

What Constituent Correspondence Reveals About Voter Sentiment

In a first-of-its-kind project, we analyzed how constituent correspondence reflects (and does not reflect) district-level voter sentiment.



Analyzing Constituent Correspondence to Understand District-Level Dynamics

Have you ever wondered whether your correspondence reports accurately represent your constituents' views? Or what the emails, phone calls, and letters you receive can tell you about the typical constituent in your district? Fireside worked with a diverse group of Fireside client offices in the U.S. House of Representatives and non-partisan public opinion researchers from University of California, Berkeley, University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), and Columbia University to analyze what district-level correspondence data can teach us about constituents in your district.

Key findings

- Constituents who contact Congress are more educated, whiter, wealthier, older, and more likely to be retirees.
- Individuals with stronger liberal or conservative positions write to Congress more than constituents with moderate positions.
- Constituent correspondence is not systematically biased in a liberal or conservative direction in general, but it often is on specific issues.
- Congress hears more often about issues where organizations successfully mobilize advocates. For example, before the *Dobbs* decision, Congress heard more from anti-abortion than from pro-abortion constituents, largely through bulk advocacy campaigns.
- Congress usually hears more often from opponents of a policy than from supporters. For example, Congress heard much more from pro-abortion constituents than anti-abortion constituents after the *Dobbs* decision.
- Which issues people write to Congress about usually reflects which issues they care about. However, Congress hears too little about some issues and too much about others relative to what their constituents say they care about.
- Correspondence from constituents closely tracks coverage of issues in the national media, especially cable news coverage. Congress therefore hears more often about issues that generate substantial media coverage — and less often about issues such as taxes, education, and housing that constituents also find important but that receive less media coverage.

Methodology

We partnered with 14 of our House offices to analyze patterns of constituent communications. These offices spanned both parties, each region of the country, and different district characteristics (e.g. rural vs. urban).

For each office, we analyzed the distribution and content of form response letters offices sent in reply to correspondents. We used this data to infer the frequency with which constituents write to Congress on different topics, and the issue position of these constituents (for or against an issue). In total, **we categorized more than 14,500 form response letters into 422 unique issue areas, covering over 3.4 million unique constituent contacts** received from January 2019 through November 2022 across these 14 offices.

Partnering with a team of non-partisan, university-based public opinion researchers, we then merged this aggregate constituent contact data with district-level public opinion data to assess the relationship of all voters in a district to those voters who wrote into offices during the 116th and 117th Congresses.

Our analysis allowed us to compare people who write to Congress against all the voters in a district in ways that haven't been possible before.

Meet the Research Team



David Broockman, associate professor at UC Berkeley, is known for his research on political polarization and persuasion. He attended Yale University and obtained his PhD from UC Berkeley. Beginning his academic career at Stanford University, Broockman has been recognized for his extensive research in political science, which has earned numerous awards.



Matto Mildenberger, Associate Professor of Political Science at UCSB, researches the political factors contributing to policy inaction regarding global climate change. His focus areas are comparative climate policymaking and U.S. climate opinions. His books examine carbon pricing politics in advanced economies, public environmental behaviors, and the interaction of economic and environmental policy preferences.



Olivia Quinn is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She studies political representation and environmental politics in the United States, with a specific interest in how public opinion on climate and energy issues shapes policy outcomes in the U.S. Congress. She holds a B.A. in political science from the University of Central Florida.



Leah Stokes is the Anton Vonk Associate Professor of Environmental Politics at UCSB. Named on TIME100 Next in 2022, Stokes is globally recognized for her work on representation and public opinion, voting behavior, and public policy. Her book, "Short Circuiting Policy," gained acclaim, and she contributes to top journals and media outlets. She holds a PhD from MIT and has worked in the Canadian parliament.



Alexander Hertel-Fernandez is associate professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University and serves as Vice Dean for Curriculum and Instruction. His teaching and research focuses on understanding the intersection between politics and markets in the U.S., the politics of policy design, and labor policy. Hertel-Fernandez recently returned to Columbia after serving in the U.S. Department of Labor and the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs.

Who Writes — and Doesn't Write — to Congress

First, we compared the demographics of constituents who contacted Congress with those of all constituents within each district. On average, **the people who contact Congress are more educated, whiter, wealthier, older, and more likely to be retirees** than those in the districts as a whole.

On the next page, Figure 1 illustrates the demographic differences between those who wrote to district offices and all voters within those districts. Any characteristics depicted to the left of the vertical dashed line are underrepresented in constituent correspondence, while those shown to the right are over-represented.

