ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: ALL TALK, NO ACTION? EVALUATING MEMBERS OF CONGRESS' ATTENTION TO FOREIGN POLICY

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Scholars agree that U.S. foreign policy is an issue which offers little distributive benefits to members of Congress and over which the executive branch exerts strong policy leadership. This raises the question of why legislators continue to spend considerable time and effort on foreign affairs. I argue that specific institutional and personal factors such as outparty membership, ideological lean, and constituent representation explain why members focus on foreign policy. In particular, I expect outparty members to use the president's ownership of foreign affairs for costless position-taking through rhetorical statements, whereas lawmakers with strong ideological preferences or those who have constituent groups with an interest in foreign affairs invest in sponsoring legislation and building coalitions of support. I utilize a novel dictionary of foreign policy-related words to operationalize member-level rhetoric in e-newsletters sent by members of the U.S. House of Representatives from the 111th to the 117th Congress, combining it with bill sponsorship data to create a unique dataset of issue attention. The results reveal a previously unknown party asymmetry, with Republicans being more attentive to foreign affairs on both rhetoric and bill sponsorship. Importantly, this effect is only partly the result of their outparty status, suggesting instead a case of "issue ownership" in foreign affairs. In addition, I show that both constituency interests as well as member background influence members' attentiveness to foreign policy and trade. On trade as a more distributive issue, members of Congress' exhibit pragmatic constituency-driven attentiveness. This dissertation contributes to our understanding of the strategic calculations made by members of Congress in an executive-dominated policy area and builds on previous studies of asymmetric party politics and legislative representation.

ALL TALK, NO ACTION? EVALUATING MEMBERS OF CONGRESS' ATTENTION TO FOREIGN POLICY

by

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Dedication

To Celine.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation turned out to be longer than I expected. As the final milestone of my journey towards the doctorate, I am happy to submit these 183 pages that have kept me busy over the past two to three years. Admittedly, I am also a little proud to be the first in my family to pursue a PhD. And because I like to make things more difficult than necessary, I did it in a language that is not my native one. Now, I can't help myself but think of Frodo in "The Lord of the Rings" as he tossed the ring into the flames of Mount Doom: At long last. It's done. The (only!) difference is that Frodo is now from a small town in Eastern Germany. And he is – that much is obvious – suddenly much taller.

There are many classmates, friends, and family members who cheered me on and supported me along the way. In fact, there are too many to mention. Nonetheless, I will attempt to name a few. My academic advisor Kris Miler has been nothing short of phenomenal in her support over the past couple of years. She has been an incredible mentor who helped me brainstorm ideas, discuss arguments, and sharpen my writing. Her comments improved this dissertation greatly, and any errors that remain are my own. I also want to thank all other committee members: David Karol, Mike Hanmer, Shannon Carcelli, and Ethan Kaplan, who all offered their advice and time at various stages of this project. In particular, Mike's advice on certain methodological choices proved invaluable. I also want to thank Sean Theriault for his support when I applied to American PhD programs. He generously made time for me during his time as a visiting professor in Berlin to discuss my plans and talk through some ideas. It is partly his fault that I did a whole PhD instead of just reading the New York Times.

My interest in American politics grew out of my experience as a master's student in Halle, Germany. Studying various political systems and legislatures under Suzanne Schüttemeyer got me fascinated with the politics of the U.S. Congress and the intricacies of the American political system. Yet, my time in Halle was not just academically formative, but also let me build some of the most important friendships in my life. My former classmates Jan, Klaus, Konstantin and Christoph are the greatest group of friends anyone can wish for, and I hope we will see each other more often in the future than in the past couple of years. I thank them for always believing in me.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

The U.S. Constitution divides authority over the use of military force and the conduct of foreign relations between Congress and the president, laying the foundation for recurrent high-profile clashes between the branches over war powers, treaties, and sanctions (Johnson 2012). Despite ongoing disagreements among scholars and policymakers over the exact responsibilities of each branch in foreign affairs, few would see Congress as the dominating institution. It is widely acknowledged that while Congress has a role to play in foreign affairs, it is the president and his administration who conduct diplomacy with other nations, putting the White House in the driver's seat on most issues concerning international politics (Krasner 1978; Lindsay 1994; Kriner 2010; Tama 2023). This institutional imbalance is reinforced by the fact that most international issues do not yield direct, distributive benefits to lawmakers' constituents. Unlike trade agreements, which can be linked to job creation or lower consumer prices, matters such as diplomatic negotiations, troop deployments, arms control, or foreign aid rarely provide electoral incentives for members of Congress focused on reelection (Mayhew 1974). Compounding this, public interest in foreign policy is generally low – except in cases of armed conflict involving significant U.S. casualties (Aldrich et al. 1989; Hersman 2000). Taken together, these factors suggest that members of Congress are unlikely to prioritize foreign affairs.

Yet, the reality of congressional lawmaking suggests otherwise. In each session of Congress, hundreds of bills concerning international affairs are introduced, ranging from trade and security to human rights, foreign aid, and international sanctions. Lawmakers regularly engage in public debates about America's role in the world, hold hearings on international developments, and propose legislation that shapes U.S. foreign policy priorities. Beyond formal lawmaking, members issue public statements, travel abroad on fact-finding missions, and

participate in other activities on global issues. This wide range of involvement presents a puzzle: Why do members of Congress – particularly those without seats on foreign affairs or defense committees – focus on foreign policy in their legislative and non-legislative behavior?

To investigate when and why members of the U.S. House of Representatives engage with foreign affairs, I put forward a theoretical framework of member attention that rests on five key incentives: constitutional, partisan, ideological, constituent, and personal. Members of Congress, as rational decision-makers, are responsive to these incentives because they align with their core goals of reelection, policymaking, and career advancement (Fenno 1973). Among other things, I argue that partisan dynamics play a key role as members of the outparty – the party that does not control the presidency – are more likely to discuss foreign affairs. They do so because the president as chief diplomat "owns" foreign policy, providing an opportunity for outparty members to criticize the party in power and benefit from public dissatisfaction at the next election. When doing so, outparty members should be more likely to emphasize rhetorical criticism over substantive legislation in their efforts to turn public opinion against the president's party (the "inparty"), because focusing on public messaging is a more cost-effective way to affect public opinion. By contrast, sponsoring foreign policy legislation requires investing more resources, is less visible to constituents, and often yields fewer short-term political benefits – making it a less attractive tool in the strategic calculus of opposition members.

Furthermore, I argue that members of the majority party will devote less attention to foreign policy. Majority party status plays a significant role in shaping congressional behavior, including in determining the focus of lawmakers' policy efforts and public messaging. Research shows that majority parties typically prioritize their agenda items (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 2005), driven by party leaders and interest groups. These issues tend to be domestic in nature,

and, consequently, are typically more polarizing than foreign affairs. By setting a legislative record for the majority party on important topics like government spending, gun control, or abortion, party leaders demonstrate the party's ability to make good on its campaign promises.

In contrast, I expect several factors to increase a member's rhetorical and legislative focus on international affairs. Members who are ideologically closer to the center and therefore less aligned with their parties on divisive domestic issues, emphasize foreign policy as a more bipartisan issue area that contributes to their moderate brand. Conversely, ideologically extreme members – such as those affiliated with the ultra-conservative House Freedom Caucus – tend to focus on polarizing domestic issues and are less likely to engage with foreign policy. Additionally, I emphasize constituency characteristics and personal background in my theoretical framework. This is because reelection-focused lawmakers are incentivized to be receptive to the interests of their districts, and members and their staff are typically well aware of the partisan and socioeconomic composition of their voter base (Fenno 1978). Although these considerations are often overlooked on foreign policy, I argue that the composition of the district matters for how legislators behave on foreign policy issues as well. Lastly, lawmakers with a specific professional background are more attuned to foreign affairs in general, as their life experience shapes their interests. In addition, members' ethnic identity will also influence their attentiveness to specific regions or countries as a reflection of their cultural heritage.

To test my claims, I draw on an original dataset that combines 14 years of members' e-newsletters with comprehensive bill sponsorship data covering the 111th through the 117th Congress. I employ computational text analysis to develop a novel dictionary-based measure of lawmakers' foreign policy rhetoric as expressed in congressional e-newsletters. This allows for the first systematic individual-level longitudinal analysis of congressional attention to foreign

and trade policy. In doing so, this project contributes to our understanding of how foreign policy is communicated by individual rank-and-file members, how asymmetric party activism varies by issue area, how descriptive and symbolic representation interact in ways that have so far been understudied, and how lawmakers' attention to foreign affairs differs from trade.

Overall, I find broad support for the theoretical expectation that foreign policy attention varies according to the five factors I identified – with one notable exception: Republicans, regardless of whether they are in control of the presidency, are significantly more active on foreign affairs than their Democratic counterparts. Both descriptive data as well as regression analyses indicate that Republican lawmakers pay more attention to foreign policy in terms of both rhetoric and bill sponsorship. Republicans use foreign policy language roughly twice as much as Democrats, and focus more on U.S. adversaries like China, Russia, and Iran. Notably, they also tend to focus on the shortcomings of the foreign policies of Democratic administrations – pointing to oppositional tactics that provide evidence for the impact of outparty status. This asymmetric pattern also aligns with broader trends in Republican politics, including the ideological rightward drift, confrontational rhetoric, and strategic opposition to Democratic administrations. The GOP is more likely to leverage foreign policy as a political tool, exploiting the president's central role in international affairs to tarnish the opposition and increase their own electoral prospects. I also find Republicans to be more focused on trade, with outparty effects pointing in the opposite – meaning negative – direction on this issue. As trade has distinct economic-distributive implications, outparty members are reluctant to focus on an issue which presidents may use to their advantage ("bring back jobs"). After all, Congress has delegated most trade policymaking to the executive branch, creating a credit-claiming opportunity for presidents.

As theorized, I find that majority-party status influences lawmakers' issue priorities, as those shifting from minority to majority tend to reduce their emphasis on international affairs in favor of domestic issues. Similarly, as legislators become more moderate relative to other members, they tend to focus more on foreign policy. This is because foreign policy is less polarized and offers a platform to cultivate a bipartisan brand. Conversely, ideologically extreme members, such as those in the House Freedom Caucus, concentrate on divisive domestic issues. Although swing-district representatives might benefit from foreign policy's bipartisan appeal, voter emphasis on domestic concerns tempers this incentive.

Furthermore, I provide evidence for the influence of constituency characteristics and lawmakers' personal backgrounds on members' attentiveness to specific foreign policy issues, using specific dictionary terms as a measure of rhetorical behavior. While most members of Congress now represent "safe" districts, they still respond to sub-constituencies, particularly when those groups are highly visible to lawmakers. First, my analysis finds that members from immigrant-heavy districts are more likely to engage with foreign policy, highlighting how constituency demographics influence legislative behavior. Second, I focus on Jewish and Latino communities in particular to show how demographic composition shapes issue attention and how it intersects with members' own ethnic background. Lawmakers from districts with sizable Jewish populations are more likely to reference Israel in their newsletters, though this tendency is mediated by party affiliation – Republicans emphasize Israel due to Evangelicals' ideological attachment to Israel, while Democratic members are much more likely to reference Israel when they are Jewish. Similarly, Latino constituents and Latino lawmakers are more likely to highlight Latin America, with Republicans doing so more than Democrats. These findings demonstrate that symbolic representation plays a key role in foreign policy communication and also

underscore the continued relevance of the electoral connection and members' personal background.

Finally, I examine trade as a policy area that blends foreign and domestic concerns and that has clear economic implications. While members' attention to trade partly follows patterns seen in foreign policy engagement, it is also shaped by constituents' economic interests. As a result, the findings on trade policy speak to both partisan dynamics while providing robust evidence for the economic implications of trade policy. Lawmakers from districts with high manufacturing employment or significant exports to China discuss trade at a higher rate, but partisan dynamics offer some nuance: Outparty members often downplay trade to avoid granting credit to the incumbent president and his party. Statistical analysis reveals that ideologically extreme and majority-party members are less active on trade rhetorically, while Republicans generally emphasize it more due to their traditional focus on free market, pro-trade policies. The chapter also highlights intraparty variation, particularly among Republicans during the Trump era, as lawmakers navigate tensions between free-trade orthodoxy and rising protectionism. Ultimately, lawmakers' attentiveness to trade reflects pragmatic efforts to balance local economic concerns with national political dynamics.

Congress & Foreign Policy

Although a wide range of foreign policy definitions are offered in the international relations literature (e.g., Waltz 1959; de Mesquita and Lalman 1992; Chong 2007), I follow those that emphasize the conduct of a state's relations with other countries as its core principle. Governments pursue their foreign policy objectives – external security, economic prosperity, great power status etc. – by using tools such as diplomacy, foreign aid, military force, and the negotiation of treaties to wield influence in the international system and protect their interests.

To clearly differentiate foreign policy – which is used interchangeably with "international affairs" in this dissertation – from other subject areas, I follow the Congressional Research Service (CRS) in its definition of "international affairs" as: "… matters affecting foreign aid, human rights, international law and organizations; national governance; passports for U.S. nationals; arms control; diplomacy and foreign officials; alliances and collective security." Importantly, a strict demarcation between foreign policy and national security as an adjacent issue area would not be appropriate, as the behavior of countries on the world stage is often motivated by security considerations (Wood and Peake 1998).

In contrast, climate or immigration policy as adjacent issue areas are not included because they are more domestic in nature. In the case of the United States, immigration can be categorized as a domestic subject area, as indicated by roll-call votes revealing a level of party unity comparable to many other domestic issues (Tama 2023, 50), indicative of its full incorporation into the broader liberal-conservative divide (Walters and Skocpol 2024). Another example of an adjacent policy issue is climate policy, which has also been absorbed into domestic conflict as documented by the partisan sorting of interest groups on environmental issues over the past decades (Karol 2019). Contemporary climate politics in the U.S. is discussed in partisan terms, and despite attention to international agreements such as the Paris Climate Agreement, also seen as a concern for domestic policymaking. In contrast, trade blurs the line between domestic and foreign policy, with economic implications for domestic industries causing substantial cross-pressures for legislators. This raises the question of whether we should expect members' attention to trade issues to be subject to the same logic as foreign policy. In Chapter 6 I will answer this question, examining the interaction of economic interests with other incentives in trade.

Scholarly attention to Congress' role in foreign affairs has traditionally focused on institutional struggles between Congress and the executive, paying limited attention to the role of individual legislators. Most studies of Congress and foreign policy have focused on the frequent clashes and the general institutional imbalance between the executive and legislative branches. A foundational example is Wildavsky's (1966) classic "two presidencies" thesis, which argues that presidents are significantly more successful in foreign policy than in domestic matters. This view was later supported by scholars who argued that executive dominance in foreign affairs has produced an "imperial presidency" (Schlesinger 1973), enabled by expanded presidential authority to use military force with limited congressional oversight. Partly driven by congressional delegation and acquiescence, the literature has traditionally centered on presidential leadership in foreign policy, relegating Congress to a reactive or peripheral role. Unsurprisingly, Lindsay (1994) described the study of Congress and foreign policy as a "backwater field" within political science, with little systematic attention to the behavior of individual members.

Since then, scholars of Congress' role in foreign affairs have made substantial progress in identifying several factors shaping the balance of power between both branches. For example, presidents are sensitive to divided government in their conduct of foreign policy because they fear political backlash, including oversight efforts, that could stymie their agenda (Kriner 2010; Fowler 2015). In addition, the distributional effects of policies as well as their ideological dimension shape presidential success because domestic groups may benefit from lobbying the government on such issues (Milner and Tingley 2015). Others note that congressional attention to foreign affairs is mediated by the importance ("salience") of specific issues (Hinckley 1994), the nature of public opinion and the timing of global events (Henehan 2000).

In addition, other studies have found that factors such as the sensitivity of liberal and conservative voters to casualties (Lee 2022) and the popularity of the president (Rivers and Rose 1985; Rohde and Simon 1985; Kriner 2010) also contribute to interbranch relations on foreign policy. That is, presidents strategically employ their political capital to successfully implement their own policy preferences in foreign affairs over those of Congress. Importantly, scholars also note that interbranch conflict differs significantly between war and peacetime efforts (Howell, Jackman, and Rogowski 2013), as lawmakers are typically more inclined to support the commander-in-chief once troops have been committed.

Over the past two decades, political polarization – long recognized as a defining feature of domestic politics (e.g., McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Theriault 2008; Mann and Ornstein 2012; Lee 2016; Jacobson 2019) – has also emerged as a central challenge to U.S. foreign policymaking. Partisan incentives increasingly override institutional loyalties, eroding Congress's ability to act as an effective check on the executive branch. Rather than defending congressional prerogatives, lawmakers from the president's party often act as partisan allies, shielding "their" president from criticism and weakening the legislature's oversight function (Fowler 2015). This erosion is also evident in the decline of the Senate's role in treaty ratification, as presidents now routinely pursue international commitments through "executive agreements" that bypass the Senate altogether (Peake 2021).

A lively debate continues over the extent of partisan polarization in foreign policy relative to domestic issues (Friedrichs and Tama 2022). Several studies find that polarization in foreign affairs has increased over time, often mirroring or even exceeding trends observed in domestic policymaking (McCormick and Wittkopf 1990; Fleisher et al. 2000; Lapinski 2013; Jeong and Quirk 2019). Others contend, however, that when different types of roll-call votes –

such as amendments and procedural motions – are considered, polarization follows a cyclical pattern rather than a steady upward trajectory (Chaudoin et al. 2010; Hurst and Wroe 2016). Analyzing over 3,000 key congressional votes since 1991, Bryan and Tama (2021) argue that foreign policy remains more consensual than domestic policy overall. Although both the House Foreign Affairs and Senate Foreign Relations Committees have become more polarized in recent decades (Bendix and Jeong 2021), they still function with more bipartisanship than most other congressional committees (Ryan 2019). Nonetheless, many scholars view the broader ideological sorting of the parties (McCarty 2019) and the decline of consensus-oriented moderates as a growing threat to U.S. foreign policy coherence and effectiveness (Schultz 2017; Pillar 2023).

Despite these contributions to the study of Congress' role in foreign policy, research gaps remain. Among other things, most studies of congressional involvement in foreign policy do not offer any measures of members' foreign policy activities at the individual level. A notable exception is Carter and Scott's (2009) study of a small number of foreign policy entrepreneurs in each chamber – subject area specialists who proactively shape the foreign policy agenda rather than deferring to the executive branch. They find that committee leaders and majority party members are more likely to influence foreign policy outcomes, reflecting institutional patterns also observed in domestic policymaking (Volden and Wiseman 2014). Moreover, they argue that lawmakers who collaborate with the administration tend to be more effective. While this work sheds light on the behavior of a small subset of highly engaged members, we still lack systematic evidence of how and why members more broadly engage with international issues. Understanding the full scope of congressional attention to foreign affairs, and the factors that drive it, remains a critical task for scholars of Congress.

Lawmakers' Focus on Foreign Policy

To address this gap, it is important to consider the broader context in which foreign policy competes for lawmakers' attention. As high-ranking elected officials, members of Congress face significant constraints on their time and resources, which are subject to competing demands from constituents, party leaders, and interest groups. As a result, they must be selective about the issues they prioritize. A substantial body of research in the areas of issue ownership, congressional foreign policy behavior, and political representation has provided us with arguments that lawmakers tend to focus more on domestic issues than international ones. This domestic emphasis reflects both electoral incentives and institutional dynamics, evidently incentivizing lawmakers to avoid foreign policy in lieu of domestic issues.

First, lawmakers focus on domestic policies because voters generally have little interest in foreign affairs (Aldrich et al. 1989; Hersman 2000; YouGov 2023). Unless an armed conflict involves significant U.S. casualties, it is hard to think of a foreign policy issue with a significant impact on congressional elections (but see Johnstone and Priest 2017 as well as Mack et al. 2013). Miller and Stokes (1963) found more than half a century ago that citizens' attitudes on foreign policy issues are regularly ignored by members of Congress, a finding that is backed up by newer studies (Jacobs and Page 2005). Even though voters might express reasonable and coherent attitudes about foreign affairs (see Aldrich et al. 2006), lawmakers seem reluctant to prioritize constituent's views on issues with a low salience and on which distinctions between the two parties are rather muted (Kertzer et al. 2021). Recent polls confirm this long-standing trend. For example, The Economist's March 2024 poll asked US voters about the priorities for the 2024 presidential election and ranked foreign policy 15 out of 15 subject categories (Economist Intelligence Unit 2024). In a similar vein, the Harvard Youth Poll conducted in April 2024 reports that even the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza are not a high priority for voters,

including most young voters (Harvard 2024). As a result, members of Congress have little reason to be responsive to public opinion on foreign policy, largely because voters are far more focused on domestic issues, which dominate their political concerns.

Given this pattern of voter disinterest, it is not surprising that congressional campaigns overwhelmingly focus on domestic issues. For example, Sulkin (2005) found that only 31 out of 825 House and Senate campaigns prioritized foreign policy as compared to 185 who focused on the budget, 148 who emphasized defense, and 98 who selected education as a key campaign issue. During the 2000 election, 85% of all candidates for Congress did not mention any foreign policy issue at all, even though that number changed markedly after 9/11 (Trumbore and Dulio 2013). Clearly, a specialization in international affairs is often seen as less rewarding for congressional candidates. While several studies have shown that presidents can indeed benefit from perceptions of "strong leadership" on foreign affairs (Nickelsburg and Norpoth 2000; Druckman and Holmes 2004), no such findings exists for members of Congress. For most incumbents, other subject areas yield a better return-on-invest with regard to reelection efforts and career goals. This is especially true for House members, who lack authority over international treaties and presidential nominations, making the Senate the predominant "foreign policy chamber" (Gillette 1953; Schlesinger 1973; Baker 2000).

The second reason why members are generally expected to focus on domestic affairs is that foreign policy does not offer the same distributive benefits for members of Congress. Distributive politics have long been noted to be at the core of legislative decision-making in the U.S. Congress, notwithstanding later informational (e.g., Krehbiel 1992) or partisan perspectives (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 2005) on legislative organization. The logic of distributive politics puts networks of mutually beneficial relationships in Congress at the center of our understanding

of committees, parties, and rules and procedures. According to this view, lawmakers engage in logrolling and pork barreling as a means of steering material benefits to their own districts – even at the cost of economic inefficiency and waste – in hopes of being rewarded with voters' loyalty in return (Mayhew 1974; Shepsle 1986).

Unfortunately for those who wish Congress would take back some of its constitutional authority over foreign affairs and national security matters, the lack of "pork" does make any such efforts less likely to succeed. Because issues such as arms control, sanctions on foreign leaders, peace-time troop deployments, and international treaties do not have a discernible economic impact on legislators' districts and states, members' electoral incentives to focus on these topics are limited. Following the logic of distributive politics, lawmakers avoid specializing in an executive-dominated policy area in which there is little money to distribute and no credit to claim. On the flip side, the absence of economic incentives also means that organized domestic interests pay less attention to foreign affairs (Tama 2023), freeing lawmakers from the additional pressure brought into the political arena by interest groups.[1]

The third major reason why members of Congress are not as active on foreign affairs is that they cannot compete with the president's ability to rapidly deploy the federal government's resources ("first-mover advantage") and better basis of information during a foreign crisis (Canes-Wrone et al. 2008). Members yield to the administration on matters on which it has more resources, the ability to act swiftly, and a more complete picture of the trade-offs involved (Hinckley 1994; Howell and Pevehouse 2007). This reflects arguments made by John Jay in *Federalist* No. 64, where he argued that the day-to-day business of foreign relations was to be

[1] But see Prasad and Savatic (2023) on immigrant diaspora interest groups.

conducted by the executive branch with its ability to negotiate in secret and to act without delay. In contrast, Congress is fundamentally in a reactive position.

Once the president has committed the country to a policy, members are reluctant to undermine the administration's efforts in order to avoid harm to the country's international standing or, when engaged in armed conflict, to the troops in the field. Former House Majority Whip Roy Blunt (R-MO) argued that "the truth is that in time of war… there is not a whole lot for members of Congress to do." (quoted in Rudalevige 2006, 2). This line of thinking is also one of the major reasons why critics in the executive branch often see Congress doing more harm than good when it engages with foreign policy, while others say Congress rarely does anything substantial on foreign affairs anyway (Lindsay 1994; Davidson et al. 2024). These concerns are reflective of the president's ability to swift unilateral action, making the executive branch a superior actor.

The fourth reason for members to stay away from foreign affairs is that the nature of many foreign policy issues enables the president to claim the mantle of the "national interest" to convince legislators to follow their lead (see also Dearborn 2021).[2] Members are inclined to defer to the president when presented with convincing arguments why congressional involvement might jeopardize relations with other countries, embarrass the chief diplomat on the world stage, or worsen an international crisis. In doing so, lawmakers avoid public blame when things go awry in international affairs (Lindsay 1994, 77). Executive branch officials regularly reprimand Congress for allegedly putting self-interest over the "national interest", for example when lawmakers choose a more hawkish foreign policy than the president without considering

[2] "The president's normal problem with domestic policy is to get congressional support for programs he prefers. In foreign affairs, in contrast, he can almost always get support for policies that he believes will protect the nation – but his problem is to find a viable policy." (Wildavsky 1966)

its effect on relationships with key allies (Tama 2023). It is therefore not surprising that some experts welcome the public's lack of attention and Congress' acquiescence on foreign affairs as an important condition for the ability of an administration to act with speed and flexibility on global issues (Holsti 1996).

Fundamentally, these arguments reflect the belief that conducting the nation's foreign affairs is not only the president's constitutional prerogative but also a more functional approach – ensuring that a single executive voice defines the national interest, rather than allowing the diverse and often parochial interests in Congress to produce incoherent or potentially harmful foreign policy positions. As a result, members of Congress are often content to defer to the president, since opposing the executive could undermine the credibility of U.S. commitments abroad and expose members to blame for any negative outcomes of American foreign policy.

In sum, foreign policy appears to be an issue area that members of Congress have little incentive to prioritize. It offers few distributive benefits for constituents, falls largely under the purview of the executive branch, and tends to attract limited interest from voters. Given these structural and political constraints, one might expect congressional engagement in foreign affairs to be minimal or peripheral. Yet, despite these obstacles, many lawmakers continue to focus on international issues. To understand why, this project shifts attention to members' rhetoric because it allows legislators to signal priorities and respond to political incentives at low cost and without the institutional hurdles associated with other forms of issue attention.

The Value of Studying Members' Rhetoric

In their studies of individual-level legislative behavior, political scientists have long relied on readily available data sources such as roll-call votes and bill introductions. While both provide valuable insights into legislators' position-taking activities, they also have significant

limitations. Roll-call votes, for instance, offer a clear record of lawmakers' position-taking activities but fail to capture the effort and initiative behind their legislative work. In addition, votes are often constrained by party leadership, strategic considerations, and the legislative calendar, limiting their value as measures of attentiveness. Similarly, while bill introductions provide a more direct window into issue prioritization, they are still subject to institutional and political constraints. Many bills never advance beyond the introduction stage, and lawmakers may re-introduce legislation for symbolic or strategic reasons rather than as a reflection of sustained policy engagement.

In addition, foreign policy is an area in which traditional legislative activities may prove less effective, as Lindsay (1994, 138) contends: "The very difficulties inherent in crafting and passing legislation, combined with the breathtaking speed with which international events can occur, encourage members to use nonlegislative means to influence the substance of policy." Accordingly, given these limitations, this study focuses on alternative forms of legislative behavior, particularly members' rhetoric, to capture how they engage with and influence foreign policy. Members of Congress use public communications to stake out positions, claim credit, and build name recognition, with messaging becoming increasingly central to their work (Fenno 1978; Mayhew 2005; Lee 2016). Lawmakers signal their attention to policy issues by utilizing various venues such as floor speeches, press releases, e-newsletters, and social media posts. While aimed at different audiences, these forms of congressional speech are valuable data sources to understand how legislators engage with issues beyond formal votes and bill sponsorship. Although more difficult to quantify, measures of political rhetoric shed light on political framing, agenda-setting efforts, and constituency outreach that shape legislative decision-making.

Recent advances in text-as-data methods have made it possible to quantify these "nonlegislative" means as a strategic tool for lawmakers to shape their public image, mobilize supporters, and signal policy priorities. A rich literature demonstrates how lawmakers build their personal brand through strategic messaging, using their voting record and digital outreach to connect with voters (Grimmer 2013a). For example, researchers find that emotional rhetoric helps politicians mobilize supporters, gain media attention, and engage outside groups, and that partisan attacks are particularly effective in driving engagement (Hong and Nadler 2012; Shapiro and Hemphill 2017; Russell 2018; Lee and Weiai 2018). In addition, recent studies show that minority parties and those out of power are more likely to use polarizing rhetoric, with Republicans being especially prone to negative messaging (Gelman and Wilson 2022; Ballard et al. 2022; Russell 2021). Parties out of power generally exhibit greater messaging discipline, as it is easier to "unify the team" by opposing the governing party's policies (Lee 2016; Lin and Noble 2024).

Given the well-documented benefits of studying members' rhetoric, I make the case in Chapter 3 for studying member attentiveness to foreign policy through congressional newsletters in addition to introduced bills. E-newsletters provide lawmakers with unconstrained space to articulate policy positions in more detail, to frame issues, and to selectively highlight their legislative priorities. Unlike social media posts, which are often crafted for broad, national audiences and shaped by platform-specific constraints, newsletters are designed to engage constituents directly. Consequently, they offer valuable insights into how members tailor their rhetoric to district-level concerns while navigating national and international political dynamics. Furthermore, newsletters serve as a valuable complement to other measures of legislative behavior, such as bill sponsorship and roll-call votes, allowing for a more comprehensive

understanding of how members communicate their involvement in foreign policy. This approach allows me to shed light on the strategic calculations that drive member engagement in an executive-dominated policy area.

Contributions

This study contributes to the existing literature on legislative behavior and Congress' role in foreign affairs in several important ways. First, by centering on the strategic calculations of individual lawmakers, it offers the first comprehensive assessment of issue attention in foreign policy across the entire membership of Congress. In doing so, the dissertation moves beyond traditional accounts of interbranch competition to examine legislator behavior in an executive-dominated policy area that rarely provides tangible benefits – or "bacon" – to bring home to constituents. Although existing research has examined Congress's role in national security and foreign affairs, it has largely focused on institutional actors such as parties, committees, or Congress as a whole (but see Carter and Scott 2009). As a result, we know relatively little about the individual-level factors that shape members' engagement with international issues beyond formal committee assignments. Yet, if it is true that "Congress doesn't check the president, individual members do" (Howell and Pevehouse 2007, 34), then we need concrete evidence of legislators' activity in foreign affairs. Members of Congress influence international affairs not only through legislation and appropriations but also by shaping public discourse through criticizing or supporting the administration and informing constituents about the implications of specific policies (Kriner 2010).

Second, this study speaks to a growing body of research documenting the nature of asymmetric partisan polarization (Mann and Ornstein 2012; Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Blum 2020). As shown in Chapter 4, Republican lawmakers exhibit a significantly greater attention to

foreign affairs than their Democratic counterparts, regardless of which party holds the presidency. Both descriptive and statistical analyses show that GOP members devote more attention to foreign policy through rhetoric and bill sponsorship, with a particular focus on U.S. adversaries and the perceived failures of Democratic presidents. This oppositional posture is consistent with my argument about the strategic impact of outparty status, but also reflects broader developments in Republican politics, including its confrontational tactics and polarizing rhetoric (Gervais and Morris 2018). While foreign policy roll-call votes remain more bipartisan (Tama 2023), members' rhetoric reveals its utility as a partisan tool the GOP uses not only to assert ideological priorities but also to shape public discourse and electoral dynamics.

Third, this study adds to our understanding of descriptive and symbolic representation. Chapters 5 and 6 provide evidence that members of Congress often engage with foreign policy and trade due to constituent considerations, as reelection-minded legislators are highly attuned to the (perceived) interests and demographics of their districts. More precisely, both chapters offer important evidence that while foreign policy is not a high priority for most voters, certain communities – such as Jewish voters regarding Israel – may prompt representatives to focus on specific international issues that do not automatically result in greater general interest in foreign policy. Importantly, when this symbolic interest-based representation intersects with lawmakers' own ethnic background, we see even greater attention to foreign policy. Overall, this project speaks to the value of issue attention as an important dimension in the legislator-constituent relationship.

Fourth, this dissertation situates foreign affairs alongside the adjacent issue of trade, which spans both domestic and international politics. Trade directly affects the economic interests in members' districts, setting up a contrast with other international issues which do not

have the same distributive consequences. Findings show that lawmakers' engagement with trade is not just shaped by partisanship and their institutional position, but also by local economic pressures. More specifically, I show that Republicans are more focused on trade than their Democratic colleagues, though with considerable intraparty variation in how they frame it – as either an economic or national security issue. In addition, members' trade rhetoric serves as a reminder how party positions can shift over time, as seen in the GOP's turn toward protectionism under Trump. Ultimately, the findings underscore the continued influence of electoral incentives on congressional attentiveness to trade policy.

Chapter Outline

The goal of this dissertation is to examine the extent of members of Congress' attentiveness to foreign policy and to explain the factors that drive it. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 develops a theoretical framework to explain when and why members of Congress engage with foreign and trade policy. It contributes to this study by identifying four key incentives in addition to members' constitutional responsibility – partisan, ideological, constituency-based, and personal – that shape their attention to international issues. Specifically, I argue that outparty members – those not in control of the presidency – are more likely to focus on foreign affairs, all else being equal. This expectation stems from the nationalized competition that characterizes contemporary American politics (Lee 2016) and shapes congressional behavior. In a polarized two-party system, members have incentives to use their platforms to undermine the opposing party, as public dissatisfaction strengthens their own side come election time (Mann and Ornstein 2012). The president, serving as a "lightning rod of national politics" (Skowronek 1993), becomes the main target for such attacks, especially in foreign policy, where executive dominance makes presidential responsibility inescapable. Outparty members therefore

have a strategic incentive to highlight foreign crises in order to erode the president's public support. In contrast, inparty and majority-party members are more likely to focus on domestic agendas, as they typically resonate more with voters. For members of the majority party, agenda control is commonly used to pass the party's domestic program, and party leaders encourage members to focus on delivering those priorities and publicizing the party's accomplishments (Gaynor 2024).

Chapter 2 also advances the argument that ideological positioning offers a member-specific reason for increased attentiveness to foreign affairs. Specifically, I expect moderate members to be more active in this area because foreign affairs remains a more bipartisan policy area (Tama 2023), offering moderates an opportunity to enhance their bipartisan credentials. Conversely, members of highly ideological intraparty organizations such as the House Freedom Caucus are likely to devote less attention to foreign policy, as their focus on divisive domestic issues detracts from international engagement.

Finally, the chapter discusses constituency pressures and personal backgrounds as additional incentives. As reelection-motivated legislators (Mayhew 1974), members strive to represent their constituents in descriptive, substantive, or symbolic ways (Pitkin 1967). This is because many ethnic communities in the United States maintain strong transnational ties and advocate for policies reflecting their historical, cultural, or geopolitical interests. These ties often translate into organized political engagement, with ethnic advocacy groups amplifying their communities' priorities and making them visible to lawmakers (Rubenzer 2011). Beyond constituency dynamics, lawmakers whose personal ethnic or professional backgrounds are more internationally oriented also tend to be more attentive to foreign affairs. These "personal roots of

representation" (Burden 2007) echo the life experiences and distinct policy interests that shape legislators' policymaking.

Following the theoretical framework, Chapter 3 introduces a novel dictionary-based measure of foreign policy rhetoric using congressional e-newsletters, complemented by bill sponsorship data. In doing so, I combine computational text analysis with conventional legislative metrics to systematically capture individual-level issue attention. Using congressional e-newsletters offers several key advantages: members have full discretion over the content, there are no formal restrictions on volume, and the newsletters are designed specifically to communicate political priorities directly to constituents. These characteristics make them a valuable source for capturing rhetorical attention to foreign policy, assuring that members' issue focus is the result of their decision, and not primarily driven by party leaders' agenda setting.

The presentation of the dictionary of 167 foreign policy-related terms developed specifically for this project makes up the core of Chapter 3. Readers are provided with a detailed description of the dictionary's construction and validation process, including manual coding exercises and comparisons with alternative measures to ensure the measures' robustness. The chapter also presents descriptive statistics that highlight patterns of foreign policy communication among members. Finally, it outlines the use of bill introductions as a more traditional, behavioral measure of issue attention, providing a point of comparison between rhetorical and legislative activity.

As the first empirical chapter, Chapter 4 investigates the role of partisanship and ideology in shaping members' engagement with foreign affairs. In it, I present strong evidence of asymmetric issue attention, with Republicans more rhetorically and legislatively active on foreign policy than Democrats, regardless of party control of the presidency. Fixed effects

models also suggest differences regarding between-member and within-member variation, as majority party members and moderates appear to not be more active per se, but members who *switch* from minority to majority are. These results contribute to our understanding of the consequences of partisan polarization and its asymmetrical nature (Mann and Ornstein 2012; Grossman and Hopkins 2016; McCarty 2019; Grumbach 2023), as nationally competitive elections incentivize partisan teamplay. In addition, Chapter 4 also speaks to the multidimensional nature of issue attention among legislators, with implications for future studies of parties' issue ownership.

Chapter 5 follows with a more detailed study of constituency factors that impact members' issue attention by providing evidence for the impact of district characteristics and members' personal backgrounds on lawmakers' engagement with *specific* foreign policy issues. Although most lawmakers now come from safe districts (McCarty 2019), responsiveness toward sub-constituencies remains an important element for lawmakers' role as district representatives, especially when constituent groups make their concerns visible to them (Miler 2010). I argue that e-newsletters allow members to symbolically demonstrate attentiveness to international concerns because the composition of their constituencies incentivizes such behavior. Focusing on Jewish and Latino communities as case studies, I find that lawmakers from areas with larger Jewish populations are more likely to highlight Israel in their newsletters, though this effect is conditioned by party: Republicans generally focus more on Israel due to Israel being a core priority for Evangelical voters, whereas Democrats' attention is more sensitive to legislators' own ethnic background. Similarly, lawmakers representing more Latino constituents mention Latin American countries at a higher rate in their newsletters, as do Latino representatives. Unexpectedly, Republicans reference the region more than Democrats. The chapter shows that

while descriptive representation shapes foreign policy discussions, it is also conditioned by partisanship. The findings also raise normative questions about the value of symbolic representation, as constituents might question the substantive significance of such rhetorical attention.

Chapter 6 examines trade policy as a hybrid issue that combines domestic economic interests with international politics. Throughout this chapter, I demonstrate that lawmakers' trade rhetoric responds to both district-level economic pressures as well as partisan incentives, with notable intraparty variation among Republicans. Unlike other foreign policy issues such as military deployments, treaty obligations, or bilateral relationships, trade has clear distributive implications for members of Congress and their constituencies. Because trade creates economic winners and losers, it subjects lawmakers to pressure from local industries and interest groups. While members' attentiveness to trade follows a logic similar to foreign policy, the domestic economic stakes lead to unique partisan dynamics: All else being equal, outparty members tend to avoid highlighting trade in order to deny the incumbent president credit for economic benefits. Statistical analysis shows that majority party and ideologically extreme members engage less with trade, while Republicans are more attentive to trade than Democrats, reflecting traditional GOP ties to free-market policies and export-oriented industries (Noel 2013). District-level manufacturing and export dependencies further impact members' attention to trade, in addition to relevant committees. When presenting evidence for *how* members discuss trade, the chapter reveals notable intraparty variation, as lawmakers balance economic and geopolitical arguments, with shifts during the Trump administration illustrating tensions between traditional Republican free-trade views and protectionist policies. Overall, Chapter 6 indicates that lawmakers' attention to trade remains heavily influenced by pragmatic, reelection-driven considerations.

Finally, Chapter 7 revisits key theoretical claims and summarizes the main findings of this dissertation, highlighting how partisanship, ideology, constituency pressures, and members' background shape lawmakers' attentiveness to foreign and trade policy. It synthesizes insights from the preceding chapters, emphasizing the importance of asymmetric partisanship on foreign affairs, the value of symbolic representation, and the relevance of economic variables for trade-related issues. I close by offering a discussion of the broader implications for research on Congress and foreign policy, suggesting directions for future scholarship and considering what the results mean for Congress' role in foreign affairs.

Chapter 2 - A Theoretical Framework of Lawmakers' Issue Attention

In Chapter 1, I argued that executive dominance, voter disinterest, and the lack of distributive benefits might make lawmakers less interested in focusing on foreign affairs. In this section, I propose five major reasons why members of Congress still pay attention to foreign policy despite the conventional expectation that they will defer to the president. As rational decision makers, members are receptive to institutional incentives around them, including electoral and ideological considerations. Moreover, the incentives and opportunities created by intense partisan competition and animosity are not unique to domestic politics and have consequences for the type of issue attention lawmakers choose. As discussed below, partisan goals tend to incentivize lawmakers to focus more on public messaging through platforms like e-newsletters, whereas others prompt a stronger focus on substantive representation through bill sponsorship. Fundamentally, these incentives are effective because they align with members' core motivations: securing reelection, advancing "good" (as in preferred) public policy, and gaining influence within Congress (Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974).

