Electoral Incentives, Institutional Constraints, and Congressional Engagement in Low-Salience Foreign Policy: A Case Study of Representative Lloyd Doggett and Syria (2013–2025)

Georgina Tenny

Washington Intern, 2026



Flinders University

Jeff Bleich Centre for Democracy and Disruptive Technologies

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About Georgina

Georgina Tenny completed the Washington Internship Program with a Capital Semester Program in the office of Representative Lloyd Doggett (TX-37) in 2026. Georgina is currently completing a Bachelor of International Relations and Political Science (Honours), where her research examines the translation of international gender equality norms into local realities in Nepal and the implications for women's rights and governance in the Indo-Pacific region. Connect with her on LinkedIn: linkedin.com/in/georgina-tenny and email: georginatenny769@gmail.com.

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jbc@flinders.edu.au

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Introduction

Syria represents a case of prolonged conflict and post-conflict foreign policy complexity. More than a decade of civil war has produced extensive humanitarian needs, fragmented governance structures, mass displacement, and enduring challenges in political reconstruction (Paris, 2004; Richmond, 2009). Post-conflict environments are characterised by delayed outcomes, indirect causal relationships, and weak attribution of political responsibility, making sustained policy engagement both difficult to design and difficult to evaluate (Doyle & Sambanis, 2000; Fortna, 2008). These characteristics create particular challenges for democratic political systems, where policymakers must balance long-term commitments with shorter-term electoral incentives and fluctuating public attention.

Following the political transition in Syria after the fall of the Assad government in 2024, the country entered a new phase of reconstruction in which transitional authorities focused on "reconstituting national security forces, extending the state's remit… and attracting investment to support Syria's recovery" (Blanchard, 2026, p. 1). However, congressional engagement with Syria did not constitute a continuous or unified policy process over this period. Instead, activity developed through discrete communicative and procedural actions, including speeches, resolutions, oversight letters, votes, and responses to specific crises (Mayhew, 1974; Arnold, 1990). This raises an important question about how democratic institutions sustain attention to complex foreign policy problems where outcomes are uncertain, responsibility is difficult to attribute, and direct policy control is limited.

This paper asks: how do electoral incentives and institutional constraints shape congressional engagement with post-conflict foreign policy in low-salience environments? The United States (U.S.) Congress possesses significant constitutional authority over foreign policy, including war powers, appropriations, sanctions, and oversight mechanisms (Howell & Pevehouse, 2007; Tiefer & Clark, 2016). However, variation in congressional engagement across foreign policy domains demonstrates that formal authority alone cannot explain legislative behaviour. Instead, political action is shaped by the interaction between institutional capacity and incentive structures that determine when and how legislators choose to exercise that authority (Mayhew, 1974; Binder, 1999).

In low-salience policy domains such as Syria, legislators face limited electoral incentives to pursue sustained policy entrepreneurship because outcomes are difficult to observe, consequences are often delayed, and responsibility is dispersed across multiple actors. At the same time, congressional actions remain highly visible through speeches, votes, resolutions, and public statements. This creates an incentive environment in which legislators can maintain political engagement through observable forms of signalling without necessarily assuming responsibility for sustained policy development or implementation (Mayhew, 1974; Arnold, 1990). Rather than producing complete withdrawal, low salience encourages adaptation in the form and intensity of legislative engagement.

This paper argues that the interaction of electoral incentives and institutional fragmentation structures congressional behaviour in post-conflict foreign policy. Low salience reduces incentives for sustained policy entrepreneurship, while fragmented authority and executive dominance constrain Congress's ability to develop coordinated and long-term policy agendas (Howell & Pevehouse, 2007; Binder, 1999). As a result, legislative engagement is redistributed across institutional channels, with position-taking, oversight, and symbolic signalling becoming primary mechanisms through which legislators maintain visibility and express policy preferences.

To examine this argument, the paper employs a structured qualitative case study of Representative Lloyd Doggett's engagement with Syria-related foreign policy between 2013 and 2025. Doggett is selected as a within-case example through which variation in congressional behaviour can be examined across different political contexts and institutional settings. The dataset consists of eight verified instances of congressional activity, including floor speeches, roll-call votes, congressional letters, resolutions, and media statements. These observations are analysed as behavioural outputs shaped by electoral incentives and institutional constraints rather than isolated political events. Drawing on Mayhew's (1974) theory of the electoral connection, Arnold's (1990) account of strategic congressional behaviour and blame avoidance, and institutional accounts of congressional foreign policy authority (Howell & Pevehouse, 2007; Tiefer & Clark, 2016), the analysis traces how structural conditions influence the form and timing of congressional engagement.