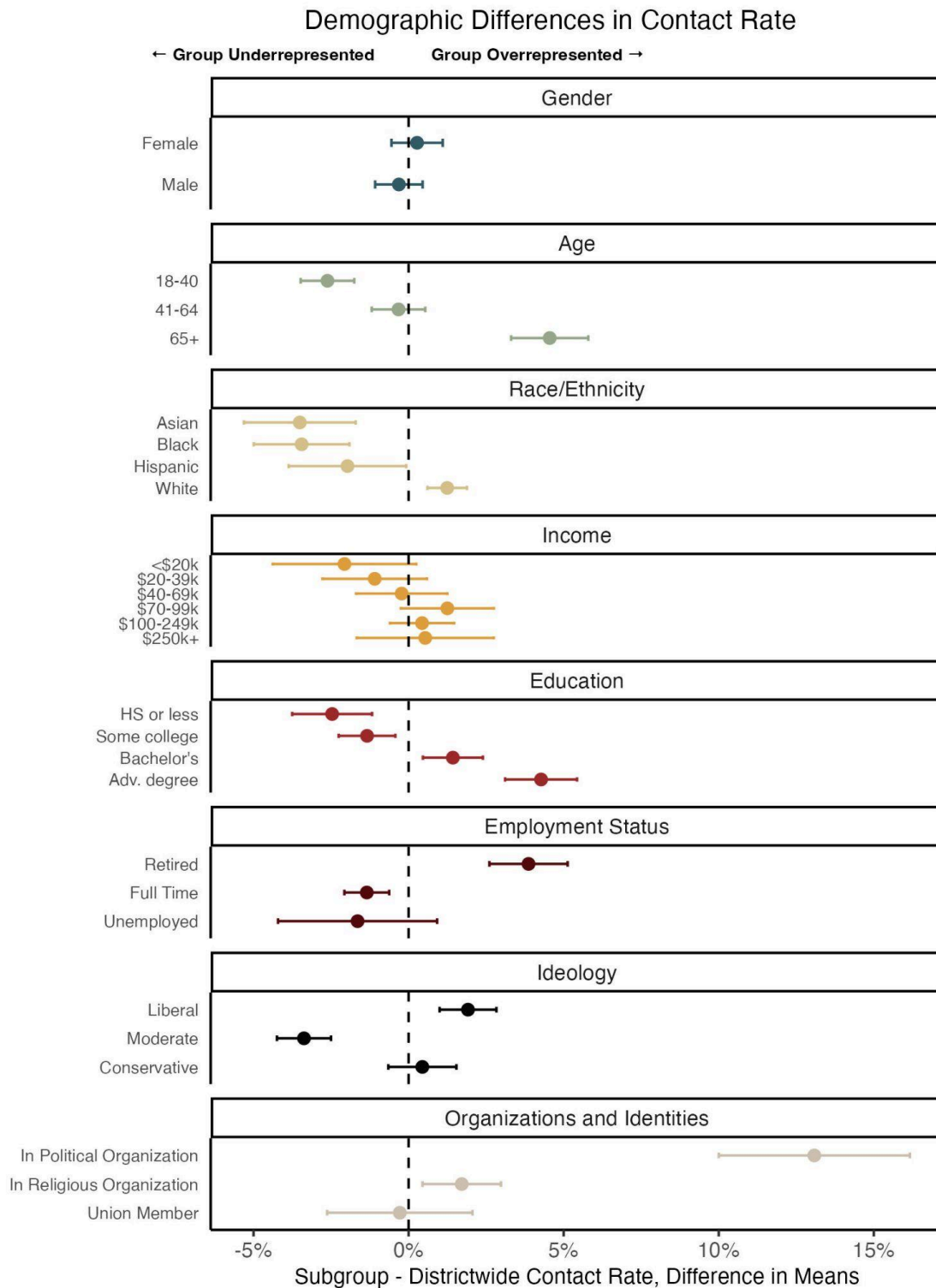


Figure 1. The rate at which different demographic groups contact Congress. Points to the right of the dashed line indicate higher contact rates, while points to the left indicate underrepresentation compared to district demographics. Differences are relative to the overall average contact rate of 8.5 percent (including both bulk campaign and organic correspondence).

Other differences exist between people who write to Congress and the rest of their districts. Members of religious organizations and labor unions are about as likely to contact their members of Congress as the average resident of a district. However, those in political organizations have more than double the contact rate.