While the framework outlined below applies to both chambers of Congress, focusing on the House of Representatives offers a least-likely case for studying members' engagement in foreign affairs. The Senate has traditionally been viewed as the more internationally oriented chamber, due in large part to its exclusive constitutional authority to provide "advice and consent" on treaties and executive appointments. These powers have reinforced its institutional identity as the superior foreign policy chamber (Schlesinger 1973; Baker 2000). Consequently, much of the scholarly literature has emphasized the Senate's role in foreign affairs, while the House is often characterized as more parochial and domestically focused – limited by its larger membership, shorter terms, and narrower constitutional responsibilities. If members of the House

nonetheless pay attention to foreign policy in a sustained way, it suggests that individual-level factors such as partisanship, ideology, or constituency interests are important parts of a more complete understanding of Congress and foreign policy.

Constitutional Responsibility

The U.S. Constitution establishes a "baseline" expectation for the constitutional roles of the presidency and Congress. It assigns authority to conduct diplomacy, to negotiate treaties, and to serve as commander-in-chief of the armed forces to the president while reserving the power to declare war and to approve international treaties for Congress, the Senate in particular. Despite executive dominance in foreign affairs (Rudalevige 2006; Kriner 2010; Carter and Scott 2021), Congress regularly needs to write and pass legislation concerning sanctions, treaties, foreign aid, and diplomatic issues, providing opportunities for members to make public policy that reflects the national interest and legislators' policy goals. Congress also conducts oversight over the federal agencies tasked with implementing the administration's decisions, albeit with a recent decline in oversight quality (Fowler 2015). Accordingly, the first reason why members of Congress pay attention to foreign affairs is that they have a constitutional responsibility to do so. Within Congress, those who are best positioned to carry out this constitutional role are lawmakers who serve on committees related to foreign policy such as Foreign Affairs, Armed Services, or Intelligence.

Previous studies have shown that committee membership is the single most important factor in explaining legislative issue attention among lawmakers (e.g., Fenno 1973; Shepsle and Weingast 1987; Hall 1996; Woon 2009), and legislators are more likely to participate in a congressional policy debate when they serve on a committee with jurisdiction over those policies (Miler 2010, 121). Members of Congress devote time and effort to these subjects because they

were assigned the responsibility to be Congress' specialists on these issues or because it might prove advantageous for their career by claiming credit for successful policy initiatives (Mayhew 1974, 115). Ambitious legislators on relevant committees use tools such as the appropriations, witness testimony, legislative markups, and oversight hearings to influence the conduct of foreign affairs (Johnson 2012, 18).[3] Accordingly, they will use their influence in multiple ways, including through educating their constituents in e-newsletters about challenges facing America on the global stage and sponsoring legislation to create new policies or change existing policies. Consequently, H1 serves as a baseline expectation for both foreign policy and trade (Ways and Means):

> *H1: Members of relevant committees mention foreign policy more frequently in their e-newsletters and sponsor more foreign policy legislation than other members.*

However, lawmakers often engage with international issues even if they do not serve on the relevant committees. This is partly due to the scarcity of committee assignments relative to the number of legislators interested in specific policy areas. Moreover, the mid-20th century norms of issue specialization – where members focused narrowly on issues within their committee jurisdiction (Matthews 1959; Fenno 1973) – have given way to a more individualized and entrepreneurial legislature. In this contemporary context, even freshman members frequently seek to establish a distinct policy profile beyond their formal committee roles (Sinclair 2007). For instance, Volden and Wiseman (2020) find that only 10 to 20 percent of Representatives qualify as "specialists" who devote more than half of their legislative agenda to a single issue.

[3] For example, congressional Democrats and Republicans used their budget power to reject Donald Trump's proposed cuts to the foreign policy bureaucracy during his first term in office (Rogin 2017).

These patterns underscore that institutional roles alone do not fully explain issue engagement, highlighting the relevance of other factors for members' attention to foreign affairs.

Partisan Incentives

One of the major changes in American politics over the past decades has been the rise of partisan polarization (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006; Lee 2016). The ideologically heterogenous party coalitions of the mid-20th century which had liberals, conservatives, and moderates distributed across both major parties gave way to nationally competitive and ideologically sorted parties disagreeing over public policy (Theriault 2008), procedure (Lee 2009; Mann and Ornstein 2012) and cultural issues (Mason 2018; Gervais and Morris 2019; Blum 2020). Consequently, polarized parties have changed how members of Congress engage with nearly all aspects of their work, including foreign policy.

I argue that one of the factors that motivates members to focus on foreign policy is outparty members' opportunity for partisan gain. Members of the opposition party have an interest in tarnishing the president's reputation and criticizing the president in a policy area that only the White House, the State Department, or other agencies can deal with. Any such criticism extents to the incumbent's party, as presidents are seen as party leaders by members of Congress and the public (Kernell 1986; Lee 2009; Jacobson 2019; Noble 2023). Accordingly, damaging the president's public standing increases the prospect of electoral success for the opposition, in accordance with the zero-sum logic of two-party politics.

Put differently, the president's role as party leader incentivizes outparty legislators to leverage his "ownership" of foreign affairs for criticism because it means that the president is seen as responsible for any setbacks, errors, or crises that come up in foreign affairs. Multiple studies have demonstrated the impact of party competition on foreign affairs. The first group of

studies emphasizes partisan teamplay. For example, Lee (2009, 91) provides evidence that party cohesion among the president's party increases when presidents take on a leadership role in foreign affairs or defense policy, but that the same cannot be said of the opposition party. Furthermore, Lewis (2017) argues that parties become more supportive of foreign intervention when controlling the presidency, while they become less supportive when in the opposition, explaining why Congress takes seemingly contradictory moves such as symbolically disapproving of Bill Clinton's Kosovo policy but then voting to fund the same (Johnson 2012, 43). The second group of studies is more focused on opposition-party members as a check on presidential power, making presidents more cautious in their policy choices when they anticipate resistance to their preferred policies. For example, presidents facing an opposition-party Congress are 75% less likely to use force in an international crisis (Kriner 2010). In addition, Carter and Scott (2004) find that the members of Congress who focus on foreign policy are often motivated by their opposition to the policies of the incumbent administration.

In sum, the arguments presented here suggest a significant degree of outparty activism in foreign affairs. Accordingly, I expect members of the party not controlling the White House to use foreign affairs for partisan criticism of the incumbent president. Whether this effect is also apparent on trade with its more distributive nature deserves separate consideration in greater detail in Chapter 6.

H2a: Members of the outparty focus on foreign policy at a higher rate in their e-newsletters than members of the president's party.

Notably, criticizing the incumbent administration can serve outparty legislators well in terms of gaining public attention, but it does not necessarily translate into increased substantive bill sponsorship. This is because the zero-sum logic of two-party competition creates strong

incentives for outparty members to prioritize public impact through media visibility over policy substance. As nationalized politics increasingly center on the presidency, the president has become a symbolic focal point for partisan conflict, encouraging lawmakers in the opposition party to amplify polarization in their public communications (Lee 2009; Jacobson 2019; Noble 2023). Using foreign policy issues to criticize the president and score political points rather than advancing substantive legislation is a rational approach for outparty members, as such legislation is unlikely to pass under an opposing administration. Moreover, focusing on criticism avoids the constraints of the legislative process, as agenda control or party leaders' calculation do not limit members' own rhetorical choices. This is why I expect outparty legislators to turn to rhetorical strategies to signal opposition in a highly nationalized political environment without offering substantive policy changes. It is, in sum, a more cost-effective strategy.

H2b: Members of the outparty sponsor foreign policy legislation at a similar rate as members of the president's party.

In addition to the importance of a legislator's partisan relationship to the presidency, I also argue that majority party status has a significant impact on members' attentiveness to foreign affairs. Both leaders' and members' priorities are mostly domestic in nature, reducing their incentive to focus on international issues when they enjoy chamber control. Majority parties monopolize the legislative agenda in service of their collective goals (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Koger and Lebo 2017), and those collective goals typically concern the passage of domestic policy favored by the party's elected officials, voters, interest groups, party leaders, and presidents. Majority parties' agenda control in committees and on the floor also explains why majority membership has a large positive effect on members' legislative effectiveness, as those members are more likely to see their introduced bills advance through committees and the

chamber (Volden and Wiseman 2014). Taken together, being in the majority party comes with advantages in lawmaking that are mostly used to advance domestic policy. Conversely, the lack of these procedural powers for minority party members means that they are less likely to have legislative success, and more likely to focus on other issues besides their own party agenda.

In sum, majority party members should be less likely to discuss foreign affairs because they are mostly focused on the passage of domestic policy priorities. Majority party status incentivizes members to focus on their party's policy agenda, as chamber control is temporary and voters and interest groups expect results. This logic also applies in cases where outparty presidents might veto their legislation, as lawmakers still advertise votes that will not be signed into law. In any case, a narrow window of legislative opportunity suggests that foreign policy issues will be delayed or sidelined unless they become urgent matters.

H2c: Majority party members mention foreign policy less frequently in their e-newsletters and sponsor less foreign policy legislation than other members.

Table 2.1 illustrates possible configurations for majority status and control of the presidency. Of the possible power settings shown, those in the minority and the outparty should be the legislators who are most focused on public messaging over substantive legislation.

Table 2.1 Institutional Power Configurations in Congress

Majority Party & Inparty	Minority Party & Inparty
Majority Party & Outparty	Minority Party & Outparty

Ideological Moderation

The third reason members of Congress may pay attention to foreign policy is because this subject area offers lawmakers an opportunity to signal ideological moderation. This is for three reasons. First, many of the domestic conflicts that characterize contemporary American politics are muted or entirely absent from foreign policy. Consequently, foreign policy has traditionally been less partisan and an area where lawmakers work together across party lines. For example, Tama (2023) finds anti-presidential bipartisanship on which majorities of Republicans and Democrats unite against the president to be three times more common on foreign policy bills compared to domestic bills. In Congress, members and their staff often deliberately try to avoid public attention to foreign affairs bills in order to keep domestic interests from "poisoning" the process with ideologically charged issues (Angevine 2021, 153). As such, moderates should be drawn to foreign policy because it is a less controversial issue area that offers substantial room for bipartisan cooperation.

Second, organized interests that are active parts of both party coalitions are not as established and involved in foreign policy. Whereas interest groups advancing ideological goals on guns, abortion, environmentalism, labor issues etc. have sorted into the two-party coalitions, little such movement has occurred on foreign affairs. For example, Karol (2009) finds that America's political parties have been largely unconstrained in altering their foreign policy positions because of the absence of organized party constituencies. Similarly, Bonica (2013) argues that interest groups focusing on foreign affairs tend to give campaign donations to members in both parties, limiting the extent of partisan polarization. Without informational cues from interest groups, legislators have a harder time gauging public opinion, estimating how controversial an issue is and ultimately deciding what the "correct" position on an issue should be (Lupia 1994). This relative absence of organized "pressure" on elected officials leaves space

for members to follow to their own ideological preferences, or to simply follow presidential leadership.

Third, voters' relative disinterest also means that members of Congress have more flexibility to translate their own ideological predispositions towards international issues into public policy (Gries 2014). Because voters typically do not prioritize foreign affairs unless the US is involved in a war, members of Congress enjoy latitude in navigating the issue according to their own beliefs if they choose to do so. It is therefore not surprising that foreign policy roll-call votes show significant intraparty divisions, reflecting members' ideological convictions about America's role in the world. For example, during the Trump and Biden presidencies, a sizable number of House Republicans regularly supported "America First" policies reminiscent of an era in which the GOP's isolationist wing was dominant, while its interventionist/internationalist faction continued to wield considerable influence within the party (Blake 2023). Conversely, the Democratic party's internal divides on international issues are also substantial, including disagreements on America's Middle East policies, the balance between free trade and protectionism, or the extent to which presidents must seek congressional authorization for the use of force. In short, members may use international issues for messaging purposes because it's one of the spaces where legislators can signal their moderation and distinguish themselves from their party.

To summarize, I expect ideologically moderate members to be more likely to emphasize foreign affairs in their e-newsletters. This is because moderate lawmakers are by definition less inclined to follow their party on controversial domestic issues. Seeking opportunities for legislative leadership, they turn to international affairs as a less polarized issue area. This is because foreign policy serves as an issue that signals bipartisan behavior. In addition, we know

from survey experiments that voters reward elected officials who are effective and bipartisan in their lawmaking efforts (Strickler 2024), which could additionally incentivize those members to focus on foreign policy as a less partisan policy area. In other words, foreign policy may help legislators' goals by offering an opportunity to cultivate a bipartisan brand.

H3a: Moderate members mention foreign policy more frequently in their e-newsletters and sponsor more foreign policy legislation than other members.

Conversely, I argue that ideologically extreme members who are more at home with polarized domestic politics are less likely to devote attention to foreign policy. In the House of Representatives, members often join ideological intraparty caucuses that serve as party "sub-brands" (Clarke 2020), signaling distinct philosophies towards voters, donors, and interest groups within the bigger party tent. These intraparty factions have historically played a significant role in influencing legislative outcomes by capitalizing on their organizational capacity and numerical strength (Bloch Rubin 2017). The House Freedom Caucus (HFC) is arguably the most prominent ideological caucus in recent memory, being labelled "legislative terrorists" by former Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-OH) for its confrontational approach to policy and procedure. Founded in 2015 by the most conservative House Republicans, the HFC became a pivotal voting bloc by successfully defeating legislation, shaping the legislative agenda, determining party messaging and strategy, changing chamber rules, and influencing leadership selection (Green 2019; McGee 2020). Ideologically extreme members – like those in the HFC – are generally more prone to "ideological grandstanding" on issues that are most divisive (Kirkland and Slapin 2019, 28) without effecting policy outcomes in the desired way, thereby developing their ideological bona fides at low cost to themselves but at a significant cost to the larger party brand (Green 2019).

I expect members of the HFC to be less focused on foreign affairs for two reasons. First, more ideologically extreme members are typically preoccupied with the most polarizing political issues which tend to be domestic such as guns, abortion, and immigration. Since HFC members are overwhelmingly concentrated at the ideological extreme of the Republican conference, they are likely less interested in dealing with international treaties, diplomatic relations, alliances, or nuclear nonproliferation which do not align with domestic left-right cleavages. Second, HFC members also tend to reflect the more transactional or "isolationist" wing of the GOP associated with Donald Trump. This orientation may not only shape their foreign policy positions but also signal a broader disinterest in international engagement, consistent with an "America First" mindset that prioritizes domestic concerns over global involvement. As such, HFC members have little interest in using foreign policy for ideological moderation.

H3b: Members of the House Freedom Caucus mention foreign policy less frequently in their e-newsletters and sponsor less foreign policy legislation than other Republicans.

Representing Constituents

Fourth, members of Congress pay attention to foreign policy because of constituent considerations. Scholars have long noted that reelection-motivated legislators are highly sensitive to the concerns of their constituents, and that constituents' needs are prioritized by members and their staff (e.g., Fenno 1978; Kingdon 1989; Mayhew 2005). Lawmakers are generally aware of the socioeconomic characteristics of voters in their districts and try to anticipate their interests accordingly (Arnold 1990; Mansbridge 2003). Miller and Stokes (1963) highlighted two distinct mechanisms of legislators' efforts to act in their constituents' interests: their own attitudes ("What is good for them?") and their perceptions of constituency attitudes ("What do they want?"). While voters typically do not prioritize international affairs, some

specific constituencies such as diaspora groups place more emphasis on those issues (Rubenzer 2011). For example, lawmakers with a greater share of Latino constituents might be more likely to pay attention to Latin America in their constituent communication because doing so is one possible way for members of Congress to signal attention to the interests of sub-constituencies (see Miler 2010), therefore cultivating support for future reelection campaigns (Fenno 1978).

Table 2.2 Operationalization of Legislator Incentives

Constitutional Responsibility	• Bicameralism (Senate > House) • Committee Membership (e.g., Foreign Affairs)
Partisanship	• Outparty membership • District vote & Competitiveness • Majority Status (focus on domestic issues)
Ideological Moderation	• Intraparty caucuses • DW-NOMINATE
Constituent Representation	• Ethnic representation (demographic variables) • Foreign-born population • Economic variables
Personal Background	• Veteran background • Ethnicity

Lawmakers often employ symbolic gestures in their rhetoric to indicate their attentiveness to constituent concerns. For example, recent research shows that redistricting can prompt lawmakers to adjust their messaging to reflect their newly drawn districts (Kaslovsky and Kistner 2024), underscoring how members tailor their rhetoric to signal attentiveness to constituents' perceived interests. While some have questioned the normative value of symbolic gestures – Hannah Pitkin (1967) famously referred to them as “irrational psychological responses” – they can also serve as meaningful trust-building tools, especially for underrepresented groups. Importantly, symbolic representation does not require shared identity

between representatives and constituents, allowing for cross-ethnic representation. Therefore, I expect that lawmakers from districts with a higher share of foreign-born residents are more likely to pay attention to international issues.

H4a: Members from districts with a larger ethnic minority population mention foreign policy more frequently in their e-newsletters and sponsor more foreign policy legislation than other members.

Although constituency considerations matter for all lawmakers, it takes on heightened importance for members in competitive districts. Specifically, I argue that members from competitive districts are less inclined to focus on foreign policy because foreign affairs won't be prioritized by swing voters who are mostly interested in domestic "bread-and-butter issues." For example, a national poll conducted in April 2024 showed that 83 percent of voters said President Biden should focus on domestic policy, compared with 14 percent who favored a focus on foreign policy (Pew 2024). Members from swing districts have an even greater incentive to deviate from their party on more high-profile issues in order to convince independent voters to support them (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002). In addition, recent studies find cross-pressured members are more likely to moderate their views (Toll 2019) and that members facing electoral threats redirect their attention toward district concerns in their floor speeches (Ban and Kaslovsky 2024), indicating a shift away from issues that seem far removed from voters' lives. Because democratic theory suggests a strong correlation between voters' policy preferences and elected officials' acts in office, it stands to reason that members will not prioritize international issues if they face a competitive general election.

H4b: Members in competitive districts mention foreign policy less frequently in their e-newsletters and sponsor fewer foreign policy legislation than other members.

Unlike foreign policy, trade policies have economic implications that members of Congress are typically very attentive to. Few charges against incumbent legislators weigh heavier than the accusation that they did not serve their constituents' interest, for example by voting to advance "job-killing" legislation. Accordingly, legislators from districts that are more dependent on trade should be more attentive to trade than their colleagues from districts with more domestically oriented local economies. Recent evidence suggests that members who represent constituents who are "losers" from free trade are much more protectionist, a pattern that is consistent across political and electoral systems (Dür, Huber, and Stiller 2024). Accordingly, I argue that economic conditions in members' district will have a significant impact on members' interest in trade.

> *H4c: Members representing districts with high exposure to international trade mention trade more frequently in their e-newsletters and sponsor more trade-related legislation than other members.*

Personal Background

The fifth group of factors concerns the personal background of members of Congress. These "personal roots of representation" (Burden 2007) reflect the life experiences and identities that shape lawmakers' policymaking decisions, especially during the agenda setting phase of the legislative process. As such, lawmakers' upbringing, education, race, gender, or professional background can shape their policy preferences and the issues they prioritize. Burden suggests that while lawmakers make strategic considerations, they are also filtering political issues through their own internal lens, meaning that life experiences can lead lawmakers to advocate for causes even in the absence of strong constituent pressure. This perspective challenges more purely rational-choice or institutional models of congressional behavior by emphasizing the role

of identity and biography in shaping political action. For example, Carnes (2012) finds that lawmakers with a working-class background hold distinct economic views that are reflected in their legislative behavior. Others argue that elected officials with a business background sponsor more pro-business legislation (Witko and Friedman 2008), that working mothers are more likely to focus on issues specific to parents and children (Bryant and Hellwege 2019) and that even the socioeconomic status of members' parents has a significant effect on their roll-call behavior, although mediated by partisanship (Grumbach 2015). Regarding occupation, Fountaine, Shepherd, and Skinner (2024) find that physician members of Congress are more legislatively effective on health policy matters. Overall, research supports the idea that both inherent and acquired identity traits influence representation.

Given the empirical evidence, members of Congress' class and occupational backgrounds should make them more likely to develop a strong interest in a specific policy area. Specifically, I expect veterans to be more focused on foreign affairs because their service made them more aware of the international challenges facing the United States. Global deployment makes military members more sensitive to the consequences of policymaking decisions for those who wear the uniform. This argument reflects existing research providing evidence for the efficacy of military service on legislative behavior. For example, Carter and Scott (2004) find that the small number of members who build a legislative profile as "foreign policy entrepreneurs" in Congress often have served in the armed forces (see also Lupton 2021a). In addition, veterans pay more attention to veterans' issues (Cormack 2021) and appear to be more bipartisan in their legislative behavior (Amoroso 2025). Matchett (2024) argues that those with military experience spend more time and effort on defense issues compared to their non-veteran colleagues while Lupton (2021b) finds that veterans exhibit distinct behavior on votes that concern oversight over military

deployments. Given the evidence for the distinct role that veteran experience has, I expect members previous military service to be more likely to discuss international affairs in their e-newsletters and to sponsor more foreign policy legislation on average. This is because a legislator's military service may lead to an increase in interest and/or better understanding of the global challenges facing the United States.

H5a: Veterans mention foreign policy more frequently in their e-newsletters and sponsor more foreign policy legislation than other members.

Members' professional experience is not the only possible personal source of interest in foreign policy. A rich body of literature has produced evidence that the ethnic background of lawmakers has a considerable impact on policymaking and the relationship between constituents and their representatives (e.g., Bratton and Haynie 1999; Haider-Markel 2007; Swers and Rouse 2013; Bowen and Clark 2014; Wolak and Juenke 2021). Scholars generally agree that there is a connection between descriptive representation – the presence of representatives with a minority background – and the substantive content of policy, although the strength of this relationship is mediated by contextual factors (Pitkin 1967; Gamble 2007; Grose 2011; Rouse 2013; Homola 2022). Accordingly, I argue that members whose ethnic identity is tied to countries or regions where they have ancestral roots or that are otherwise meaningful for their identity should be more likely to focus on these *specific* foreign policy issues.

In order to examine the relationship between ethnicity and attentiveness to foreign affairs, I focus on two distinct minority groups: Latino and Jewish members of Congress. In addition to being the largest minority group in the United States, Latino legislators now make up roughly ten percent of House members. Existing research on Latino representation in Congress has produced inconsistent evidence for the link between descriptive and substantive legislation, though the

heterogeneity of Latinos as a minority group makes it difficult to find consensus on what constitutes "Latino interests" (e.g., Minta 2009; Wallace 2014; Rouse 2023). To date, no studies have examined the connection between Latino background and interest in foreign affairs. As one of the few studies to do so, Uscinski et al. (2009) provide evidence that member ethnicity can have an impact on foreign policy activism in Congress, especially when legislative activities other than roll-call votes are examined. As members of an ethnic minority with ancestral roots in a specific world region, I expect Latino lawmakers to be more interested in international issues related to Latin America, but not in foreign policy per se. This is because little evidence exists that would suggest a greater affinity of Latino legislators to international issues, as domestic concerns such as education, crime, and healthcare typically top Latino voters' concerns in most surveys to date (Swers and Rouse 2013).

H5b: Latino legislators are more attentive to Latin America in their e-newsletters, but not more likely to discuss general foreign policy issues.

In addition to examining Latino legislators, I also analyze the extent to which Jewish members of Congress engage with foreign policy more broadly, and with Israel in particular. The Jewish American community, as a diaspora group, has historically maintained strong ties to global concerns and traditions of liberal internationalism (Cavari 2021). Although Jewish Americans' attitudes toward Israel are often complex (Barnett 2016), their concern for international issues is frequently reinforced through religious, cultural, and familial networks, as well as through communal institutions that emphasize the significance of U.S. foreign policy. For example, Congresswoman Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR), quoted by the Jewish Democratic Council of America, underscores the normative dimension of this engagement: "Being a proud Jewish

Democrat means always keeping in mind the concept of Tikkun Olam – our obligation to repair the world."

Studying the views of Jewish Americans on foreign policy, Barnett (2016) argues that many Jewish voters identify with core American values of liberalism, religious freedom, and pluralism as the foundation for building a more just society at home and around the globe. As a result of being a diaspora community as well as the many threats to the physical safety of the Jewish people throughout history, their view of international issues tends to be more cosmopolitan rather than tribal or nationalist. Following Barnett's arguments, I expect Jewish legislators to feel a heightened sense of responsibility to advocate on issues related to the State of Israel and to demonstrate leadership on broader foreign policy such as human rights, international stability, and democratic governance. In sum, Jewish cultural and religious heritage as well as historic experience suggests that Jewish identity is an important factor in shaping lawmakers' foreign policy attentiveness and advocacy with regard to Israel and beyond.

H5c: Jewish legislators are more attentive to both general foreign policy issues as well as Israel in particular in their e-newsletters.

Conclusion

Members of Congress' attentiveness to foreign affairs presents a puzzle: Why would lawmakers pay attention to an issue area that is dominated by the executive branch, that offers few tangible benefits that lawmakers can distribute to their constituents, and that voters rarely prioritize? In a political environment where legislators must allocate their limited time and resources across an array of competing demands, one might expect them to ignore international issues in favor of domestic concerns, which tend to be more politically salient. In addition, the

House of Representatives is traditionally the chamber less engaged in foreign affairs than the Senate, making the study of members' attention to international issues a least-likely case.

The theoretical framework presented above offers an alternative perspective. I argue that members of Congress' attentiveness to foreign policy and trade is the product of a blend of partisan, ideological, constituency-driven, and personal incentives. In a competitive two-party system, outparty members focus more on foreign affairs because they seek to weaken the president's public standing, as the opposition party will benefit from voters' dissatisfaction with the incumbent at the next election. As diplomat-in-chief, presidents simply can't escape responsibility for international crises. On the other hand, members of the majority party should be less likely to engage with foreign affairs than minority party members, because they have an opportunity to pass the party's domestic agenda. Consequently, this domestic focus will result in a lower interest in foreign policy.

In addition to partisan incentives, lawmakers also choose to engage with issues that align with their ideological orientations. Whether they see themselves as moderates not only impacts the content of their policy preferences but also the strategic selection of issue areas in which they seek to build a bipartisan reputation. I argue that more moderate members of Congress are more likely to devote attention to foreign affairs because these issues tend to be less polarized than many domestic concerns. For moderates seeking to cultivate a bipartisan track record, international affairs provide opportunities to collaborate across the aisle without the partisan conflict that accompanies debates on taxes, healthcare, or immigration. On the other hand, highly ideological lawmakers – such as members of the House Freedom Caucus – are less inclined to prioritize foreign policy. These members often focus on hot-button domestic issues that energize

their partisan base and align with their ideological brand, leaving little room to engage with international matters.

In addition to partisan and ideological incentives, constituency pressures play a critical role in shaping lawmakers' engagement with foreign policy. Members of Congress representing districts with sizable ethnic communities often address international issues tied to their constituents' countries of origin. Diaspora communities can exert meaningful political influence, encouraging legislators to prioritize policies that reflect cultural and emotional ties to a "homeland." Such pressures frequently transcend traditional partisan and ideological divides, highlighting how constituency considerations can elevate the salience of foreign affairs for reelection-focused lawmakers.

Finally, I argue that legislators' personal backgrounds – including prior professional experience and ethnic identity – also influence their engagement with international issues. These personal characteristics foster greater sensitivity to global affairs and strengthen their attentiveness to constituents' concerns. Additionally, lawmakers representing districts with greater economic dependence on international trade – such as those with a high concentration of export-oriented industries – face strong incentives to pay attention to trade policy. These members may be more likely to communicate about trade in constituent messaging or to sponsor more trade-related bills. With these theoretical expectations in place, I now turn to the research design, detailing the data sources and methods used to evaluate lawmakers' attentiveness to foreign and trade policy.

Chapter 3 - Measuring Attention to Foreign Policy

The previous section discussed the institutional and personal factors that incentivize lawmakers to focus on foreign policy despite its executive dominance and its lack of distributive benefits. In this section, I argue that studying the extent of member activity on foreign affairs requires a methodological approach that measures members' issue attention through other legislative behavior besides roll-call votes. Before introducing newsletter rhetoric and bill sponsorship as my measures of issue attention, I will outline the limitations of traditional roll-call measures and explain why they are insufficient for the purposes of this study.

One of the most ubiquitous measures of legislative behavior is members' roll-call record. As a readily available data source, congressional votes reveal important patterns in lawmakers' position-taking, such as the prevalence of partisan polarization (Theriault 2008; Mann and Ornstein 2012; Jeong and Quirk 2019), the interaction of ideology and constituency interests (Bafumi and Herron 2010), the effectiveness of party leaders in manipulating the legislative agenda (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Koger and Lebo 2017) and incentivizing members' loyalty (Pearson 2015), or the frequency of bipartisanship in lawmaking (Curry and Lee 2020; Tama 2023). On foreign policy, roll-call votes help us identify the extent to which partisan and ideological attachments guide congressional oversight over president's use of military force (e.g., Kriner 2010) or patterns of partisan conflict on foreign policy issues over time (Jeong and Quirk 2019). In sum, members' voting records are an indispensable source of scholarly insight into legislative behavior, revealing patterns of party loyalty, ideological alignment, and political representation.

However, roll-call votes are not without major limitations. First, members' voting behavior is heavily influenced by the agenda setting of party leaders, a factor over which

individual lawmakers have limited influence. This is especially true in the House, where leadership typically prevents votes that would split (or "roll") the majority party (Cox & McCubbins 2005; Lee 2009). In doing so, party leaders strategically select issues on which their caucus is united and avoid votes on issues on which this is not the case. This is in addition to the rising levels of party loyalty which limit individual-level variation on roll-call votes in our polarized era. "Reflexive partisanship" (Lee 2009) distorts members' true preferences, for example on procedural votes on which all members are expected to support their party, resulting in inflated measures of partisanship due to higher party unity (Jessee and Theriault 2014). In other cases, party leaders schedule messaging votes that are strategically designed to set the parties apart. The goal is not to pass a bill into law, but to signal to voters and interest groups that the party is united on a particular issue (Lee 2009; McCarty 2019; Davidson et al. 2024).

Second, and more importantly for this study, roll-call votes also do not reveal the effort a member spends on any given issue. That's because votes illuminate position-taking patterns across all members, but they do not allow an assessment of lawmakers' issue focus. For instance, a legislator might cast a vote in favor of a bill but spend little time or resources advocating for it, suggesting minimal personal investment. Instead, members take cues from presidents, party leaders, interest groups, committee leaders, and senior lawmakers in deciding how to vote on an issue, perhaps without ever having read the bill they vote on (Box-Steffensmeier, Ryan, and Sokhey 2015). A vote does not reveal whether a lawmaker prioritizes a particular issue, for example by writing a bill, making a public statement, or engaging in coalition-building and the search for legislative compromise. Those behaviors are not captured in roll-call data. Consequently, roll-call votes allow no conclusions about legislator's priorities. Fortunately, scholars may resort to superior measures of issue attention.

An important way through which lawmakers indicate their attention to an issue is their public rhetoric. The relative absence of party control over this type of legislative content allows us to infer that member rhetoric reflects strategic choices in lawmakers' communication with voters. Members of Congress are less constrained in their communications and use floor speeches, committee statements, social media, or constituent newsletters to signal stakeholders such as voters, interest groups, the media, or party leaders that an issue is being taken seriously (Mayhew 1974). For example, members of Congress may frame an issue as "bipartisan" in order to cultivate public support regardless of actual cross-party appeal (Westwood 2021), build their own digital "home style" (Fenno 1978) through position-taking and credit-claiming (Grimmer 2013b), and use emotional rhetoric to mobilize voters and generate media attention (Lee and Weiai 2018; Macdonald, Russell, and Hua 2023). More recently, scholars found that when members are redistricted into new constituencies, they are more likely to adjust their social media rhetoric than their voting behavior (Kaslovsky and Kistner 2024). On foreign policy issues, members might vote for bipartisan legislation but still criticize the president for "projecting weakness" on the world stage, in line with research showing that legislators are more likely to discuss partisan votes over bipartisan ones (Gaynor 2024). Unlike roll calls, rhetorical statements are not structured by leaders' agenda setting efforts and therefore provide a better opportunity for legislators to set priorities, send signals to external stakeholders, and to create their own ideological image. The following section will explain why congressional e-newsletters are well suited to study members' foreign policy rhetoric.

Newsletters & Issue Attention

Members of Congress do not experience a scarcity of public venues to make political statements. Through speeches on the floor and in committees, interviews with the press, social

media activity, press releases, and op-eds, lawmakers have many channels to communicate their positions, signal priorities, and engage with different audiences. These statements serve several purposes – from appealing to constituents and interest groups to influencing legislative outcomes and shaping public discourse. Among the many available outlets, congressional e-newsletters represent a particularly useful source of insight into how members prioritize certain issues in their constituent outreach.

Lawmakers use e-newsletters to connect with constituents in their districts who want to stay informed about their representative's activities in Washington. E-newsletters are among the "least nationalized and, by extension, most idiosyncratic" (Green et al. 2024) communication channels available to members. Legislators have complete discretion over the content of these newsletters, which are not constrained by specific character limits (Cormack and Meidlinger 2022) and can include infographics, hyperlinks, and videos (Cormack 2017). While produced in an official capacity and at taxpayer expense, e-newsletters are subscriber-based and opt-in, which exempts them from the pre-election blackout period that applies to franked mail. They are sent frequently (see below) and are overwhelmingly aimed at constituents, not the broader national public. As such, they tend to emphasize local concerns, district-level accomplishments, and personal connections as their audience prioritizes domestic matters. These characteristics make newsletters an excellent medium for examining how – and how often – members choose to engage with foreign policy, an area often viewed as peripheral to district-level concerns. In this study, I utilize Cormack's (2017) updated collection of 150,000 e-newsletters sent by members of Congress between 2009 and 2023 (111^{th} to 117^{th} Congress) to develop a measure of rhetorical issue attention.

Using data from the 111th to the 117th Congress provides valuable variation in partisan control of Congress and the presidency (see Table 3.1), as research has found ample evidence for the impact of party control of both branches on members' legislative behavior (Volden and Wiseman 2014; Kriner and Schickler 2016; Lee 2016; Curry and Lee 2020). During that time, the U.S. was not engaged in a major war, limiting the extent to which the congressional agenda is shaped by wartime decision-making with high salience for voters and politicians. While the U.S. military reported several hundred fatalities per year due to hostile action during the 111th and 112th Congress, this number dropped significantly after U.S. troops left Iraq in December 2011 (Defense Casualty Analysis System), averaging between 14 (2018) and 96 (2013) casualties per year. This means that foreign policy did not dominate the national agenda during the time studied here, increasing the likelihood that lawmakers' focus on international affairs reflects other factors besides media attention.

Table 3.1 Party Control of Congress & Presidency

Congress	Years	House	Senate	President	Government	Outparty
117	2021-2023	Dem	Dem	Dem	Unified	Rep
116	2019-2021	Dem	Rep	Rep	Divided	Dem
115	2017-2019	Rep	Rep	Rep	Unified	Dem
114	2015-2017	Rep	Rep	Dem	Divided	Rep
113	2013-2015	Rep	Dem	Dem	Divided	Rep
112	2011-2013	Rep	Dem	Dem	Divided	Rep
111	2009-2011	Dem	Dem	Dem	Unified	Rep

Across the dataset, Republicans account for 52% of all member-Congress observations. However, due to the specific timeline of the study – which spans a period in which Republicans more frequently held either the majority in Congress or were in the outparty – they make up a disproportionate share of observations in both institutional roles: 72% of all outparty observations and 60% of all majority party observations. This imbalance has implications for

interpreting results that distinguish between outparty effects (i.e., whether a member is in the party not controlling the presidency) and party effects (i.e., whether a member is a Republican). It is also relevant for model specifications that rely on fixed effects, where the focus is on within-member variation over time. The unequal distribution of party affiliation across institutional roles means that changes in status (e.g., from majority to minority or from in-party to outparty) are not evenly distributed across parties, which may affect the identification of within-member versus between-member effects. Table 3.2 presents a cross-tabulation of member-Congress observations by party affiliation and institutional position.

Table 3.2 Number of Observations by Institutional Power, 111th – 117th Congress (n = 2,786)

Majority Party & Inparty 627 (37% GOP)	Minority Party & Inparty 713 (27% GOP)
Majority Party & Outparty 913 (75% GOP)	Minority Party & Outparty 533 (65% GOP)

Descriptive statistics for the number of e-newsletters sent per House member per Congress throughout the period included in my dataset (2010-2023) are shown in Table 3.3 The mean number of newsletters sent by a member in any given Congress is 48, with 720 words per newsletter on average. The number of newsletters sent during the 111th Congress (2009-2011) was 6,711 and so substantially lower than in following Congresses (20,633 on average) because many members were only starting to adopt digital tools of constituent communication. [4] The

[4] The total number of observations is somewhat lower than all members who served during this time. A small number of members did not use newsletters as a tool, and some only send them during specific years. For example, Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, did not use newsletters for most of his

most prolific senders throughout all 13 years are Jim Cooper (D-TN, 1488 newsletters), Vern Buchanan (R-FL, 1353), and Kevin McCarthy (R-CA, 1347), Doug Lamborn (R-CO, 1343), and Robert Wittman (R-VA, 1288). Cooper, Lamborn, and Wittman served or continue to serve on the House Armed Services Committee. Among the Top 50 of all newsletter senders are 33 Republicans, and 17 Democrats, reflecting the more prolific use of newsletters among Republican members of Congress.

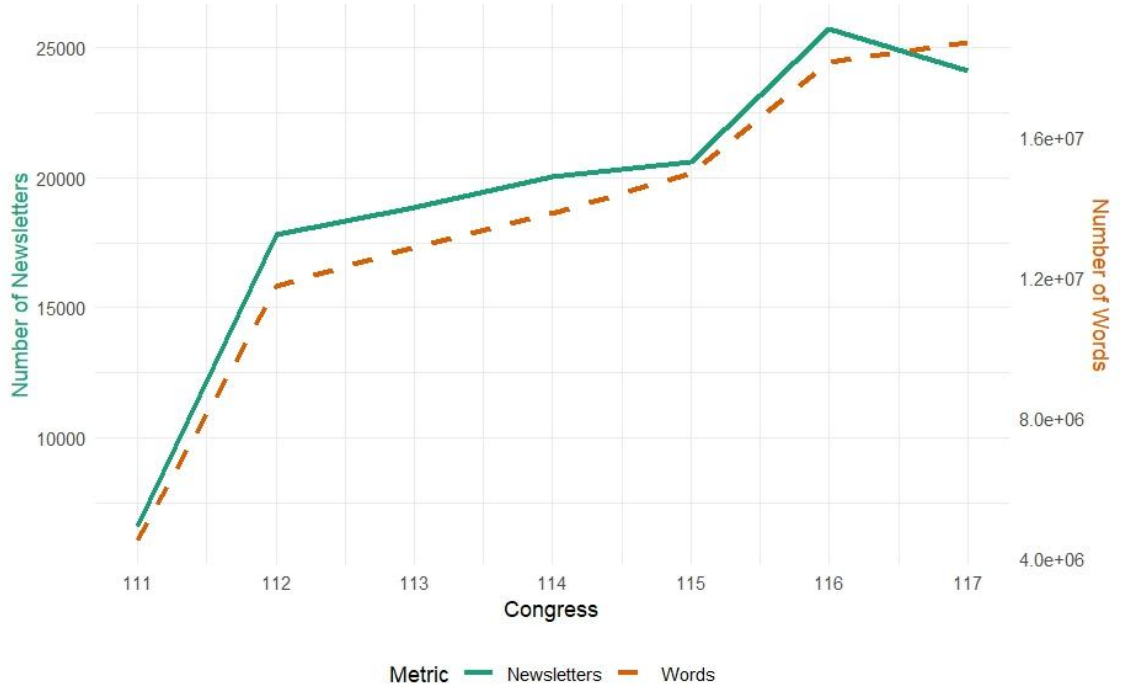
Table 3.3 Descriptive Statistics for E-Newsletters sent by Members (111th – 117th Congress)

	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max
Newsletters	1	14	34	48	71	636
Words per newsletter	75	373	601	721	901	5539

In order to parse members' newsletters for statements focused on foreign policy, I use the text analysis software "LIWC-22" (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count). LIWC calculates the percentage of words that fall into various social, psychological and emotional categories. LIWC's efficacy has been validated in psychological research (Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010) and has – among other things – been used to analyze tweets sent by congressional candidates (e.g., Sylwester and Purver 2015; Gervais, Evans and Russell 2020). Newly built dictionaries for customized analyses can be easily uploaded and used via LIWC, a feature that is essential for my analysis of foreign policy attention among members of Congress.

service in Congress (check). Observations are substantially lower during the 111th, when many members had not yet adapted e-newsletters as a tool.

Figure 3.1 Newsletters and Word Volume by Congress (111th – 117th Congress)



The Foreign Policy Dictionary

For the purposes of this study, I created a unique dictionary of 167 distinct words and n-grams to measure members' attention to foreign affairs issues. I relied on a three-stage process to build the dictionary. In stage one, I parsed the websites of the House Foreign Affairs and the Senate Foreign Relations committees to identify the topical focus of all hearings between 2009 and 2023, focusing on hearing title and official descriptions of the hearing. These terms constitute the core of the foreign policy dictionary, including frequently used words such as country names, names of institutions ("NATO") and references to foreign crises ("war crimes"). I include both single words and combinations of two or more words (n-grams) such as "international law" in my dictionary because doing so avoids false positives. For example, the

word “nations” is used to refer to the “United Nations” but also to describe Native American tribes. By including “United Nations” instead of “nations,” false positives are avoided.

