How Newspapers Reveal Political Power
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Using Newspaper Text to Measure Power
Political science is in large part the study of power, but power itself is difficult to measure. Using a new dataset containing nearly 50 million historical newspaper pages from 2,700 local U.S. newspapers over the years 1877–1977, we construct a measure of political power based on the relative frequency of news coverage.

In this paper, we validate the measure and we show how it can be applied to a wide range of offices and actors spanning a long period of U.S. history.

A New Dataset of 50m+ Newspaper Articles
• Newspapers.com: archive containing OCR newspaper texts.
• Use a stratified sample of 50% and focus on the period 1877–1977, which contains the bulk of the data.
• Clean the OCR text by using regular expressions.

Measuring Power as Relative Newspaper Coverage
Relative Power of A = # of Mentions of A
# of Mentions of A + # of Mentions of B

The Power of Congressional Committees
The relative coverage of congressional committees matches up well with the Groseclose-Stewart rankings of committee desirability.

Effects of Mayoral Reforms
Historically, many cities changed to a city manager style of government which stripped powers from the mayor. Can we detect this shift with our measure?

Detectors of shifts in power from RTAA
The passage of the RTAA shifted considerable tariff-making power from Congress to the president. Does our measure pick this up?

Application: The Decline of State Party Organizations
Now we apply the measure by examining the frequency of news coverage about Democratic and Republican state party committees over time.

Changes in Leadership Tracked in Coverage
Members of Congress see a marked increase in news coverage during the time they are in leadership.

Conclusion: A New Measure of Political Power
We can learn a lot about the power of political actors and offices by examining how often the news covers them. There are many cases where the measure will not hold (e.g., when celebrity coverage is high), but it is a widely applicable measure of power that researchers can use to study many individuals and offices over a long time period.