We also compared the political views of people who write into offices to the public at large. Both **strong conservatives and liberals are more likely than moderates to contact their members of Congress**, with about 9 percent of both groups contacting Congress during the study period.

At the same time, **liberals and conservatives contact Congress about equally often**. Liberals do contact Congress very slightly more often, and we found that this is largely due to bulk (“campaign”) correspondence which accounts for more than 75 percent of all contacts. When it comes to organic contact — the emails, phone calls, and letters sent independently by constituents without the help of advocacy organizations — liberals and conservatives contact Congress equally often. This indicates that organic correspondence generally reflects each district’s ideological diversity.

Constituent Correspondence by Mode of Contact

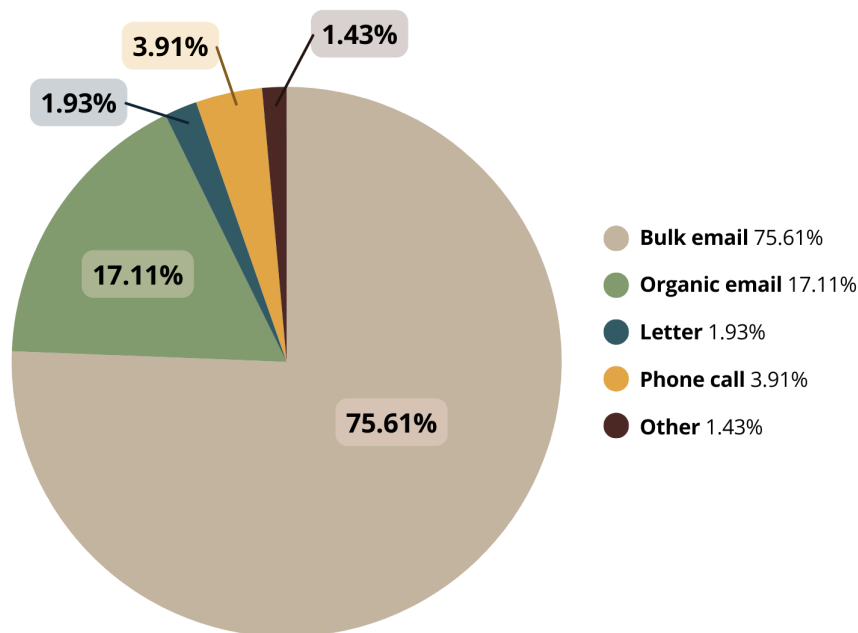


Figure 2. ‘Bulk’ email contacts – constituent correspondence assisted by advocacy organizations – account for over 75 percent of total contacts. “Other” includes faxes, postcards, office walk-ins, and a small percentage of correspondence with an unknown mode of contact.

Does Constituent Correspondence Lean Left or Lean Right?

Although liberals and conservatives contact Congress about equally often in general, Congress hears especially often from constituents in two cases:

1. When organizations successfully mobilize contact to Congress
2. When people learn about policy changes or events they dislike in the media

This means that Congress often fails to hear from people who are unorganized, unrepresented by political organizations, or who support a policy change.

Case Study: Abortion

Correspondence to Congress about abortion is a good example of both. Figure 3 shows correspondence to participating offices about abortion during 2021-2022. The left panel shows “bulk” campaign correspondence, and the right panel shows “organic” correspondence. Before the *Dobbs* decision, Congress heard much more from anti-abortion constituents than pro-abortion constituents, largely via bulk campaigns mobilized by advocacy organizations. However, after the *Dobbs* decision, pro-abortion constituents reacting to the decision represented the vast majority of both bulk and organic contact. By contrast, anti-abortion constituents reacted to the decision far less.