The paper is organised into five sections: literature review, methodology, analysis, discussion, and conclusion. The literature review situates the study within scholarship on legislative behaviour, institutional constraints, and post-conflict governance. The methodology outlines the structured qualitative case design and coding framework. The analysis presents empirical findings from the Doggett dataset, while the discussion interprets these findings in relation to the broader theoretical debate. The conclusion draws together the study's implications for understanding how democratic institutions maintain engagement with complex foreign policy challenges under conditions of weak salience and fragmented authority.

Literature Review

Incentives and Political Behaviour in Post-Conflict Governance

A foundational assumption of institutional and public choice approaches is that political outcomes are shaped by incentive structures embedded within institutions rather than being direct reflections of policy preferences or normative goals (Coyne, 2008, as cited in del Castillo, 2010; Mayhew, 1974). Political actors operate strategically within environments defined by electoral incentives, informational constraints, and the anticipated consequences of political action, meaning that behaviour often reflects adaptation to institutional conditions rather than the pursuit of policy effectiveness alone (Arnold, 1990). This perspective is particularly relevant to post-conflict environments, where uncertainty, delayed outcomes, and diffuse causal relationships complicate political actors' ability to claim responsibility for success or failure.

Post-conflict governance presents a particularly difficult environment for sustained political engagement because outcomes frequently emerge over extended time periods and through indirect mechanisms. As a result, political actors face challenges in demonstrating immediate achievements or attributing responsibility for long-term outcomes. Under these conditions, visible and attributable actions may become more politically valuable than sustained investments whose effects are uncertain or difficult to observe (Coyne, 2008, as cited in del Castillo, 2010). Institutional incentives therefore shape not only policy choices but also the forms through which political actors communicate commitment and demonstrate responsiveness.

Post-conflict governance scholarship similarly emphasises the importance of institutional conditions in determining reconstruction outcomes. As Coyne (2008) argues, "the existing culture and the institutional framework" are central factors influencing success and failure (as cited in del Castillo, 2010, p. 305). However, while this literature explains why sustained engagement is necessary for effective reconstruction, it provides less attention to the domestic political processes that determine whether such engagement can be maintained over time. This creates an analytical limitation: post-conflict scholarship explains the need for long-term attention but does not fully account for the domestic political incentives that determine whether external democratic institutions sustain that attention.

Legislative Behaviour and Electoral Incentives

Legislative behaviour theory provides a complementary framework for explaining how elected officials respond to these incentive structures. Mayhew's (1974) theory of the electoral connection conceptualises members of Congress as actors seeking re-election through three central activities: credit-claiming, position-taking, and advertising. From this perspective, legislative behaviour is shaped by the need to produce visible and interpretable signals that allow constituents to evaluate political performance. Consequently, actions that are publicly observable and easily attributable may generate greater electoral value than complex policy initiatives whose outcomes are uncertain or delayed.

However, electoral incentives vary depending on the salience of the policy domain. Issue salience refers to the degree of public attention and political importance attached to a particular issue, shaping the extent to which legislators can claim credit, avoid blame, or face electoral consequences for their actions (Mayhew, 1974; Arnold, 1990). In high-salience policy areas, legislators experience stronger incentives to demonstrate action because voters and interest groups are more likely to monitor outcomes. Conversely, in low-salience areas, public attention is weaker, and accountability mechanisms are less immediate, reducing incentives for sustained policy entrepreneurship.

Arnold's (1990) account of congressional action extends this framework by demonstrating that legislators respond not only to opportunities for credit-claiming but also to the risks of blame and electoral exposure. Legislators are motivated not only to claim responsibility for

successful outcomes but also to minimise exposure to politically damaging consequences. This mechanism is particularly relevant in foreign policy environments characterised by uncertainty, military risk, and weak attribution. In such contexts, legislators may prefer forms of engagement that allow them to demonstrate responsiveness while limiting responsibility for uncertain outcomes. Therefore, low-salience and high-uncertainty environments are expected to encourage cautious, symbolic, or episodic forms of legislative action rather than sustained policy ownership.