In stage two, I applied the dictionary to 150,000 newsletters using the text analysis software LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count), analyzing 106 million words. I then read 200 newsletters in which LIWC identified foreign policy content. To start, I only read newsletters with more than three words from the foreign policy dictionary (17% of all newsletters) and started excluding words from the dictionary that would misleadingly refer to topics not connected to international affairs (false positives). For example, the word “international” is an insufficient indicator of foreign policy focus because it is frequently invoked in the names of companies, organizations, or places. “International” is therefore excluded as a single word but included in n-grams such as “international community”, “international criminal court”, and “international law.” In addition, I also identified common words that are almost exclusively used in a foreign policy context (e.g., “aggression”). Words were included in the dictionary if manual word searches found them nine out of ten times to be used in a foreign policy context.

Stage three included reading bill descriptions of introduced legislation during the 117th Congress to identify other references potentially indicating a focus on international affairs. Once additional references to international politics (“regime,” “nuclear program”) were identified and included in the dictionary, I repeated the coding process through LIWC so that the dictionary could be refined by identifying additional false positives and false negatives. Manual coding validation of 200 newsletters that LIWC identified as “foreign policy” resulted in 90% correctly coded newsletters – a 10% false positive rate that is mostly due to adjacent policy areas such as trade and immigration “spilling over” due to the topical similarity. Manual coding of 200

newsletters not classified as “foreign policy” by LIWC resulted in 98% congruence – a 2% false negative rate.

The final stage of the coding process was the validation of the dictionary approach by two external undergraduate students who manually coded a sample of 300 newsletters as binary “foreign policy” or “not foreign policy” after which their classification was compared to the machine-coded classification. Coders received detailed instructions with example phrases beforehand (see Appendix). Results show that coder one and LIWC agreed in 91% of the 300 cases. For coder two that match is 93%. The agreement between both coders is 94%. Cohen’s Kappa as a commonly used measure of intercoder reliability adjusts for the possibility that some agreement might happen by chance (e.g., many zeroes), making it a more reliable measure than simple percent agreement. A value of 1 means perfect agreement, whereas 0 means the agreement between coders is no better than chance. Beyond 0.8 is generally considered “almost perfect”, whereas between 0.6 to 0.8 considered “substantial.” In this case, a Kappa of 0.79 indicates substantial agreement between the two coders, suggesting that their classifications are highly consistent. In other words, there is little disagreement beyond what would be expected by chance.

Cases of disagreement between coders can be grouped into two categories. The first category is disagreement because of the somewhat arbitrary cutoff of three foreign policy-related words that was used to classify a newsletter as “foreign policy.” In the empirical analysis below, I rely on word counts instead of newsletter counts for my dependent variable, where no cutoff is needed because every dictionary word appearing in a newsletter is counted. The second category of disagreement concerned ambiguous cases such as trade and immigration which may have a foreign policy dimension. In such cases, coders might reasonably disagree on how to interpret

the context in which they appeared. For example, one member wrote about energy policy, but used geopolitical argument to make the case for an increase in US natural gas extraction: “This bill also expedites exporting liquefied natural gas, which is particularly important to the President of Ukraine who addressed a joint session of Congress just last week.” The foreign policy dictionary would pick up the reference to Ukraine but ignore references to new drilling permits or EPA regulations. In a few cases one of the coders missed a single sentence, such as “While in Austin, I was on ABC "This Week" and TWC News "Capital Tonight" to discuss the threat that ISIS presents to America and to our national security. You can watch the clips below.” This case would be picked up by the dictionary, as ISIS is mentioned here. Overall, human validation showed great consistency between human and machine-coded assessment.

Table 3.4 shows the final foreign policy dictionary with included and excluded words and n-grams. Explicitly excluded n-grams might refer to domestic issues, names of institutions, or trade and immigration that were identified during the manual validation. Some words that appear foreign policy related are mostly used in other contexts, such as veterans’ affairs. For example, references to “Vietnam” are almost exclusively used when referring to veterans who have served there. Similarly, “Afghanistan veterans,” “Iraq veterans,” or “Korean War” primarily reference memorial services, medal recipients, or other issues unrelated to foreign policy. The n-gram “terrorist attacks” is frequently invoked when elected officials refer to 9/11 memorial services. “Invasion” used to appear in an international context but has been coopted by Republicans for domestic politics when discussing migration at the southern border.

Table 3.4: Dictionary of Foreign Policy Related Words

Included: afghanistan, africa, aggression, airstrike, alliances, allies, alqaeda, argentina, armenia, arms control, asia, aukus, australia, azerbaijan, baltic, baltics, bangladesh, belarus, belgium, benghazi, boko haram, bombing, brazil, britain, bulgaria, burma, cambodia, canada, caucasus, ceasefire, china, civilians, colombia, congo, costarica, crimes against humanity, cuba, cyprus, czech, democracies, denuclearization, deterrence, diplomacy, diplomat, diplomatic, dissident, doha, dominican republic, drone strike, ecuador, egypt, el salvador, embargo, embassy, estonia, ethiopia, ethnic cleansing, europe, european union, extrajudicial, finland, foreign adversaries, foreign aid, foreign minister, france, genocide, germany, global challenges, guantanamo, guatemala, haiti, hamas, hezbollah, hizballah, honduras, hongkong, houthi, humanitarian aid, human rights, hungary, india, indo-pacific, international agreement, international coalition, international community, international criminal court, international law, international security, iran, iraq, ireland, isil, isis, israel, italy, japan, karabakh, kazakhstan, kenya, korea, kosovo, kurdish, kuwait, latin america, latvia, libya, lithuania, mexico, militants, military intervention, multilateral, myanmar, nato, nicaragua, nigeria, no-fly zone, nonproliferation, norway, nuclear agreement, nuclear bomb, nuclear program, nuclear threat, nuclear weapons, pakistan, palestine, peace deal, peacekeeping, peace negotiations, peace treaty, poland, political prisoners, portugal, proliferation, qatar, refugees, regime, regional security, russia, rwanda, sanctions, saudi arabia, singapore, somalia, spain, strategic interests, sudan, sweden, syria, taiwan, taliban, territorial integrity, terrorism, tibet, treaty, u.s. interests, ukraine, united kingdom, united nations, uyghurs, venezuela, war crimes, war powers, world order, world stage, yemen, algeria, zimbabwe.

Excluded: afghanistan veterans, afghanistan war, aid to mexico, asian and pacific, asia-pacific, california secretary of state, canada and mexico, china reports, china shuts down, china trade, colorado secretary, connections with russia, connections with russia, deployed to afghanistan, deployed to afghanistan, deployed to iraq, domestic terrorism, domestic terrorists, domestic terrorists, earthquake in haiti, east palestine, flights from china, florida secretary of state, global human rights, gulf of mexico, human rights campaign, iraq veterans, iraq veterans, korean war, koreatown, mexico and canada, mexico-canada, new mexico, new mexican, reported in china, returning from afghanistan, returning from iraq, russia hoax, russia inquiry, russia investigation, russia probe, served in afghanistan, served in iraq, served in the middle east, state's office, subcommittee on asia, subcommittee on asia, subcommittee on europe, texas secretary of state, travelers from china, u.s.-mexico border, west india, "wuhan, china."

The list of country names included in my dictionary covers America's key allies, foreign adversaries, and important non-aligned countries. Manual keyword searches identified country names that had to be excluded because they appear in location names such as "Village of

Denmark" or "Denmark High School." Others refer to the location of congressional district offices such as Bolivia, North Carolina or Lebanon, Missouri. "Turkey" was removed for Thanksgiving-related reasons, while "Pacific" or "Caribbean" often appear in names of places and institutions. Many country names never appear in newsletters and are therefore not included here. The manual reading of members' newsletters also revealed that there is a court case referencing the town of Greece, New York. Robustness checks in the empirical chapters include a separate dictionary without any country names whatsoever.

I excluded "state department" due to frequent references to travel warnings or visa issues. Additionally, diplomatic titles such as "ambassador" are often used to refer to hearing witnesses, for example during the Trump impeachment hearings. "Authoritarianism" is used in domestic contexts and therefore not included. "Consulate" appears too often in relation to immigration questions or to the opening of new consulates in members' districts. "Humanitarian" as a standalone word is not precise enough because it is used in relation to immigration. "Humanitarian aid" on the other hand is used exclusively in an international context and therefore included. "Democracies" is included while the singular "democracy" would be too unspecific.

Other phrases are invoked when adjacent policy areas such as trade and immigration are discussed. For example, Canada and Mexico are often mentioned together when lawmakers refer to trade issues such as the NAFTA free trade agreement. I therefore excluded phrases that only appear in a trade-related context such as "Canada-Mexico." Such cases are included in Chapter 6 instead. Nevertheless, it is important to note that a perfect distinction between trade/immigration and foreign policy is not possible in all cases. For example, a member of Congress who wrote that, "migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras who have fled violence or lack of

jobs" is referring to conditions in countries of origin – a potentially relevant fact for US foreign policy and picked up by the dictionary. An example on which the two human coders disagreed was a member who discussed trade in geopolitical terms: "New Zealand and Australia are critical to U.S. interests in the Pacific region – and to jobs and the economy here in Washington state: According to the WA Department of Commerce, since 2004, Washington state exports to Australia have seen a 35% growth and include anything from airplanes to forklifts to natural vitamins." The word "exports" is counted by the trade dictionary in Chapter 6, whereas the country names are picked up by the foreign policy dictionary used in Chapter 4. Overall, such ambiguous cases do not appear in a number large enough to be problematic for the validity of the measure.

Another potentially confounding issue is are Covid-related mentions of China. I found that of the 8,600 newsletters that contain references to China, only 752 also contain references to Covid-19. Of those 752, not all connect "China" with "Covid." In cases they do, the statements are often relevant for US foreign policy, such as, "It is unbelievable that China is forcing COVID lockdowns again. The Chinese people have every right to protest, and I stand with them as they fight for freedom from tyranny." Overall, more than 90% of China-related messaging appears to be unrelated to Covid. For additional validity I excluded (by default) phrases that are unique to Covid, such as "travelers from China", "China reported", "flights from China", "reported in China", "Wuhan, China", and "China shuts down." As previously mentioned, excluding all country names as a robustness check alleviates any concerns about country name references that are not relevant to foreign policy.

Rhetoric: Dependent Variables

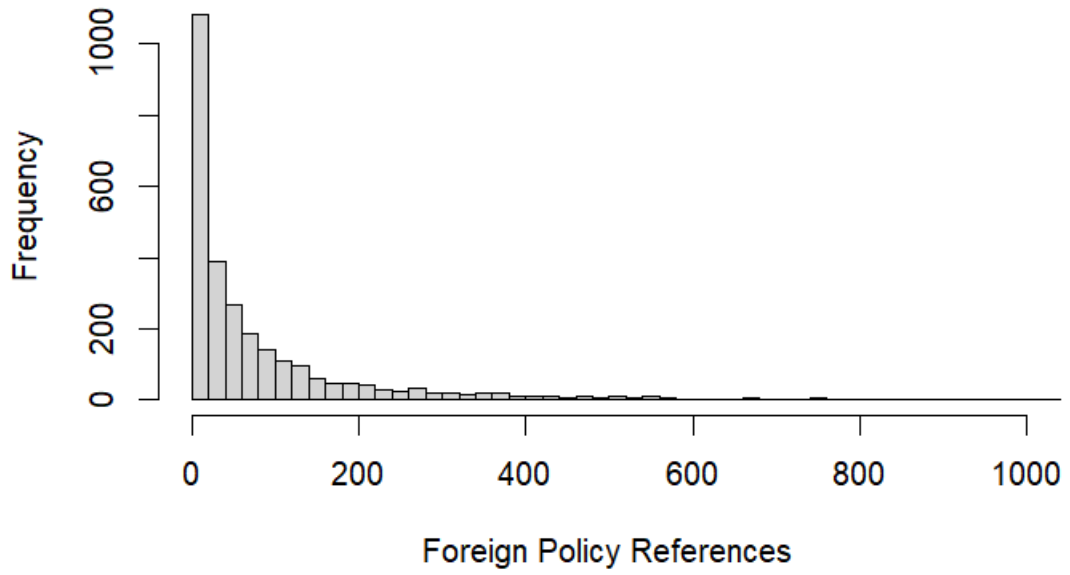
In order to measure members' foreign policy rhetoric in e-newsletters, two basic options present themselves as possible dependent variables. The first approach is a count of the number of newsletters containing foreign policy references per member (per Congress). Members might signal attention to foreign policy by mentioning a topic regardless of the actual length of such discussions in any given newsletter. In this case, a count of newsletters that mention foreign policy would capture lawmakers' agenda-setting behavior. The difficulty in this approach lies in designating a newsletter as "foreign policy related." I only code newsletters as "foreign affairs related" if they contain at least three words included in the dictionary. Such a seemingly arbitrary cutoff guards against false positives in cases where legislators refer to country names in statements such as, "He studied in India before coming to the U.S." Similarly, members often announce interviews with media outlets in their newsletter through sentences like, "I joined Morning Joe on MSNBC on Monday to discuss bipartisan efforts in Washington, the President's support in Ohio, and North Korea." While the interview itself might be focused on international affairs, the newsletter is not. While 37% of newsletters contain some foreign references, only 17% contain more than three dictionary words and therefore pass the three-word minimum threshold for foreign policy-relevant rhetoric. Table 3.5 indicates that such a measure results in a median number of only three foreign-policy related newsletters per member per Congress. Unfortunately, the exclusion of less than three words results in a loss of potentially valuable information.

Table 3.5: Descriptive Statistics for Foreign Policy-related Words in Newsletters per member per Congress

	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max.
Count of newsletters with at least 3 foreign policy related words	0.0	1.00	3.00	7.8	9	346
Word count of foreign policy words	0.0	6.0	29.0	85.3	90.0	3001.0

The second approach is a total count of the number of words related to foreign policy per member (per Congress) as the dependent variable. This approach is preferred and used in subsequent chapters of this dissertation because it allows for a more fine-grained assessment of member attention, providing additional variation that gets lost at the newsletter level. Newsletters vary significantly in length and depth, so treating all mentions equally – regardless of whether they involve a single reference or a detailed discussion – obscures the actual volume of references to foreign policy. By counting the number of foreign policy-related words, I can capture not just whether a topic is mentioned, but how extensively it is discussed. This approach offers greater resolution and comparability across members, as it accounts for differences in overall newsletter volume and communication styles. It also avoids false equivalence between brief mentions and substantive engagement, allowing for a more accurate assessment of how much emphasis individual lawmakers place on foreign policy in their constituent communications. Figure 3.2 depicts the frequency of foreign policy-related words per member per Congress from the 111th to the 117th Congress (2009-2023). The variable is highly skewed, as is typical for count data. Accordingly, the empirical chapters will employ negative binomial regression models, accounting for overdispersion in the word count.

Figure 3.2 Histogram of Foreign Policy References per Legislator (111th – 117th Congress)



Bill Introduction & Issue Attention

A second way in which members signal their commitment to an issue is through bill sponsorship. Writing legislation requires time and effort that could be spent on other activities, making introduced legislation a credible position-taking tool (Rocca and Gordon 2010). Sponsoring a bill creates opportunity costs because members and their staff must invest time and effort to write legislation, build support among colleagues, connect with interest groups, and coordinate with the administration on complex issues such as foreign relations – all while facing the risk of opposition to proposed policies (Schiller 1995). These risks are balanced with the potential payoffs of successful bill sponsorship, such as a higher likelihood of advancing into leadership positions (Wawro 2000) and attracting campaign donations from interest groups (Rocca and Gordon 2010).

In addition, credit-claiming, position-taking, and advertising as part of their policymaking activities also serve to offset resource, opportunity, and political costs that bill sponsorship creates (Mayhew 1974; Sulkin 2005). Credit-claiming allows members to take ownership of

specific achievements of bill passage, communicating to their constituents that they have been effective advocates in a policy area. This is often done through press releases, newsletters, or social media, emphasizing their role in initiating or supporting policies that benefit their voters. Advertising goes beyond specific accomplishments, allowing members to build a general image of competence, attentiveness, or alignment with district values. By publicly highlighting their bill sponsorship record and policy positions, members can strengthen their reputations and build political capital, turning the costs of sponsorship into an asset that supports their long-term electoral and policy goals.

While members typically invest time and resources in writing a bill, not all bills are meant to make it through the legislative process. Whether a bill receives committee action or is scheduled for a vote on the floor depends partly on the level of commitment and strategic intent behind its introduction. If the goal is a messaging effort aimed at voters and interest groups, then a bill from previous Congresses might be reintroduced without much additional effort.[5] If bill passage is the goal, members will seek support from colleagues, voters, interest groups, the executive branch, or the media in order build a coalition of support (Volden and Wiseman 2014, 14). This often involves securing the backing of fellow lawmakers, especially key committee members, who can influence a bill's trajectory. The strategic intent, therefore, shapes the level of effort invested in the bill, with substantive initiatives requiring a comprehensive approach to coalition-building and advocacy (Bernhard and Sulkin 2018).

By comparison, cosponsoring a bill is a relatively costless exercise which enables lawmakers to signal support for an issue (position-taking) without making a broader commitment

[5] To be sure, reintroductions can be successful. For example, Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD) introduced H. Res. 512 during the 116th Congress (2019-2021), calling for the "global repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy laws.", which was agreed to by the House under suspension of the rules. The bill had been referred to committee in the previous GOP-controlled Congress, but did not receive consideration.

such as helping to shepherd the bill through the legislative process (Garand and Burke 2006). In essence, a member simply "signs on" to a bill. While the number and the partisan balance of cosponsors provide valuable information about legislative quality, cross-ideological appeal, and prospects for success, it does not tell scholars much about members' issue attention. Cosponsorship as a coalition-building signal provides valuable information about members' position-taking (Angevine 2021) but is not as suitable as a measure of issue attention. Therefore, the focus in this study will instead be on members' rhetoric and bill introductions.

Measuring Bill Introduction

In order to measure members' issue attention through bill sponsorship, I rely on a collection of 2,704 bills designated as "International Affairs" by the Congressional Research Service (CRS)[6] that were sponsored by House members between 2009 and 2023. During this time, the mean number of bills introduced per member is 17 bills per Congress, but on average only one of those bills concerned international affairs (Table 3.6). As is common for count data, both counts – words and bills – are skewed heavily to the right, with many zeroes on one end and high-scoring outliers on the other. This skewed distribution supports the conventional view that the average House members does not prioritize foreign affairs, providing the rationale for understanding the strategic choices of those who do. Adding additional categories such as "Armed Services and National Security" would not accurately capture foreign policy content, as most legislation in this category concerns veterans' affairs. To demonstrate the point, the word cloud shown as Figure A1 in the Appendix depicts the 75 most frequently used words in the titles of bills designated as "Armed Services and National Security" during the 117th Congress.

[6] The CRS is an official nonpartisan government agency with the mandate of providing research and analysis on matters relevant to national policymaking. CRS subject designations – used for all bills and resolutions introduced since 1979 – encompass 32 subject areas such as "Labor and Employment", "Social Welfare", "Commerce" and so on.

Table 3.6 Descriptive Statistics for International Affairs Bills Introduced

	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max.
All Bills Introduced	0	9	14	17	22	103
IA Bills introduced	0	0	0	1	1	41

Read: The average count of international affairs bills sponsored per member per Congress is one.

Table 3.7 lists the top 10 House members based on their sponsorship of international affairs bills over the course of their service in Congress (not per Congress). Data shows that the most productive sponsors of international affairs legislation are members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, underscoring the importance of institutional positions. Previous research has shown that committee membership is the key driver of issue attention (Woon 2009) and policy debates among lawmakers (Miler 2010, 121).

Table 3.7 Member Top 10 by Foreign Policy Bills as % of all Bills, 111th – 117th Congress

Name	State	Party	Committee	% Foreign Policy Bills
Ros-Lehtinen, Ileana	FL	R	FA	73.7
Jacobs, Sara	CA	D	FA	62.5
Lowenthal, Alan	CA	D	FA	54.5
Smith, Christopher	NJ	R	FA	51.9
Granger, Kay	TX	R	AP	44.0
Diaz-Balart, Mario	FL	R	AP	42.5
Hastings, Alcee	FL	D	HC	41.5
Berman, Howard	CA	D	FA	40.6
Franks, Trent	AZ	R	AS	39.3
Reschenthaler, Guy	PA	R	FA	38.9

Committee Abbreviations: AS = Armed Services; FA = Foreign Affairs; FS = Financial Services; AP = Appropriations; ED = Education; HC = Helsinki Commission

Conversely, Table 3.8 lists members by the use of foreign policy-related rhetoric across the period studied. In both rankings, members of key committees are overrepresented. The

legislator with the highest share of foreign policy references, David Rivera (D-FL), is an example of the increased attentiveness with which members on relevant committees consider issues such as foreign affairs (Fenno 1973; Sulkin 2005; Volden and Wiseman 2014; Davidson et al. 2024). The member with the most bills sponsored on international affairs (87), Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), was chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee during the 112th Congress (2011-2013). She is also the only member featured on both lists, further highlighting the gap between rhetorical focus and lawmaking activity among all members. Notably, both lists include representatives who are not affiliated with committees traditionally associated with foreign policy – underscoring the potential of other individual-level factors beyond committee membership to incentivize member attention.

Table 3.8 Member Top 10 by Share of Foreign Policy References in E-Newsletters, 111th – 117th Congress[7]

Name	State	Party	Committee	% Foreign Policy
Rivera, David	FL	R	FA	1.60
Ros-Lehtinen, Ileana	FL	R	FA	1.45
Kucinich, Dennis	OH	0	ED	1.12
Deutch, Theodore	FL	0	FA	1.10
Sires, Albio	NJ	0	FA	1.09
Salazar, Maria	FL	R	FA	1.06
Gimenez, Carlos	FL	R	AS	1.02
Royce, Edward	CA	R	FA	1.02
Pittenger, Robert	NC	R	FS	0.90
Frelinghuysen, Rodney	NJ	R	AP	0.80

Committee Abbreviations: AS = Armed Services; FA = Foreign Affairs; FS = Financial Services; AP = Appropriations; ED = Education

In summary, rhetoric and bill sponsorship are effective measures for examining members of Congress' issue attention in foreign policy. Unlike roll-call votes, which do not allow a view of legislative *priorities* and are often influenced by party pressures and procedural constraints,

[7] Only members who sent more than 10,000 words in e-newsletters over all Congresses are included.

rhetorical statements and bill sponsorships reflect individual members' proactive engagement with issues. These behaviors capture the choices members make to communicate their positions and address constituent or group interests in foreign affairs. By analyzing rhetorical issue attention and sponsorship patterns, scholars gain an understanding of how lawmakers assert their influence in a policy domain typically dominated by the executive branch.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 advances the argument that studying lawmakers' rhetorical behavior through constituent e-newsletters offers critical insights into their issue attention, complementing more traditional measures like bill sponsorship. E-newsletters provide a form of constituency communication free from constraints imposed by party leaders, allowing members to highlight the issues they personally prioritize, including foreign policy. By combining rhetorical and behavioral measures, this chapter sets the stage for a more comprehensive understanding of legislative issue engagement.

Central to this approach is the introduction of a novel foreign policy dictionary, specifically designed and validated for this project. The chapter details the dictionary's construction and robustness checks and presents descriptive patterns of foreign policy communication across different member characteristics. By pairing rhetorical data with bill introductions, it establishes a dual framework for measuring issue attention, providing a richer and more nuanced basis for my analysis of members' attentiveness to foreign policy. The next chapter shifts focus from the methodological choices to the empirical results, focusing on partisanship and ideology as important determinants of lawmakers' issue attention.

Chapter 4 - Foreign Policy, Ideology and Partisanship

Faced with countless demands on their time and resources, members of Congress must constantly choose which issues to prioritize. This chapter presents evidence that, when it comes to foreign policy, those choices are influenced in part by members' partisan affiliation, institutional position, and ideological commitment. The results presented in this chapter speak to research highlighting the significant role these factors play in influencing congressional lawmaking. While mid-20th century studies of Congress posited that political parties should not be the primary lens through which we view Congress (Mayhew 1974), the ideological sorting of both parties and the ensuing increase in partisan polarization (Theriault 2008; Mann and Ornstein 2012; Lee 2016; McCarty 2019) have produced a very different political environment for elected officials. Nationally competitive elections incentivize partisan teamplay, including carefully crafted messaging that highlights the successes of members' own party and the weaknesses of the opposition. Additionally, the legislative process has changed from a decentralized, committee-centric "regular order" to more centralized lawmaking that leaves fewer policymaking opportunities for rank-and-file members (Sinclair 2007; Cox and McCubbins 2005; Curry and Lee 2020). As a result, public communication has become increasingly central to the work of members of Congress.

I argued in Chapter 2 that the rise of partisanship in congressional lawmaking extends to foreign affairs as well, because members of the outparty have incentives to tie the president to international crises. Presidents conduct the nation's foreign policy as chief diplomat and therefore cannot escape their responsibly for the nation's foreign policy track record. In this chapter, I show through computational text analysis that partisanship, majority status and ideological factors influence individual members of Congress' proclivity to discuss foreign

policy. Strikingly, I find that Republican members – who were the outparty in five out of the seven Congresses studied in this dissertation – call more attention to foreign policy in their newsletters and introduce more international affairs bills than Democrats. In contrast, the effect for majority party members suggests that they are just as focused on foreign policy as other members, but that individual lawmakers who gain majority status decrease their attention to foreign affairs, on average. This supports the expectations formulated in Chapter 2, demonstrating the importance of domestic priorities for majority party legislators.

While between-member variation does not indicate any difference in foreign policy attention between moderate and ideologically extreme legislators, I find that members who become more moderate over time focus on foreign policy at a higher rate, consistent with the argument that moderation will result in additional attention to more bipartisan issues. In contrast, I find that members of the ultra-conservative House Freedom Caucus – an ideologically extreme intraparty caucus – pay less attention to foreign affairs than other Republicans on both newsletter rhetoric and bill sponsorship because they prioritize more polarizing domestic issues. Taken together, the findings offer qualified support for the hypothesis the ideology has an impact on members' attentiveness to foreign affairs.

The remainder of this chapter will proceed as follows. First, I will discuss the theoretical expectations for lawmakers' issue focus, revisiting some of the arguments outlined in Chapter 2. Then, I present evidence for differences between the parties and their proclivity to focus on foreign affairs in their newsletters, relying on descriptive newsletter data. The core of this chapter is the regression analysis, through which I study the individual-level variables that influence members' bill sponsorship and rhetorical focus. I close Chapter 4 by presenting examples of members' rhetoric in newsletters, followed by a discussion of the results.

Expectations

In today's Congress, legislative behavior is to a significant extent shaped by lawmakers' party affiliation. As the ideological distance between both parties has grown over time, so has partisanship's importance as a key factor influencing lawmakers' actions, shaping their voting behavior (Theriault 2008; Lee 2009; McCarty 2019) as well as their communication strategies across various communication platforms, including social media (Ballard et al. 2023; Gelman and Wilson 2022; Russell 2021), press releases (Grimmer 2013a), and floor speeches (Noble 2023). In their capacity as reelection-focused politicians, outparty members often employ partisan rhetoric to score political points by undermining the president's reputation – and, by extension, the standing of the president's party (Jacobson 2019). In doing so, legislators decrease public support for the incumbent party, thereby improving their side's prospects for success in the next election. Because foreign policy is a particularly executive-dominated policy area, I expect outparty members to discuss foreign policy in e-newsletters at a higher rate, as they have an incentive to focus on the incumbent president's alleged incompetence in foreign affairs.

Another important factor shaping congressional behavior is majority party status. A substantial body of research underscores the influence of majority control on both lawmaking and messaging activities in Congress (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Volden and Wiseman 2014; Lee 2016). Congressional majorities tend to prioritize domestic issues that align with the interests of voters, organized constituencies, and party leadership. In their constituent communications, majority-party lawmakers frequently highlight policy accomplishments, particularly on issues that dominate U.S. political discourse such as the size of government, gun control, and abortion (Davidson et al. 2024). Majority parties also wield significant agenda-setting powers, including control over which bills reach the floor, the rules governing debate, and leadership of committees (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Curry and Lee 2020). Given that majority

status offers a unique opportunity to advance a legislative agenda, I expect majority-party members to place less emphasis on foreign affairs, both in their public communications and in their legislative initiatives. Instead, the majority party is focusing on domestic priorities where they are more likely to achieve policy wins.

I also consider ideological extremism to be an important predictor of members of Congress' likelihood to focus on foreign policy. Scholars have demonstrated that the American two-party system is sorted along a liberal-conservative continuum through which many important political disagreements are understood (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006; Theriault 2008; but see Lee 2009). I expect moderate members to pay more attention to foreign policy in their rhetoric and their bill sponsorship because moderate lawmakers, who are less inclined to align with their parties on divisive domestic issues, often gravitate toward foreign policy as a comparatively less polarized issue area. Engaging in foreign policy enables moderates to project statesmanlike or bipartisan behavior, a quality that voters tend to reward in lawmakers perceived as effective and collaborative (Strickler 2024). Thus, foreign policy aligns with moderates' goal of avoiding polarizing domestic issues and focusing on bipartisan causes in both rhetorical expression and substantive legislation.

Conversely, ideologically extreme members should be less likely to focus on foreign affairs because their priorities often align with the partisan and polarizing domestic issues that energize partisan voters and ideologically committed organized interests (Grimmer2013a). Those legislators tend to emphasize issues that are part of their party's agenda over more bipartisan and less salient topics such as foreign policy. The House Freedom Caucus – founded in 2015 by some of the most conservative House Republicans – has influenced legislation, shaped party strategies, altered chamber rules, selected leaders, and developed distinct donor networks and

funding mechanisms (Bloch Rubin 2017; Green 2019; McGee 2020; Clarke 2020). I expect members of this ideologically extreme group to be less likely to focus on foreign policy.

Furthermore, I also consider members' constituency composition to influence members' engagement with international affairs. While district-level pressures are examined in more detail in Chapter 5, I expect members from competitive districts to be less likely to focus on foreign affairs, all else being equal. This is because those members face uncertain reelection prospects, meaning they must prioritize policies which appeal to a wide range of voters. Typically, foreign policy is not a key priority for voters (Aldrich et al. 1989; Hersman 2000; Jacobs and Page 2005). Instead, "bread and butter" issues – meaning economic policies – are often prioritized by members from marginal seats (Grimmer 2013a). In addition, I also expect members with a higher share of foreign-born constituents to be more likely to discuss foreign policy in their newsletters as their constituents are more attentive to it. These constituents may have personal, family, or economic ties to other countries, increasing their interest in international affairs. As a result, lawmakers have a greater incentive to respond to global events or U.S. foreign policy decisions that affect their communities. This dynamic could shape not only rhetorical attention but also bill sponsorship on issues such important to foreign diaspora groups.

Lastly, I argue that the personal backgrounds of members of Congress, encompassing both their life experiences and professional identities, influence their attention to foreign policy. Members with relevant experience – such as military service – are more likely to feel confident in and committed to shaping foreign policy. This background gives them not only the knowledge to engage meaningfully with complex global issues but also a personal stake in the outcomes. Accordingly, I expect veterans to discuss foreign policy in their e-newsletters and to sponsor related legislation at a higher rate than other members. In addition, a lawmaker's identity – such

as their ethnic background – can shape their emotional connection to certain global issues. Research on descriptive representation demonstrates that lawmakers with minority backgrounds often prioritize issues relevant to their communities (e.g., Grose 2011; Rouse 2013). Building on this, the study examines whether Latino and Jewish legislators exhibit heightened attention to foreign policy issues connected to their ethnic heritage. Given their ancestral ties to Latin America, I hypothesize that both groups are drawn to regional issues, but not to foreign policy more broadly.

Differences between the Parties

Any analysis of contemporary American politics will reveal important differences (or "asymmetries") between the parties, for example in messaging strategies on social media (Russell 2021; Heseltine 2025), oppositional politics (Morisi, Jost, and Singh 2019), or focus on procedural warfare in Congress (Theriault 2013; Green 2019). While both parties have become ideologically sorted, the Republican party has been more ideologically homogenous for decades (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016) and Republicans in Congress have moved further to the right than Democrats have moved left (McCarty 2019, 42). Consequently, members of Congress' partisanship might influence their issue attention, as both parties have developed certain core issues which voters identify with them ("issue ownership", see Egan 2013). While voters typically grant Republicans greater competence on economic and national security issues, they tend to trust Democrats more on healthcare and education (Wright, Clifford, and Simas 2022).

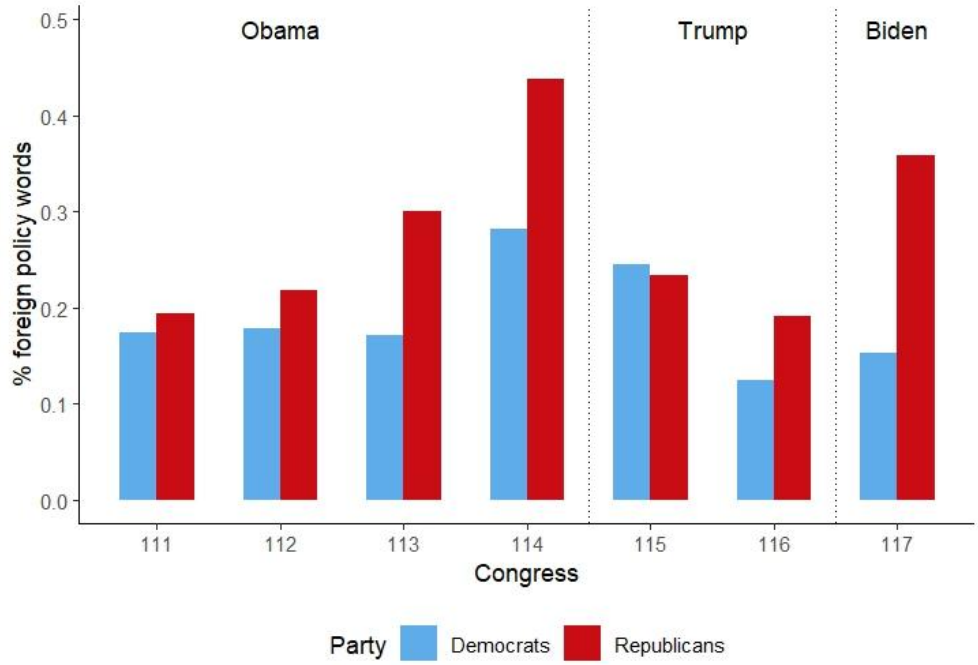
There are reasons to believe that Republican members might be more inclined to focus on foreign affairs than their Democratic colleagues. The first reason is that foreign policy has traditionally been an issue that Republicans emphasized previously in campaigns for president (Arbour 2014) and tied to issues traditionally "owned" by the GOP such as defense and national

security (Egan 2013). Second, Republicans were the outparty in five out of the seven Congresses in the period studied. Consequently, Republicans should have more incentive to tie the incumbent (Democratic) president to foreign affairs because it helps their electoral goals. In this section, I present descriptive evidence in line with these arguments. Additionally, the empirical results presented in this chapter speak to this possible interplay of party status and asymmetric issue attention.

To explore this relationship, I examine how parties vary in the rhetorical attention they devote to foreign affairs across different congressional sessions. One approach involves calculating the percentage of words each party devotes to foreign policy in its newsletters, averaged by Congress, using foreign-policy related words per party and Congress divided by the total number of newsletter words by party and Congress. The advantage of this approach lies in highlighting the collective voice of the party, not its individual members. Accordingly, Figure 4.1 illustrates the relative prevalence of foreign policy-related rhetoric among all House members from the 111th to the 117th Congress by party.

As can be seen in Figure 4.1, Republicans surpass Democrats in six out of the seven Congresses examined, with a particularly heavy focus on foreign affairs during the 114th and the 117th Congress. Consistent with expectations, the chart demonstrates that the outparty devotes greater attention to foreign affairs in members' newsletters in six of the seven Congresses examined. The 116th Congress – spanning the second half of Donald Trump's presidency – stands out as the sole instance where members of the president's party devoted more attention to foreign affairs than the opposition.

Figure 4.1 Percentage of Words focusing on Foreign Policy per Congress by Party (mean % per party)



Note: The percentage shown is this figure is the number of foreign-policy related words divided by total number of words per party per Congress.

Figure 4.1 also reveals that during the 114th Congress, Republicans allocated the highest proportion recorded across all Congresses in the dataset to foreign affairs. The 114th Congress – Obama's last two years in office – saw major international challenges such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, also known as "Iran Nuclear Deal"), negotiated between Iran on one side and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany on the other. Figure 4.7 in this chapter provides further evidence for Iran's prominence in Republicans' communication during that time. Congressional Republicans strongly opposed the Obama administration's efforts, and 47 GOP senators signed a letter to the Iranian Regime vowing that the next Republican president would revoke such an executive agreement with the "stroke of a pen," thereby undermining Obama's diplomatic efforts. Similarly, the 117th

Congress (2021-2023) saw the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022. The withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 was widely seen as chaotic and criticized across the political spectrum, coinciding with a significant drop in Biden's job approval rating.

An alternative method for examining trends in issue attention between the parties is to calculate the percentage of words *each legislator* devotes to discussing foreign policy in their newsletters. These percentages are then averaged by Congress and party, ensuring that each legislator contributes equally to the analysis. This approach emphasizes individual issue attention rather than aggregate party-level focus. Doing so makes it less likely that outliers (e.g., those on the Foreign Affairs Committee) skew the results towards their party.

Figure 4.2 Percentage of Words per member per Congress by Legislator (mean % per legislator)

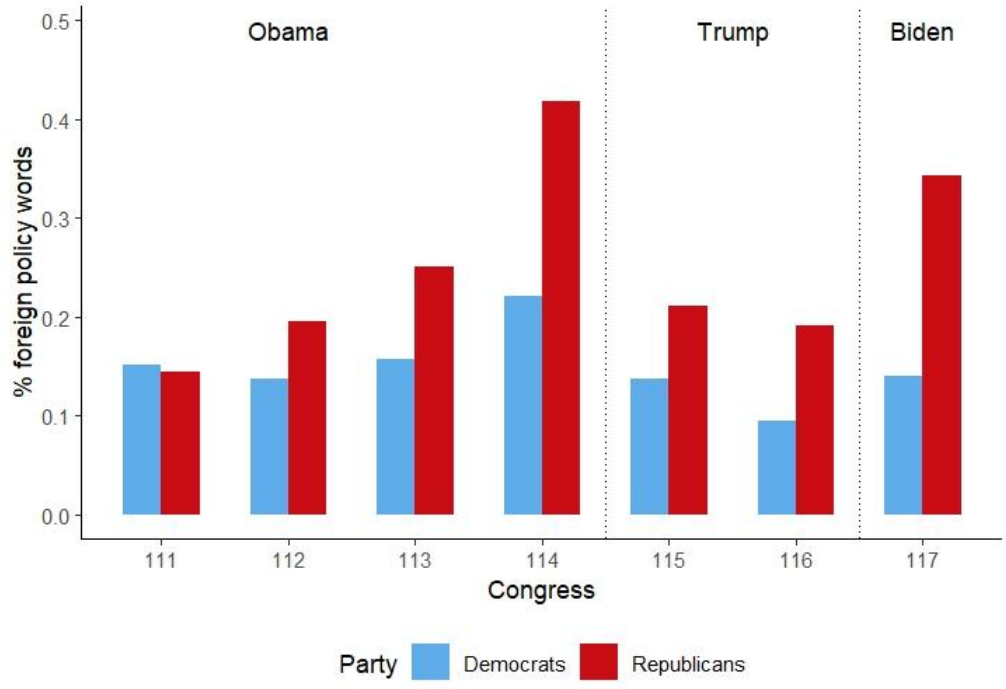
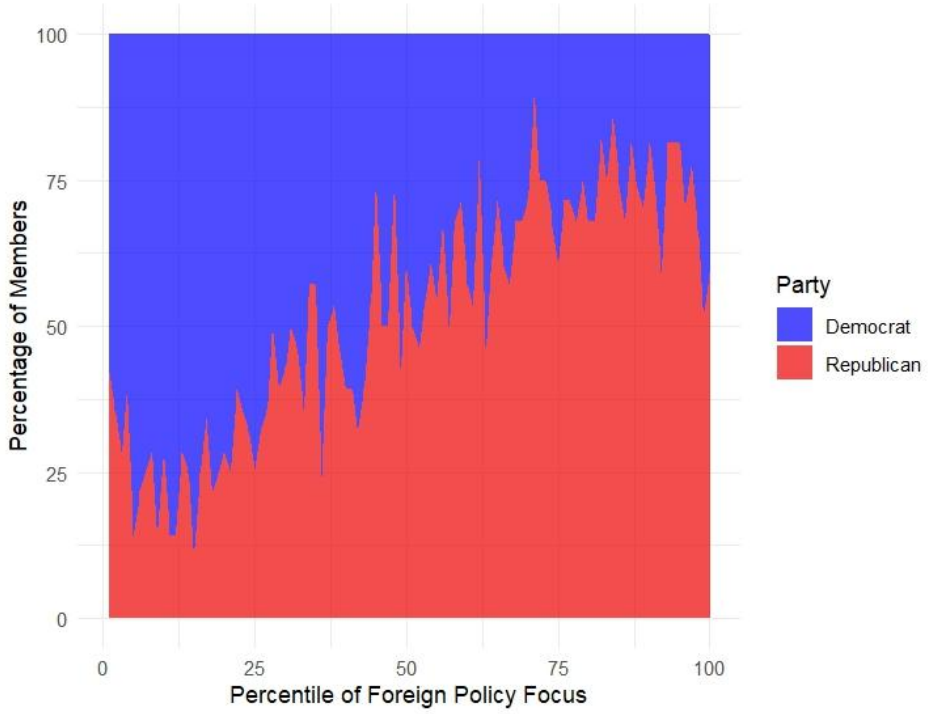


Figure 4.2 shows that Republicans are, as in Figure 4.1, more active than Democrats in six out of seven Congresses studied. However, Democrats marginally surpass Republicans only during the 111th Congress, a time during which Democrats controlled Congress and the presidency. The drop-off among Democrats during the 115th Congress in comparison to Figure 4.1 suggests that a smaller number of Democratic foreign policy experts led the charge during Trump's first two years in office, while the *average* Democrat continued to focus on other (domestic) issues. Figure 4.2 also suggests that Republican members might be more active in general, a premise that deserves further study through the regression analysis in the next section.