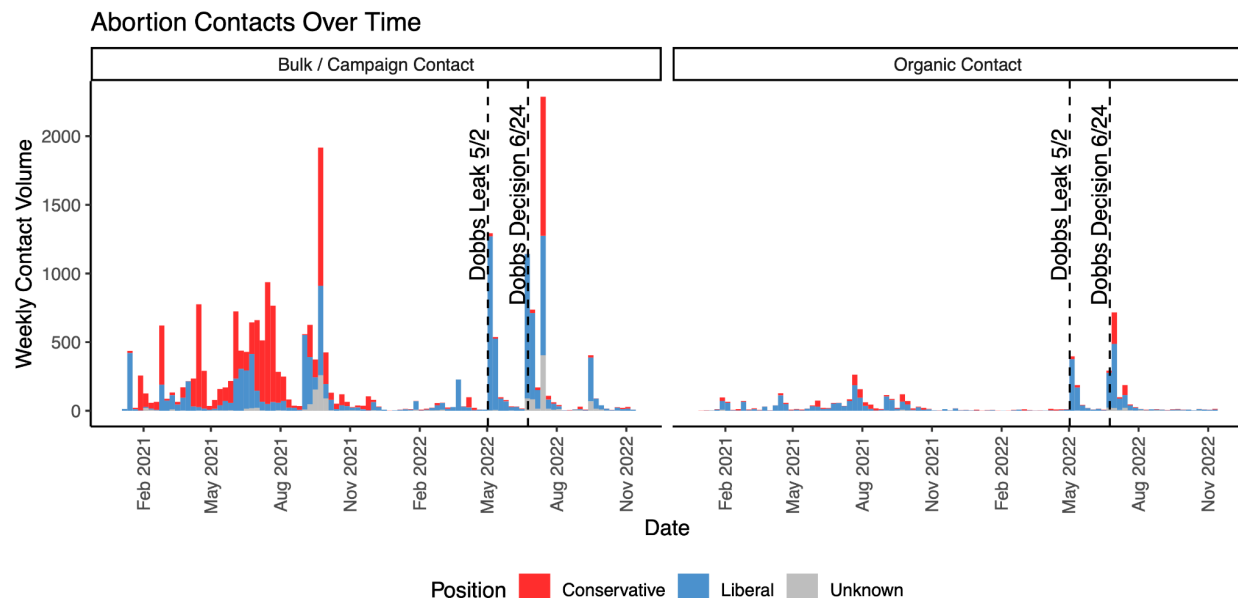


Figure 3. Correspondence to participating offices about abortion, 2021-2022. Conservative bulk campaigns represented most contact to Congress before the *Dobbs* decision, after which liberal correspondence grew dramatically.

Case Study: Climate & Environment

We see similar patterns on the issue of the environment and climate, but in the opposite directions ideologically. Liberal groups tend to mobilize far more on this issue than conservative groups. However, in March 2021, motorsport enthusiasts organized a campaign opposing recent EPA efforts to enforce pollution controls on racecars. This reaction led conservative contacts to briefly overwhelm liberal ones.

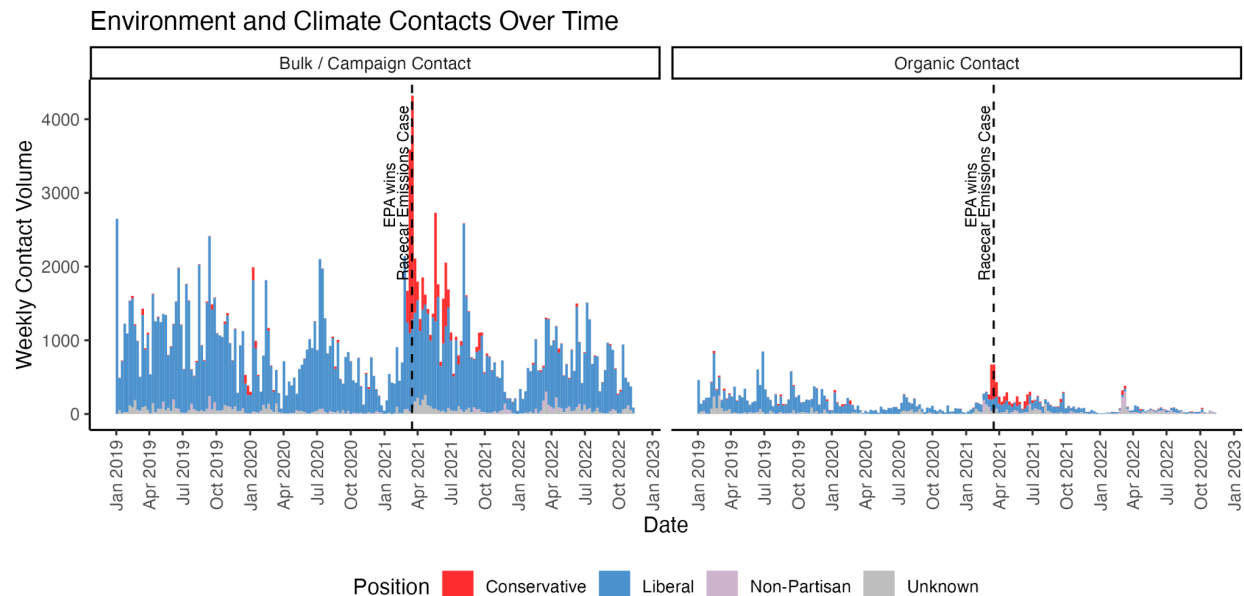


Figure 4. Correspondence to participating offices about the environment, 2021-2022. Liberal correspondence is far more common on environmental issues, especially bulk campaign correspondence — except after a campaign started to oppose the EPA's regulation of racecar emissions.

