + \beta_1 \textit{Australian Ballot}_{it} + \beta_2 \textit{Direct Primary}_{it} + \epsilon_{it}.$$

Identification therefore relies on the usual parallel trends assumption. While not innocuous, this assumption is much weaker than the assumptions required if we did not include the fixed-effects (e.g, no unobserved heterogeneity in fixed state characteristics that is correlated with the reforms).<sup>25</sup>

The estimates are shown in Table ???. We consider four different time periods (rows). The first is the entire period under study, 1876-1977. The second considers a slightly narrower period stopping before the modern era of a large incumbency advantage and “candidate centered politics.” We considered a number of different periods in addition to those shown in the table, and find that the basic results are quite robust. Columns three and four focus on each reform separately. For the Australian ballot (column 3) we stop in 1904. This reflects a trade-off between two considerations: (i) we want several years of “post reform” observations for as many states as possible, but (ii) we do not want to extend too far into the era where many states are using direct primaries. Similarly,

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<sup>25</sup>Since we include year fixed-effects we cannot test the assumption that New Deal era programs undermined or helped party organizations using a simple pre- and post-New Deal dummy variable. To test the impact of these programs requires additional information—e.g., information about how the incidence of the programs varied across state.

**Table 3 – Impact of Reforms on the Power of State and Local Party Committees.**

	Time Period			
	1876–1977	1876–1950	1876–1904	1896–1950
Australian Ballot	-0.70 (0.21)	-0.56 (0.19)	-0.67 (0.30)	–
Direct Primary	-0.42 (0.21)	-0.55 (0.24)	–	-0.49 (0.23)
N	1093	673	209	547

State and year fixed-effects are included in all specifications. Standard errors, clustered by state, are in parentheses.

for the direct primary (column 4) we begin in 1896. Again, this reflects a tradeoff between two considerations: (i) we want several years of “pre reform” observations for as many states as possible, but (ii) we do not want to extend too far into the era where many states have not yet adopted the Australian ballot.

The bottom line from the table is clear. Both reforms appear to have substantially weakened the power of state and local party committees. All point estimates are statistically significant at the .05 level (we compute standard errors clustered by state), and they are substantively large. In terms of magnitudes, over the 1876–1950 period the mean of *Relative Party Mentions* is 1.25, the overall standard deviation is 1.05, and the average within-state standard deviation is 0.51. Thus, the estimates from column 2 of the Table ?? imply that both reforms reduced *Relative Party Mentions* by about half of one standard deviation, or an entire standard deviation within-state.

We also examined the impact of *state* civil service reforms, but the estimated regression coefficients are small statistically insignificant. One possible reason for this is measurement error, because we do not (yet) have a measure of civil service reforms at the city or county level. We are in the process of constructing measures of local civil service laws up to 1940.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Even this variable will contain significant measurement error. Ideally, we want to know the fraction of local government employees throughout the state that are covered by civil service. The best we can do is to estimate this using city and county populations, and rely on an assumption that the ratio of local government employees to population is approximately the same throughout the state.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that we can use newspaper coverage of relevant political actors as a measure of their political power, under certain conditions. We have collected a new dataset of over 60 million historical U.S. newspaper articles, and we have validated our resulting measures of political power in a variety of ways. We have shown that newspaper coverage of political actors decreases in times when they hold less powerful positions and increases when they hold more powerful ones, and we have shown that the measure correlates well with several existing measures of particular forms of political power.

We believe the measure has several strengths that will make it valuable for future work. First, the measure is historically comprehensive, covering an important 100-year period of American history. This period covers all manner of reform and upheaval in the American political process, including two world wars, the expansion of suffrage, Prohibition, the progressive reforms, McCarthyism, the Voting Rights Act, and Watergate, among many others. The study of all these events, and many others, concerns fundamental questions about who holds power, when they hold it, and why they are able to do so.

Second, the measure is broadly applicable; in our validity tests, we apply it to Congressional committees, to Congressional leaders, to the president, and to local municipal governments, and in our analysis we further apply it to state and local party committees. There is no reason to think it could not be extended further, to other political actors in other contexts. The measure can therefore facilitate further research in well-developed fields (e.g., Congress, the president), and also encourage new research in American contexts that have received less scholarly attention (e.g., local government).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>We are currently investigating three questions along these lines: (1) Rather than study the effects of reforms on the power of state and local party committees, study the effects of having powerful vs. weak party committees on election outcomes. Do areas with strong party committees have less competition in their primary elections? Are candidates supported by strong party committees especially likely to win their primary elections? Is there more straight-ticket voting in the general election in areas with strong party committees? (2) Did “personalistic” coverage of politics rise as state and local party organizations have become weaker? We will study the mentions of U.S. senators and representatives, as well as statewide elected officers and state legislators. Initially we will focus on politicians with less common names. We will see whether the coverage of individual politicians and candidates is correlated with an increase in the incumbency advantage and split-ticket voting. (3) Has the relative importance of party loyalty in Congress changed over time? For example, was a high degree of party loyalty necessary in order to obtain positions on powerful committees during the Reed-Cannon era, and did this change after the revolt against Cannon? We can use our measure of the relative power of committees to address this question.