Figure 4.3 Stacked Area Plot of Members by Foreign Policy Focus

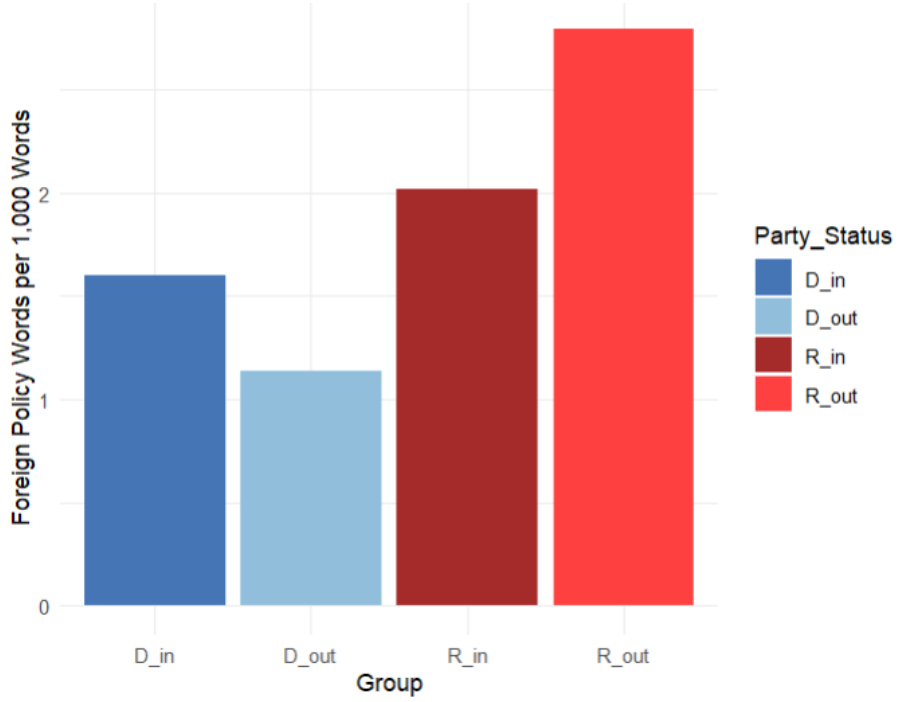


Variable: Percentage of newsletter words that reference foreign policy. Unit: Legislator in each Congress. N = 2786.

Another way to illustrate partisan patterns of issue attention is shown in Figure 4.3. The area plot displays the partisan distribution of foreign-policy related rhetoric in e-newsletters across all

legislators in the dataset. While Republicans account for 52 percent of all lawmakers between 2009 and 2023, they represent 71 percent of lawmakers in the top 10th percentile for foreign policy focus, as measured as the percentage of total words that discuss foreign affairs. In contrast, Republicans constitute only 25 percent of those in the bottom 20th percentile. This skew suggests that Republican lawmakers are disproportionately represented among the most foreign policy–attentive legislators. While this pattern further supports the argument that partisanship is a powerful driver of rhetorical engagement with foreign affairs, it does not offer any assessment of its interaction with outparty or majority status. For this reason, Figure 4.4 displays the mean rate of foreign policy words conditioned on outparty status (control of the presidency).

Figure 4.4 Foreign Policy Word Rate by Party and Outparty Status



A clear partisan asymmetry emerges: While Republicans are more focused on foreign affairs when being the outparty, Democrats are less so. This is a somewhat unexpected result, as the theoretical argument in Chapter 2 did not differentiate between the two major parties. The finding suggests that outparty dynamics might not operate uniformly across parties, pointing to

asymmetries in how Democrats and Republicans respond to being out of power and echoing Grossman and Hopkins' (2016) argument about important differences between America's major parties. The pattern shown in Figure 4.4 also highlights the importance of testing assumptions that may appear symmetrical in theory, but do not yield uniform results across both parties. As additional robustness check I reproduced the figure with country names excluded from the dictionary. As shown in Figure A2 in the appendix, the patterns are identical, suggesting this pattern is not driven by idiosyncratic dictionary choices.

Overall, the descriptive data indicate a partisan asymmetry on foreign affairs, with Republicans being more active on international issues. While these aggregate patterns are informative and insightful, they do not account for the individual-level dynamics that drive lawmakers' attention to foreign policy. Members of Congress operate under varying constraints and incentives, including their institutional roles and ideological commitments. To better understand these dynamics, the next section shifts the focus to the interaction of member-level characteristics, examining how factors such as outparty status, majority control, and ideology influence individual legislators' attentiveness to foreign affairs.

Statistical Analysis

In Chapter 3, I argued that issue attention can take both rhetorical and legislative forms, which I measure using two distinct indicators: e-newsletters and bill introductions. Building on this framework, the core of this chapter is the multiple regression analysis presented in Table 4.1. The primary dependent variable for rhetorical attention to foreign policy is the number of foreign policy related words used by each member of Congress per congressional session. For legislative attention, I use the number of bills introduced by each member that are classified as international affairs by the Congressional Research Service. In both models, I control for the total number of

words (or bills) to ensure that the analysis captures the relative emphasis on foreign policy compared to other issues.

Several independent variables are included as key predictors, selected for their theoretical relevance to members' foreign policy engagement. Outparty status is measured through a 0/1 indicator variable, with Republicans being coded as 1 for the presidencies of Barack Obama and Joe Biden. If my expectations hold, then outparty members – in most Congresses Republicans – should be more active on foreign policy because they see it as an opportunity to criticize the incumbent administration. However, to test the possibility of a party effect, e.g., Republicans generally being more active on foreign affairs, I also include an indicator variable for GOP members. If it is true that one effect dominates the other, then the regression analysis should reveal so. Similarly, I include a dichotomous variable for majority party status given that majority members tend to prioritize partisan agenda items which are mostly domestic in nature (Cox & McCubbins 2005).

Moreover, lawmakers' ideological extremity is measured through the absolute distance of a members' DW-NOMINATE score to the chamber mean, so that liberals and conservatives are compared to moderates. If moderates are drawn to bipartisan issues, then the effect for ideological extremity should point in a negative direction on rhetoric and bill sponsorship. Since I also hypothesized that members of extreme intraparty caucuses such as the House Freedom Caucus should be less active on foreign affairs, I included a variable for Freedom Caucus membership separately in Table A2 in the Appendix because the analysis requires a split sample with Republicans only, as a comparison to Democrats makes little sense for a caucus that is entirely Republican. This analysis is discussed later in this chapter.

Several district variables are included as well. First, I include a predictor for the percentage of foreign-born residents per state as a proxy for the ethnic diversity of members' constituents because the interest of immigrants about the affairs of other countries should incentivize lawmakers to cover these issues with greater interest. I also include a dummy variable for competitive districts (in addition to continuous vote share), coded 1 if the incumbent had a vote share of less than 55% in the previous election. This is because the five percentage-point threshold reflects common conceptions of "competitiveness" used by election analysts such as the Cook Political Report. Members in competitive reelection contests can be expected to be more focused on domestic issues due to voters' concern for "bread and butter" issues.

Other binary variables capture members' professional and ethnic background. I include indicator variables for Hispanic and Jewish members because research has produced substantial empirical evidence for the importance of race in legislative activities (e.g., Uscinski et al. 2009; Rouse 2023; and Chapter 5 of this dissertation). In order to test my claim that veterans are more active on foreign affairs, I rely on existing datasets of military service such as Lupton's 2017 replication data for the 111th and 112th Congress. For the 117th Congress I rely on the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA), and for other Congresses on the University of Michigan's "CongressData" dataset (Grossmann, Lucas, and Yoel 2024). Lastly, positions on key committees, seniority status and committee chair status are also included as important variables shaping lawmaker efforts. This is because previous studies showed that committee membership and seniority to be powerful predictors of legislative behavior (Volden and Wiseman 2014).[8]

[8] The full equation for Model 1 in Table 4.1 is as follows: $\log(E[\text{foreignpolicywords}_i]) = \beta 0+\beta 1\cdot\text{Republican}_i+\beta 2\cdot\text{outparty}_i+\beta 3\cdot\text{majority}_i+\beta 4\cdot\text{dist\_floor}_i+\beta 5\cdot\text{jewish}_i+\beta 6\cdot\text{hispanic}_i+\beta 7\cdot\text{veteran}_i+\beta 8\cdot\text{seniority}_i+\beta 9\cdot\text{foreignborn\_district}_i+\beta 10\cdot\text{competitive}_i+\beta 11\cdot\text{vote\_pct}_i+\beta 12\cdot\text{foreign\_com}_i+\beta 13\cdot\text{armed\_com}_i+\beta 14\cdot\text{intel\_com}_i+\beta 15\cdot\text{approp\_foreign}_i+\beta 16\cdot\text{words}_i+t\sum\gamma t\cdot\text{Congress}_t$

The dependent variable in Models 1 and 2 in Table 4.1 below is the number of foreign-policy related words per member per Congress, based on the dictionary discussed in Chapter 3. In contrast, Models 3 and 4 use the number of bills introduced that were coded as "international affairs" by CRS. In both cases a negative binomial regression model is employed, as is appropriate for non-normally distributed count data. Estimates show how each predictor variable influences the log of the expected count of the dependent variable. All models employ Congress fixed effects to account for time-variant factors.[9] Including member-level fixed effects in count models is not always feasible due to computational limitations. However, given the substantive relevance of within-member changes over time, Models 2 and 4 in Table 4.1 incorporate member fixed effects. As such, Models 2 and 4 account for a shift in member's behavior after a change in chamber control, outparty status or committee membership. In other words, rather than comparing across members, these models compare *each member to themselves* over time (see Clarke, Volden, and Wiseman 2023 for a similar approach). Accordingly, variables that do not change over time such as party ID or ethnicity should be excluded in those models because they are absorbed by the individual fixed effects. Both between-member and within-member variation offer valuable insights for understanding the dynamics of foreign policy attention. All models include controls for the total number of words and bills per member per Congress.

The Models shown in Table 4.1 offer some surprising results. What stands out in Model 1 is the pronounced positive effect for Republican members of Congress and the null result for outparty members. Because Model 1 captures between-member variation (i.e., it does not include member fixed effects), the results suggest that GOP members discuss foreign policy at a higher rate than their Democratic colleagues, all else being equal. In contrast, not being in the

[9] Results are robust to the exclusion/inclusion of Congress fixed effects.

president's party does not seem to have an independent effect on members' newsletter rhetoric. While Republicans were the outparty in five of the seven Congresses examined in this study, the results call into question Hypothesis 2a – that legislators' rhetorical attention to foreign policy is due to outparty status. Although the effect could still be driven by presidential politics and partisan posturing, the findings may point to a general asymmetry between Republicans and Democrats. An alternative model specification omitting Republican members yields a significant positive result for outparty members, albeit at a lower magnitude (0.244). Put differently, while an outparty effect on members' foreign policy rhetoric cannot be ruled out, Model 1 suggests that the observed differences are more likely driven by general distinctions between the parties.

In addition, Model 3 shows that this effect is not limited to members' rhetoric, as the same pattern emerges on bill sponsorship. Outparty members do not sponsor international affairs legislation at a higher rate than other legislators, but Republican members do. While this finding supports Hypothesis 2b that outparty members do not sponsor more foreign policy bills, Hypotheses 2a and 2b are conceptually linked and form a joint argument that is not supported by Models 1 and 3. In addition, both models show no significant effect for majority party status on rhetoric and bill sponsorship, contrary to the hypothesized negative association with foreign policy activism. I argued in Chapter 2 that congressional majorities often prioritize domestic issues in line with voter and party priorities, using constituent communication to highlight their domestic policy accomplishments. These results cast doubt on this assertion.

However, while members of the majority are not more active on foreign affairs *per se*, Models 2 and 4 show statistically significant positive within-member effects. Because Models 2 and 4 employ member-level fixed effects, they allow us to estimate the effect of a member switching from minority status to majority status on both measures of attentiveness: rhetoric and

introduced bills. Notably, members become less interested in foreign policy on both measures when they gain majority status. This is a substantively important result, as it suggests that majority members are not inherently less attentive to foreign policy, but rather that lawmakers themselves tend to reduce their attention to foreign affairs after gaining majority status. Clearly, understanding the difference between between-member (Models 1 and 3) and within-member variation (Models 2 and 4) is key to unpacking the dynamics underlying the observed effects.

Table 4.1 also reveals important patterns on member characteristics such as ideological extremity. Hypothesis 3a posits that more moderate members should be more likely to focus on foreign affairs because they tend to avoid controversial domestic issues and focus on more bipartisan issues instead. The results offer mixed evidence for this view, suggesting that ideological extremity is not a statistically significant predictor of additional attention to foreign policy in Model 1 (between-member), but does predict that when members become more extreme over time (relative to other members), they increasingly turn away from international affairs in their newsletter rhetoric (Model 2). As a less polarized issue area, foreign policy serves moderate members as a signal of bipartisanship towards voters and interest groups. While bipartisan appeals are easier to make through rhetorical statements than through legislative coalition building, the effect is significant in both member-fixed effects models. Curiously, Model 3 shows a *positive* association between ideological extremity and foreign policy bill sponsorship, the opposite effect of the within-member change. Evidently, cross-sectional patterns (how different types of members behave) and longitudinal patterns (how a single member behaves as they change) point in opposite directions. While extreme members sponsor foreign affairs bills at a higher rate on average, becoming more extreme over time reduces foreign policy bill sponsorship due to extreme members' increased focus on more polarizing domestic agendas.

Table 4.1 Predictors of Foreign Policy Rhetoric and Bills (111th – 117th Congress)

		Negative Binomial Regression: Log of Expected Count of Words/Bills			
		# of Words in Newsletters		# of Bills introduced	
		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Party Status	Republican	0.827***		0.407***	
		(0.055)		(0.082)	
	Outparty	-0.008	0.058	0.093	0.035
		(0.047)	(0.037)	(0.067)	(0.049)
	Majority	-0.023	-1.105**	0.216	-1.551**
		(0.093)	(0.512)	(0.135)	(0.758)
Member Characteristics	Ideological Extremity	0.036	-2.546**	0.956***	-3.018*
		(0.177)	(1.148)	(0.254)	(1.700)
	Jewish	0.356***		0.354***	
		(0.096)		(0.119)	
	Hispanic	-0.153*		-0.213*	
		(0.087)		(0.120)	
	Veteran	0.053		0.121	
		(0.057)		(0.082)	
	Seniority	-0.004	-0.258***	0.033***	-0.063
		(0.005)	(0.075)	(0.007)	(0.120)
Constituents	% Foreign Born	1.671***	-0.297	2.973***	0.028
		(0.242)	(1.294)	(0.328)	(0.107)
	Competitive District	-0.071	-0.132**	-0.003	-0.158
		(0.067)	(0.066)	(0.102)	(0.106)
	District Vote	-0.001	0.001	0.003	0.001
		(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Committees	Foreign Relations	0.678***	0.466***	1.381***	0.491***
		(0.072)	(0.106)	(0.084)	(0.105)
	Armed Services	0.256***	0.195*	0.424***	-0.021
		(0.064)	(0.117)	(0.094)	(0.177)
	Intelligence	0.248**	-0.048	0.247*	0.004
		(0.102)	(0.118)	(0.140)	(0.149)
	# of Words or Bills	0.00003***	0.00002***	0.041***	0.040***
		(0.00000)	(0.00000)	(0.003)	(0.003)
	Congress fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Member fixed effects	No	Yes	No	Yes
	Observations	2,786	2,786	2,786	2,786
	Log Likelihood	-13,098.340	-12,037.940	-3,169.815	-3,182.592
	Akaike Inf. Crit.	26,242.670	25,843.880	6,385.630	6,409.184

Importantly, all results remain robust when excluding more militaristic terms such as "terrorism," "drone strike," "bombing," and "air strike." They are also unaffected by the inclusion of "Benghazi," referring to the investigation into the 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy in Libya.

Before turning to other predictors, it is important to consider the substantive effects of the key variables. Given the choice of estimator, the coefficients in Table 4.1 are not easily interpretable, representing the change in the log of the expected count of the dependent variable given a one-unit change in the predictors. A more intuitive interpretation of the results is possible once the coefficients are transformed into incidence rate ratios where numbers higher than one represent an increased rate of foreign policy attentiveness and values lower than 1 represent a decrease. Table 4.2 displays results for all statistically significant variables, adjusting the rate-change to a standard-deviation change for continuous variables. Holding all else constant, Republican members mention foreign policy-related words at a rate 129% higher than Democrats, a big substantive increase. Put differently, the model expects GOP members to send more than twice as many foreign policy-related words per Congress than Democrats, a pattern consistent with the descriptive statistics presented above. Importantly, this pattern extends to bill sponsorship as well, where Republicans sponsor bills at a 50% higher rate than Democrats.

Republicans' increased attention to foreign policy raises more general questions about both parties' issue focus and the reasons behind it. The finding speaks to the concept of issue ownership, which suggests that parties gain an advantage when voters trust them more on specific issues. The public typically associates Democrats with compassion-oriented issues like healthcare, education, and the social safety net, while Republicans are viewed as stronger on defense and national security (Hayes 2005; Petrocik 1996; Egan 2013). However, prior research is mixed on whether either party consistently "owns" foreign policy more broadly, with Petrocik

(1996) classifying it as a "performance issue" and Egan (2013) not finding a particular partisan pattern on the topic. It is possible that GOP members emphasize foreign affairs because national sovereignty, military strength, and a hawkish approach to international threats are more tied to a conservative worldview than diplomacy and multilateralism are to liberals. In this view, Republicans might emphasize foreign affairs because it is related to defense and national security and therefore a possible extension of Republican core issues. In any case, the results speak to the literature on asymmetries between the parties (Grossman and Hopkins 2016).

Table 4.2: Incidence Rate Ratios (IRR) for Foreign Policy Rhetoric & Bills – With non-binary predictors adjusted for one-standard deviation change

	Rhetoric		Bills	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Republican (1/0)	2.29	-	1.50	-
Majority Party Member (1/0)	-	0.33	-	0.21
Ideological Distance (SD)	-	0.52	1.28	0.46
Jewish (1/0)	1.42	-	1.43	-
Hispanic (1/0)	0.85	-	0.80	-
Seniority (SD)		0.77	1.03	-
Foreign Born (SD)	1.20	-	1.39	-
Competitive District (1/0)	-	0.88	-	-
Foreign Relations (1/0)	1.96	1.59	3.97	1.63
Armed Services (1/0)	1.29	1.21	1.53	-
Intelligence	1.28	-	1.28	-

Note: Coefficients are only converted into incidence ratios for statistically significant predictors.

In addition to the partisan pattern, the incidence rate ratios (IRRs) in Table 4.2 also show a substantively large effect for lawmakers who move from the minority to the majority (within-member), which is associated with a 67% decrease in the expected rate of foreign policy mentions for a one-standard deviation increase in ideological extremism, holding other variables constant. For bills (Model 4), that reduction amounts to 79%. These effects are consistent with the view that majority parties focus on implementing their domestic agenda during times of chamber control, regardless of the fate of party-line bills in the Senate. A preoccupation with

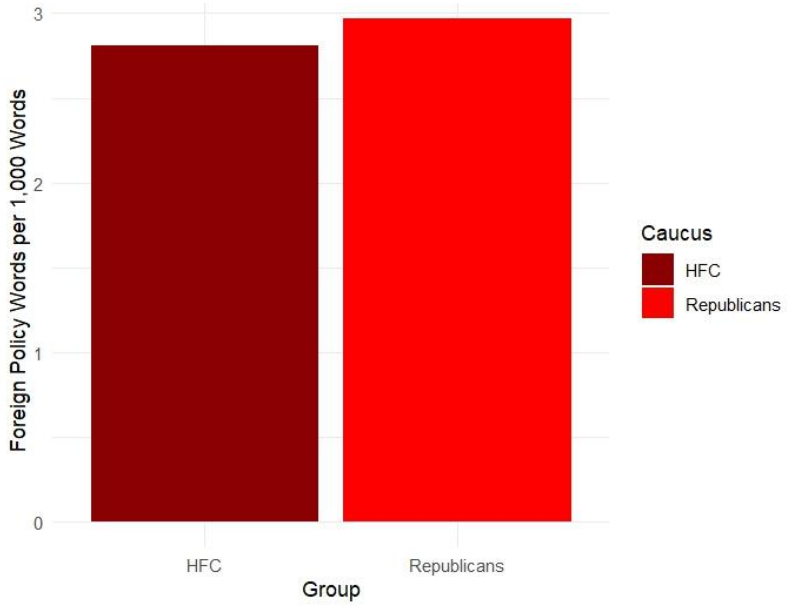
domestic policymaking is characteristic for a competitive national environment in which both major parties are interested in passing their agenda before the next election (Lee 2016; Wang 2024). These findings also challenge previous studies arguing that members who are not in the president's party but in the majority are often more entrepreneurial on foreign affairs (Carter and Scott 2009, 56).

Differences between within-member and between-member variation are also apparent with regard to ideological extremity. While Models 1 and 3 suggest that members' ideological position relative to others does not influence their proclivity to focus on foreign policy, the member-level fixed effects in Models 2 and 4 indicate a significant reduction in the rate of references to foreign policy in members' newsletters and in the rate of introduced international affairs bills. IRRs indicate that a one standard deviation increase in ideological extremity (measured by DW-NOMINATE distance from the chamber mean) corresponds to a 48% and 54% decrease in expected foreign policy rhetoric and legislative activity, respectively. In other words, as individual members grow more ideologically extreme over time, they tend to pay less attention to foreign policy. Conversely, more moderate members do not reference foreign affairs more often per se, and ideologically extreme members do not less so. Additionally, these results are not sensitive to alternative measures of ideological extremism, such as distance to the majority party median, the absolute DW-NOMINATE value, or DW-NOMINATE itself.

Positions measured through roll-call votes are not the only measure of ideology examined in this study. In Chapter 2 I argued that members of ideologically extreme intraparty caucuses should be less active on foreign affairs, as they are preoccupied with more polarizing issues such as guns, abortion, taxes, immigration etc., which tend to be domestic in nature. Accordingly,

Figure 4.5 compares the mean rate of foreign policy words[10] between members of the most conservative Republican caucus, the House Freedom Caucus (HFC), and other Republicans. The period covered is the 114th to the 117th Congress, because the HFC was founded in 2015. As shown, the difference between the two groups appears to be minimal. A Wilcoxon rank-sum test – a quasi t-test designed for skewed data such as word counts – confirms that the difference between HFC members and other Republicans is not statistically significant. However, to account for potential confounding variables such as committee assignments, ideology, and district characteristics, a regression model is necessary.

Figure 4.5 Foreign Policy Focus among HFC members and other Republicans 114th to 117th Congress



This regression analysis is restricted to GOP lawmakers, since HFC members can only be compared to other Republicans. Consequently, split sample regression models are presented in Tables A3 and A4 in the Appendix. In contrast to the descriptive data presented in Figure 4.5, HFC membership is significantly and negatively associated with the rate of foreign policy

[10] The number of foreign policy words per 1000 newsletter words.

language in newsletters. Transforming the HFC coefficient of -0.255 in Table A2 into an IRR indicates that HFC members use foreign policy language at a rate 23% lower than other Republicans, holding all other factors such as ideology and committee membership constant. For a lawmaker sending the mean rate of foreign policy words per Congress (85), this would translate into an additional 20 words, a modest but meaningful effect. However, Table A3 shows that there is no such effect on bill sponsorship. Given the overall small median number of international affairs bills that are sponsored, it is not surprising that there is little difference between HFC members and other Republicans. Overall, these results offer qualified support for Hypothesis 3b, suggesting that being a member of an ideologically extreme intraparty caucus reduces members' rhetorical attentiveness to foreign affairs.[11]

Hypotheses 4a and 4b posit that lawmakers' attention to international affairs is shaped by the characteristics of their districts. The "electoral connection" (Mayhew 1974) incentivizes lawmakers to avoid the impression that they're indifferent to the interests of their constituents. Highly visible sub-constituencies – such as immigrant communities – can therefore exert significant influence on legislative behavior, encouraging lawmakers to appear responsive (Miler 2010). If this is true, then lawmakers with a higher share of foreign-born residents may emphasize international issues that resonate with those communities. Consistent with this expectation, Models 1 and 3 show that members from districts with a higher share of foreign-born citizens are more likely to discuss foreign policy in their e-newsletters, and also more likely to offer substantive legislation, lending support to Hypothesis 4a. Evidently, lawmakers with more diverse constituencies signal through symbolic and substantive issue attention that they

[11] HFC results are not sensitive to the inclusion/exclusion of more "militaristic" language such as terrorism, drone strike, bombing, air strike. It is also not sensitive to the inclusion of the "Benghazi" investigation into the 2012 attack on the US embassy in Libya.

represent foreign-born constituents as well. This includes increased rhetorical focus on international cooperation or diaspora-related issues in newsletters, as well as a greater rate of bill sponsorship. Such behavior reflects lawmakers' strategic effort to demonstrate responsiveness to the (perceived) interests of their multiethnic electorate.

Another important consideration for reelection-motivated lawmakers is the partisan composition of their districts. Representatives from competitive districts often face stronger incentives to emphasize issues with broad, cross-ideological appeal. In practice, this typically leads to a greater focus on domestic concerns, as voters tend to prioritize economic, healthcare, and education issues over foreign policy. Consequently, international affairs may receive less rhetorical or legislative attention from lawmakers seeking to appeal to a more ideologically diverse electorate. While most members of Congress now come from safe seats as a result of the geographic sorting of voters and the widespread use of gerrymandering (McCarty 2019), other lawmakers continue to face a tough general election environment. Across my dataset, between 50 (114th Congress) and 93 (112th Congress) districts are considered competitive in each Congress. Table 4.1 shows that the directionality of the effect is negative in all four Models, as expected. However, only Model 2 – which includes member-level fixed effects – yields a statistically significant result. Specifically, it estimates that representatives who transition from a non-competitive to a competitive district reduce their rate of foreign policy rhetoric by approximately 13%, compared to those who remain in stable electoral environments. This modest yet meaningful shift is consistent with the idea that electoral incentives shape issue attention. In total, 196 members experience transitions in district competitiveness across the dataset. These findings suggest that lawmakers are attuned to the fact that foreign policy resonates less with constituents than domestic issues – an insight repeatedly borne out in public

opinion polls highlighting voters' greater concern with the economy, health care, or immigration. This suggests that rhetorical responsiveness is more sensitive to electoral incentives than legislative entrepreneurship. Members may be more inclined to adjust their messaging to signal alignment with voter priorities, even if their formal legislative behavior remains stable. Additionally, statistically significant effects on bill sponsorship are also less likely to emerge because the median number of foreign policy bills per member is quite low, resulting in limited variation and statistical power.

The last set of hypotheses presented in Chapter 2 concerns representatives' personal backgrounds. Members' legislative behavior is often shaped by their life experiences, professional careers, and identities, with prior research documenting the impact on how members engage with different policy areas. For example, members from working-class backgrounds often hold distinct economic views (Carnes 2012), while physicians are more effective on health policy (Fountaine, Shepherd, and Skinner 2024). Although I expected veterans to show greater engagement with international issues in both their rhetoric and legislative activity because of their additional interest as a result of their military service, no such effect can be found in the Models presented in Table 4.1. The result for veterans is only statistically significant when the indicator variable for Republicans is omitted from the model, suggesting that the effect is absorbed by partisanship as most veterans serving in Congress are Republicans.

In contrast, I find support for the idea that lawmakers' ethnic background influences their legislative behavior, though in different directions for Jewish and Hispanic members. Surprisingly, Models 1 and 3 suggest that Jewish lawmakers devote more attention to foreign policy, whereas Hispanic lawmakers do so less. However, as the only variable in Model 1 the effect for Hispanic members is not robust to clustered standard errors by legislators, meaning

that once we account for the fact that observations within the same legislator may be correlated (i.e., not independent), the estimated effect becomes statistically insignificant. This suggests that Model 1 may have overstated the strength of the relationship.

Notwithstanding these methodological considerations, the finding that Latino lawmakers' interest in Latin American affairs may not translate into broader foreign policy domains such as great power competition or global diplomatic relations is consistent with the argument presented in Chapter 2, and reflects finding presented below in Chapter 5. The effect for Jewish legislators indicates a broader concern for international affairs, likely shaped by the historic experiences of diaspora and transnational solidarity, rather than a narrow focus on Israel's security alone. These dynamics will be explored further in Chapter 5, with emphasis on the interaction between members' ethnicity and their constituent representation.

Lastly, those on the House Foreign Affairs Committee discuss foreign policy and sponsor corresponding legislation at a much higher rate than other members, consistent with Hypothesis 1. The incidence ratio shows legislators on the committee to reference international affairs twice as much as non-committee members, equivalent to 82 additional words for someone who sends the congressional average of 85 words per Congress. Additionally, members of the Foreign Affairs Committee are the primary sponsors of foreign policy legislation, with an expected 300% increase over other legislators. This is in line with expectations, as those lawmakers are Congress' subject experts and often play a key role in securing the passage of important foreign policy measures (Carter and Scott 2009). I find a similar effect for members of the Armed Services and Intelligence Committees, albeit at a reduced magnitude. Members of those committees use language focused on foreign policy at an increased rate of 29% and 28%,

respectively. Overall, these results indicate the continued importance of institutional positions for members' issue focus.

The statistical analysis presented above illustrates the impact of partisan, ideological, constituent, and personal incentives on members' attentiveness to foreign policy. Most notably, the data reveal a striking partisan asymmetry: it is not so much outparty members who emphasize foreign affairs, but Republicans in particular. Both descriptive statistics and regression models show that Republicans consistently exhibit higher levels of foreign policy engagement – both rhetorically and legislatively – suggesting that they treat foreign policy as a core party issue. While outparty dynamics cannot be ruled out entirely, given that Democrats held the presidency for 10 of the 14 years in the study, the pattern is notable and deserves additional inquiry in the following section of this chapter. In addition, the results also underscore important differences in between-member and within-member effects. For example, while moderates and majority-party members are not more likely to focus on foreign policy overall, members gaining chamber control and becoming more ideologically extreme has a negative impact on their foreign policy focus. Finally, the evidence presented above speaks to the importance of both constituency composition and legislator background – factors that warrant further investigation in Chapter 5.

Members in their own words

While the large-n statistical analysis above highlights the volume of issue attention in newsletters and bills, it provides little insight into the nature or framing of *how* lawmakers discuss foreign affairs in their constituent communication. In this section, I provide examples of members' foreign policy positions in newsletters, with a particular focus on both partisan conflict and internal factional disagreements (Jeong and Quirk 2019; Homan and Lantis 2020; Tama

2023). Republican legislators tend to not only reference foreign policy more frequently than their Democratic counterparts but also emphasize different themes such as foreign adversaries or multilateral treaties. The examples below also indicate that, despite roll-call votes revealing substantial bipartisan cooperation in international affairs (Curry and Lee 2020; Tama 2023), representatives' rhetorical framing often diverges from this pattern. Congressional leaders, especially within the Republican party, urge members to discuss legislation in ways that emphasize party agendas over the actual level of consensus surrounding an issue (Westwood 2021; Gaynor 2024).

In general, criticism of an incumbent president's policies can be focused on a specific topic or expressed in more general and simplistic terms. For example, Figure 4.6 indicates that Republican members of Congress, traditionally more "hawkish" on national security, tend to paint Democratic presidents, often seen as more "dovish" (Jeong and Quirk 2019), as "weak" on the world stage. They do this by claiming that America's enemies feel "emboldened" by the perceived "weakness" of the current administration, regardless of the actual issue substance and discussion of possible alternatives. Remarkably, the noun "weakness" is almost exclusively invoked in foreign policy contexts, and in most cases by Republicans.[12] Consider Brian Babin (R-TX), who argued in 2016 that, "President Obama … released billions of dollars in sanctions to the Iranians. This is yet another embarrassing episode of weakness and capitulation that only serves to embolden our enemies and increase the likelihood of conflict." Babin was not a member of the Foreign Affairs or Armed Services committees but still chose to focus on this foreign affairs topic in his newsletters as it provided an opportunity to frame the incumbent opposition-party president. Another example is Carlos Giménez, a moderate Republican

[12] Table A1 in the Appendix contains a random sample for the use of "weakness" in March and April 2023, indicating that the term is a) used primarily by Republicans and b) in a foreign policy context.

representing a swing district in Florida southern, who blasted Biden's foreign policy in one of his 2021 newsletters as "weak and ineffective policies that are emboldening the Communist Chinese."

Figure 4.6 References to specific Foreign Policy Tropes by Party, 111th – 117th Congress

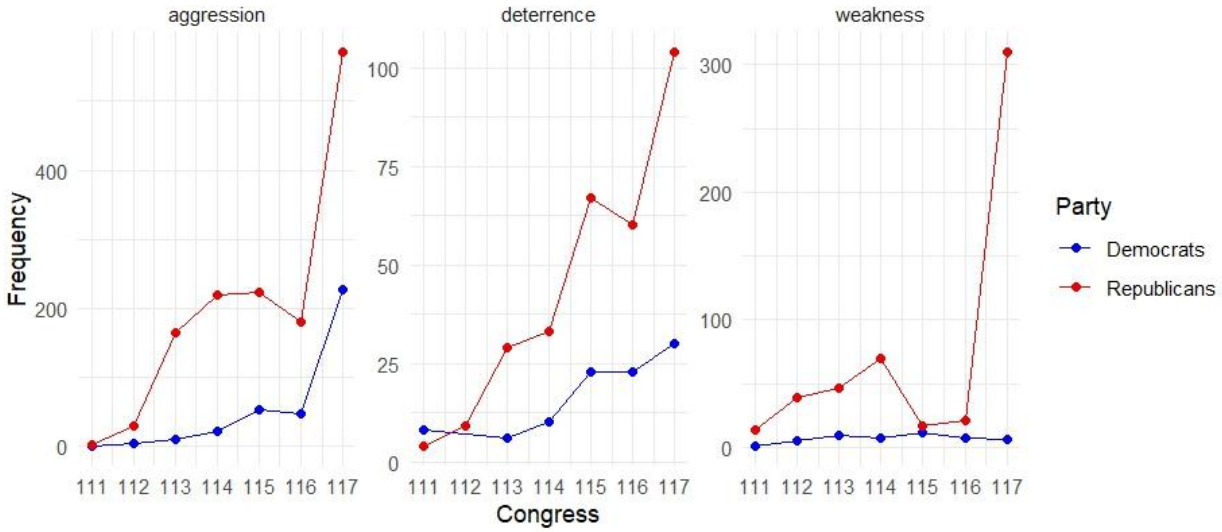


Figure 4.6 shows that while Republicans were already using the "weakness" trope during the Obama presidency, the use increased significantly during Biden's time in office. Such attacks might be especially potent because Republicans "own" national security as a subject area adjacent to foreign policy, consistently earning higher trust from voters on this issue than Democrats (Egan 2013). These patterns are often reflected in congressional campaigns, where candidates in Republican-leaning districts are more likely to discuss Republican-owned issues like taxes, defense, and terrorism as opposed to Democratic core issues like education or social security (Arbour 2014). Overall, Figure 4.6 reveals a consistent pattern over time: Republican lawmakers reliably invoke well-known foreign policy tropes – rhetorical frames centered on foreign 'aggression,' the importance of military strength for 'deterrence,' and accusations of Democratic presidents' 'weakness' on the world stage.

Other examples of partisan activism on foreign affairs over the past 15 years include GOP efforts to frame the Iran Nuclear Deal as counterproductive, or outright dangerous for the security of the Middle East and American interests in the region. Despite the agreement being negotiated by the Obama Administration, congressional Democrats did not match Republicans' messaging efforts. In 2015 alone, Republicans invoked "Iran" 6,102 times – seven times more than Democrats (881). Among the 20 most prolific Iran messengers in 2015 are 18 Republicans but only two Democrats, Adam Schiff (CA) and Jim Cooper (TN). Neither Schiff nor Cooper were members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee at the time. During that year, Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-NJ), a member of the Appropriations Defense Subcommittee, invoked "Iran" a record 197 times, followed by Foreign Affairs chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) with 148 times.

Figure 4.7 References to Selected U.S. Adversaries by Party over Time

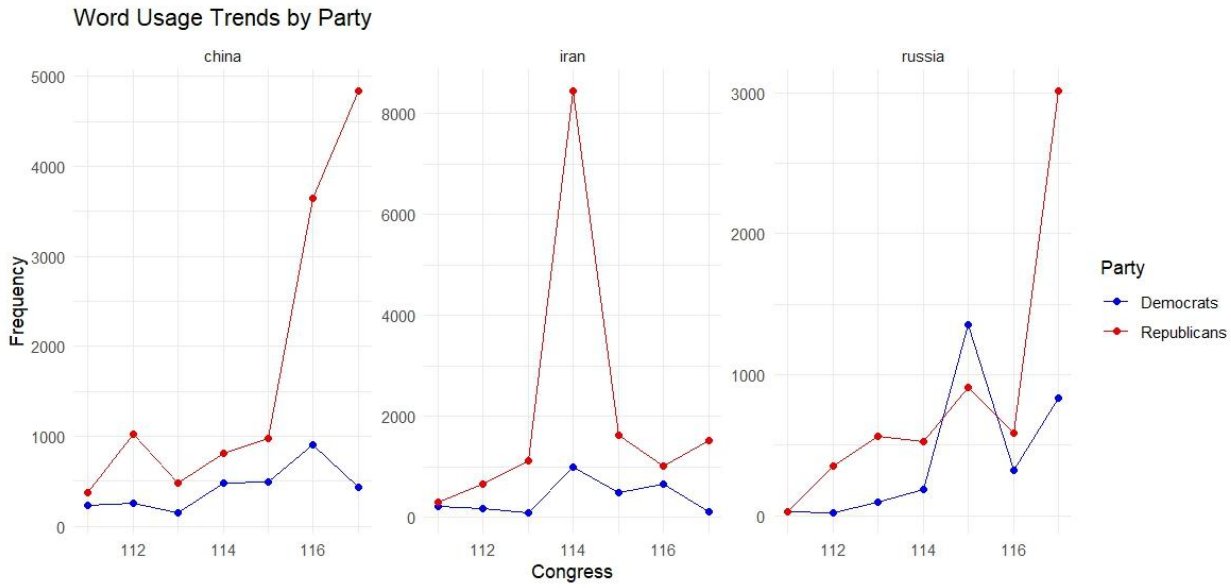


Figure 4.7 provides evidence for the Iran deal as a driving force behind GOP foreign policy messaging during the 114th Congress (2015-2017). Throughout 2015, Frelinghuysen focused on the Iran negotiations by criticizing the administration for overestimating Iran's trustworthiness, saying "Iran has violated sanctions before and is likely to cheat again. And yet,

the Administration makes concession after concession to Tehran even Iran it spreads violence, threatens the safety of our troops in the Middle east, and develops new ICBMs that will put America in its cross-hairs." Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), former chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, focused on Iran's domestic politics to criticize the administration's concessions, saying "Iran's human rights practices are among the worst in the world. But in its desperation to secure a nuclear deal, the Administration has, I believe, ignored the many other concerns we have with the Iranian regime." Conversely, many Democrats acknowledged the compromise character of the deal but refrained from assigning responsibility to Obama or Secretary of State John Kerry. As a member who did not sit on Foreign Affairs at the time, Michael Capuano (D-MA) defended the agreement, saying "… a perfect agreement, satisfying all sides, is an impossible standard. … a negotiated agreement, however imperfect it may be, offers the strongest possibility of preventing a nuclear arms race and further military conflict in the Middle East."

It was not only that Democrats mounted a tepid defense of the deal itself, but the party was also internally divided over its merits. Although members of Congress typically refrain from openly criticizing a president from their own party, some – particularly those in swing districts – question administration policies in pursuit of a more moderate and bipartisan public image. In 2015, Brad Ashford (D-NE) represented Nebraska's competitive 2nd district and came out against the deal without mentioning President Obama by name, writing, "I voted against approving the Iran Nuclear Deal because it should have been much stronger. I listened to my constituents, top military leaders, and foreign policy experts to oppose this deal on a bipartisan basis."