Discrepancies Between Correspondence and District Sentiment

Even though conservatives and liberals contact Congress about equally often, patterns of organizational mobilization and constituent reaction to the national political agenda **lead correspondence to poorly reflect district opinion on some specific issues**. Sometimes, opinions expressed in constituent correspondence do not line up well with the views of voters in the district as a whole.

Figure 5 compares the amount of liberal or conservative bias in constituent correspondence. The Figure compares survey responses among all constituents of participating offices with just those who wrote to Congress about each issue.

On some topics, like the Biden infrastructure agenda, the Equality Act, abortion rights, and gun laws, constituent correspondence is **more conservative** than the district. On other topics, including policing, the minimum wage, immigration, and marijuana decriminalization, constituent correspondence is **more liberal** than the sentiment in the district at large. In summary, **even though there is no liberal or conservative skew on average, there often is on individual issues**.

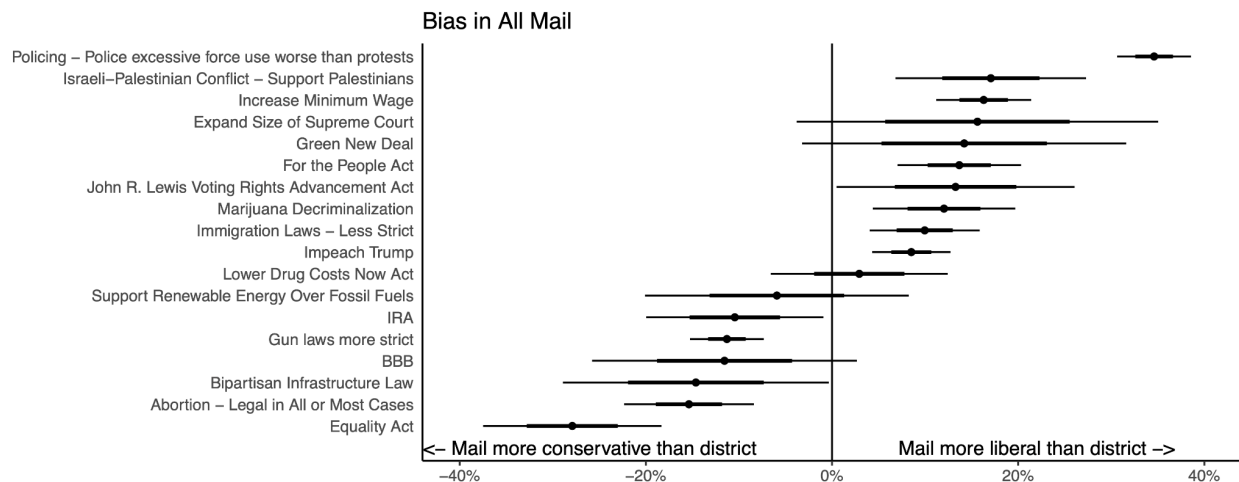


Figure 5. Differences between constituent sentiment overall and as expressed in constituent correspondence. The level of true district support is centered at zero, such that deviations from 0 percent indicate a liberal or conservative bias.

District Priorities and Constituent Correspondence

Despite the influence of organizations and high-profile events in driving constituent correspondence, we still find that **people are much more likely to contact Congress about issues that are important to them — even through bulk campaigns coordinated by advocacy organizations.**

Figure 6 shows that people are about three times as likely to think an issue is important if they contacted Congress about it than if they didn't — even when prompted to contact by an organization. This suggests that **bulk campaign correspondence aided by advocacy organizations and other constituent mobilizers can help people voice their top policy priorities to Congress.**