Congress, Foreign Policy, and Institutional Constraints

While electoral incentives explain why legislators seek visibility and minimise risk, institutional structures shape the opportunities available for action. The U.S. Congress possesses significant constitutional authority over foreign policy, including war powers, appropriations, oversight, and authorisation procedures (Howell & Pevehouse, 2007; Tiefer & Clark, 2016). However, these formal powers operate within a fragmented institutional environment in which authority is divided between Congress, the executive branch, committees, and procedural rules governing legislative action.

This fragmentation limits Congress's capacity to develop sustained and unified foreign policy agendas. Although legislators may possess formal authority, executive dominance in foreign affairs provides presidents with advantages in agenda-setting, access to information, and rapid decision-making (Howell & Pevehouse, 2007; Tiefer & Clark, 2016). As a result, Congress often exercises influence through indirect mechanisms such as oversight, public statements, authorisations, and procedural constraints rather than through direct policy implementation.

Institutional fragmentation also contributes to episodic patterns of congressional attention. Rather than maintaining continuous engagement with complex foreign policy issues, Congress frequently responds to crises, executive initiatives, or moments of heightened public visibility. Committee specialisation and competing domestic priorities further limit the ability to coordinate sustained attention across institutions. These patterns reflect broader constraints associated with political attention and bounded rationality. As Sabatier (2007) argues, political actors operate within environments where "one simply cannot look for, and see, everything" (p. 10), requiring prioritisation among competing issues. In foreign policy,

where consequences are often uncertain and geographically distant, these constraints can intensify cycles of attention and disengagement.

Post-Conflict Foreign Policy and Syria

Post-conflict governance scholarship argues that durable peace requires sustained engagement across political reconstruction, institutional development, economic recovery, and humanitarian assistance (Paris, 2004; Doyle & Sambanis, 2000). These approaches conceptualise recovery as a long-term process dependent on consistent resources, institutional investment, and continued political commitment. However, this assumption raises an important question: how do democratic political systems sustain attention to conflicts in which outcomes are delayed, responsibility is diffuse, and electoral incentives are limited? Existing scholarship suggests that political attention is often uneven, particularly in foreign policy domains where domestic audiences have limited information and weak incentives to monitor outcomes (Richmond, 2009). Syria illustrates this tension. Congressional engagement has not followed a continuous trajectory. However, it has instead occurred through responses to specific moments of heightened attention, including debates over military intervention, chemical weapons crises, humanitarian emergencies, and displacement-related concerns. These fluctuations reveal a divergence between the sustained engagement required by post-conflict governance and the episodic engagement encouraged by domestic political incentives.

Therefore, Syria provides an analytical opportunity to examine how democratic institutions respond to prolonged foreign policy challenges. Rather than treating variation in engagement as evidence of inconsistency or disengagement, the case allows examination of how legislative attention is redistributed across different institutional channels under conditions of weak salience and fragmented authority.

Literature Gap

Despite extensive research on post-conflict governance and legislative behaviour, these literatures remain insufficiently connected. Post-conflict scholarship explains why sustained engagement is necessary for reconstruction but provides limited insight into how external political systems maintain or reduce attention over time (Paris, 2004; Doyle & Sambanis,

2000). Conversely, legislative behaviour theory explains electoral incentives and strategic responses to uncertainty. However, it is less developed in its explanation of how these mechanisms operate in foreign policy environments characterised by delayed outcomes, weak attribution, and limited direct legislative control (Mayhew, 1974; Arnold, 1990).

This creates a theoretical gap regarding why congressional engagement persists while changing form across time and institutional settings. Existing frameworks explain either the need for sustained engagement or the incentives that shape legislative behaviour. However, they do not fully account for how democratic institutions sustain attention through fragmented and adaptive forms of political action.

The Study's Contribution

This study addresses this gap by arguing that the interaction of electoral incentives and institutional constraints structures congressional engagement in post-conflict foreign policy. Under conditions of low salience and weak attribution, legislators have limited incentives to pursue sustained policy entrepreneurship. At the same time, fragmented institutional authority restricts their capacity to produce coherent long-term policy outcomes.