Figure 4.7 also highlights Republicans' more frequent focus on specific U.S. adversaries, including an emphasis on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[13] The passage of a $40 billion assistance package for Ukraine, which passed the House by a vote of 368-57 in May 2022, was an example of bipartisanship in foreign policy. 85 percent of House members voted for the bill, including most Republicans. Brett Guthrie (R-KY), a member of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, connected aid for Ukraine with a reference to domestic policies, arguing that "I support sending the Ukrainian people more military aid and crushing Putin and his complicit financiers with a full arsenal of sanctions. One of our most important weapons against Russia is our energy, and we can successfully diminish reliance on Russian energy if we unleash American energy independence." The 57 Republicans voting against the aid included many of the most conservative members of the Republican Conference, including most members of the House Freedom Caucus (HFC). Some who voted against the bill, such as HFC member Andrew Clyde (R-GA), argued that they oppose Putin's war, but that they take offense with specific sections of the bill: "… there are serious questions surrounding many provisions within President Biden's Ukraine aid package that have nothing to do with military assistance, including broad allowances for refugee resettlement and benefits assistance." Here, Clyde connects foreign policy questions with domestic politics, consistent with my argument that more extreme legislators are motivated by domestic politics.

The content of members' newsletters also offers interesting insights into shifts in both parties' issue positions over time. Contrary to Democrats' support for Ukraine in the aftermath of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion, 85% of the newsletter sentences referencing Ukraine during Obama's presidency were written by Republican members. During the 113th Congress, Majority

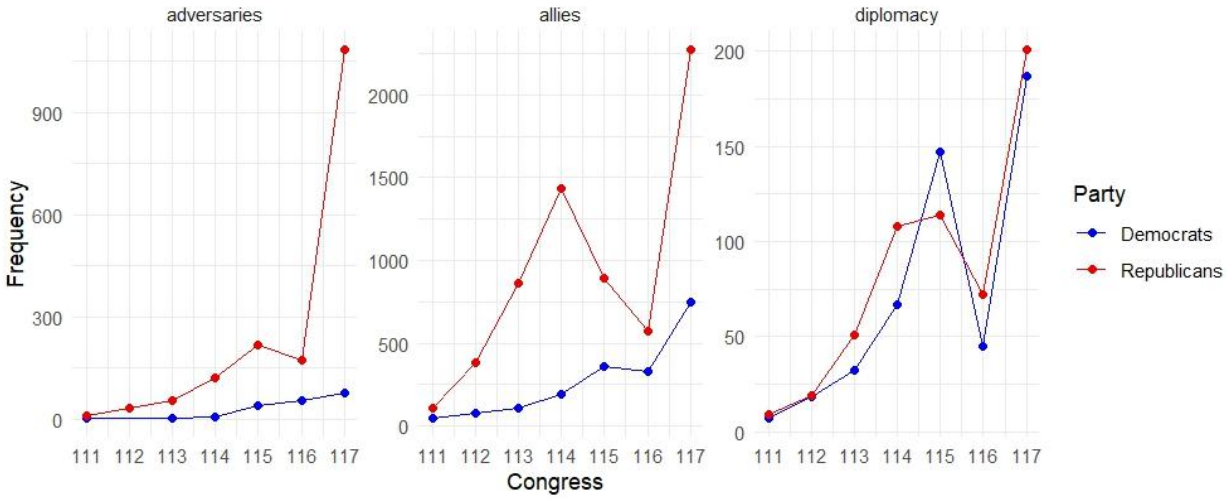
[13] As explained in Chapter 3, impeachment-relevant references to Russia such as "Russia probe", "Russia hoax" etc. are excluded.

Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA) reiterated U.S. support amidst Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine in 2014: "Vladimir Putin's recent military invasion and illegal annexation of Crimea stand in direct violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and international law." Mike Coffman (R-CO) stated his support for a more robust approach by the Obama administration, writing a "… bipartisan letter urging President Barack Obama to support Ukraine by sending it defensive weapons and sharing appropriate intelligence with it as well so that it may defeat the pro-Russian separatist elements currently waging war in the eastern portion of the country." While the response from Republican members to the situation in Ukraine was overwhelmingly supportive, a minority staked out an "America First" Position months before Donald Trump declared his candidacy for president. Scott DesJarlais (R-TN), a founding member of the House Freedom Caucus, explained his opposition to congressional support for Ukraine: "I was one of 17 members of congress to vote against authorizing President Obama to send nearly a billion dollar to Ukraine without a long-term strategy." Even so, DesJarlais clarified that he stood "… against President Putin's meddling in Crimea." In response to retaliatory sanctions announced by Russia's foreign ministry against US members of Congress, Joe Courtney (D-CT), said "Standing with the Ukrainian people is a moral imperative – I welcome the sanctions, and so do many of my bipartisan colleagues."

The emerging picture from members' use of specific foreign policy phrases and terms suggests a clear partisan asymmetry: Democrats tend to invoke most foreign policy concepts less often than their Republican counterparts. While Figure 4.8 shows that both parties refer to 'diplomacy' at similar frequency – indicating shared rhetorical commitment to negotiation and engagement – the same cannot be said for other key terms. As illustrated in the figures above, Republicans are more likely to emphasize concepts such as "deterrence," "aggression," and

"weakness," reflecting a consistent rhetorical focus on military strength, foreign threats, and critiques of perceived Democratic softness in international affairs. In contrast, Democrats do not consistently use language that emphasizes liberal internationalist themes – such as references to "allies" – more frequently than Republicans, suggesting that even traditionally Democratic frames of international engagement are not leading themes in their constituent communications.

Figure 4.8 References to Adversaries and Allies by Party, 111th – 117th Congress



Conclusion

The evidence presented in this chapter lends support to several of the theoretical expectations outlined in Chapter 2. Both descriptive statistics and regression models show that Republican lawmakers consistently emphasize foreign affairs more than their Democratic counterparts – both in e-newsletters and in bill sponsorship. This emphasis is particularly pronounced when it comes to key U.S. adversaries such as Russia, China, and Iran. The Republican focus on foreign threats and the perceived failures of Democratic administrations suggests that both issue ownership and Republicans' outparty status during the period under study influence their engagement with foreign policy. These findings also align with broader patterns in contemporary Republican politics, which over the past two decades have been marked

by greater ideological rigidity (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016), more aggressive rhetorical strategies (Gervais and Morris 2018; Cormack 2024), and a more confrontational approach in Congress (Theriault 2013; Green 2019). Importantly, the Republican party's sustained effort to leverage foreign policy as a site of opposition is consistent with the notion that legislators seek to capitalize on the president's institutional responsibility for foreign affairs – though it is more strategically and visibly exploited by Republicans.

In addition, Chapter 4 also provides important context for the hypothesized impact of majority party focus and ideological extremism on members' issue focus. In both cases, between-member and within-member effects vary: Majority party members are not less active on foreign policy per se, but members who switch from the minority to the majority adjust their issue focus away from foreign affairs towards domestic agendas. Similarly, lawmakers who become more moderate relative to other members also put an additional focus on foreign affairs, as they often avoid divisive domestic issues. Foreign policy, being less polarized, allows moderates to focus on bipartisan cooperation – qualities that might be rewarded by swing voters. On the other hand, ideologically extreme groups such as the House Freedom Caucus prioritize domestic topics. To be sure, the same rationale might incentivize members from competitive districts to focus on international affairs, since they tend to benefit from bipartisan rhetoric (Westwood 2021). However, because voters' concerns about domestic issues typically outweigh their interest in foreign affairs, representatives in tough districts will adjust their issue focus accordingly.

In sum, this chapter highlights the role of partisanship, institutional position, and ideology in shaping lawmakers' foreign policy engagement while also providing evidence for the relevance of district demography and member background. Notably, members from states with

higher shares of foreign-born citizens are more likely to focus on foreign policy, pointing to the strategic responsiveness of legislators to the interests of immigrant communities. These results suggest that domestic political incentives – particularly those tied to constituency composition – can create meaningful linkages between local and international priorities. Building on these insights, the next chapter will explore how legislators' personal backgrounds and constituency incentives intersect to shape their foreign policy behavior.

Chapter 5 - Foreign Policy & the Electoral Connection

The previous chapter established key findings regarding the influence of partisanship and ideology on members' constituent communication. While Chapter 4 also acknowledged the role of district-level incentives, it left open the question of whether these effects differ across specific foreign policy issue areas. This chapter addresses that gap by presenting evidence that they do. Echoing Mayhew (1974), I argue that we should generally assume that members of Congress are driven by the goal of reelection, which compels them to focus on the interests and concerns of their districts. Other motivations, such as advancing their legislative careers or crafting good public policy (Fenno 1973), though important, are necessarily secondary since they depend on securing reelection. However, contemporary trends in partisan polarization and nationalization have weakened the electoral connection, shifting legislative incentives away from district-centered concerns and toward broader partisan and ideological goals (Hopkins 2018). This raises important questions about the extent to which foreign policy engagement remains subject to constituency pressures or whether lawmakers' rhetorical and legislative priorities in international affairs are now primarily shaped by partisan or ideological considerations.

Accordingly, this chapter examines the impact of district characteristics and the personal background of members of Congress on their decisions about whether to engage with specific foreign policy issues. While 80 to 90 percent of members of Congress now come from districts considered "safe" for one of the two major parties (McCarty 2019), previous studies have shown that sub-constituencies continue to play an important role in incentivizing lawmakers to be responsive to district needs. This is especially true of constituent groups that ensure that their concerns are more visible to legislators (Miler 2010). Because e-newsletters are a suitable tool for members to signal to constituents that their concerns are being taken seriously, I expect

lawmakers' propensity to talk about international affairs to be influenced by constituencies within their districts and states. While this focus is symbolic in nature (see Pitkin 1967), it complements more substantive ways of representing constituency interests. Lawmakers' symbolic actions – acknowledging communities, participating in events, or referring to local sports teams in official speeches or newsletters – conveys an understanding of constituents' concerns, their cultural background, or simply "I am one of you." Regardless of tangible policy results, members of Congress reassure their constituents through symbolic representation that they are working on their behalf, creating a perception of authenticity and trust that they hope will be electorally rewarded in the long run (Vishwanath 2024; see also Hunt 2022).

Symbolic references made by elected officials are especially important for ethnic minority groups, as they may promote trust in the democratic system among those who were traditionally marginalized (Dietrich and Hayes 2023). Yet, we know little about the extent to which lawmakers focus on foreign affairs because they represent specific demographic groups. In this chapter, I focus on two ethnic communities: Jewish voters and Latino voters. I chose these two ethnic constituencies for three reasons: First, both groups have strong transnational and diaspora ties that influence their issue focus and policy preferences. As a consequence, these ties may shape how members of Congress address Israel and Latin America in their constituent communication. Second, both Jewish as well as Latino voters have cultural/historical roots in regions with a high salience in American foreign policy debates, as U.S. support for Israel and America's relations to countries across the Western hemisphere generate public debate. And third, both groups offer important variation in their geographic concentration, size, religiosity, and other socioeconomic variables. This variation makes both communities valuable case studies

for understanding how legislators adjust their foreign policy communication in response to constituent pressure.

I find that those from districts with a higher percentage of Jewish constituents are indeed more likely to focus on Israel in their newsletters, consistent with the expectation that demographic variables have an impact on members of Congress' issue focus. However, this relationship is conditioned by partisanship. The regression analysis in this chapter shows that while Republicans are more likely to focus on Israel in general – reflecting the importance of Israel for Evangelicals as a key group within the Republican coalition – Jewish Democrats are much more focused on Israel than their co-partisans. Additionally, models suggest that regional characteristics are also at play, as Republicans from the Northeast are less likely to focus on Israel than other Republicans. Similar findings emerge with regard to Latino representation. Those from districts with a higher share of Latino voters reference Latin American countries more often in their newsletters, as do Latino representatives. Importantly, Republicans are more likely to reference Latin America than Democrats, in line with their generally more pronounced foreign policy focus but in contrast to Democrats' electoral advantage with Latino voters.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. First, I outline the theoretical expectations regarding the influence of constituency composition on congressional rhetoric, with a particular focus on the interaction between legislators' personal backgrounds and their district demographics which is built on a larger literature on descriptive and substantive representation. Next, I present empirical evidence demonstrating the continued significance of constituent effects, beginning with an analysis of lawmakers' tendency to reference Israel in their e-newsletters. This is followed by an examination of Latino representation and its implications for

rhetorical strategies. Finally, I conclude with broader observations and key takeaways from the chapter.

Expectations

As outlined in Chapter 2, I argue that constituency incentives and legislator background play an important role in shaping legislators' likelihood of addressing foreign affairs in their official communications. Specifically, I argue that members of Congress are attuned to the perceived or actual interests of ethnic minority groups regarding international issues and foreign countries, incorporating these considerations into both their rhetorical and legislative agendas. This responsiveness stems from the fundamental nature of congressional representation, in which lawmakers' engagement with their constituencies is shaped by their perceptions of district composition and the groups within it. A substantial body of research in race and ethnic politics has studied the relationship between legislators and ethnic minority groups, finding a strong link between descriptive (shared identity) and substantive (shared policy interests) forms of representation (Piscopo 2011; Hayes and Hibbing 2017). Members of Congress may employ symbolic forms of representation through their constituent communication, as such public gestures "… create a sense of trust and support in the relationship between representative and represented" (Eulau and Karps 1977, 241). Importantly, lawmakers may do so regardless of the normative implications of rhetoric as a substitute for more "meaningful" legislative efforts.

Rather than responding to a singular, uniform "district interest," legislators navigate a political landscape composed of multiple issue-specific sub-constituencies, each defined by distinct policy concerns (Miler 2010; Cayton and Siemers 2024). With regard to foreign policy, ethnicity emerges as a particularly salient factor, as many ethnic communities in the United States maintain strong transnational ties and advocate for policies that align with their historical,

cultural, or geopolitical interests. These connections often translate into organized political engagement, with ethnic advocacy groups and influential community networks amplifying their priorities in legislative discourse (Rubenzer 2011).

In this chapter, I focus on Jewish Americans and Latino Americans as key examples of ethnic constituencies that influence congressional foreign policy rhetoric. Both groups represent transnational and diaspora ties, represent regional interests relevant to U.S. foreign policy, and offer variation in their cultural and demographic characteristics. As previous studies have established a link between descriptive and substantive forms of representation for Hispanic Americans and other minority groups (Wilson 2010; Rouse 2013; Demessie and Henderson 2021; Vishwanath 2024), I expect members to reference both Israel and Latin America more often in their official communication when they face ethnic sub-constituencies that incentivize them to do so and when they share ethnic/religious identity with those groups.

Legislators who share an ethnic/cultural identity with specific constituency groups are especially likely to reflect that in their communication, as their lived experiences often lead them to signal their belonging, support, and identification with those sub-groups (Fenno 1978; Mansbridge 1999). Representing constituents' interests is more intuitive for those who understand them firsthand, and lawmakers who share descriptive characteristics with their constituents are often intrinsically motivated to advocate for co-ethnic political concerns (Broockman 2013). While descriptive representation is neither necessary nor sufficient in assuring substantive representation of the policy interests of minorities (see "surrogate representation," e.g., Mansbridge 1999; Miler 2018), this pattern is evident in how members of Congress reference Israel in their communications, particularly among those with a Jewish background.

Representation Case I: Israel

The United States and Israel are bound together as allies through strong social, cultural and historic ties. The United States was the first country recognizing the State of Israel in 1948, and has supported its ally militarily, economically, and politically for many decades. While US administrations of both parties have at times been critical of specific Israeli policies, Israel continues to enjoy broad support by the US public and among America's elected representatives (Mead 2008; Gallup 2023). This support is reflected in consistent congressional approval of military aid, security cooperation, and joint defense projects. Legislators from both parties frequently cite strategic interests, shared democratic institutions, and commitments to regional stability as key reasons for maintaining strong ties. Members of Congress regularly participate in delegation visits, advocate for economic and technological cooperation, and address policy issues related to the broader Middle East (Masters and Merrow 2024). Additionally, many lawmakers view support for Israel as a response to the concerns and priorities of their constituents, including those in communities with ethnic and cultural connections to Israel (Cavari 2021).

Table 5.1 Top 5 Country Mentions in E-Newsletters (111th – 117th Congress)

Rank	Country	Mentions
1	China	18855
2	Iran	18539
3	Israel	14822
4	Afghanistan	13799
5	Ukraine	11506

Israel's position as a key U.S. ally in a difficult security environment is reflected in the frequency with which members of Congress mention the country in their official communications. Table 5.1 shows the five most-mentioned countries in congressional

newsletters, highlighting the prominence of Israel in legislative discourse. Despite being a much smaller country compared to others on the list, Israel ranks third in mentions, following China and Iran, countries that are widely seen as strategic U.S. adversaries. This suggests that Israel is a central concern for lawmakers' foreign policy considerations.

The reasons for lawmakers' rhetorical attentiveness to specific countries are partly guided by their constituencies. Some of their voters have a particular interest in foreign affairs, often including groups with ethnic, religious, or cultural ties to countries or regions. According to the U.S. Census, 7.5 million Americans identify as Jewish, representing 2.3% of the U.S. population, with New York and New Jersey having the highest share of all US states at 8.5% and 6.2%, respectively. While the degree to which Jewish American voters prioritize Middle East politics varies, U.S. support for Israel remains a key issue for many. For instance, a 2021 Pew poll found that a majority of U.S. Jews feel "very" or "somewhat" attached to Israel (Pew 2021). In 2020, 82 percent of Jewish adults said "… caring about Israel is an essential or important part of what being Jewish means to them" (Gramlich and Cooperman 2023). While feelings about Israel are often complex and nuanced, the data make clear that Israel has a deep significance for many Jewish voters.

When a substantial portion of a constituency cares about U.S. relations with a specific country, lawmakers representing those areas have incentives to reflect those interests in their public communication. By doing so, members demonstrate their responsiveness to the interests of their constituents. I therefore expect members of Congress from districts or states with larger Jewish populations to devote more attention to Israel in their e-newsletters. To measure this, I adopted a parsimonious approach, constructing a dictionary with only three terms: "Israel," "Israeli," and "Israelis." This dictionary was applied to all 150,000 congressional e-newsletters,

covering all House members between 2009 and 2023. On average, Israel and its people are mentioned 1,500 times per Congress. Table 5.2 lists the 10 members of Congress who mentioned Israel most frequently in their newsletters relative to other terms.[14] Notably, five of them represent districts in Florida, while none are from New York or New Jersey. This is particularly striking given that 14 of the 25 congressional districts with the largest Jewish populations are in New York or New Jersey. The absence of lawmakers from these states raises questions about the relationship between constituency demographics and congressional communication on Israel. Furthermore, the dominance of Republican members points to a possible asymmetry in issue focus between the two major parties.

Table 5.2 Top 10 Members of Congress by Focus on Israel in E-Newsletters (111th – 117th Congress)

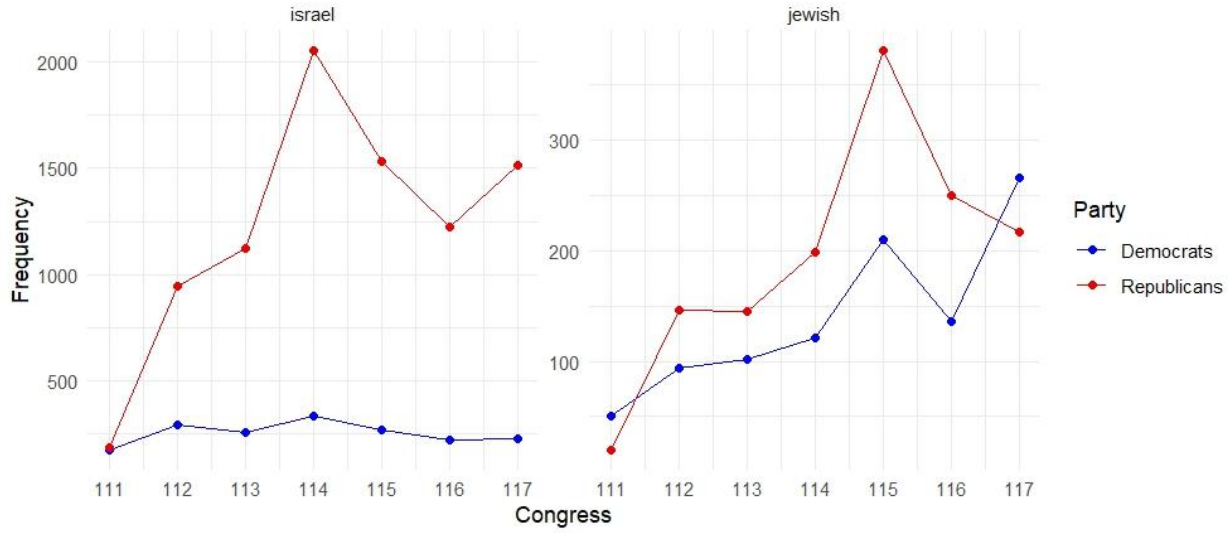
First	Last	State	Party	% of words focused on Israel
Theodore	Deutch	FL	D	0.173
Doug	Lamborn	CO	R	0.121
Carlos	Gimenez	FL	R	0.110
Bob	Dold	IL	R	0.089
Ileana	Ros-Lehtinen	FL	R	0.085
Mark	Meadows	NC	R	0.082
Allen	West	FL	R	0.082
Cresent	Hardy	NV	R	0.072
Steven	Watkins	KS	R	0.069
Alcee	Hastings	FL	D	0.067

The past three decades have seen shifts in public support for Israel among Americans. For the Christian Right and many Republican elected officials, support for Israel is a key policy position shaped by a combination of ideological, strategic, and religious arguments (Rynhold 2015). Republican administrations have increasingly aligned with Israel, viewing it as a key U.S.

[14] For this ranking, I excluded those who sent less than 10,000 words in newsletters across all Congresses (13% of all members), as the low number of overall words overstates the impact of a handful of Israel mentions (e.g., mentioning an Israel-related bill multiple times in a single newsletter). The median number of words sent per member across all Congresses is 61,000.

ally in the Middle East and a critical partner in countering regional threats such as Iran. Evangelicals, constituting a significant portion of the Republican base (Williams 2010), often support Israel due to theological beliefs rooted in Christian Zionism – the idea that Israel's existence and prosperity fulfill biblical prophecy (Lienesch 1993; Gries 2015; Hummel 2019). Many evangelical Christians see U.S. support for Israel as a moral and religious imperative, reinforcing the strong Republican backing for policies such as military aid, recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and opposition to international pressure on Israeli settlements. This alignment has contributed to Israel's prominence in Republican foreign policy discourse and electoral politics. Take, for example, Rep. Doug Lamborn (R-CO), Co-Chair of the bipartisan Congressional Israel Allies Caucus (CIAC), who, in a newsletter sent in 2017, explicitly referred to the largest pro-Israel organization in the United States "Christians United for Israel", praising the group and reiterating his pro-Israel record, "I believe Israel is the promised land and Jews are the chosen people."

Figure 5.1 References to "Israel" and "Jewish" by Party, 111th – 117th Congress



Members of Congress' rhetoric seems to confirm these trends. As Figure 5.1 shows, Republican members of Congress pay more attention to Israel throughout the period studied. A

particular spike occurs during the 114th Congress (2015-2017), when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke before the United States Congress and when Republicans justified their opposition to the Iran Nuclear Deal with implications for Israel's security. For example, Rep. Bradley Byrne (R-AL) urged the Obama Administration during that time to stop negotiations over a nuclear agreement with Iran, writing in one of his newsletters that, "Instead of continuing with these failed talks, the United States should listen to the concerns of Israel and halt these dangerous talks."

In contrast, the number of Democratic references to Israel does not follow similar trends and hovers around 250 references per Congress across the period studied. Instead, Democratic lawmakers seem to prefer references to the communities they represent, as evidenced by the use of "Jewish" over time. This discrepancy speaks to the intra-party politics of the Democratic party. While Jewish voters have been traditionally aligned with the Democratic Party (Weisberg 2012), disagreements among liberal voters and groups over Israel's Middle East policies makes Democratic members cross-pressured on this important foreign policy issue. The Obama administration exemplified these cross-pressures, pursuing a middle-of-the-road approach that continued to shield Israel from critical UN Security Council resolutions while also disapproving of the Israeli government's approach to the peace process. Accordingly, the relationship between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu has been described as "cold" at best (Cavari 2022). Democratic members of Congress navigate these intraparty disagreements by focusing on specific elements of the US-Israel relationship. For example, Rep. Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ), one of the most outspoken pro-Israel voices in the Democratic caucus, informed his constituents about legislation he introduced during the 115th Congress (2017-2019) focused specifically on economic relations, saying, "I introduced a bipartisan bill with Rep. McHenry and Rep. Vargas

to help state and local governments combat the hateful BDS movement that targets the United States' vital ally Israel by boycotting Israeli goods and services and sanctioning anyone who interacts with the Jewish state." In sum, both Republicans and Democrats discuss Israel in their newsletters, albeit at a different magnitude and for different reasons.

In order to understand the combination of factors that might predict members' likelihood to focus on Israel in their communication to the district, I employ a regression analysis. The dependent variable is the number of references to "Israel," "Israeli," or "Israelis" in congressional e-newsletters per legislator per Congress. This measure captures the extent to which individual members of Congress highlight Israel-related topics in their direct communication with constituents. The variable is highly skewed, with few members being responsible for the bulk of Israel references. Table 5.3 shows that the median legislator does not typically reference Israel in newsletters.

Table 5.3 Descriptive Statistics of Israel References in Newsletters (member per Congress)

	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max
Israel References	0	0	0	3.9	2	421

To account for potential demographic and electoral influences, I introduce several dichotomous independent variables. First, I include a dummy variable for whether a legislator represents a district in the top ten percent of all congressional districts by Jewish population. I use a binary measure rather than a continuous variable because the Jewish population – approximately seven million nationwide – is relatively small compared to other ethnic groups (e.g., Hispanics at 60 million) and is highly geographically concentrated. The top 10% threshold captures districts with a significant Jewish presence (>5% in a district), where constituents are

more likely to have a strong interest in U.S.-Israel relations. In contrast, including a continuous measure of the Jewish population share does not yield statistically significant results.[15]

Second, I also include a dummy variable for whether a member personally identifies as Jewish, as Jewish legislators may be more inclined to discuss Israel due to their personal interest, its importance in Jewish-American culture, or for political reasons, as hypothesized in Chapter 2.[16] This is because members' life experiences inform their policy interests, shaping how they present themselves to constituents. While the relationship between descriptive representation and legislative behavior is nuanced, a common ethnic and cultural background has been shown to have a meaningful impact on lawmakers' inclination for public outreach to co-ethnic communities (Gervais and Wilson 2019).

Third, I include indicator variables for members from New York and New Jersey,[17] as both states have historically large and politically active Jewish communities, which may incentivize their representatives to engage more frequently with Israel-related issues as part of the region's distinct political culture. New York City and its larger metropolitan area have been a major destination for Jewish immigrants throughout history, shaping the region culturally in numerous ways (Moore et al. 2012). Members from the Northeast might emphasize Israel regardless of their own identity and the actual number of Jewish constituents because support for Israel has long been embedded in the region's political discourse. When doing so, elected officials signal alignment with established norms and expectations, even in the absence of direct constituent pressure.

[15] The median share of the Jewish population is 1% across all districts and 10% across the districts in the 90th percentile.
[16] Data on Jewish members of Congress was sourced from the Jewish Virtual Library.
[17] Of all 255 (out of 2,786) member-Congress observations from New York or New Jersey, 27% are Republicans.

Lastly, theoretical expectations warrant the inclusion of a variable capturing the share of Evangelical Christian voters. Evangelicals are a key Republican constituency supporting Israel, largely due to beliefs about Israel's role in fulfilling biblical prophecy (Hummel 2019). This helps to explain the strong Republican endorsement of policies such as continued military aid and the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Because district-level data for the share of Evangelicals was not available at the time of this writing, I rely on state-level estimates. However, the share of Evangelical Christians per state does not have a statistically significant effect when included in the models below.

Statistical Analysis: Israel

Models 1 and 2 in Table 5.4 are negative binomial regression models with Congress fixed effects, estimating the log of the expected count. The results are robust to the application of standard errors clustered by legislator to account for both heteroskedasticity and correlation within clusters (e.g., repeated observations of legislators). All models include relevant institutional variables expected to affect legislators' constituent communication, such as partisanship, majority status, ideological extremity, district vote share, and relevant committee membership.

Table 5.4 presents the results for two models, with the second model including an additional interaction term to examine the possible intersection of partisanship and regional specificities. Results for both models indicate that Republicans refer to Israel at a higher rate than Democrats, reflecting both ideological and partisan commitments to a key US ally. Notably, being a Republican has a larger impact on the rate of Israel references than being a member of the House Foreign Relations Committee or being from New York or New Jersey, states with historically prominent Jewish communities.

Table 5.4 Predictors of Israel References 111th – 117th Congress

	Negative Binomial Estimator: Expected Count	
	Model 1	Model 2
Republican	1.754***	1.828***
	(0.150)	(0.108)
From NY/NJ	0.467**	0.782***
	(0.209)	(0.204)
Republican * From NY/NJ		-0.996***
		(0.325)
Top10 Jewish %	0.449*	0.376**
	(0.233)	(0.174)
Jewish Member	1.728***	1.770***
	(0.366)	(0.186)
Majority	-0.009	-0.082
	(0.251)	(0.199)
Approp Sub: Defense	0.713**	0.693***
	(0.326)	(0.219)
Foreign Relations Com	0.518***	0.509***
	(0.185)	(0.139)
Armed Services	0.260	0.258
	(0.179)	(0.128)
Ideological Extremity	0.738	0.573
	(0.587)	(0.383)
District Vote	0.009	0.009
	(0.006)	(0.004)
Seniority	-0.035*	-0.037*
	(0.019)	(0.012)
HFC	0.090	0.088
	(0.266)	(0.203)
words	0.00003***	0.00003***
	(0.00000)	(0.00000)
Constant	-3.467***	-3.416***
	(0.491)	(0.347)
Congress fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,786	2,786
Log Likelihood	-4,401.922	-4,397.721
theta	0.263***	0.265***
	(0.012)	(0.012)

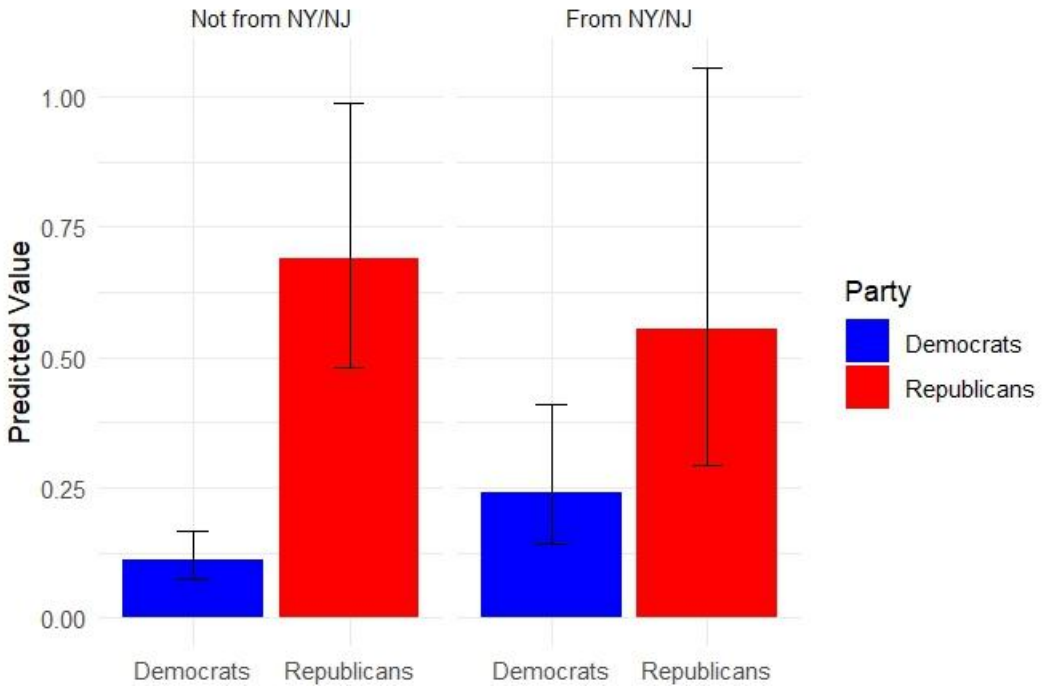
Transforming coefficients into incidence rate ratios and holding other variables constant, being a Republican is associated with a 5.78-fold increase in the expected count of Israel-related references, whereas being a member of the Foreign Relations Committee is associated with a 1.68-fold increase. The striking magnitude of Republicans' Israel messaging is in line with the partisan asymmetry depicted in Figure 5.1 above.

Importantly, the interaction term in Model 2 has a negative coefficient, suggesting that this partisan asymmetry is mediated by regional specificities. While Republicans, on average, may be more likely to discuss Israel, this trend does not hold uniformly across all regions. In particular, the model estimates Republicans from New York or New Jersey to reference Israel less than other GOP members, even when controlling for factors such as a legislator's Jewish background, the share of the district's population identifying as Jewish, or the percentage of Evangelical voters per state. Figure 5.2 shows the predicted word count for Israel references conditioned on party and region, with a visible drop-off among Republicans from the Northeast. These results indicate that the partisan asymmetry on Israel references is reduced among lawmakers from the Northeast.

Notably, the share of Evangelical voters per state is not a significant predictor of lawmakers' attention to Israel, even though Republican views on Israel are heavily influenced by Evangelicals' understanding of the United States' and Israel's role as exceptional countries. These views are based on biblical prophecies about the return of the Jewish people to ancient homelands in connection with the foretold Second Coming of Jesus to earth (Lienesch 1993). As such, many Republicans understand support for Israel not just as a vital American foreign policy interest but also see it as support for Christian-Judeo values on the world stage (Goldman 2018). A 2015 poll commissioned by the Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland shows that 77% of

Evangelical Republicans want the United States to lean toward Israel in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as compared to 36% of non-Evangelical Republicans (UMD Sadat Chair 2015), possibly contributing to the pattern visible in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2 Predicted Israel References by Party and Region



The regional pattern visible in Figure 5.2 suggests that the political, cultural and electoral dynamics of the Northeast may shape Republican engagement with Israel in ways that differ from the broader national trend. It is possible that Republican lawmakers in these states face different incentives, such as the need to appeal to a more moderate or cross-pressured electorate. Given that Jewish voters tend to lean Democratic and that most Jewish elected officials are affiliated with the Democratic Party, Republican legislators from New York and New Jersey may perceive less electoral benefit in emphasizing Israel-related issues. Instead, they prioritize topics that resonate more broadly with their constituents or align with the concerns of their state's Republican base. This stands in contrast to Republicans from regions where support for Israel

may be more closely tied to evangelical Christian influence. Importantly, including a variable for the share of the Evangelical population per state does not yield a statistically significant effect – a finding that warrants further study.[18]

In addition, in line with Hypothesis 4a, members from districts with a significant Jewish minority population are more likely to discuss Israel in their e-newsletters, as expected.[19] The coefficient for the districts with the highest share of Jewish voters is 0.449, corresponding to an incidence rate ratio (IRR) of 1.57, meaning that the rate of references is 56.7% higher for a district in the top ten percentile of all congressional districts by Jewish population. This suggests that legislators respond to the demographic composition of their constituencies by emphasizing issues that are salient to their voters, such as Israel. Moreover, it underscores the role of identity-based constituencies in shaping lawmakers' rhetoric, particularly on foreign policy issues where ethnic or religious ties are especially salient. The results also support earlier studies finding that the share of Jewish constituents has an impact on senators' bill (co-)sponsorship on Israel-related topics (Rosenson, Oldmixon and Wald 2009).

Finally, members of Congress who identify as Jewish demonstrate a significantly higher likelihood of engaging with Israel in their communications. The IRR for a coefficient of 1.728 is approximately 5.63, indicating that Jewish members mention Israel 463% more frequently than their non-Jewish counterparts. This pattern reflects a combination of personal interest and shared identity with their constituents, reinforcing the empirical literature on identity-driven representation (e.g., Dietrich and Hayes 2023; Gervais and Wilson 2019). Representatives' ethnic background shapes how lawmakers see the world, and which issues they view as

[18] Adding the share of Mormon voters – a Christian religious movement with a religious attachment to Israel – does not yield a statistically significant effect.
[19] Using a continuous variable for the share of Jewish voters per district has no statistically significant effect.

personally meaningful. When legislators share an ethnic or cultural background with a group, they are more likely to feel a sense of responsibility toward it and engage in public gestures that affirm group belonging. These expressions can signal solidarity, build trust, and demonstrate that the group's presence and interests are acknowledged in the national conversation – including on foreign affairs. For example, Rep. Debbie Wassermann Schultz (D-FL), a Jewish member representing a district with many Jewish constituents, praised an American veto during a UN Security Council meeting in 2011, commenting, "By using our nation's veto power against an unfair & biased UN Security Council resolution, the United States forcefully rejects any attempts to derail the peace process with unjust international condemnations of the Jewish state." In short, both constituency characteristics and personal identity shape legislative behavior and rhetorical priorities.

It is important to note for both methodological and substantive reasons that most Jewish lawmakers belong to the Democratic Party. For instance, during the 117th Congress (2021–2023), 24 out of 26 Jewish members were Democrats, highlighting the partisan dimension of this engagement. While Jewish identity is highly correlated with Democratic Party membership, the inclusion of a control for partisanship increases rather than diminishes the coefficient for Jewish identity.[20] This suggests that a model without partisanship would underestimate the true relationship between lawmaker identity and Israel references. When isolating the sample to Democrats only, Jewish lawmakers still mention Israel over 700% more often, reinforcing the interpretation that descriptive identity – not just partisanship or institutional position – is the main driver of engagement with Israel in congressional communications. Overall, Jewish

[20] The negative binomial coefficient for being a Jewish lawmaker in model that includes partisanship (Republican=1) is 1.75. The coefficient in a model without any partisanship is 0.86, and for a model with only Democrats 2.13.

Democrats in Congress are much more likely to mention Israel in their constituent communication than their non-Jewish colleagues.

Representation Case II: Latin America

The United States' growing Hispanic[21] population is at the center of significant demographic and cultural shifts in the United States, increasing from 14 million in 1980 to 62 million in 2020 (Pew 2022). Accordingly, political scientists are interested in its implications for electoral outcomes, policy priorities, and representation. As a highly diverse group, Latino voters encompass a wide range of national origins, socioeconomic backgrounds, political ideologies, and regional identities. While their policy priorities vary significantly, political attitudes among Latino voters tend to be socially conservative and economically liberal on average (Rouse 2013; Barreto and Segura 2014; Fraga, Velez and West 2024). Surveys consistently find issues such as the economy, healthcare, and education to be at least as relevant to Latino communities as immigration policy, pointing to a more complex constituency than is often assumed (UT Austin 2024). Like other Americans, foreign policy is not typically seen as a priority for Latino voters.

Given the growing Hispanic population in the United States and its political significance, members of Congress have incentives to reference Latin America in their newsletters. In doing so, legislators establish a connection with voters who may have personal or ancestral ties to the region. This is particularly relevant for Latino legislators, who research suggests are more likely to employ symbolic messaging in their communications (Gervais and Wilson 2019; Pleites-Hernandez 2023). Symbolic forms of representation are particularly important for ethnic minority groups, as such communication helps foster a sense of inclusion and responsiveness

[21] While not identical, "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably here.

even in the absence of direct policy action and persistent representational deficits in Congress (Knoll 2009). Additionally, I also expect legislators representing districts with a larger Hispanic population to highlight U.S. relations with Latin America as a means of demonstrating responsiveness to their constituents' concerns. By incorporating such rhetoric in their e-newsletters, members of Congress engage in a form of voter outreach that shows their commitment to the cultural heritage of Latino communities and signals attentiveness to foreign policy issues that resonate at the local level.

In order to operationalize attentiveness to foreign policy topics that concern Latino voters, I propose a country-based dictionary as the basis for a new dependent variable. If lawmakers focus on U.S. relations with Latin America, they should mention those countries. The dictionary contains the five largest origin countries and territories for Hispanic Americans: Mexico, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba (Pew 2022) in addition to other Latin American nations and relevant regional terms. This approach ensures that the analysis reflects references about ancestral home countries of various Hispanic groups. As shown in Table 5.5, the dictionary includes country names (e.g., Argentina, Colombia, Peru), demonyms (e.g., Argentinian, Colombian, Peruvian), and broader regional identifiers (e.g., Latin America, Central America, South America). Lawmakers may discuss "Colombian immigrants" or "Argentinian businesses" rather than just mentioning "Colombia" or "Argentina," and without demonyms, such statements would be overlooked.

Table 5.5 Latin America Dictionary

Argentina, Argentinian, Bolivia, Bolivian, Central America, Chile, Chilean, Colombia, Colombian, Costa Rica, Costa Rican, Cuba, Cuban, Dominican, Ecuador, Ecuadorian, El Salvador, Salvadoran, Guatemala, Guatemalan, Honduras, Honduran, Latin America, Mexico, Mexican, Nicaragua, Nicaraguan, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Peruvian, Puerto Rico, Puerto Rican, South America, Uruguay, Venezuela, Venezuelan.