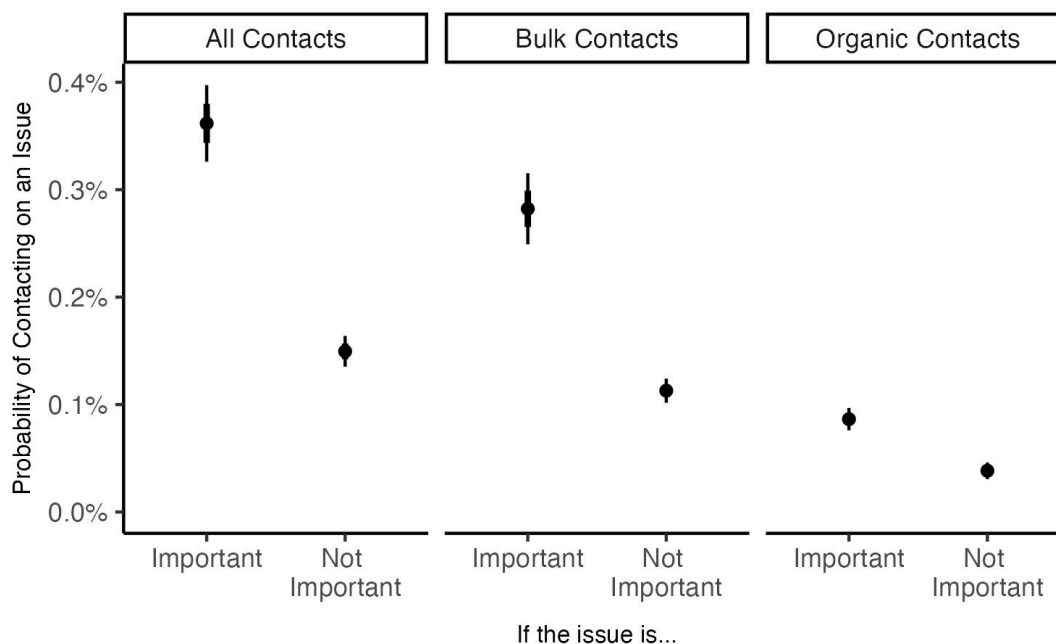


Figure 6. Probability of correspondence on an issue, by self-reported issue importance.

Orphaned Issues

Even though people tend to contact Congress about issues they care about, Congress hears too little about some issues and too much about others relative to what constituents say they care about.

The first column in Figure 7 shows how many constituents indicated that various political issues were extremely important to them personally. The second and third column compares these results to those from organic and bulk correspondence. **Congress tends to hear more about issues that are more important to constituents — but there are also issues many constituents care about that Congress rarely hears about, such as taxes, education, housing affordability, and workers' issues.**