Of course, the measure is not without its limitations. While in many instances coverage may indicate political power, it also results from other sources, such as “celebrity” coverage. In many applications this may mainly add noise to the measure, which is not overly problematic when it is used as a dependent variable in an analysis. In cases where the political actor in question has significant personal appeal or celebrity status, however (e.g., the U.S. president) the measure is likely to break down. Researchers who use a similar measure in other contexts must always take care to validate its use and consider alternative explanations for how the measure fluctuates.

In addition to introducing this measure, we have also offered a substantive analysis using our measure. Party committees were once a defining feature of U.S. politics, holding sway over nominations and distributing vast amounts of patronage within their local domains. Why and how did party committees lose this power? Using a difference-in-differences design, we have shown that two reforms—the Australian ballot and in the institution of primary elections—have both had major effects on the power of party committees. Each reform noticeably reduced local news coverage of party committees and thus, we have concluded, has sapped these committees of some of their power.

Because power is at the core of political science, measuring it in data is an important task for empirical researchers. The newspaper-based measure we have put forward in this paper offers researchers a chance to study power in American politics in a variety of ways. In addition, the arguments we have made, and the validity tests we have performed, should aid researchers in constructing similar newspaper-based measures for other countries and other time periods. Though newspapers have many reasons to publish what they do, the overall frequency with which they cover political actors is a telling indication of who is powerful.

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## Appendix

**Table 4** – The 50 Most Common Newspapers in Dataset.

Newspaper	Pages	First Year	Last Year	State
Abilene Reporter-News	452,252	1926	1977	TX
Albuquerque Journal	312,826	1882	1977	NM
Alton Evening Telegraph	235,141	1853	1972	IL
The Bridgeport Post	273,910	1947	1977	CT
The Bridgeport Telegram	227,785	1918	1977	CT
The Brooklyn Daily Eagle	457,294	1841	1955	NY
Chicago Daily Tribune	257,688	1849	1922	IL
The Chillicothe Constitution-Tribune	224,239	1890	1988	MO
The Cincinnati Enquirer	195,487	1841	1923	OH
The Corpus Christi Caller-Times	241,515	1912	1977	TX
The Daily Herald	429,998	1886	2006	UT
The Daily Times	205,312	1865	1977	NJ
Delaware County Daily Times	286,222	1876	1977	IN
El Paso Herald-Post	193,431	1931	1977	TX
The Evening News	194,214	1899	1974	MI
The Evening Review	231,344	1885	1977	OH
The Galveston Daily News	319,238	1865	1999	TX
The Gettysburg Times	213,953	1909	2009	PA
The Index-Journal	396,147	1919	2010	SC
The Indiana Gazette	323,554	1868	1981	PA
Indiana Gazette	201,415	1890	2008	PA
The Indianapolis News	193,653	1869	1932	IN
The Kansas City Star	340,728	1881	1976	MO
The Kokomo Tribune	347,354	1868	1999	IN
Lebanon Daily News	247,459	1872	1977	PA
Lincoln Evening Journal	230,925	1912	1976	NE
The Lincoln Star	300,099	1913	1977	NE
Logansport Pharos-Tribune	205,433	1890	2006	IN
Lubbock Avalanche-Journal	316,812	1927	1977	TX
The Morning Herald	427,066	1907	1977	MD
New Castle News	363,846	1891	1978	PA
The New York Times	259,388	1851	1922	NY
News-Journal	198,110	1891	1977	OH
The News-Palladium	229,649	1896	1978	MI
The Ogden Standard-Examiner	309,659	1888	1977	UT
The Oil City Derrick	201,981	1885	1977	PA
Oshkosh Daily Northwestern	219,797	1872	1975	WI
The Ottawa Journal	510,633	1885	1980	PA
The Pantagraph	250,388	1954	2013	IL
The Paris News	237,867	1933	1999	TX
The Post-Crescent	195,471	1861	1976	WI
The Salina Journal	287,177	1951	2009	KS
The Salt Lake Tribune	334,311	1890	1977	UT
The San Bernardino County Sun	698,155	1894	1998	CA
Santa Ana Register	214,518	1906	1977	CA
Santa Cruz Sentinel	482,474	1884	2005	CA
The Sedalia Democrat	219,671	1891	1987	MO
Standard-Speaker	232,882	1961	2000	PA
The Times	742,550	1785	1998	NY
Tucson Daily Citizen	234,102	1941	1977	AZ