On the other hand, demonyms may refer to U.S. domestic issues or communities (e.g., Puerto Rican voters, Mexican American culture) without reflecting engagement with foreign policy or the countries themselves (immigration and humanitarian affairs). Given these ambiguities, I re-ran the statistical analysis using a dictionary that excluded "Cuban", "Argentinian" etc. as a robustness check, with nearly identical results (see Table A4 in the Appendix).[22] The terms "Latino" and "Hispanic" are not included, as they are typically used in domestic outreach to Hispanic communities, rather than in reference to U.S. relations with Latin American countries. While these words occasionally appear in discussions related to immigration or diaspora engagement, they tend to reflect ethnic or cultural identification rather than issue-specific attention to international affairs or bilateral relations with Latin American states. Including them would likely introduce noise by capturing discourse unrelated to foreign policy.

Table 5.6 Descriptive Statistics of Latin America References in Newsletters (member per Congress)

	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max
Full Dictionary	0	0	1	10	7	1337
Excluding Mexico	0	0	0	7	4	1326

Importantly, mentions of "Mexico" or "Mexican" make up one third (32.6%) of all 40,000 Latin America references members of Congress made in their e-newsletters between 2009 and 2023. As Mexico is often the focus of debates about immigration or trade – policy areas that have important domestic as well as foreign dimensions – I created an additional dictionary excluding the terms "Mexico" and "Mexican." The correlation between the

[22] The full dictionary results in 28,000 words being counted as Latin American reference. The dictionary excluding demonyms identifies 23,600 words. Taking out demonyms yields a correlation of 0.99 at member-congress level with the full dictionary.

comprehensive version ("full dictionary") and the dictionary excluding Mexico is 0.97. Table 5.6 shows the descriptive statistics for both dependent variables as word counts per member per Congress.

While the median legislator appears to mention Mexico or Mexicans one time per Congress on average, substantive engagement with Latin America remains limited to a smaller subset of representatives, explaining the gap between mean and median. But for a significant share of members, it is an important issue for their constituent communication. Table 5.7 highlights the ten members who reference Latin America or its citizens most frequently, based on the dictionary that excludes mentions of Mexico. As expected, the list is dominated by members with Hispanic backgrounds; however, it is notably led by lawmakers from Florida and New York rather than border states. The rankings do not shift significantly when using the full dictionary, which includes "Mexico/Mexican" references.

Table 5.7 Top 10 Members of Congress by Focus on Latin America in E-Newsletters 111th – 117th Congress – Full Dictionary

First	Last	State	Party	% of words focused on Latin America
Pedro	Pierluisi	PR	D	2.44
Jenniffer	González-Colón	PR	R	1.31
David	Rivera	FL	R	1.04
Nydia	Velázquez	NY	D	0.73
Gwen	Graham	FL	D	0.67
Maria	Salazar	FL	R	0.61
José	Serrano	NY	D	0.59
Carlos	Gimenez	FL	R	0.49
Albio	Sires	NJ	D	0.46
Neal	Dunn	FL	R	0.37

Latino representatives dominate Table 5.7, with an equal number of Democrats and Republicans.[23] Seven out of the ten lawmakers represent majority-Hispanic districts, in line with research showing that larger minority populations increase the likelihood of electing representatives from their own communities (Lublin et al. 2020). In this context, majority-minority districts have played a crucial role in enabling the electoral success of co-ethnic candidates. Between 2009 and 2023 – the period of this study – 80 percent of House members representing the 50 districts with the largest Hispanic populations had a Hispanic background. These trends reflect a substantial body of research that finds that ethnic communities prefer representation through co-ethnic legislators, all else being equal (Stokes-Brown 2006; Barreto 2010).

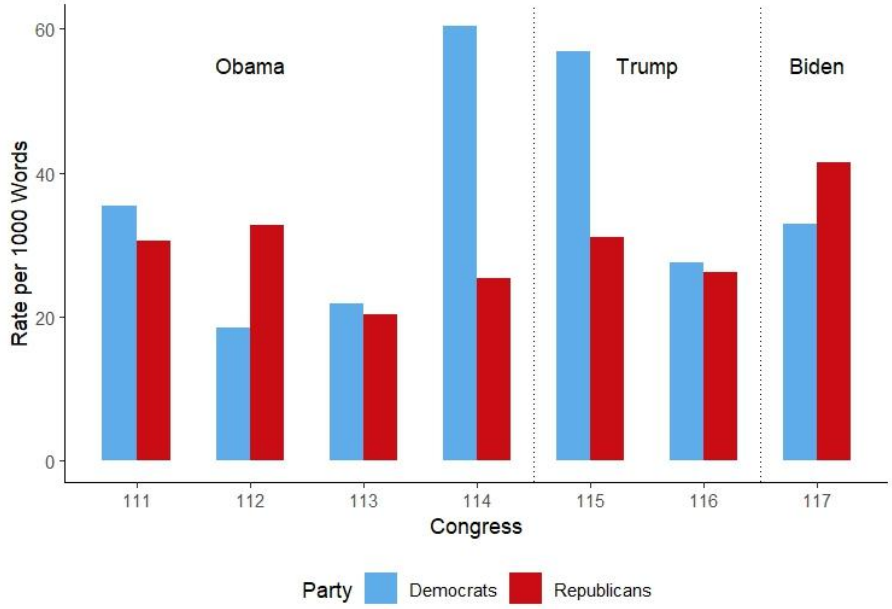
Remarkably, Table 5.7 shows that legislators from New York and Florida exhibit a disproportionate share of references to Latin America in their public communications. This pattern suggests that regional specificities shaped by demographic concentrations and constituency interests play a role in driving engagement with foreign policy issues related to Latin America. Lawmakers from Florida, New York and New Jersey appear to reference Latin America more often than their colleagues. The correlation between Hispanic share of a state's population and the Latin America issue focus is 0.47 for the full dictionary and 0.3 for the dictionary excluding Mexico.

Moreover, important differences between the parties emerge. Figure 5.3 shows the share of Latin America references by party for the full dictionary, measured as the number of references per 1,000 words in newsletters in each Congress. Democrats referenced Latin

[23] The record for most Latin America references (raw count) in a single Congress goes to Rep. Adriano Espaillat (D-NY), the first Dominican American in the House of Representatives.

America at almost twice the rate of Republicans during the 114th and 115th Congress, while parity between the parties exists for the first two years of Joe Biden's term.

Figure 5.3 Rate of Words with Latin America Focus by Party (Full Dictionary)



Overall, descriptive data point to the importance of legislator ethnicity and constituency effects in shaping references to Latin America in congressional newsletters. Additionally, Figure 5.3 points to potential partisan asymmetries in issue focus. Whether these trends persist once other variables are accounted for remains an open question – one that the next section seeks to address through more rigorous statistical methods.

Statistical Analysis: Latin America

I am now turning to an examination of lawmakers' attention to Latin America in their e-newsletters. The results for four negative binomial regression models with Congress fixed effects are presented in Table 5.8. In each model, the word count of references to Latin America is regressed on several independent variables concerning party, ideology, committee membership, and two new measures: the Hispanic background of members of Congress and the Hispanic share

of the district population. If expectations hold, Hispanic members of Congress should reference Latin American countries at a higher rate than their non-Hispanic counterparts because such references reflect their own identity and serve as a form of symbolic representation that resonates with co-ethnic constituents. Similarly, representatives from districts with a larger Latino population should be more likely to mention Latin American communities and countries, due to their responsiveness to constituents' backgrounds and interests. The main four predictors of interest are partisanship, outparty status, Hispanic share per district, and Hispanic background of members.

The results reveal several noteworthy patterns. First, Republicans are more focused on Latin America in general, as indicated by the positive coefficient for being a Republican. Given Democrats' greater support among voters of color (Barreto 2010), one might expect Democratic members to reference Latin America more frequently. As Model 2 demonstrates, replacing "Republican" with "Outparty" yields a statistically significant result, although at a smaller magnitude. For that reason, Models 3 and 4 include both "Republican" and "Outparty", producing statistically significant results for both. This suggests that both Republican members as well as outparty members are more likely to reference Latin America. Notably, the magnitude of being a Republican is reduced significantly when using the dependent variable that excludes Mexico. This is possibly due to immigration-related rhetoric among Republican members, as references to the southern border are common among GOP lawmakers. However, the statistical significance as well as the magnitude of the effect are not sensitive to the exclusion of demonyms ("Cuban", "Mexican" etc.), as demonstrated by Table A4 in the Appendix. The GOP advantage on Latin America references is unlikely to be the result of immigration rhetoric.

Table 5.8 Predictors of Latin America References 111th – 117th Congress

	Negative Binomial Estimator: Log of Expected Count			
	Full Model 1	Full Model 2	Full Model 3	No Mexico Model 4
Republican	0.936***		0.827***	0.588***
	(0.071)		(0.076)	(0.097)
Outparty		0.547***	0.295***	0.435***
		(0.066)	(0.069)	(0.088)
Competitive District	0.203**	0.139	0.201**	0.281**
	(0.098)	(0.100)	(0.098)	(0.126)
Hispanic Member	1.027***	1.088***	1.052***	1.417***
	(0.144)	(0.148)	(0.144)	(0.184)
Hispanic %	2.159***	1.489***	2.109***	1.502***
	(0.224)	(0.225)	(0.224)	(0.288)
Foreign Relations Com	0.477***	0.534***	0.467***	0.594***
	(0.102)	(0.104)	(0.102)	(0.130)
Armed Services	-0.110	-0.138	-0.115	-0.254**
	(0.094)	(0.095)	(0.093)	(0.121)
Ideological Extremity	0.085	0.143	0.095	-0.043
	(0.275)	(0.281)	(0.274)	(0.352)
District Vote	0.013***	0.007**	0.012***	0.018***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)
Majority Party	-0.225	-0.163	-0.247*	-0.265
	(0.142)	(0.145)	(0.142)	(0.182)
HFC	-0.169	0.133	-0.148	-0.320
	(0.157)	(0.159)	(0.157)	(0.203)
# of Words	0.00003***	0.00003***	0.00003***	0.00003***
	(0.00000)	(0.00000)	(0.00000)	(0.00000)
Constant	-1.560***	-0.993***	-1.599***	-2.006***
	(0.273)	(0.272)	(0.273)	(0.311)
Congress fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,786	2,786	2,786	2,786
Log Likelihood	-6,788.626	-6,834.369	-6,779.332	-5,351.692
theta	0.430*** (0.016)	0.408*** (0.015)	0.435*** (0.016)	0.266*** (0.011)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	13,613.250	13,704.740	13,596.660	10,741.380
Note:				*p**p***p<0.01

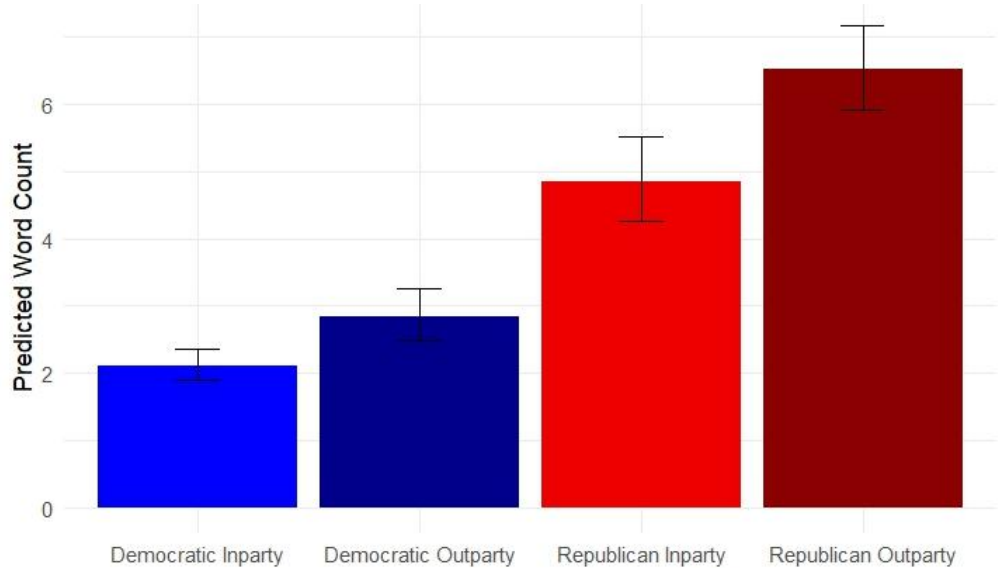
What does the positive coefficient for Republican members mean in substantive terms? A coefficient of 0.936 for Model 1 translates into an Incidence Rate Ratio (IRR) of 2.55, meaning that a one-unit increase in the predictor variable is associated with a 155% increase in the expected count of the outcome, holding all else constant. For a member who mentions Latin American countries 8 times (75th percentile) as a Democrat, the predicted increase for being a Republican would yield 20 mentions, while for a more engaged member who mentions those topics 50 times (95th percentile),[24] the increase would result in 127 words. The coefficient of 0.547 for outparty members in Model 2 translates to an IRR of 1.73, a smaller 73% increase in the expected count of words.

To better illustrate this pattern, consider Figure 5.4, which shows the combined effects of partisanship and outparty status for Models 3 and 4. As shown, the model expects Democratic members to reference Latin America (including Mexico) two times on average per Congress when their party holds the White House. In contrast, Republican outparty members are predicted to mention Latin America over six times on average per Congress. The partisan differences become less pronounced in Model 4, which excludes Mexico from the analysis. In this model, there is little distinction between Democratic outparty members and Republican inparty members in terms of their mentions of Latin America. Overall, these findings highlight a divide based on partisanship and control of the presidency, with Republicans, especially when in the outparty, more frequently focusing on Latin American issues.

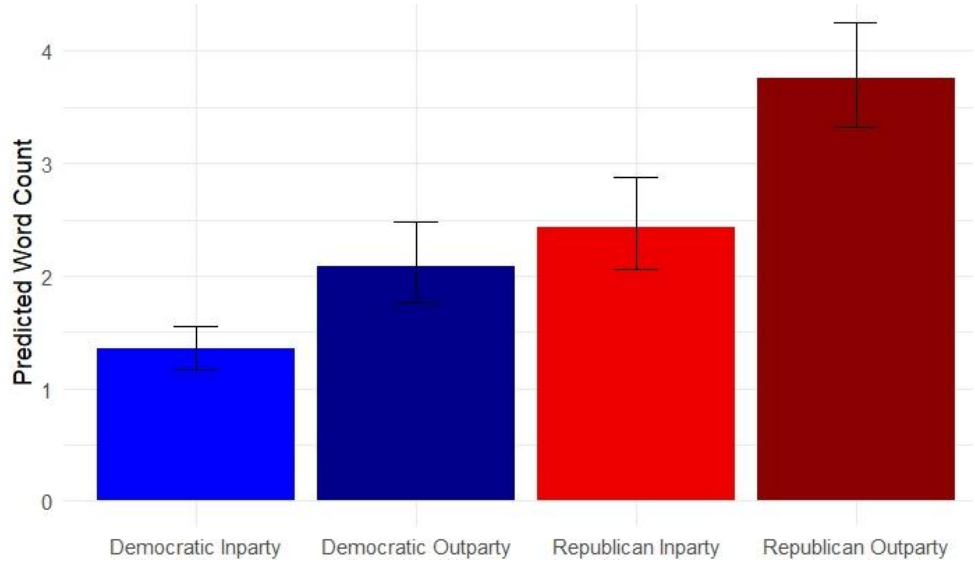
[24] Referencing Latin America at this rate includes members such as Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), Alma Adams (D-NC), and Allen West (R-FL).

Figure 5.4 Predicted Word Count by Party and Outparty Status – Model 3 and 4

Model 3 – Including Mexico



Model 4 - Excluding Mexico



Consistent with expectations, both member ethnicity and Hispanic population share per district are significant predictors of Latin America references in Table 5.8. The positive coefficient of 1.027 for being a Hispanic member of Congress in Model 1 corresponds to an IRR of 2.79, meaning that the incidence rate is expected to increase by a factor of 2.79 for a one-unit

increase in the predictor variable. In practical terms, this suggests that a representative like Tom Emmer (R-MN), who includes approximately 100 references to Latin America in his newsletters per congressional term, would be expected to include 279 references if he were a Latino representative. The magnitude is similar when using the exclusionary dictionary as dependent variable (Model 4), translating into an increase by factor 2. Taken together, all models provide evidence for the significant role that identity plays in shaping rhetorical attention to Latin American issues.

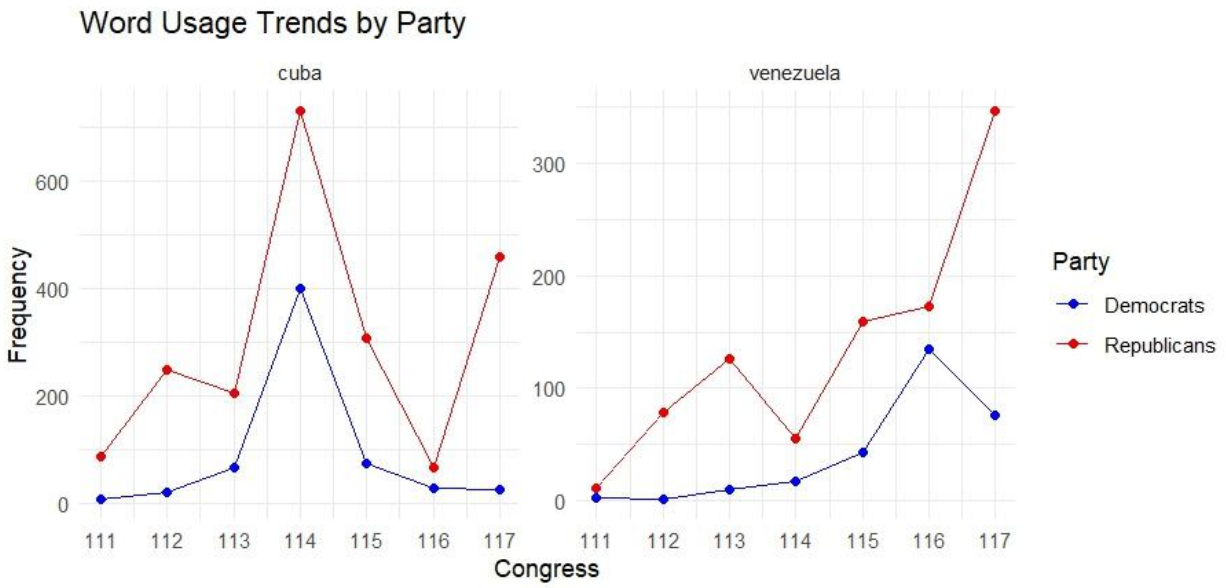
Similarly, the coefficient for the Hispanic share of a district's population is positive and significant in all four models, suggesting that lawmakers from districts with larger Hispanic communities are more attentive to Hispanic-related issues. To explain this effect substantively, consider that a one-standard-deviation increase (18 percentage points) in the share of the Hispanic population per district corresponds to an IRR of 1.42 in Model 1, meaning the incidence rate of the outcome variable is expected to increase by 42%. Substantively, this 18% increase in the Hispanic share per district is equivalent to representing a district where the Hispanic population jumps from the 25th percentile (5%) to the 75th percentile (22%), illustrating the impact of demographic composition on lawmakers' rhetoric. A double-digit percentage increase in rhetoric is non-trivial, as it suggests that even modest increases in the share of Hispanic residents may produce a shift in lawmakers issue focus.

The effect is somewhat reduced for the dictionary that excludes Mexico. In Model 4, the IRR for a coefficient of 1.502 translates into an expected word count increase by a factor of 4.5 or a 350% increase for a one-unit change in the predictor. Translated to a one-standard-deviation increase (0.18) in the Hispanic share per district, the model predicts a 30% increase in the incidence rate. Overall, the results for Hispanic share per district and members' ethnic

background provide evidence for the impact of members' identity and constituency incentives on their issue-specific foreign policy rhetoric.

The higher rate of references to Latin America for Republicans in all four Models warrants further examination of lawmakers' rhetoric. Immigration as a Republican-owned issue often invites references to national origin ("Mexican migrants" etc.) or national borders ("the border with Mexico"). However, the persistence of the partisan effect beyond the exclusion of Mexico in Model 4 suggests that Republicans are more likely to mention Latin American countries more generally. For example, GOP members often mention countries that stand ideologically opposite to the United States, referencing socialist regimes in Latin America. Take Figure 5.5, which shows the frequency of references to Cuba and Venezuela by party over time. As shown, Republicans refer to those countries at a higher rate, with a spike during the 114th Congress, when the Obama administration attempted a (ultimately unsuccessful) normalization of previously hostile relations between Cuba and the United States. For example, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) connected the Cuban dictatorship with other foreign adversaries during the 114th Congress, criticizing the Obama administrations' approach by saying, "I firmly believe that the President's concessions to the Castro brothers pose a real national security threat." Ros-Lehtinen is the member of Congress with most Cuba references (195), followed by Carlos Gimenez (175), and David Rivera (171), all three Florida Republicans.

Figure 5.5 References to Cuba and Venezuela by Party, 111th – 117th Congress



Her issue focus is reflective of both her personal background as well as her constituency. Ros-Lehtinen was the first Cuban American elected to Congress, and her father was a businessman and anti–Fidel Castro activist. In addition, Florida has a prominent Cuban American community which is strongly anti-communist and overwhelmingly Republican in their voting behavior (Bishin et al. 2008). Furthermore, the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) has successfully lobbied Congress to keep the trade embargo policies that were enshrined in federal law through the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992 and the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 (Haney 2018) in place.

Members from swing districts often focus on less contentious issues, such as Rep. Adrian Smith (R-NE), who spoke at length about new trade agreements during the 113th Congress, saying, “In my opinion, the enactment of trade agreements with South Korea, Colombia, and Panama was the best bipartisan accomplishment of the President's first term.” Democrats, less likely to reference “socialism,” tend to refer to human rights or democracy issues when invoking those countries. Consider Rep. Darren Soto (D-FL), who informed his constituents about

important Latin America issues during the 115th Congress, saying: "On Thursday, September 21, I addressed the political, economic, and humanitarian crises in Venezuela and expressed my support for standing in solidarity with the people of Venezuela."

To conclude, the fact that Republican members of Congress are more likely to reference Latin America in their constituent communication is striking, given that Latino voters – despite considerable heterogeneity by origin country – have historically leaned Democratic. One possible explanation is that foreign policy, particularly issues related to security and international relations, is a policy area traditionally "owned" by Republicans. As such, GOP members focus on U.S. security interests in the western hemisphere. Additionally, Republicans might strategically focus on Latin America in an effort to appeal to specific voter blocs. While Latino voters continue to lean Democratic, recent trends suggest a trend reversal among younger and foreign-born immigrants (Hopkins, Kaiser and Perez 2023; Wakefield, Fraga, and Frisk 2025). These patterns underscore the potential for shifting partisan alignments within the Latino electorate, and potential opportunities for strategically motivated legislators to increase their party's prospects with those voting blocs.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this chapter highlights the impact of partisanship, legislator background, and constituency incentives on members' foreign policy attentiveness. As the analysis shows, district-level factors such as ethnic composition, along with the personal identity of lawmakers, significantly influence members' foreign policy rhetoric. This underscores the importance of constituent demographics in shaping members' issue focus, with ethnic communities like Jewish and Latino Americans incentivizing lawmakers' attention to foreign countries. These findings complement scholarship on descriptive and substantive representation,

adding important new elements to existing studies about bill sponsorship (e.g., Wilson 2010) and committee hearings (e.g., Minta 2013) that have already demonstrated the ways in which ethnic representation impacts policymaking. In this chapter, I show that while descriptive representation matters in foreign policy discussions, it is linked to the ideological and partisan inclinations of lawmakers. Importantly, the findings also highlight a less frequently discussed consequence of descriptive representation: its influence on the foreign policy agenda within Congress. This expands our understanding of how identity-based representation affects the relations of the United States with its neighbors and the rest of the world.

The chapter also raises important normative questions about the value of symbolic representation in the absence of substantive policy outcomes. While Pitkin (1967) argued that symbolic representation, which does not directly translate into policy change, may lack rational justification, more recent research suggests that it can still play an important role (Vishwanath 2024). Symbolic gestures in foreign policy communication can foster a sense of belonging among constituents, shaping the intersection of ethnicity and national identity. This may compensate for the representational deficit that often exists in Congress, particularly for minority groups. While these symbolic acts may not always lead to tangible policy changes, they can contribute to a broader sense of inclusivity and recognition for communities who might otherwise feel marginalized in the political sphere (also see Knoll 2009).

As the chapter concludes, it is clear that the relationship between district composition, personal background, and foreign policy rhetoric is complex and multi-faceted. The focus on Israel and Latin America demonstrates how lawmakers respond to the interests of their constituencies, while also being guided by the partisan and ideological pressures that shape their

actions. The next chapter will shift attention to trade, exploring an issue area that touches both domestic and foreign policy concerns.

Chapter 6 - Foreign Policy & Trade

The two preceding chapters examined members of Congress' attentiveness to foreign policy, a policy area which typically does not have economic implications for members' constituencies. In this chapter, I will focus on trade as an issue that is both domestic and foreign in nature and has a distinct distributive dimension. Like foreign policy, trade policy concerns the relationship between the United States and other countries. Both policy areas are shaped by international dynamics, diplomatic considerations, and strategic interests. They often involve negotiations with foreign governments, require coordination between countries' executive branches, and are influenced by global events beyond lawmakers' control. Yet, unlike foreign policy, trade has direct and tangible effects on domestic industries, jobs, and prices, making it a unique combination of international relations and local economic interests.

For lawmakers, trade has potential economic consequences in their states and districts because it creates domestic winners and losers, benefiting some sectors while disadvantaging others. Winners typically include industries that are competitive internationally ("comparative advantage"), such as those that benefit from expanded markets, cheaper inputs, or specialized production. Among the pressures members face are local economic interests, but also national interest groups such as unions. For Democratic members, the positions of organized labor towards trade agreements bears great weight, whereas Republican members tend to be more receptive to business groups (Karol 2009). In addition to domestic pressures, presidential leadership plays a key role on trade as Congress has delegated substantial authority to the executive branch in this policy area. While tariffs were set by Congress during the 19th and early 20th century, beginning in the 1930s Congress increasingly authorized the executive branch to levy tariffs, delegating its own responsibilities under Article I Section 8 of the US Constitution to

"regulate commerce with foreign nations" to the president (Deering 2005, 361). For the politics of trade, this creates incentives for co-partisans of the president to publicly support the trade policies proposed by the administration even if ideological or constituency pressures conflict with it.

I argue that members' attentiveness to trade follows a logic similar to foreign policy, albeit with some key differences. First, a key difference is that outparty members navigate competing pressures in an issue area with clear distributive implications. Presidents leverage the economic benefits of trade policies to claim credit for job creation and economic growth, incentivizing opposition members to avoid the issue in order to not grant too much bipartisan praise to the incumbent party. At the same time, trade offers a strategic opportunity to undermine the administration's economic agenda in the eyes of voters, prompting members to frame trade agreements as "job-killing" policies. Because trade policy directly affects industries, wages, and employment in their districts, lawmakers may use trade to highlight existing economic difficulties and blame the administration for factory closures, outsourcing, or declining wages. This makes trade a potent avenue for economic messaging, allowing outparty members to portray the president as prioritizing global interests over domestic workers.

Second, given the potential economic benefits and costs for their constituents, members face cross-cutting incentives in their position-taking on trade, which in turn shapes the level of attention they devote to the issue. Lawmakers from districts with trade-exposed industries such as manufacturing or agriculture have stronger incentives to engage with trade policy than those whose constituencies are less directly affected. For some, this means advocating for protectionist measures to shield domestic industries from foreign competition, while for others, it involves supporting free trade agreements that benefit local exporters. While these competing pressures

may lead members to inconsistent or strategically ambiguous messaging, it also incentivizes more attentiveness to trade as an issue. Whether these pressures are equally powerful as determinants of rhetoric and bill sponsorship is a key question for this chapter.

The findings here largely confirm those expectations. Like foreign affairs, Republicans are *more* active on both rhetoric and bill sponsorship, reflecting a long-standing ideological focus – or issue ownership – on economic policies as drivers of growth and prosperity. Additionally, Republicans' engagement with trade policy also shows the party's responsiveness to business interests and export-oriented industries, which have historically played a key role within the GOP coalition (Noel 2013). Importantly, members of the president's party are more likely to focus on trade policy than outparty members in their rhetoric, in line with arguments about the president's leadership on an issue which tends to be politically beneficial for the incumbent party. As a consequence of the president's leadership in trade negotiations, outparty members are incentivized to focus on other issues that draw more favorable distinctions between the parties rather than raise the salience of an issue on which the opposition may point to job-creating policies. Additionally, majority party members discuss trade and sponsor trade-related bills at a lower rate, as do more ideologically extreme members, a pattern that is not entirely surprising given the domestic focus of party agendas.

The analysis also shows that district-level manufacturing and exports to China increase members' rhetorical issue attention, confirming expectations regarding localized economic interests as incentives for (symbolic) issue engagement. This suggests that lawmakers are sensitive to the economic condition of their constituencies when deciding whether to speak publicly about trade. It also underscores how economic globalization creates domestic political pressures that blur the line between (inter-)national and constituency-driven policymaking.

Finally, members of the House Agriculture Committee, the Ways and Means Committee (which has jurisdiction over trade), and the Foreign Affairs Committees are more likely to talk about trade than other members. Members on these committees specialize in issue areas for which trade is highly salient, highlighting the continued relevance of committee assignments in an era of increasingly centralized lawmaking (Sinclair 2007; Curry and Lee 2020).

The rest of this chapter will unfold as follows. First, I will briefly discuss the expectations regarding trade policy in more detail. Because trade is an amalgam of foreign and domestic incentives, I consider to what extent the theoretical expectations are similar to foreign policy. In the next step, I describe the methodological approach in this chapter, which relies on a novel dictionary of trade-related words. Following this methodological description are two empirical sections, one focusing on the regression analysis and one examining the trade-related themes in members' e-newsletters in more detail. The chapter concludes with a short summary and a discussion of the implications for trade as part of foreign policy.

Theoretical Expectations

Both trade and foreign policy involve negotiations with other countries, executive branch leadership, and are subject to events that are not entirely under lawmakers' control. However, unlike foreign policy, trade also reflects the domestic politics of economic costs and benefits. Tariffs and trade agreements typically create winners and losers, raising trades' salience and creating disagreement over the merits of specific policies. For members of Congress, trade has the potential to cause substantial cross-pressures, pitting expectations from constituent groups, organized interests, and co-party presidents against each other. This raises the question of whether we should expect members' attention to trade issues to be subject to the same logic as foreign policy. A couple of considerations are therefore in order.

First, outparty members face competing incentives when it comes to trade policy. Like foreign policy, trade agreements are typically negotiated by the executive branch in coordination with foreign governments, limiting lawmakers' direct involvement. This dynamic creates a political dilemma for members of the opposition: while trade deals may generate broad economic benefits that attract bipartisan support, endorsing them may result in additional public approval for the party in power. Under these conditions, outparty members may either criticize the administration's approach for partisan gain or strategically pivot to issues where the governing party is more vulnerable to public criticism. Simply opposing the president's trade agenda carries political risk, especially when trade outcomes have the potential to deliver tangible economic gains for constituents. Because the consequences of new agreements – positive or negative – may not be immediately apparent, outparty lawmakers may hesitate to spotlight an issue on which the president can credibly claim future credit. As a result, outparty members may opt to downplay trade and focus attention on policy areas that are more electorally advantageous. Overall, the incentives for outparty members are mixed and potentially more complex than in other areas of foreign policy, due to the domestic economic implications of trade. I therefore hypothesize that these effects cancel each other, yielding no statistically significant results for outparty membership on trade.

Second, the economic implications of trade also suggest an increased relevance of district (electoral) pressures for members' legislative and non-legislative behavior. This is because legislators are fundamentally interested in their reelection, as all other goals depend on continued public support to stay in office (Fenno 1978). It is therefore not surprising that district-level pressures have a substantial impact on members' position-taking on trade. For example, Miler and Allee (2018) find that local economic interests act as cross-cutting pressures that offset

ideological factors such as attitudes on free trade vs. protectionism. Other studies found similar effects (e.g., Hiscox 2002). Even in electoral systems that favor party discipline, the expected consequences of trade on constituents influence politicians' trade-policy preferences (Murillo and Pinto 2023). In contrast, foreign policy is typically discussed as national policy, with the "national interest" rhetorically dominating localized considerations. As a result, I expect localized economic conditions to positively impact members' attentiveness to trade policy.

Finally, we should also expect public statements to reflect members' existing ideology on trade matters. Previous studies showed that members at ideological extremes tend to oppose free trade, while those near the center tend to support it (Xie 1999). For example, Rocca and Wang (2025) find that ideology matters more than party affiliation on members' position on steel tariffs, but that constituency-driven factors continue to be relevant. This is despite research showing that voters do not have a good understanding of trade[25] as a policy issue (see Rho and Tomz 2017), and that most citizens do not prioritize trade in their voting decisions (Guisinger 2009). While these findings might suggest a decrease in constituency relevance due to lack of voter knowledge, they also indicate a potential avenue for ideology-driven decision-making, for example through a "extremes vs. center" pattern akin to foreign policy. As proponents of free trade, I expect more moderate members to be more likely to pay attention to trade than their colleagues at the ideological extremes.

Data & Methods

Given the distinctiveness of trade policy, I developed a novel dictionary of 31 words and n-grams to measure members' attention specifically to foreign trade. In doing so, I relied on a

[25] For example, in 2024 only 45% of American voters were able to correctly answer what a tariff is (Ipsos 2024).

multi-stage process parallel to the process used to develop the foreign policy dictionary. I started with trade-related hearing transcripts and witness statements on the websites of the House Ways and Means Committee, which has jurisdiction over trade issues. Potential terms were manually identified and then validated through iterative keyword searches in congressional e-newsletters, allowing me to detect both false negatives and false positives. A manual review of LIWC's classification results for a random sample of 100 newsletters found all newsletters to be correctly identified, providing confidence in the dictionary's reliability for capturing trade communication.

The selected dictionary terms directly capture lawmakers' attention to trade policy, international commerce, and economic globalization. The inclusion of "trade" as a standalone term ensures the coverage of key trade-related n-grams, including trade agreements, trade barriers, and trade deficits. Specific treaties (e.g., USMCA, NAFTA, TPP) and international institutions (e.g., WTO, GATT) are central to public discourse on trade policy. Terms like "exports," "imports," "foreign investment," and "global market" reflect discussions on international economic engagement. Furthermore, "outsourcing," "offshoring," and "anti-dumping" address concerns about domestic economic impacts, while protectionist language captures debates on fair trade and economic nationalism. The dictionary is shown in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Trade Dictionary

Included: trade, tariff, tariffs, usmca, nafta, transatlantic trade and investment partnership, ttip, trans pacific partnership, tpp, tppa, wto, gatt, exports, imports, foreign investment, global market, outsourcing, offshoring, anti-dumping, market access, imported goods, cheap goods, fairly traded, trading practices, trading partners, currency manipulation, protectionist, protectionism, economic relationship, offshoring, american goods.
Excluded: trade unions, trade workers, trades (e.g., building trades), the trade, trade commission, publicly-traded, trade association, cap and trade, energy exporter, imported oil, imported gas, gas imports, oil imports (it's about energy policy and/or sanctions), trading stocks, trade Subcommittee, stock trading, traded.

Equally important are excluded terms, referring to concepts that are not primarily used in a trade context. “Trade unions" and “trade workers” are invoked in relation to organized labor. “Cap and trade” is a distinct term in environmental policy that gained prominence during Barack Obama’s presidency, while “publicly traded” and “stock trading” relate to financial markets and anti-corruption efforts in Congress. Energy-related imports (e.g., “imported oil,” “gas imports”) are often more relevant to energy policy and sanctions than trade, but present ambiguous cases, and are excluded here. Additionally, names such as “trade subcommittee” are excluded.

Some words appear to be trade related but are used in other contexts as well. For example, “manufacturing” and “supply chain” are frequently used in domestic economic contexts and in discussions about the Covid-19 pandemic, making them imperfect indicators of trade policy attention. Similarly, “bilateral” is typically paired with “trade” and does not add independent value. “Subsidies” appear across multiple policy domains, particularly healthcare, lacking sufficient specificity to trade discussions. The term “importation” is somewhat ambiguous, as it is repeatedly invoked in discussions spanning multiple policy domains. Overall, manual validation showed exceptional consistency between human and machine coding.

Table 6.2 presents the 10 most prolific trade-focused members as a percentage of their overall word count and indicates that there is little overlap between the percentage of words lawmakers dedicate to foreign affairs (Table 3.8 in Chapter 3) and the percentage of words focused on trade. Ranking all members by their respective trade- and foreign policy-related word use (absolute numbers) yields a weak correlation of 0.34. The correlation between the *percentage of words* focused on foreign policy and the percentage focused on trade (per member per Congress) is even weaker at 0.12, with only one lawmaker appearing in both Top 10 rankings (David Rivera). This is a strong indicator that lawmakers treat foreign affairs and trade as distinct

dimensions in their issue focus, as those who emphasize foreign affairs do not prioritize trade, and vice versa. This apparent distinction suggests that members may view trade policy primarily through an economic lens rather than as a subset of broader foreign policy concerns. In addition, Republican members are once again overrepresented among trade-focused lawmakers, a pattern that is also found in the statistical analysis below.

Table 6.2 Member Top 10 by Trade References in E-Newsletters, 111th – 117th Congress[26]

Name	State	Party	Committee	% Trade
Reichert, David	WA	Rep	WM	0.50
Space, Zachary	OH	Dem	EC	0.40
Rivera, David	FL	Rep	FA	0.39
Manzullo, Donald	IL	Rep	FA	0.38
Visclosky, Peter	IN	Dem	App	0.37
LaHood, Darin	IL	Rep	WM	0.36
Tiberi, Patrick	OH	Rep	WM	0.33
Smith, Adrian	NE	Rep	WM	0.32
Marshall, Roger	KS	Rep	SB	0.27
Armstrong, Kelly	ND	Rep	EC	0.25

Committee Abbreviations: WM = Ways and Means; FA = Foreign Affairs; EC = Energy and Commerce, AP = Appropriations; SB = Small Businesses

In addition to members' trade rhetoric, I also examine their legislative attention to trade policy by looking at all bills designated as "Foreign Trade and International Finance" by the Congressional Research Service that were introduced between 2009 and 2023. Like international affairs bills, the distribution of those bills across all members is skewed, with a few high-scoring outliers but otherwise little activity for the average member of Congress. Descriptive data for both members' trade rhetoric and their sponsorship of trade-related legislation are presented in Table 6.3. These descriptives underscore the relatively limited attention that legislators devote to trade. The median number of trade-related words per member per Congress is just three – ten

[26] Only members who sent more than 10,000 words in e-newsletters over all Congresses are included.

times fewer than the median for foreign affairs (29). Similarly, the average number of trade bills introduced per member is lower than the average for international affairs legislation. This overall pattern of limited engagement coupled with low variation across members suggests caution in not overstating small effects when interpreting the regression results for trade bill sponsorship.

Table 6.3 Descriptive Statistics for Trade-related Words and Bills (111th – 117th Congress)

	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max.
Trade Words	0	0	3.00	15.7	14	1040
Trade Bills	0	0	0	0.58	0	60

Statistical Analysis

Because trade has economic consequences, additional district-level data were collected through the U.S. Census and the University of Michigan's "CongressData" dataset (Grossmann, Lucas, and Yoel 2024). Data for the 111th and 117th Congress had to be added manually using additional sources such as the U.S.-China Business Council and US Census data. Among the new variables is district-level manufacturing share, capturing the extent to which a district's economy depends on industries vulnerable to shifts in global trade. A higher manufacturing share suggests greater sensitivity to trade policies, as these industries are often affected by tariffs, trade agreements, and international competition. Lawmakers from more trade-exposed districts should be more likely to engage in trade issues in their newsletter rhetoric and bill sponsorship.

In line with the previous literature on congressional trade policies (e.g., Beaulieu and Magee 2004; Miler and Allee 2018), the share of a district's population with a college degree is used as a proxy for free trade sentiment. The argument is that those without a college degree often prefer protectionism because "unskilled" workers are at risk of seeing their jobs being outsourced to countries with cheap labor. Likewise, the share of white-collar workers may be

inversely related to protectionist sentiment, possibly inducing members to pay less attention to trade as an issue area. In addition, the value of exports to China by congressional district (in US-$) is used as another variable for local economies' vulnerability to trade shocks such as tariffs (U.S.-China Business Council 2019). At the state level, I introduce trade dependency as a composite measure that combines the share of a state's imports and exports as a percentage of its gross domestic product (GDP). This variable captures the degree to which a state's economy is influenced by cross-border trade, reflecting its economic exposure to global markets. In theory, members from trade-exposed states might be more likely to reference trade in their rhetoric or introduce more trade-related bills. Lastly, three committees were identified as having special relevance to trade: Ways and Means because of its jurisdiction over trade, Foreign Affairs because of the trade's relevance to foreign policy, and Agriculture due to farmers' dependence on specialized equipment and products. Thus, members of those committees should be more active on both trade rhetoric and bill sponsorship.

Table 6.4 presents the results from two negative binomial models: one estimating members' trade-related rhetoric (word count), and the other estimating their sponsorship of trade-related bills (bill count). Negative binomial regression is appropriate given the count nature of the dependent variables and the overdispersion in the data. Both models include Congress fixed effects to account for temporal variation. Member fixed effects to test for possible within-member variation were not feasible due to the large number of zeros, which led to convergence issues. Notably, the results remain substantively unchanged when using robust standard errors clustered by legislator.[27]

[27] Seniority is not significant when using clustered SE.