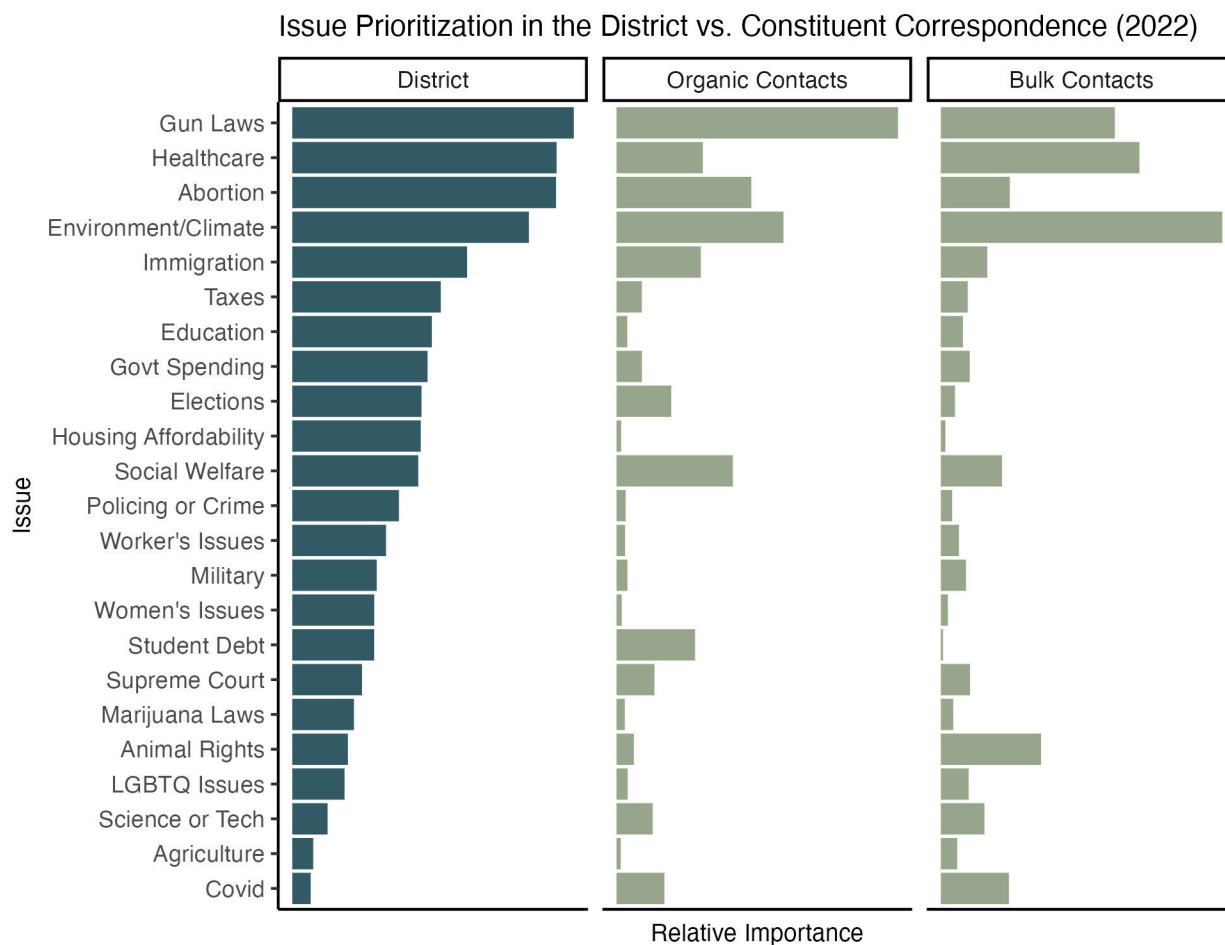


Figure 7. Relative difference between district-level issue importance and correspondence volume, by issue and type of correspondence.

Congress hears more about issues that attract media coverage — either because Congress is about to take action on an issue, or because of events such as mass shootings. Figure 6 shows that gun laws were one of the top issues that Congress heard about over the last few years. Figure 8 shows that correspondence about gun laws often closely follows bill introductions and mass shootings, which tend to attract large amounts of media coverage. For example, following the Uvalde shooting in May 2022, liberal constituents wrote to Congress in large volumes; however, following the House’s consideration of the assault weapons ban in response to the shooting, conservatives wrote to Congress to oppose the legislation.

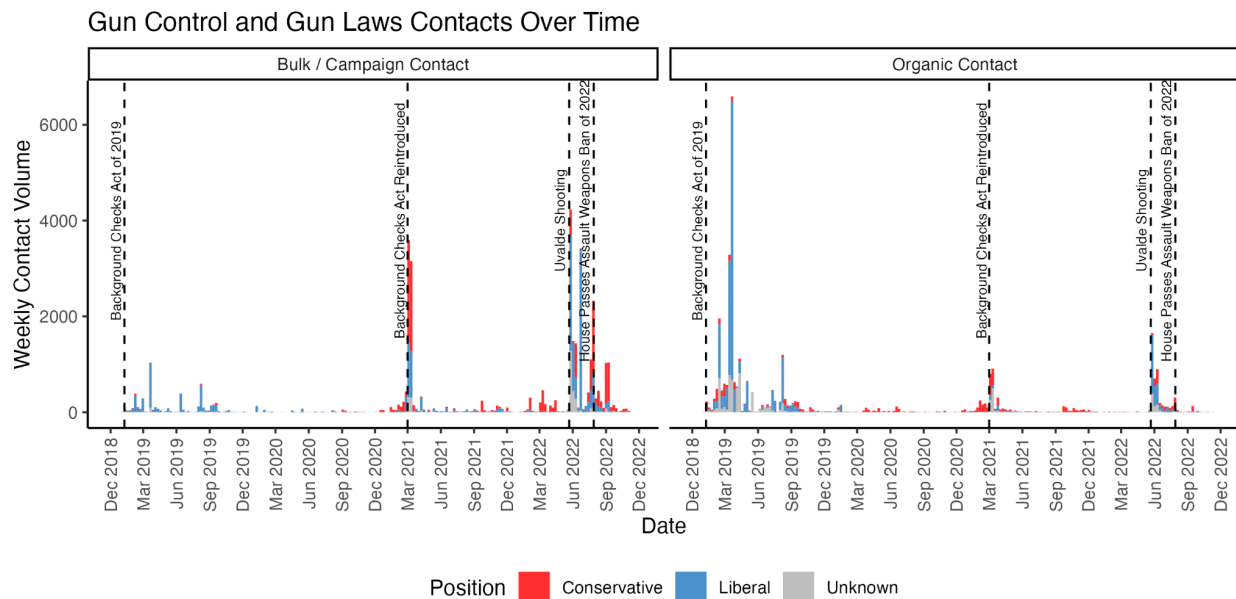


Figure 8. Correspondence to Congress about guns often closely follows bill introductions and mass shootings.