Independent variables are grouped by institutional position, district considerations, and committee position. A first look at the institutional determinants of trade attention reveals patterns of party and chamber control that are similar to foreign policy but differ in one key aspect: Outparty members reference trade in their newsletters at a *lower* rate than inparty members. More strikingly, Republican members both use more trade-related words and sponsor more trade bills than their Democratic colleagues. Chamber control and ideological extremity on the other hand show negative coefficients, similar to the patterns observed on foreign policy. However, in contrast to foreign policy, members of the House Freedom Caucus do not stand apart from other Republicans in their trade focus when included in a split-sample test with only GOP members. Results for the split sample can be found in Table A5 in the Appendix.

In addition, two economic district-level variables stand out as positive predictors of trade rhetoric but not trade bill sponsorship: Manufacturing share per district and the value of exports to China per congressional district, meaning that lawmakers from districts with more manufacturing or more exports to China talk more about trade in their e-newsletters. Surprisingly, the share of foreign-born residents per district is inversely related to the count of trade references in newsletters and the count of trade bills introduced. The reasons for this particular result are unclear, as lawmakers from more diverse districts should be more likely to focus on international topics, all else being equal. Additionally, being from a competitive district does not have a negative effect on the rate of trade references in newsletters. This is possibly due to trade being more of a "bread and butter" issue with economic relevance in the eyes of lawmakers running in swing districts. As such, the potential negative effects of a supposedly "foreign" subject area on members' attentiveness to trade are offset by its perceived relevance for voters.

Table 6.4 Predictors of Trade Policy Rhetoric and Legislation (111th – 117th Congress)

	Negative Binomial Regression: Log of Expected Count	
	Model 1: Newsletter attention to Trade (# of words)	Model 2: Trade legislation introduced (# of bills)
Institutional Position		
Outparty	-0.435***	-0.173
	(0.067)	(0.138)
Republican	0.727***	0.296*
	(0.079)	(0.156)
Majority	-1.154***	-0.840***
	(0.140)	(0.251)
Ideological Extremity	-1.862***	-0.732
	(0.269)	(0.476)
Seniority	0.014*	0.024*
	(0.007)	(0.013)
District Considerations		
Trade Dependency (State)	0.003	0.009
	(0.004)	(0.006)
White Collar % (District)	-1.023	-1.199
	(0.710)	(1.242)
Exports to China (District)	0.0003***	0.0002
	(0.0001)	(0.0001)
Manufacturing % (District)	2.249***	1.886
	(0.799)	(1.415)
Foreign-Born Population (District)	-0.968***	-1.482**
	(0.362)	(0.676)
% College Degree	0.087	-1.486
	(0.563)	(1.062)
Competitive District	0.065	0.081
	(0.095)	(0.168)
Committee Position		
Agriculture Com	0.358***	0.094
	(0.100)	(0.184)
Ways and Means Com	0.869***	0.864***
	(0.112)	(0.176)
Foreign Relations Com	0.317***	0.668***
	(0.102)	(0.171)

# of Words	0.00003***	
	(0.00000)	
# of Sponsored Bills		0.069***
		(0.005)
Constant	2.279***	-0.690
	(0.463)	(0.830)
Observations	2,786	2,786
Log Likelihood	-8,165.059	-1,745.101
theta	0.438*** (0.014)	0.327*** (0.028)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	16,380.120	3,540.202
Note:		*p**p***p<0.01

Interpreting the substantive meaning of negative binomial regression coefficients is challenging because of their logarithmic form, meaning a one-unit change in an independent variable leads to a multiplicative change in the dependent variable. To make results more intuitive, coefficients can be converted into incidence rate ratios (IRRs) by exponentiating them, which shows the percentage change in the expected count of the dependent variable. Table 6.5 makes it easier to interpret the regression coefficients in Table 6.4 by transforming coefficients into an incidence rate ratio (IRR).[28] Results as a rate change per standard deviation increase are shown in the last column of Table 6.5.

Several results stand out. First, Republicans discuss trade at a much higher rate on average. As Table 6.5 shows, GOP members use trade-related words more than twice as much as Democrats, holding all else constant and controlling for the overall number of words in newsletters. Importantly, including another indicator variable for the 115th and 116th Congress does not change the magnitude of the effect, suggesting that this pattern is not an artifact of the Trump era. Instead, the GOP's trade focus aligns with its long-standing pro-business stance,

[28] To adjust the incidence rate ratio (IRR) for a one standard deviation change in the independent variable, the coefficient is first multiplied by the standard deviation and then exponentiated.

which has emphasized lower tariffs, deregulation, and open markets since the 1970s, regardless of shifting political dynamics.

Table 6.5 Transformation of Trade Coefficients into % Rate Change (Newsletters)

Variable	Coefficient	Incidence Ratio (IRR)	Std. Dev or Binary	One-SD change IRR	% change
Outparty	-0.435	0.647	1	0.647	**-35%**
Republican	0.727	2.069	1	2.069	**106%**
Majority	-1.154	0.315	1	0.315	**-69%**
Ideological Extremity	-1.862	0.155	0.2619	0.614	**-38%**
Seniority	0.014	1.014	4.3724	1.063	**6%**
Exports to China	0.0003	1.000	380.191	1.121	**12%**
Manufacturing %	2.249	9.478	0.0462	1.109	**11%**
Foreign-born %	-0.968	0.380	0.1104	0.899	**-10%**
Agriculture Com	0.358	1.430	1	1.430	**43%**
Ways and Means Com	0.869	2.385	1	2.385	**138%**
Foreign Relations Com	0.317	1.373	1	1.373	**37%**

Note: Coefficients are only converted into incidence ratios for statistically significant predictors.

Second, other institutional factors such as majority party status and ideological extremity show similar effects to the ones described in Chapter 4. Majority party members reference trade at a rate 69% lower than minority members, focusing on issues that reflect the domestic agenda of their respective party. In a similar way, ideologically extreme members have little incentive to discuss trade or sponsor trade bills at a rate higher than other members given their focus on more polarized issues. Outparty members' reduced focus on trade is in line with their broader strategy of emphasizing contrasts with the governing party, prioritizing topics that offer clearer partisan divides, greater electoral mobilization potential, and less risk of promoting the incumbent president's success in negotiating trade agreements with other countries. This suggests that trade, while important, is often overshadowed by issues that offer more immediate political benefit in legislators' communication with constituents and other stakeholders.

Third, legislators are responsive to trade's distributive dimension, as indicated by the district-level effects shown in Table 6.5. Both district manufacturing and the value of exports to China are significant predictors, increasing the rate of trade references in lawmakers' newsletters at a similar magnitude of 11-12% for each standard deviation increase. Notably, this effect does not extend to trade bills, suggesting a more symbolic (or "performative") responsiveness to district interests. This allows legislators to signal attentiveness to local economic concerns without the cost of sponsoring legislation on an issue which Congress has mostly delegated to the executive branch. By referencing trade more frequently, lawmakers from export-heavy districts may appease constituents who worry about the impact of global trade on their communities.

Fourth, committee effects are apparent for both rhetoric and bill sponsorship. As expected, members of the House Ways and Means Committee talk about trade at a rate more than twice as high as other members (138%) and sponsor trade bills at a similarly increased magnitude. Additionally, members of the Foreign Affairs and Agriculture Committees also pay more attention to trade, although this effect is limited to rhetoric for those who sit on the Agriculture Committee. This focus reflects the connection between agricultural policy and international trade, as many farmers depend on export markets for their products. Trade agreements, tariffs, and import competition directly impact commodity prices, making trade a central concern for members from agriculture-heavy districts. By emphasizing trade in their rhetoric, these lawmakers signal their responsiveness to farm-state constituents and industry groups.

Members' Trade Rhetoric

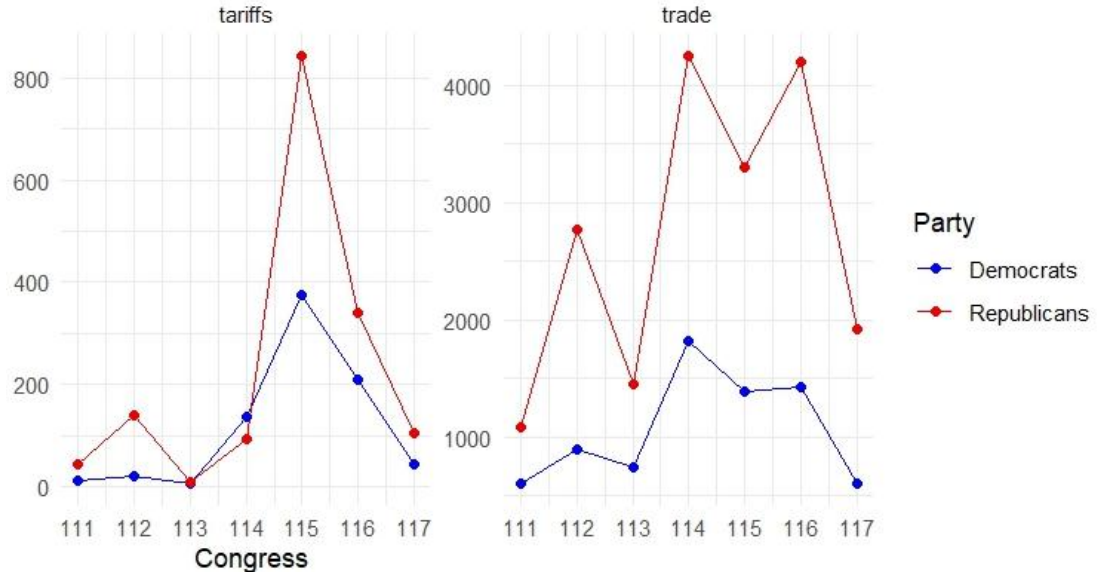
The previous section points to institutional, ideological, and electoral effects as key predictors of members' attentiveness to trade. However, it is not yet clear what the *thematic* focus of members' trade rhetoric is. Among the factors that I expect to stand out in members' newsletters is presidential leadership, as both the Obama and Trump administrations pursued new trade agreements with foreign nations during the period of this study (2009-2023). Trump's zero-sum, mercantilist thinking on trade as candidate and president broke with the free-trade policies of previous administrations of both parties and, while facing some pushback among Republican elites, spurred a resurgence in protectionist sentiment among the Republican base. Consequently, partisan attitudes towards trade liberalization flipped between 2011 and 2021, with Republican voters now being more skeptical of free trade than Democrats (Keser et al. 2024).[29]

Figure 6.1 indicates the prevalence of trade-related terms among lawmakers over time. As shown, members of both parties focused more on tariffs during the 115th Congress (2017-2019), Donald Trump's first two years in office. During that time, Trump used his authority to levy tariffs on imports from numerous countries. While Republicans in Congress sought to avoid too much public criticism of Trump's policies, newsletters indicate widespread GOP skepticism about the impact of tariffs on domestic consumers and businesses. Then-House member and now-Senator Roger Marshall (R-KS) argued at the time, "…although the president provided a limited exception to Mexico and Canada, I still believe there are other countries included in this tariff that should not be, and I encourage the president to re-evaluate this target."

[29] While voters agree in the abstract that "trade is good," most Republicans (52%) say that international trade is bad for job creation in the United States, while only 30% of Democrats agree (Friedhoff 2024).

In line with heightened GOP attention to trade, now-Florida Governor Ron DeSantis was among Trump's intraparty critics, decrying tariffs on imports from Mexico in one of his newsletters as a "tax on American consumers." Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY), during the 115th Congress still seen as a member with a moderate voting record, worried about the impact of new tariffs on steel and aluminum from allies such as Canada: "I strongly oppose these tariffs on our nation's closest economic partner. If President Trump wants to target Chinese steel dumping, he should target tariffs at China and not at our friends to the North." This public opposition to the policies of a same-party president provides a notable contrast with House Republicans' mostly uncritical public cheerleading during the first weeks of Donald Trump's second term, which saw a renewed executive focus on tariffs as an instrument of economic coercion, leverage, and revenue (Gamio and Swanson 2025). Overall, Figure 6.1 speaks to the GOP advantage on trade-related messaging in e-newsletters.

Figure 6.1 References to Tariffs & Trade, 111th – 117th Congress



During the 115th Congress, Jim Cooper (D-TN) was the Democratic member with most references to tariffs in his newsletters, frequently including media headlines and explaining the

impact of trade policies to his constituents, arguing that one specific tariff was "… a tax on every consumer who wants to buy a washing machine." Representing a rural Midwestern district, his colleague Collin Peterson (D-MN) criticized the tariffs as well, saying "… tariff standoffs with many of our trading partners are harming wheat growers and other commodities, and the payments USDA will soon issue are not going to be enough to help farmers recoup their losses." Other outparty members such as Suzan DelBene (D-WA), educated their voters about efforts to offset the effect of tariffs on jobs and industries: "This week, I introduced legislation to offer assistance to American workers whose jobs are being affected by President Trump's tariff blitz." Overall, members' newsletter rhetoric during the 115th Congress provides evidence for bipartisan pushback against presidential trade policies that broke with previous administrations' approach. At the same time, the low overall frequency of references suggests that tariffs remain a niche topic for most members.

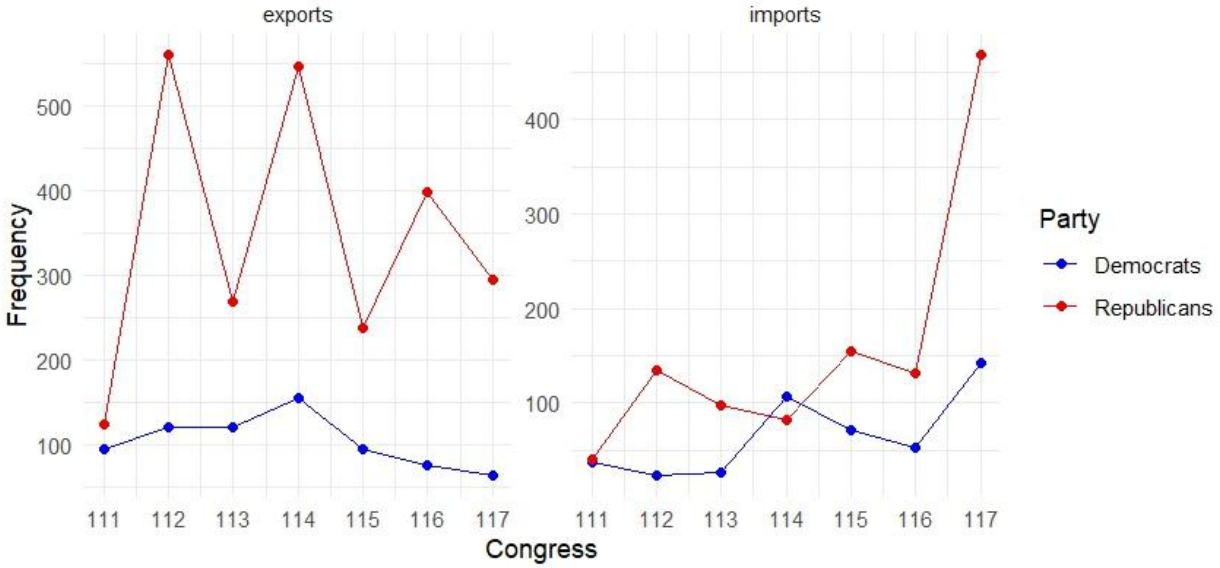
Trade policies as an instrument of foreign policy also allow the United States as the world's largest economy to exert considerable political influence on international politics without the use of military force. Economic sanctions, tariffs, and export controls are frequently used to punish adversaries, deter aggression, or incentivize policy changes. During the 114th Congress (2015-2017), Rep. Tom Emmer (R-MN) referred to bipartisan foreign policy initiatives regarding Cuba, saying "Back in July, Kathy Castor (D-FL) and I introduced the Cuba Trade Act of 2015 which would lift the trade embargo on Cuba. A majority of Americans agree that it is time to allow the Cuban people to learn firsthand, that democracy and capitalism are necessary for a better economy and overall way of life." In his newsletter, Emmer framed lifting trade restrictions as an important step towards improving relations between Cuba and the US and

incentivizing the Cuban regime to improve its human rights record. Importantly, Emmer represented a district with a disproportionate share of manufacturing industries.

In a similar way, Rep. Walter Herger (R-CA), a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, discussed the potential impact of US economic sanctions on Iran's nuclear program during the 112th Congress (2011-2013): "I'm encouraged that the sanctions passed by Congress in 2010 have substantially reduced foreign investment into Iran's economy, undermining their nuclear program." Geopolitical arguments using trade as a "hard power" foreign policy tool were also prevalent among members during the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Rep. Juan Vargas (D-CA) explained one of his votes to his constituents by referencing trade as an economic weapon in lieu of military intervention: "On March 17, I voted to revoke permanent trade relations with Russia and Belarus in response to Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion of Ukraine. By banning trade relations, President Biden will raise tariffs on goods from Russia and Belarus, further isolating both countries' economies and depleting war funds."

Figure 6.2 shows that Republicans reference exports at a higher rate, a noteworthy contrast with the more balanced use of "imports." Overall, 8 out of 10 references to exports in newsletters are made by Republican members. The increased focus on imports during the 117th Congress is the result of U.S. economic sanctions against Russia following its actions in Ukraine. Then-Representative and now-Senator Markwayne Mullin (R-OK) – representing a district with higher-than-average manufacturing – combined general agreement with the use of these policy tools with criticism of the administration's energy policy: "Though president Biden finally banned the imports of Russian crude oil and petroleum, he did not announce the amplification of American oil and gas."

Figure 6.2 References to Exports and Imports, 111th – 117th Congress

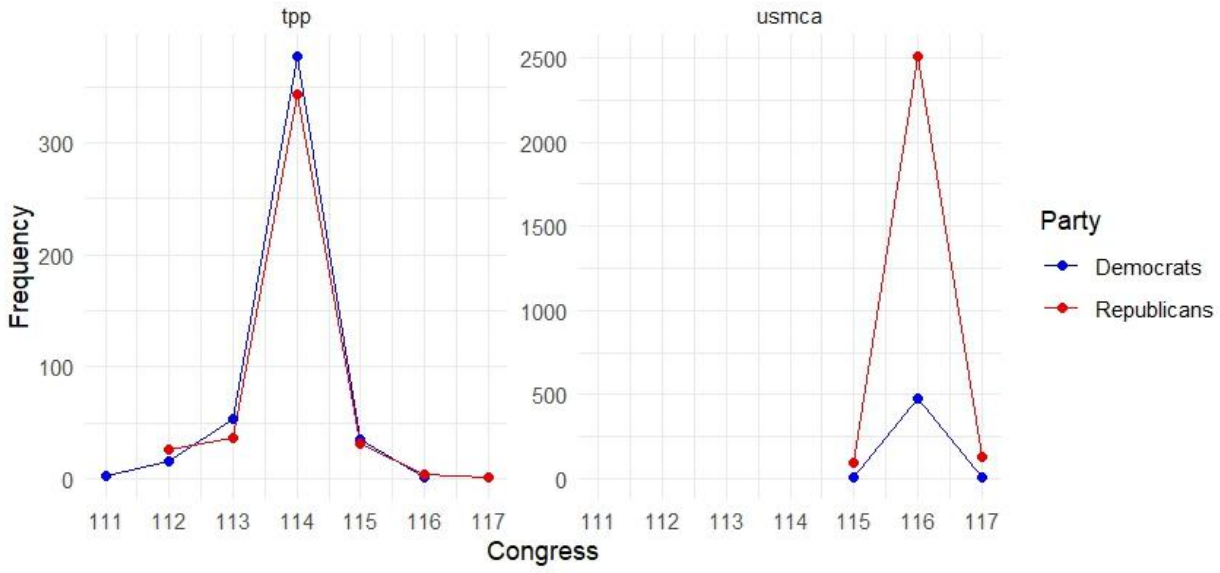


Giving credit to a same-party president, Rep. Kathy Castor (D-FL) touted her support for Ukraine: "Following the historic and powerful sanctions imposed by President Biden to hold Putin and Russia accountable, I voted to ban Russian oil and gas imports and send support to people of Ukraine and their armed forces." As one of eight members to vote against the suspension of normal trade relations with Russia, former Freedom Caucus chair Andy Biggs (R-AZ) did not oppose the suspension itself, but other provisions of the bill that he interpreted as a trojan horse for Democratic domestic policy priorities: "The bill would amend the Global Magnitsky Act to allow President Biden to create his own definition of 'human rights abuses' and target any foreign individual anywhere in the world. Given the Biden Administration's radical view that access to abortion is a human right, I fear this provision could be used to target pro-life leaders…"

Although outparty status is generally negatively related to the discussion of trade, Figure 6.3 indicates that Republicans matched their Democratic colleagues in discussing the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement between the U.S. and several Asian countries

during the 114th Congress (2015-2017). Favored by the Obama administration, the agreement had significant economic and geopolitical implications as a key component of the Obama's "pivot to Asia." At the time, lawmakers explained their position in newsletters, reflecting tensions between "free traders" and "protectionists" that divided both parties. While the agreement was signed by 12 countries in 2016, the U.S. never became a party to it. Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, who had initially supported TPP as Secretary of State but now faced criticism from Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump for her economic policies, distanced herself from TPP during the presidential primary, echoing concerns about its impact on American jobs.

Figure 6.3 Newsletter References to TPP and USMCA, 111th – 117th Congress



Opposition to free trade has been more prevalent among Democrats since the 1970s, when unions shifted their position in a more protectionist direction (Karol 2009). Accordingly, legislators who have union ties or who come from regions which have seen a loss of blue-collar jobs are often more opposed to agreements such as TPP. One of those members, Rep. Richard Nolan (D-MN), referenced TPP more often than any other lawmaker during the 114th Congress,

with 168 mentions overall: “This TPP agreement – negotiated in secret for the benefit of 600 multi-national corporations – will send more good jobs overseas and threaten the very existence of our domestic steel industry we need to rebuild America.” While some Democratic members supported new trade agreements negotiated by the Obama administration, midwestern lawmakers such as Marcy Kaptur (D-OH) – representing a district with a higher share of manufacturing industries – continued to voice concerns: “The South Korea, Colombia, and Panama agreements will simply continue the failed trade policies embodied by NAFTA.” Opposition to free trade united more moderate members from swing districts with the most progressive House Democrats. Rep. Jerry Nadler (D-NY), representing parts of Manhattan and Brooklyn at the time, argued that “Ever since NAFTA was passed in 1993, the American people have been sold the same propaganda – that free trade will boost exports and create jobs.” Republicans such as Rep. David McKinley (R-WV) also questioned the impact of trade agreements on his constituents during the 114th Congress: “The damage done to manufacturing in West Virginia by past free trade laws, such as NAFTA and CAFTA, is devastating.”

Table 6.6 shows that during the 114th Congress, members from the Great Lakes region (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Ohio) referenced TPP at a higher rate. The dependent variable measures the frequency with which each member mentioned TPP in newsletters, while the key predictor is an indicator variable for whether the member represents a Great Lakes state. Given the region’s history of manufacturing job losses, its representatives are more inclined to scrutinize new trade agreements. Even after controlling for partisanship, ideology, and other member-level characteristics, the effect of regional representation remains strong. This suggests that district-level economic concerns rooted in trade-related dislocation are a powerful driver of rhetorical engagement with trade policy.

Table 6.6 TPP References (114th Congress)

	Negative Binomial Regression: Log of Expected Count
Republican	-0.109
	(0.650)
Competitive District	-1.395***
	(0.520)
Great Lakes	2.738***
	(0.634)
Exports to China	0.001***
	(0.0002)
Manufacturing %	-8.017***
	(3.040)
Controls for Ideology/Committee	Yes
# of Words	0.00003***
	(0.00000)
Constant	-1.319
	(1.040)
Observations	408
Log Likelihood	-468.824
Note:	*p**p***p<0.01

David McKinley's position was not shared by everyone within the House Republican Conference. Rep. Iliana Ros Lehtinen's (R-FL) view during the 113th Congress (2013-2015) reflected a positive attitude towards NAFTA in the years before Donald Trump's rise: "The economic opportunities created by NAFTA are especially important in my home state of Florida, where international trade and foreign investment create one out of every six jobs." While lawmakers' focus on the TPP agreement subsided in subsequent years, Rep. Don Bacon (R-NE) expressed hopes for a "better" version of TPP during Trump's first term in office: "I had a much-needed meeting with President Trump this month to fight for our robust AG economy and

discuss the impact of tariffs on Nebraska farmers. I urged the president to protect our farmers in Nebraska when discussing new trade deals and tariffs. The president said he'd reconsider rejoining TPP negotiations to get a better deal. I think this is necessary to open trade doors to eleven other countries." Bacon's approach of combining a pro-trade message with a plea for the need to protect farmers indicates how members navigate the cross pressures of constituency interests, presidential leadership, and ideology rhetorically.

During the 116th Congress (2019-2021), Republicans referenced the NAFTA replacement "U.S. – Mexico – Canada – Agreement" (USMCA) five times as much as Democrats, a pronounced inparty effect during a time when the GOP could claim few political victories. In contrast, their Democratic colleagues avoided discussion of the USMCA mostly for two reasons: First, raising the salience of an issue on which Trump could credibly take credit would undermine the opposition's arguments about his failures. Pivoting to other policies is therefore a rational strategy for a vote-maximizing opposition party. Second, many Democrats saw themselves in agreement that the deal was an improvement over the status quo. Unsurprisingly, GOP members celebrated the agreement as a fulfilled campaign pledge for Trump, who ran on a protectionist platform, lamenting unfair trade practices and the outsourcing of American jobs. While the USMCA keeps core elements of NAFTA in place, it also requires a higher percentage of North American-made auto parts and stronger labor protections, particularly in Mexico, while also modernizing other trade rules. Figure 6.3 reveals that the attention to the new trade agreement was limited to the 116th Congress, a strong indicator of presidential agenda-setting power and a consequence of decades of congressional delegation of trade policymaking to the executive branch (Irwin 2017). New York Republican Chris Collins explicitly referred to the chief executive in his newsletter, writing "Thanks to President Trump and the USMCA, western

New York dairy farmers will now be able to compete fairly in Canada, and American farmers will be protected burdensome tariffs and regulations." Kevin Yoder (R-KS) focused more on the economic benefits of the new agreement: "USMCA will create more balanced, reciprocal trade that supports high-paying jobs for Americans and grow the North American economy." Overall, discussion of the USMCA followed the pattern of stronger GOP and inparty support, in line with the statistical analysis above.

Conclusion

Trade and foreign policy are similar in several ways. Both involve the United States' interactions with other countries and are shaped by executive branch leadership rather than direct congressional involvement – despite Congress' power to regulate foreign commerce under the U.S. Constitution. Both subject areas are influenced by global power dynamics and often framed in terms of national interest and strategic priorities. Both provide members of Congress with opportunities to engage symbolically even when their formal legislative influence is limited. However, unlike foreign policy, trade has distinct economic and distributive consequences. Its blend of domestic and international considerations presents members of Congress with multiple competing incentives. While voters often do not understand the implications of specific trade policies (Rho and Tomz 2017), legislators still take great care in navigating the cross-pressures of constituency interests, presidential leadership, and ideological considerations.

The findings presented in this chapter underscore the impact of partisanship, institutional position, and economic pressures in shaping lawmakers' engagement with trade. Republicans' heightened focus on trade – both in rhetoric and bill sponsorship – mirrors their activities on foreign affairs. As a party that is traditionally tied to business interests, the GOP's attention to trade reflects both historical party priorities and strategic responsiveness to economic interests.

The significant role of district-level manufacturing and export dependencies highlights the extent to which trade remains a politically salient issue subject to local economic concerns. While majority party control and ideological extremity suppress trade-related activity, members serving on key committees with jurisdiction over trade show that institutional positions remain a key determinant of legislative issue attention.

The evidence presented in this chapter also underlines significant intraparty variation in how members of Congress engage with trade, balancing economic arguments with geopolitical considerations. While some lawmakers emphasize the economic benefits of trade agreements, such as market access and job creation, others frame trade policy through a national security lens, particularly in response to strategic foreign policy considerations. While Congress tended to be more protectionist than the executive branch throughout much of the 20th century, this dynamic shifted during Donald Trump's presidency, as his administration's use of tariffs marked a departure from traditional Republican orthodoxy, drawing criticism from within his own party.

Overall, the findings in this chapter underscore the impact of pragmatic, reelection-driven considerations on lawmakers' engagement with trade policy, as members balance partisanship with the economic interests of their constituencies. While trade and foreign policy are similar in many respects, economic factors play a more central role in shaping members' attentiveness to trade policy. The potential for beneficial or adverse economic consequences of trade agreements creates distinct incentives for lawmakers to engage, particularly when local industries and jobs are at stake. This economic dimension makes trade policy politically salient at the district level, prompting members to weigh district and national interests in ways that differ from their approach to foreign policy more broadly.

Chapter 7 - Discussion and Conclusion

This dissertation seeks to understand how and why members of Congress are attentive to foreign policy. The central puzzle is that members pay attention to this policy area, even though it offers few of the electoral or material benefits emphasized in traditional theories of congressional behavior. Unlike trade policy, which links international politics to domestic economic interests, foreign affairs do not offer distributive benefits for members of Congress. There is no "bacon" to bring home; no infrastructure projects, no federal grants, and no jobs to take credit for. Additionally, lawmakers are aware that foreign policy ranks low on most voters' priority lists, with the exception being crises involving American casualties. Compounding this, the president's constitutional authority as chief diplomat and commander-in-chief places Congress in a largely reactive position. Given these constraints, conventional wisdom suggests that House members outside of relevant committees should not be concerned with foreign affairs.

The findings presented in this dissertation challenge the notion that lawmakers neglect foreign policy, offering robust evidence for the relevance of both institutional and individual motivations driving lawmakers' attention to international affairs. While a substantial body of literature has explored interbranch dynamics in foreign policy, there has been no systematic assessment of the extent to which individual legislators engage with these issues. This dissertation addresses that gap by putting a special emphasis on rhetoric in addition to bill introduction – arguing that members' constituent communications provide valuable insight into their policy priorities. This is because e-newsletters allow lawmakers to bypass many of the gatekeeping constraints associated with other forms of legislative behavior. Paired with bill sponsorship data, a traditional indicator of legislative behavior, rhetorical analysis offers a fuller

picture of lawmakers' attentiveness to foreign affairs. Chapters 4 to 6 revealed how and why members choose to speak and act on foreign policy.

Findings & Takeaways

Partisan Asymmetry

A common theme in this dissertation is the increased Republican activism on foreign affairs and trade. This is surprising, as I expected outparty status to be a major predictor of members' attention to foreign affairs because its executive dominance offers an opportunity to tarnish the incumbent party's standing by tying its president to foreign crises. Instead, the empirical chapters suggest that this partisan asymmetry exists independently of control of the White House. The evidence presented here shows that GOP members are more attentive to both foreign and trade policies in general, regardless of institutional or constituency effects. The magnitude of this effect is not trivial, with chapters 4 and 6 documenting a two-fold increase in the rate of foreign affairs and trade references in comparison to Democrats. This finding contributes to a growing literature in American politics documenting party differences in communication patterns (Russell 2021; Gaynor 2024), oppositional tactics in Congress (Theriault 2013; Green 2019), ideological homogeneity (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016) and ideological extremism at the state and federal level (Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Mann and Ornstein 2012; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; McCarty 2019; Blum 2020; Grumbach 2023; Heseltine 2025). This project is another reminder that Democrats and Republicans prioritize a different set of issues and values.

Specifically, the partisan asymmetry revealed here speaks to the concept of issue ownership, as America's two major parties each have differing topical foci. Scholars found that voters trust the two parties on specific subject areas, giving their candidates an advantage when

the salience of those issues increases during campaigns. For example, voters trust Democrats in policy areas that invoke compassion and empathy such as healthcare, education, and the social safety net (Hayes 2005). Candidates benefit from their party's public image by credibly claiming to be better able to "handle" such issues. As one of the first to examine issue ownership, Petrocik (1996) documented a GOP advantage on foreign policy and defense during the 1980s but classified foreign affairs generally as "performance issue" on which neither party had an inherent advantage. Similarly, Egan (2013) found that Republicans "owned" defense and national security, but said little about foreign policy. In contrast, newer studies find that partisan polarization has reduced the impact of issue ownership on voter evaluations of candidates and parties (Wright, Clifford, and Simas 2022). The findings here suggest that Republicans "own" foreign policy even in a highly partisan environment.

This pattern raises important questions about Republican members' attentiveness to foreign affairs that is not explained by the existing literature on party differences. While control of the presidency does not appear to be the driving factor in Chapter 4, the thematic focus of its foreign policy rhetoric points to presidential criticism as a core theme among Republicans. This is consistent with recent findings that see Republicans as a more "presidency-centric" party, regardless of their role as co- or out-partisans. For example, Alexander and Jacobs (2023) find Republicans to be "… systematically more reactive to the White House's position on legislation than their Democratic counterparts." Other studies also find Republican messaging efforts to be more consistent (Green et al. 2024; Cormack 2024), serving as a reminder of the distinct nature of America's two major parties and the GOP's more pronounced oppositional tactics (Gervais and Morris 2018), including a more sophisticated public messaging operation (Gaynor 2024).

Conversely, the partisan asymmetry presented here raises important questions about Democrats' lack of foreign policy focus. The Democratic party stands in a proud foreign policy tradition, shaping international affairs throughout the 20th century from Wilson's "Fourteen Points" to Roosevelt's and Truman's post-World War II liberal international order. As believers in liberal internationalism, Democrats tend to emphasize a multilateral approach to foreign affairs, placing trust in diplomacy, international institutions, and universal human rights. Hence, few observers of U.S. politics would see Democrats to be fundamentally less interested in America's role in the world, as evidenced by the fact that leading foreign policy entrepreneurs can be found in both congressional parties. Clearly, the rhetorical asymmetry revealed in this study invites further inquiry into the strategic or structural reasons behind Democratic members' lack of focus on foreign policy.

While the possibility of measurement choices as an explanation for this pattern cannot be ruled out entirely, the magnitude of GOP foreign policy focus remains robust to alternative dictionary choices, for example when excluding more militaristic terms such as "terrorism," "drone strike," "bombing," and "air strike." The results are also unaffected by the inclusion of "Benghazi," a term reflecting House Republicans' investigations into the 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy in Libya ("Benghazi"). Instead, this subdued attention to foreign policy is likely shaped, at least in part, by the nature of the Democratic Party's coalition. In general, Democrats put forward ambitious domestic reform programs, reflecting their coalition's policy-demanding organized interests (Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Bawn et al. 2012). These groups seek concrete domestic progress on economic and social welfare spending, incentivizing elected officials to prioritize such issues over international relations, especially on subjects with broad consensus

within the party (Hacker et al. 2024). Because Democratic members of Congress reflect the party's issue consensus, they will be less inclined to spend time and resources on foreign affairs.

In addition, polls indicate that the foreign policy asymmetry might also be influenced by public opinion, adding another facet to this dynamic. For example, YouGov found in March 2023 that 56% of Republican voters said foreign policy is important to them, but only 40% of Democrats did (YouGov 2023b). In addition, a May 2025 YouGov survey found that on foreign policy, 37% of voters trust the GOP more than Democrats, whereas only 33% trusted Democrats more (YouGov 2025). While that number is similar to Donald Trump's approval on handling foreign policy early in his second term (36% approved "strongly" or "somewhat" in April/May 2025), the gap is virtually identical to the August 2024 and December 2023 YouGov results (32% and 29% for Democrats, and 38% and 36% for Republicans, respectively), indicating that short-term shifts in presidential approval do not fully explain the persistence of this pattern. If voters have more trust in Republicans' ability to handle foreign affairs, then future scholarship should further examine the implications of the GOP's issue advantage for legislative behavior.

Institutional Position

Beyond this partisan asymmetry, this dissertation also serves as a reminder of the importance of institutional dynamics in shaping lawmakers' issue attention. In contrast to the partisan dynamic, the evidence for the impact of majority party status on foreign and trade policy is not as strong, producing mixed results in the three empirical chapters. I hypothesized that majority party members should be less focused on foreign affairs, because party agendas are typically domestic in nature and majority parties have an opportunity to enact their program. While between-member variation shows no significant difference between minority and majority members in Chapter 4, within-member variation – reflecting the use of legislator fixed effects –

reveals a negative effect on members' foreign policy attentiveness when someone switches from the minority to the majority, consistent with the expectation that agenda control incentivizes a change in issue focus towards domestic priorities. While majority status yields null results for specific issues such as Israel and Latin America, its impact on trade is negative overall. A substantively significant decrease in trade references and trade bills for majority party members suggests that trade issues are not prioritized because lawmakers focus on their domestic agenda. Additional work should extend this analysis to floor speeches, leveraging additional variation over time to uncover the effects of chamber control on members' trade and foreign policy focus more comprehensively. Doing so would also enable scholars to study multiple decades, allowing a more detailed examination of the relationship between majority status and control of the White House.

Ideological Extremism

Furthermore, my findings also document the impact of ideological factors on members' issue attention. Roll-call based measures of ideological moderation/extremity such as DW-NOMINATE produce statistically significant negative effects on foreign affairs (within-member) and on trade (between-member), suggesting that more moderate lawmakers are more likely than their ideologically extreme colleagues to discuss these issues in e-newsletters. On foreign policy, I argued that moderate members are inclined to focus on a less polarized issue area to demonstrate bipartisan appeal, as bipartisanship is perceived as an effective way to "get things done" in addition to be understood by moderate members as being desirable per se (Volden and Wiseman 2014). In addition, it is well established that voters value legislative effectiveness and bipartisanship (Harbridge 2015; Westwood 2022), making foreign policy a strategic choice for lawmakers seeking legislative impact. Importantly, the evidence for ideological factors on bill

sponsorship is more mixed, as evidenced by the null effect on trade bills and the inconsistent effects on international affairs bills. This may in part reflect the relatively low number of foreign policy bills sponsored overall, which limits variation and may reduce the ability to identify ideological patterns, serving as a reminder that lawmakers typically focus on other issues when authoring legislation.

Interestingly, the evidence of being a member of an ideologically extreme intraparty organization such as the House Freedom Caucus is more robust and consistent. As arguably the ideologically most extreme faction in the House of Representatives (Bloch Rubin 2017; Green 2019; Clarke 2020), HFC members stand apart from other Republicans as less focused on foreign affairs in their newsletter rhetoric. Consistent with expectations, ideologically motivated groups like the HFC prioritize domestic social and economic issues. This finding is also in line with studies finding a trade-off between partisan rhetoric and legislative effectiveness, as lawmakers who amplify partisan messaging tend to be less effective in moving bills through the legislative process (Lin and Noble 2024). While the overall "effectiveness" of the House Freedom Caucus is subject to scholarly debate (Green 2019), its impact on GOP politics has been characterized as a negative agenda setter with detrimental effects on the GOP's legislative productivity (McGee 2020).

Constituency Effects

Another persistent theme in this dissertation is the influence of constituency interests on members of Congress' attentiveness to foreign affairs. All empirical chapters provide evidence that lawmakers remain responsive to the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of their constituencies. The statistically significant impact of the share of foreign-born residents, the ethnic composition of the electorate, district-level economic conditions, and regional specificities

such as the historically traumatic experience of the loss of manufacturing jobs in the industrial Midwest show the enduring relevance of the electoral connection. While rising polarization and the decline in competitive congressional districts (McCarty 2019) have amplified the role of partisanship in shaping legislative behavior, they have not eliminated the importance of constituency-based considerations. Rather, the findings suggest that even in an era of increased ideological polarization, lawmakers continue to calibrate their foreign policy engagement in ways that reflect the interests and identities of their constituents. As Chapter 5 has shown, lawmaker ideological lean has limited relevance when it comes to constituency-focused issue attention; more moderate members are not more or less likely to focus on Israel or Latin America. Instead, members of Congress' own ethnic background has been proven to be a considerable amplifier of constituent interests.

One might question whether members' rhetorical issue focus offers meaningful benefits for constituents, as elected officials might create the impression that they "pander" to parochial interests. While symbolic representation that does not result in direct policy change might be relatively costless for members of Congress, a substantial literature offers arguments for its relevance in strengthening the relationship between representatives and those who are represented (e.g., Piscopo 2011; Hayes and Hibbing 2017; Vishwanath 2024). Scholars have found that descriptive representation, which is based on shared identity, can reinforce trust and political efficacy among minority communities, especially when paired with substantive policy responsiveness. Yet, even when policy outcomes are not immediately affected, symbolic forms of representation – such as public gestures, cultural recognition, or rhetorical outreach – may help build a sense of inclusion and trust between lawmakers and constituents (Eulau and Karps 1977). In today's digital communication environment, tools like e-newsletters allow members to

engage in this kind of symbolic politics more directly and frequently. These forms of communication enable lawmakers to signal their priorities, affirm shared identities, and shape how they are perceived by the public. In doing so, they maintain the representative bond in ways that matter politically, even if such efforts do not always translate into legislation. Taken together, all empirical chapters provide solid evidence for the persistence of the "electoral connection" (Mayhew 1974).

Legislator Background

In addition to constituency factors, this dissertation also underscores the importance of legislators' personal backgrounds in shaping their issue attention. While district-level characteristics are strong predictors of members' focus on regions such as Israel and Latin America, personal factors – particularly ethnic background – also play a significant role. These "personal roots of representation" (Burden 2007) influence how lawmakers engage with specific international issues, complementing prior findings that link member ethnicity to foreign policy activism in Congress (Uscinski et al. 2009). Although a growing body of literature has identified a significant relationship between prior military service and legislators' policy priorities – particularly on defense and veterans' affairs – this dissertation finds no such effect. Contrary to studies that show veterans are more active on military-related issues and more likely to emerge as foreign policy "entrepreneurs" (Carter et al. 2004; Cormack 2021; Lupton 2021a), the statistical analyses presented here do not reveal a consistent or significant impact of military experience on foreign policy engagement via newsletters and bills. Given the decline of foreign policy expertise in Congress (Goldgeier and Saunders 2018), this is problematic news of Congress' ability to provide a meaningful check to the executive dominance of foreign affairs.

Finally, I provide evidence to the extent to which members' attentiveness to trade mirrors foreign policy. As an issue area that blends domestic economic interests with international considerations, legislators exhibit a familiar partisan asymmetry: Republican lawmakers are more rhetorically and legislatively active on trade, reflecting traditional party priorities as a "free market" party. Importantly, the analysis highlights intraparty variation in how trade is framed and politicized, especially considering recent turn towards protectionism under the Trump administration. Reflecting presidential leadership on trade as a salient factor and in contrast to foreign policy, members of the president's party are more attentive to trade policies in their newsletters. This suggests that inparty members are ready to "sell" their party leaders' efforts in securing economic benefits to their constituents. During the time period examined here, Obama's planned but not executed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Trump's tariffs threats and the NAFTA-replacing USMCA provided multiple opportunities for lawmakers to offer public support or criticism regarding the administration's trade policies. Importantly, Chapter 6 also illustrates the continued responsiveness of members to export- and manufacturing-heavy constituencies. Overall, these patterns underscore how pragmatic, reelection-oriented incentives – mediated by party – continue to structure congressional behavior on trade.

Contributions

This project contributes to our understanding of legislative issue attention and the relationship between Congress and foreign affairs in several ways. First, it is the first study to systematically examine lawmakers' attentiveness to foreign affairs across all members of Congress, providing a novel data source with significant potential for future research. Its individual focus presents a shift away from interbranch relations on foreign affairs towards a theoretical framework of issue attention that centers the individual representative, highlighting

partisan, constituency, and personal incentives. In doing so, this study echoes earlier work on members of Congress' legislative and non-legislative behavior (e.g., Fenno 1978) and applies a rational-choice framework to explore previously understudied patterns of foreign policy rhetoric and bill sponsorship. The findings presented here build on the existing literature studying the impact of issue substance on congressional-executive relations, members' ideological positions, and interest group activism (Rohde 1994; Jones 1995; LeLoup and Shull 1999; Lee 2009; Harbridge 2015; Porter and Case 2025).

Second, this dissertation contributes additional empirical evidence to the growing body of research highlighting the asymmetric nature of America's two major parties (Mann and Ornstein 2012; Grossman and Hopkins 2016; McCarty 2019; Blum 2020; Russell 2021; Grumbach 2023). Republican and Democratic members of Congress represent disparate party coalitions and, as a consequence, differ in their issue focus. Accordingly, future scholarship should examine the extent to which foreign policy has become a "Republican owned" issue (e.g., Egan 2013). Specifically, more work is needed to understand the reasons why Republican members of Congress put more emphasis on international affairs and why they are more active on foreign trade on both bill sponsorship and rhetorical engagement. Chapter 4 indicates that Republican members often view foreign policy through a national security lens – an issue area in which their party enjoys a consistent advantage in public trust – potentially explaining their heightened engagement. Conversely, the relative lack of foreign policy focus among Democratic legislators also warrants closer examination. Taken together, these patterns underscore the evolving nature of both parties and the need for additional research on how asymmetric politics shapes congressional behavior across issue domains.

Third, this study adds a new perspective to existing accounts of political representation. Previous research emphasized the value of shared identity as a reason why some legislators might be more suitable to represent traditionally marginalized communities in substantive ways. However, these studies were almost exclusively focused on domestic issues. While there are good reasons to suspect issues such as civil rights, the economy, and social welfare to be prioritized over America's role in the world, I present evidence that members' own ethnic background matters a great deal for their attentiveness to foreign affairs. While lawmakers who don't share the same descriptive characteristics as many of their constituents might still be effective advocates on their behalf by acting as "surrogate representatives,"[30] I show that ethnic background is a powerful predictor of members' attentiveness to world regions or specific countries. This raises the larger question of how descriptive representation might inform our understanding of the nature of U.S. foreign relations. While it is foremost the executive branch which conducts diplomatic relations with the rest of the world, members of Congress' shape public perception, conduct oversight, and engage in their own foreign policy entrepreneurship on behalf of their constituents (Carter and Scott 2009). Accordingly, this study provides a valuable foundation for further inquiry into the personal roots of Congress' attentiveness to trade and foreign affairs.

Fourth and finally, this project does not examine foreign affairs in isolation from other adjacent issue areas but instead incorporates trade as a subject area that is both domestic and foreign in nature. Unlike international affairs, foreign trade concerns core economic interests of members' constituencies, creating cross-cutting incentives for legislators. I demonstrate that members' attentiveness to trade policy is shaped by a complex interplay of partisanship,

[30] E.g., Mansbridge 1999 and Miler 2018.

institutional roles, and local economic pressures. While voters themselves may not fully understand trade policy, members of Congress respond strategically to constituency interests, presidential leadership, and balance those with their own ideological commitments. Republicans exhibit a heightened rhetorical and legislative focus on trade, likely driven by their historical party priorities and responsiveness to economically affected districts. Notably, members' rhetorical themes reveal significant intraparty variation, with some lawmakers emphasizing trade's economic benefits and others linking it to national security concerns. Chapter 6 also serves as a reminder that party orthodoxy may shift over time, particularly under the Trump administration's protectionist agenda, which disrupted the GOP's post-1970s free-trade consensus (Karol 2009). Overall, the findings presented here serve as a reminder how pragmatic, reelection-driven considerations continue to influence congressional behavior on trade.

Implications for the Study of Congress

The findings of this dissertation offer several important lessons for future scholarship on Congress' role in foreign affairs and members' individual issue attention. First, the partisan dynamic uncovered in this study provides further evidence for the (inter-)nationalization of political conflict in the United States. Using the "national interest" as a partisan talking point to damage the president's popularity for electoral gain raises serious normative questions about the ability of elected officials to act in unison on the world stage. Scholars and policymakers alike have expressed concern in recent years about domestic polarization undermining U.S. foreign policy interests (e.g., Schultz 2017; Goldgeier and Saunders 2018; Pillar 2023) as hyper-partisanship combined with the erosion of social trust and cohesion harm America's "domestic political capacity to translate […] power assets into international influence" (Trubowitz and Harris 2019: 621). In particular, the continued nationalist turn of the Republican party under

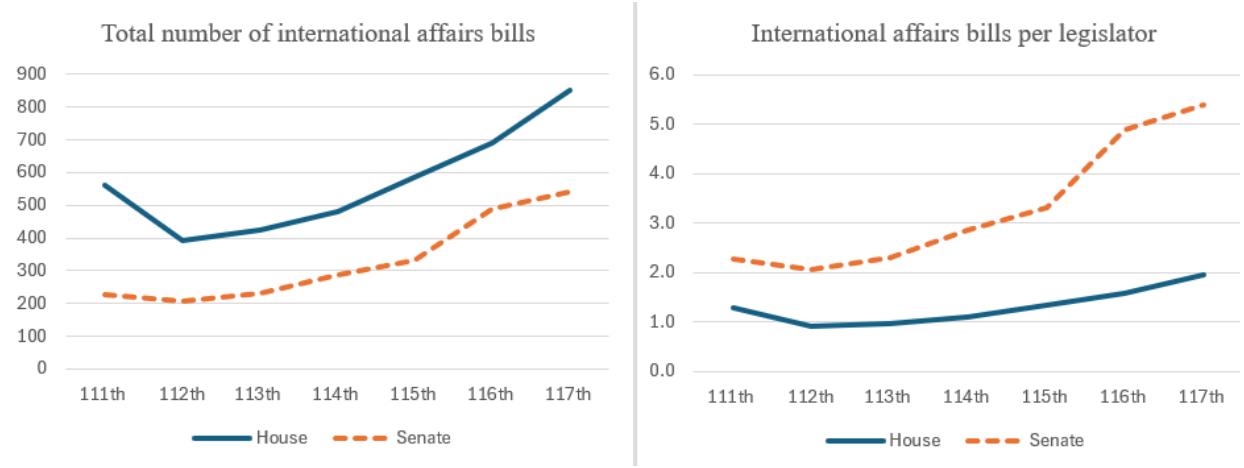
Donald Trump raises the specter of a long-term "populist politicization" (Cadier 2023) of U.S. foreign policy that sees international affairs as mere extension of domestic conflict, practicing an adversarial form of politics in a quest against political opponents and their programs. These concerns compound with an increasing power imbalance between Congress and the executive branch on national security (Binder, Goldgeier, and Saunders 2024), making divided government a necessary condition for meaningful oversight and accountability over an empowered presidency.

However, these normative considerations also open the door to a deeper discussion about what constitutes an "appropriate" level of disagreement in Congress and the broader public regarding America's role in the world. A more polarized foreign policy discourse is not inherently problematic, just as bipartisan consensus is not inherently virtuous. In fact, bipartisan unity has historically enabled serious foreign policy failures (Tuttle 2022), and foreign adversaries may respond more seriously to U.S. actions when they are backed by unified party support rather than half-hearted consensus across the aisle (Schultz 2001). No branch of government, political party, or chamber of Congress holds a monopoly on sound foreign policy judgment, and both parties continue to exhibit substantial internal disagreements over important foreign policy questions (Tama 2023). Therefore, incorporating these normative considerations into future studies on contemporary asymmetries between America's major political parties would ensure the field's continued focus on the real-world consequences of partisan polarization.

In addition, while this study revealed several institutional and personal factors that influence members' attention to foreign policy, we know little about the relationship between legislators' *position* in foreign affairs and its impact on voter evaluations. Do voters see legislators who focus on foreign relations in a different light, possibly favoring politicians who

are perceived to be "tough" on the world stage (see Druckman and Holmes 2004)? Or, conversely, do voters reward elected officials who frame foreign affairs in a more bipartisan way by invoking the "national interest?" It may be that the reduced relevance of candidate-specific factors such as prior experience and incumbency for election results (Algara and Bae 2024) also reduces the potential benefits for candidates' issue frames. Regardless, more empirical evidence on the effects of issue framing on voter evaluations would inform our understanding of the scope conditions under which members of Congress choose to invest their time and energy.

Figure 7.1 Introduced International Affairs Bills in both Chambers



Furthermore, this project focused exclusively on House members as Congress' lower chamber presents a least-likely test for lawmakers' attentiveness to foreign policy. A natural extension of this research would be to incorporate the Senate, which has traditionally been more the more foreign-policy-oriented chamber because of its power to provide "advice and consent" on treaties and executive appointments (Gillette 1953; Schlesinger 1973; Baker 2000). Figure 7.1 supports this bicameral distinction, showing that individual senators sponsor, on average, at least twice as much foreign policy legislation as their House counterparts. Additionally, senators' six-year terms insulate them somewhat from immediate electoral pressures, allowing for greater autonomy in pursuing foreign policy initiatives that reflect national rather than parochial interests

(Carter and Scott 2009, 39). It is conceivable that partisan attention patterns are less pronounced in the Senate, where norms of reciprocity, courtesy and bipartisanship have weakened considerably, but not to the point of complete extinction (Sinclair 2007; Kriner and Schickler 2016; Curry and Lee 2020). Whereas the House majority consistently advances a partisan agenda (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Lee 2009), minority party legislators continue to play a significant role in the less hierarchical and more individualistic Senate, partly because of the 60-vote threshold for cloture (MacNeil and Baker 2013). Noble's (2023) finding that the impact of outparty status on references to the president is muted in the Senate and Clark, Lazarus and Schorpp's (2021) conclusion that presidents enjoy greater support on foreign policy roll-call votes in the House than in the Senate speak to the value of a bicameral perspective in future extensions of this dissertation.

Another important question for future studies is the possible variation of lawmakers' rhetoric across different venues and platforms. Are there systematic differences in issue attention between constituent-facing outlets such as newsletters and institutional settings such as floor speeches? If so, what drives these differences, and what do they reveal about legislators' strategic decision-making? For instance, Green et al. (2024) report a moderate correlation between partisan positioning in newsletters and floor speeches that leaves substantial variation unexplained. This suggests that legislators actively tailor their rhetoric to their audience and the institutional context in which they operate. To better understand these dynamics, it is imperative to include other forms of political communication in future studies. Such an approach not only provides a more comprehensive view of how members engage with foreign policy across different arenas but also enables the study of rhetorical change over time. Given the deepening of partisan polarization in recent decades, studies might uncover venue-specific and temporal shifts

in the way lawmakers frame international issues. If it is true that Congress defines the nation's "public sphere" (Mayhew 2000), then political scientists need to examine how elected officials shape public discourse.

Another important implication for future research on Congress' issue attention is the efficacy of legislative behavior outside of formal institutionalized structures. While congressional committees continue to play an important role in shaping the legislative process, their role has atrophied in recent years due to more leadership-centric lawmaking (Sinclair 2007; Curry and Lee 2020; Gaynor 2024). This raises important questions about the extent to which members who are not on relevant committees may emerge as issue leaders, including on foreign policy. Research shows that lawmakers often take cues from committee leaders and senior members when casting key votes (Box-Steffensmeier, Ryan, and Sokhey 2015), suggesting a strong institutional influence on members' position-taking. However, issue leadership may also arise through other channels, such as public rhetoric, bill sponsorship, or media engagement. Future research should explore the conditions under which rank-and-file members outside of the formal committee jurisdiction are able to act as issue entrepreneurs and influence the broader policy discourse. A better understanding of these alternative institutional pathways would significantly advance the literature on congressional policy entrepreneurship (e.g., Schiller 1995; Wawro 2000; Sulkin 2005; Carter and Scott 2009; Lantis 2019).

Lastly, normative concerns should also inform analyses of how ethnic advocacy groups shape the formulation of American foreign policy. While diaspora groups play an important role in representing the diversity of America's electorate, they also prioritize parochial agendas, which may conflict with the broader national interest (Shain 1999, see also Smith 2000). This dynamic poses a challenge for both researchers and policymakers, as it touches on the tension

between democratic responsiveness and coherent foreign policymaking. Despite important contributions (e.g., Rubenzer 2011; Thurber, Campbell, and Dulio 2018), more systematic research is needed to understand when, how, and under what conditions ethnic interest groups shape the foreign policy agenda. For example, Paul and Anderson Paul (2009) argue that the Israeli and Cuban American interests have been more successful in influencing public policy than other comparable ethnicity-based interest groups because of the alignment of their goals with U.S. national interests, their ability to present a unified voice, and the political and financial resources they command play pivotal roles in their success. In sum, the influence of organized constituency groups on foreign policy remains an underexplored but potentially consequential area for scholars of legislative behavior and political representation.

Conclusion

The question of what members of Congress do and why they do it lies at the heart of legislative studies. In this dissertation, I investigated the puzzle of why lawmakers pay attention to foreign policy. Because this issue area is dominated by the executive branch, doesn't offer distributive benefits, and is not prioritized by voters, it may seem counterintuitive for individual legislators to devote attention to foreign affairs. Yet, as this study demonstrates, members are engaged in shaping America's role in the world not just through legislation, but also through their constituent communication.

I put forward a theoretical framework that centers on several key incentives. I argue that members' attention to foreign affairs is shaped by a confluence of partisan priorities, institutional positions, ideological commitments, and their personal background. Overall, I find broad support for my arguments. Employing a dictionary-based text-as-data approach, I present evidence for the persistence of partisan asymmetries, constituent pressure, and members' own identity. The

findings presented here have broader implications for how we understand members of Congress' issue attention, the relationship between them and their constituents, and the evolving nature of party competition.

While foreign policy will not be the main focus of most lawmakers, we now have a clearer understanding of the conditions under which they do engage – and why. Ultimately, this dissertation demonstrates that members of Congress' foreign policy behavior is not insulated from domestic political dynamics but is instead intertwined with the broader themes of American politics.

Appendix

Figure A1: Word Cloud of Bills designated as "Armed Services and National Security"

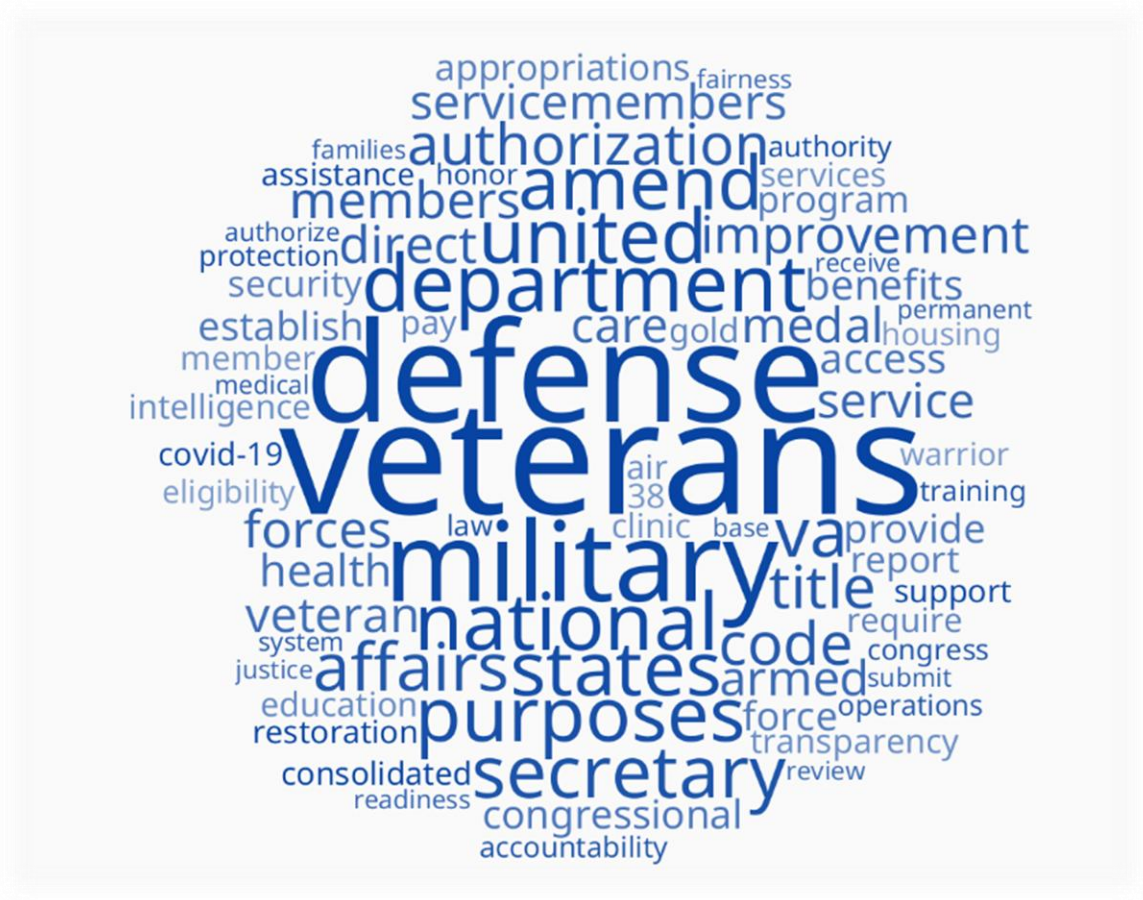
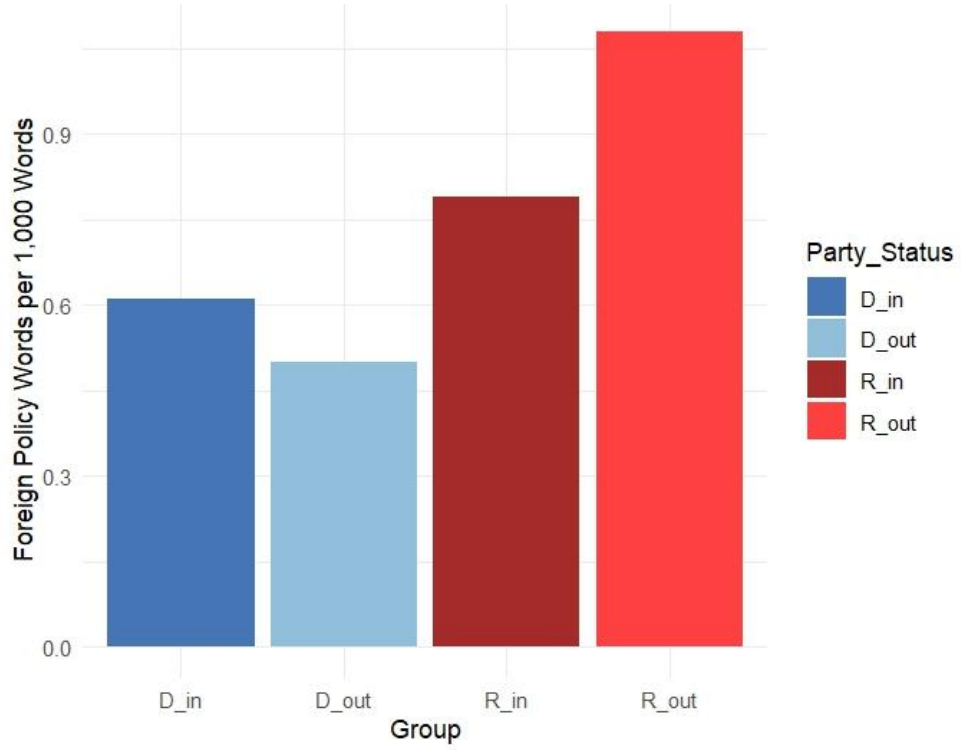


Figure A2: Foreign Policy Word Rate by Party and Outparty Status – Country names excluded



Coding Instructions for Human Coders of Congressional Newsletters

Dear coders,

Thank you for making time to code 300 newsletters according to their foreign policy content. Your help with this dissertation project is greatly appreciated. The following instructions are meant to help you make coding decisions.

Task: You will receive an Excel file with a random sample of 300 newsletters sent by members of Congress between 2009 and 2023. The column "body" will contain the text of the newsletters. Please **read** each newsletter and determine **whether these newsletters discuss foreign policy.** If you think they do, then code them "1" in the column titled "foreign policy." If not, code them "0" (zero).

What counts as "foreign policy"? We're looking for content mentioning topics and words like:

- E.g., U.S. relations with other countries ("allies", "adversaries"),
- E.g., International organizations such as the United Nations, Nato, etc.
- E.g., Global conflicts such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or US intervention in Libya 2011,
- US policy towards specific world regions (e.g., the Middle East),
- Non-state actors such as terrorist organizations (Al Qaeda, ISIS, etc.),
- Foreign aid, or general aid to countries,
- Congressional delegations visiting foreign countries,
- International treaties (e.g., arms control efforts),
- US military deployments abroad,
- US Sanctions against foreign countries, persons, organizations, corporations.

This is not an exhaustive list. Newsletters that discuss foreign policy will often mention other countries, especially America's main adversaries such as Russia, China, or Iran. However, newsletters may discuss foreign policy without mentioning specific countries. A member describing a bill that would strengthen US support for global human rights might refer to "authoritarian regimes." A legislator who calls on the president to issue new sanctions against persons or entities might refer to criminal organizations rather than countries (e.g., drug cartels or terrorist organizations). These would be considered to be mentions of foreign policy even though they do not specify another country.

When you determine that a newsletter concerns foreign policy, **enter "1" in the corresponding "foreign policy" column.** When you think it does not, **code it "0".**

As you read through more newsletters, you'll become more skilled at identifying the policy content, and you may find yourself skimming rather than reading each one in detail. That's fine.

The following pages contain some examples. Some newsletters will discuss adjacent policy areas such as trade, immigration, and climate. Those are generally **not** considered foreign policy.

However, there are ambiguous cases in which you need to rely on your own judgment. The last page of this guide provides some examples of such ambiguous cases.

Examples of foreign policy-related rhetoric in newsletters (coded "1"):

"What should the international community do in response to human rights violations in Egypt and Syria? Reports of rising international turmoil and human rights abuses continue to surface in the news this week."

"Whether a month or a year, Iran's determined march toward possessing nuclear weapons is a direct and grave threat to the United States and our allies."

"The Obama Administration needs a strategy to defeat, not just contain, this terrorist threat. Congress, as always, stands ready to work with the Administration where necessary to help protect and defend the American people and support our allies."

"I oppose the disingenuous actions by the Palestinian Authority leadership to solicit condemnations of Israel and to extract land guarantees through the United Nations and not at the negotiating table. It is the long-standing U.S. practice to exercise its veto and opposition to such measures."

"This week President Obama addressed the nation on the mission in Libya and announced NATO led forces will now be leading the effort to stabilize that country."

"Rep. Rich McCormick (R-GA) has introduced a bi-partisan resolution with Rep. Jared Moskowitz (D-FL) recognizing India's territorial claim to the disputed Arunachal Pradesh region against aggression by communist China."

"The Congressmen traveled throughout Afghanistan to assess ongoing military efforts to defeat al Qaeda and the Taliban insurgency. These operations are helping to secure the Afghan people and denying al Qaeda or other terrorist organizations safe havens that can be used to launch attacks."

"On July 14, 2015, President Obama announced that an agreement had been reached between Iran and the six major powers (United States, Russia, China, Britain, France, the United Kingdom and Germany) to curb Iran's nuclear program and increase international inspections."

"Last week, I went to Eastern Europe to do this and to visit with foreign leaders from Lithuania and Ukraine. Congressman Flores meets with U.S. Paratroopers stationed in Lithuania. This visit provided me with close-up examples of Russia's aggression in the region."

"After returning from the trip a few weeks ago, I sat down with Peggy Chang of Voice of America to discuss the four-nation visit, the importance of U.S.-China relations, and the increasing threats of a nuclear armed North Korea. You can catch last month's interview by clicking here."

“The terrorist murders of our ambassador to Libya and three other brave Americans and the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Egypt were a shock to us all. They should make us examine President Obama's foreign policies and leadership in general, and the use of foreign aid more specifically.”

Examples of newsletters that have no foreign policy content (coded “0”):

“Some of the consequences of the Affordable Care Act we have already seen: fewer full-time jobs, canceled health plans and increased premiums for those who can find insurance.”

“Today, the House passed the bipartisan CARES Act, the next phase of Congress' COVID-19 response.”

“Recognizing that working- and middle-class families are still struggling in this tough economy, last week the United States Senate passed legislation that would extend all of the tax cuts for another year, except for those that go only to the richest 2% of Americans.”

“Recently, the IRS has further degraded trust from the American people. The House passed bills this week to address the agency's scandal surrounding political targeting of non-profits and the lack of agency accountability.”

“We must use our power and every tool at our disposal to secure the border, stop the reckless spending, and hold the Biden Administration accountable for their incompetence, abuse of power, and failed policies.”

Newsletters discussing TRADE, IMMIGRATION, CLIMATE, and VETERANS are NOT considered foreign policy:

Trade newsletters typically mention trade agreements, tariffs, or offshoring of American jobs to other countries. Those are NOT considered foreign policy (coded “0”).

“In recent years, I believe our relationship was more give on the part of the United States and more take on the part of our allies. President Trump has attempted to right this wrong by negotiating the United States-Mexico-Canada Trade Agreement (USMCA).”

“While tariffs are the least desirable trade tool in our kit, they are a necessary one, and I believe the President is right to use them. However, we need to ensure that when we apply tariffs, we do so in a way that puts the maximum amount of pressure on China so that they change their behavior while also mitigating against the adverse effects on our own producers, manufacturers and economy.”

“South Korea - U.S. Free Trade Agreement Gains Momentum Last Wednesday marked the 3rd anniversary of President Bush signing the South Korea - U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA). Three years have passed, and Congress has yet to act on this monumental and important agreement.”

“But countries with which we are negotiating trade deals today do not have the same respect for the rule of law, labor standards or workers' rights. For instance, as drafted, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade deal currently being negotiated with 11 countries, will hurt American workers and continue the trend of corporations offshoring jobs and driving down wages.”

“During my time in Congress, I have opposed trade agreements that are bad for U.S. manufacturers and American workers, including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Unfortunately, the TPP is more of the same.”

“The United States is the most influential country in the global economy. In order for the U.S. to maintain that position, it is necessary that we continue to expand our trade partnerships throughout the world. Free trade opens new markets to America's agricultural and industrial producers and allows our economy to expand, which means more jobs right here at home in Georgia's Eighth Congressional District.”

Immigration newsletters typically mention the border, specific immigration policies, and migrants. Those are NOT considered foreign policy (coded “0”).

“President Biden's border crisis has hurt our country and put our security at risk. Since October of last year, Border Patrol has had 1.6 million migrant encounters. This includes 56 suspected terrorists and an unknown number who were not stopped.”

“The Keep Families Together Act prohibits separating undocumented children from their parents. It also requires more child welfare training for Customs and Border Protection officials and agents.”

“We need Homeland Security on the job to help our local police, stop terrorists, and secure our borders. I joined with responsible people in both parties to keep this agency open, and I'm pleased to report that we were successful because we stood firm and united.”

“Once there was funding for the border wall, an end to chain migration, and an end of the visa lottery system, President Trump would allow a DACA deal. Instead, the Democrats showed that they do not believe in compromise.”

“This month, I met a Guatemalan woman who spent $28,000 to get herself and each of her three young granddaughters into the United States through illegal means. The girls wore matching pink polka dot shirts as they waited to be processed at the Border Patrol detention facility in McAllen, Texas.”

“And in the last few weeks, the Biden Administration granted amnesty to nearly half-a-million Venezuelan migrants and began issuing identification cards to illegal immigrants.”

Climate & energy rhetoric typically mentions US climate policies or refers to international agreements like the Paris Climate Accords. Those are NOT considered foreign policy (coded “0”).

"I am thrilled by President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement. It is high time that we do away with this unconstitutional treaty negotiated by former President Obama,"

“Climate Action Now Act , my bill to ensure that the U.S. honors our commitments detailed in the Paris Agreement and lays the groundwork for further climate action.”

“After more than 2,300 days of excuses and delays, it is time to approve the Keystone XL Pipeline . On Friday the House passed legislation approving long overdue constructions of the pipeline.”

“The U.S. is home to a wealth of natural resources and recently surpassed Russia to become the world leader in the production of oil and natural gas. Yet, as it stands, much of that crude oil is unable to be exported into the global market.”

“The Citizens Climate Lobby has been meeting with Members of Congress from all over the country, to discuss the effects of climate change. Climate change is a serious issue that could prove to be devastating not only to our environment but also to our economy.”

“The Paris agreement imposed steep, unrealistic cuts to American emissions while letting big polluters like China continue to pump out greenhouse gases. Submitting to the agreement sacrificed our ability to act in the United States' best interests with nothing to be gained in return. So I applauded President Trump's decision to withdraw from the agreement last June.”

Veteran affairs newsletters typically mention veterans who are honored, benefit from federal programs, or subject of new bills. This is considered domestic policy, **NOT** foreign policy (coded “0”).

“As an Air Force veteran, I admire the young men and women who choose to build their careers in the service; attending a military academy is just one way to pursue this, as you may have seen in this week's Morning Mailbag.”

“The House has recently passed important legislation affecting veterans. These bills help to uphold our nation's commitment to those who have volunteered in her defense: H.R. 2189 addresses the disability claims backlog at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) by establishing a commission or task force charged with examining the root causes of the backlog.”

“Jeffrey graduated from Pacific High School in 2008 and joined the U.S. Army the following year. After completing basic and advanced training at Fort Benning, Georgia, he was stationed at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage, Alaska before being deployed to Afghanistan in 2011.”

“This week, I joined Rep. Jackie Speier (D-CA), Chair of the Subcommittee on Military Personnel, to introduce bipartisan legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives to establish a "Safe to Report" policy across the military.”

“I also had the pleasure of welcoming renowned military historian and retired British Army Major Timothy Kilvert-Jones to Nebraska this month. I first met Maj. Kilvert-Jones at the 70th

anniversary of the D-Day landings. When he found out that I was from Nebraska, he reminded me that President Eisenhower notably declared that it was a Nebraskan, Andrew Jackson Higgins who "won the war for us."

“Today, we enjoy our liberty because of the brave service members throughout our history who were willing to fight and die. Even those who did not die in combat, returned from war profoundly changed.”

Newsletters that are ambiguous might refer to the foreign policy implications of adjacent policy areas such as trade or immigration. Here, use your **own judgment** to code “1” or “0” and add a note in the “Notes” column.

“We must do all we can to hold Putin accountable for senselessly attacking the Ukrainian people and undermining global stability. The suspension of normal trade relations is an essential part of our effort to restore peace, save lives, and defend democracy.” *Here, the focus is on Russia’s actions against international peace. Despite the reference to “suspending trade relations”, the example can confidently be coded as foreign policy. (“1”)*

“Free trade is a critical component of our free market economy, and expanded trade opportunities grow our economy and create jobs here in America, deepen ties with allies, and let us write the rules of the 21st Century global economy, rather than China or Russia.” *Here, the main focus is trade, but the justification is geopolitics. If the rest of the newsletter is about trade, then code “0.” If more geopolitical references follow, code “1.”*

“This bipartisan legislation introduced by Foreign Affairs Chairman Eliot Engel and Ranking Member Michael McCaul aims to address the root causes of migration by bringing hope back to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.” *Immigration is the main topic, but they also refer to conditions in foreign countries. Rely on remaining newsletter context to determine the coding.*

“Back in July, Kathy Castor (D-FL) and I introduced the Cuba Trade Act of 2015 which would lift the trade embargo on Cuba. A majority of Americans agree that it is time to allow the Cuban people to learn firsthand, that democracy and capitalism are necessary for a better economy and overall way of life.” → *This can be coded as foreign policy, since the main focus here is NOT on trade restrictions but rather on its effects on Cuba and the long-term relations between Cuba and the US. (“1”)*

“Today, Reps. Adriano Espaillat (NY-13) and Joaquin Castro (TX-20) led a bipartisan letter to President Biden, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas , and Secretary of State Antony Blinken urging the administration to expand Temporary Protected Status protections for migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua.” *Here, the main focus is migrant’s status in the US. If the main focus is not relations with foreign countries, or the conditions in these countries, then code “0.”*

“There's no one fix to our nation's immigration crisis. We need to secure our border, but we also need to make sure that other nations are held accountable for their role in the crisis. That's where

the House Foreign Affairs Committee comes in. This week, we considered the Regional Immigration Diplomacy and Enforcement (RIDE) Act, which would authorize the Secretary of State to negotiate regional immigration agreements with countries like Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala." *Since it concerns the administration negotiating international treaties, coding "1" would be appropriate.*

"We passed legislation to protect our nation's Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) by banning reserve oil exports to China. President Biden has used the SPR as political cover for his extreme climate agenda and its disastrous consequences. At the same time, Biden has been supplying China with U.S. oil. Somebody must tell the President that China is not our friend, and American oil and gas producers are not the enemy!" *In this example, climate, energy, and geopolitics are interconnected. Use your own judgment by relying on context to code "1" or "0."*

"This bill is a critical step towards boosting economic development, creating more jobs, and strengthening our national security objectives. We have the resources to supply our NATO allies with North American energy and mitigate the national security risks that come with dependency on Russian and Middle Eastern oil." *Here, geopolitics is used to justify US energy policy. Coding "1" is defensible because other national security and foreign affairs arguments are mentioned in this newsletter.*

Table A1: Random sample for the use of "weakness" from March/April 2023.

"The inexcusable inaction of this administration demonstrates weakness."	Patrick McHenry (R-NC)
"Everyone from China and Russia to cartels and terrorist groups are emboldened by President Biden's continued weakness on the world stage."	Jacob LaTurner (R-KS)
"In the last two years under President Biden and Speaker Pelosi, the United States went from peace through strength to flat-out weakness on the global stage."	Brian Mast (R-FL)
"The world is more unstable with the Biden Administration at the helm. Instead of leading from a position of strength, Biden is leading with weakness through teleprompter."	Wesley Hint (R-TX)
"In August 2021, we all watched in horror as the Biden Administration's disastrous Afghanistan withdrawal left 13 of our servicemembers dead and allowed the Taliban to retake the country in days. It was particularly difficult for me and my fellow veterans who sacrificed so much to stabilize this region to see such weakness portrayed by the United States on the world stage."	Jennifer Kiggans (R-VA)
"But even corrupt Mexican officials don't enrich the cartels as much as President Biden does. We will continue to see the cartels and thugs emboldened as Biden projects weakness."	Matt Gaetz (R-FL)
"This is just another example of this Administration displaying weakness toward the security of our nation."	Robert Wittman (R-VA)

Table A2: Foreign Policy References – Split by Party

Negative Binomial Regression: Log of Expected Count		
	Republicans	Democrats
Outparty	-3.030**	-0.238*
	(1.341)	(0.135)
Majority	0.007	-0.133
	(0.666)	(0.220)
HFC	-0.225**	
	(0.095)	
Ideological Extremity	0.146	0.148
	(0.203)	(0.387)
Jewish	-0.165	0.338***
	(0.237)	(0.124)
Hispanic	0.030	-0.249**
	(0.149)	(0.119)
Veteran	0.090	0.023
	(0.056)	(0.127)
Seniority	-0.012*	0.002
	(0.007)	(0.009)
% Foreign Born	2.119***	1.556***
	(0.349)	(0.366)
Competitive District	-0.099	-0.111
	(0.075)	(0.119)
District Vote	0.001	-0.002
	(0.003)	(0.004)
Relevant Committees	0.606***	0.795***
	(0.083)	(0.126)
# of Words	0.433	-0.096
	(0.659)	(0.197)
Constant	5.145***	2.002***
	(1.362)	(0.330)
Congress fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,458	1,328
Log Likelihood	-7,602.781	-5,362.646
Akaike Inf. Crit.	15,251.560	10,765.290
Note:		*p**p***p<0.01

Table A3: International Affairs Bills – Split by Party

Negative Binomial Regression: Log of Expected Count		
	Republicans	Democrats
Outparty	0.043	0.147
	(0.097)	(0.094)
Majority	0.040	0.329
	(0.190)	(0.235)
HFC	0.104	
	(0.156)	
Ideological Extremity	0.895**	0.645
	(0.362)	(0.463)
Hispanic	0.219	-0.380***
	(0.243)	(0.141)
Veteran	0.196**	-0.176
	(0.098)	(0.155)
% Foreign Born	0.002	0.044***
	(0.012)	(0.010)
Competitive District	3.405***	2.575***
	(0.570)	(0.412)
District Vote	-0.214	0.074
	(0.137)	(0.154)
Relevant Committees	1.328***	1.419***
	(0.117)	(0.121)
# of bills	0.059***	0.033***
	(0.004)	(0.003)
Constant	-2.104***	-3.007***
	(0.387)	(0.351)
Observations	1,458	1,328
Log Likelihood	-1,557.205	-1,607.325
theta	1.021*** (0.113)	0.911*** (0.094)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	3,146.409	3,244.649
Note:		*p**p***p<0.01

Table A4: Predictors of Latin America References 111th – 117th Congress with demonyms excluded ("Cuban" etc.)

Negative Binomial Regression: Log of Expected Count		
	Model 1	Model 2
Republican		0.851***
		(0.077)
Outparty	0.550***	0.299***
	(0.067)	(0.070)
Competitive District	0.168*	0.238**
	(0.102)	(0.100)
Hispanic Member	1.132***	1.102***
	(0.150)	(0.146)
Hispanic %	1.168***	1.799***
	(0.229)	(0.227)
Foreign Relations Com	0.514***	0.466***
	(0.106)	(0.103)
Armed Services	-0.110	-0.090
	(0.097)	(0.095)
Ideological Extremity	0.206	0.163
	(0.286)	(0.278)
District Vote	0.008**	0.014***
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Majority Party	-0.136	-0.219
	(0.147)	(0.144)
HFC	0.099	-0.188
	(0.161)	(0.159)
# of Words	0.00003***	0.00003***
	(0.00000)	(0.00000)
Constant	-1.211***	-1.885***
	(0.277)	(0.278)
Observations	2,786	2,786
Log Likelihood	-6,486.725	-6,430.869
theta	0.401*** (0.015)	0.430*** (0.016)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	13,009.450	12,899.740
Note:		*p**p***p<0.01

Table A5: Trade References: Republicans Only

Negative Binomial Regression: Log of Expected Count	
Outparty	1.148
	(1.300)
HFC	-0.119
	(0.141)
Ideological Extremity	-1.315***
	(0.295)
Seniority	0.005
	(0.010)
Trade Dependency (State)	-0.012***
	(0.004)
White Collar % (District)	-1.495*
	(0.904)
Exports to China (District)	0.001***
	(0.0002)
Manufacturing % (District)	1.362
	(0.873)
Foreign-Born Population (District)	0.735
	(0.548)
% College Degree	1.715**
	(0.764)
Competitive District	0.016
	(0.110)
District Vote %	0.0002
	(0.004)
Agriculture Com	0.396***
	(0.116)
Ways and Means Com	0.964***
	(0.125)
Foreign Relations Com	0.058
	(0.122)
# of Words	-0.039
	(0.197)
words	0.00003***
	(0.00000)

Constant	1.003
	(1.406)
Observations	1,458
Log Likelihood	-5,055.078
theta	0.616*** (0.026)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	10,156.160
Note:	*p**p***p<0.01

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