This correlation between media coverage and constituents reaching out to Congress spans across various issues. We looked into this connection by integrating Congressional correspondence data with news coverage data from major national newspapers and cable news networks. **The more attention issues receive in the national media, the more likely constituents are to contact their members of Congress on those same issues.**

Data from [Stanford University's Cable TV News Analyzer](#) strengthens this link, specifically for cable news coverage on CNN, Fox, and MSNBC. For example, Figure 9 shows how attention to immigration-related matters (left-hand side) and to the U.S. Postal Service (right-hand plot) had a parallel spike in both cable news coverage and constituent engagement. This is portrayed in the amount of coverage (measured in seconds) either immigration or the U.S. Postal Service received on these networks, and the subsequent increase in constituent outreach regarding these specific issues. The black lines indicate the volume of letters Congress received daily on a given issue, and the dashed gray lines indicate the duration of coverage these issues received on CNN, Fox, and MSNBC.

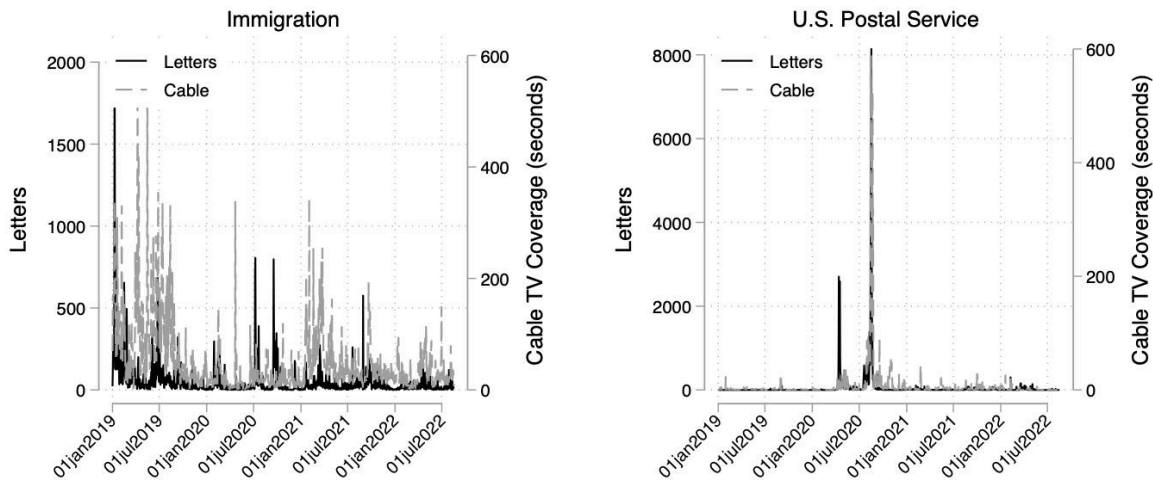


Figure 9. Relationship between cable news coverage of immigration (left) or the U.S. Postal Service (right) and letters received by Congress.

On the other hand, issues such as taxes, education, and housing affordability are nearly as important to constituents as immigration — yet these issues do not lend themselves to concrete, specific “focusing events” that generate media coverage, and so Congress hears far less about them.

From Data to Dialogue: Enhancing Representation with Fireside

Congressional correspondence plays a pivotal role for constituents to relay their views to their Representatives and Senators. In return, it becomes a vital channel through which Congress members gain insight into their constituents' concerns and interests.

This project is part of Fireside's efforts to help offices better interpret the correspondence they receive, and how it may reflect the views and priorities of their district as a whole. The findings reveal the intricate dynamics of constituent correspondence and its pivotal role in unveiling district-level sentiments. As evidenced by the data, while constituent correspondences often mirror district opinions, disparities do exist — shaped by demographics, grassroots mobilization, and media influence. Fireside stands uniquely poised to address the challenge of meaningful constituent engagement.

Fireside's innovative CRM platform, designed specifically for Congressional offices, transforms the way members of Congress connect with their constituents. By offering targeted insights from this research, Offices equipped with Fireside have a distinct advantage — they possess an up-to-the-minute understanding of their constituency, enabling proactive and informed responses that resonate with their district's needs and interests.

Learn how Fireside can help you amplify your impact, better engage with your district, and foster trust through enhanced representation at fireside21.com.



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