Rather than producing disengagement, these conditions encourage the redistribution of legislative activity across different institutional forms, including oversight, position-taking, procedural action, and symbolic signalling. These forms allow legislators to maintain political visibility while managing uncertainty, attribution risks, and institutional limitations. The contribution of this study is therefore to integrate legislative behaviour theory with post-conflict governance scholarship by demonstrating that congressional engagement can remain continuous in presence while fragmented in form, shaped by the interaction between electoral incentives, institutional structures, and changing levels of issue salience.

Methods

This study employs a structured qualitative case study design to examine Representative Lloyd Doggett's engagement with Syria and Syria-adjacent foreign policy between 2013 and 2025. The research design is explanatory in orientation, focusing on how electoral incentives and institutional constraints shape the form and timing of congressional behaviour in a low-

salience foreign policy environment. Rather than attempting to generate statistically generalisable claims about congressional behaviour, the study develops a theoretically informed explanation of behavioural mechanisms within a single case. The approach follows a structured, theory-guided case study design consistent with George and Bennett's framework for qualitative case research (as cited in Seawright, 2008). It uses process tracing to connect observable political actions to underlying institutional and behavioural dynamics.

The case study method is appropriate because the research question concerns how and why congressional engagement varies across time and institutional contexts. A qualitative design allows examination of the sequence, meaning, and context of legislative actions that would be difficult to capture through quantitative measures alone. In particular, the study focuses on how similar substantive concerns may be expressed through different institutional channels depending on levels of salience, attribution, and executive–legislative power asymmetry. The purpose is therefore not to measure the frequency of congressional action, but to explain the mechanisms through which congressional engagement is structured.

Doggett is selected as a strategic case for within-case analysis rather than as a representative sample of congressional behaviour. This case selection enables examination of variation in legislative behaviour while holding individual-level characteristics relatively constant. Doggett's Syria-related activity between 2013 and 2025 provides a longitudinal case spanning multiple phases of U.S. engagement with Syria, including debates over military intervention, responses to chemical weapons use, war powers disputes, humanitarian assistance, and post-conflict displacement governance. This temporal range allows analysis of how congressional behaviour changes across different political environments while maintaining focus on a consistent legislative actor.

Doggett's engagement is also analytically valuable because it occurs across multiple institutional venues, including House floor speeches, roll-call votes, congressional resolutions, collective letters, media interviews, and public statements. These forms of action differ in their levels of visibility, institutional authority, and attribution. For example, individual speeches allow legislators to communicate clear positions directly to public audiences, while collective letters distribute responsibility among multiple actors. Examining variation across these venues therefore provides insight into how institutional structures shape the expression of legislative preferences.

The dataset consists of eight verified instances of congressional activity attributable to Doggett between 2013 and 2025. Each observation represents a discrete unit of analysis and is drawn from publicly available congressional records, official statements, and reputable media transcripts. Table 1 presents the structured dataset used for analysis, summarising each observation according to policy category, communicative mode, behavioural pattern, and evidentiary summary. Appendix A (Doggett Evidence Record Set) provides the complete evidentiary foundation for these observations, including source identification, contextual information, extracted evidence, and extended coding notes. This separation between empirical evidence and analytical presentation allows the main analysis to focus on theoretical interpretation while maintaining transparency and traceability of the underlying data.

	Category	Mode	Pattern	Evidence	Analytical memo
2013- Syria Intervention Hesitancy	War powers / Syria intervention / executive military authorisation	Communicative Action (elite public speech in an interest group setting)	Procedural Constitutional Constraint Signalling + Anticipatory Blame Avoidance (Arnold, 1990)	Doggett signals conditional opposition to U.S. military intervention in Syria, emphasising the absence of a clearly defined mission and requesting further classified briefings before authorisation. He separates moral condemnation of Assad from support for military action and frames intervention as high-risk and potentially destabilising.	This case shows early-stage constraint formation through procedural threshold-setting rather than outright opposition, with emphasis on mission clarity, institutional caution, and anticipatory blame management under uncertainty.
2013- Syria Intervention and War Powers Approval (Radio Interview)	War powers / Syria intervention / executive military authorisation	Communicative Action (media-based legislative signalling)	Procedural constitutional constraint assertion + cross-party norm enforcement	Doggett insists that President Obama must obtain congressional approval before military action in Syria, invoking war powers norms, the Iraq War precedent, and a comparative reference to the UK Parliament's rejection of intervention.	This case reflects explicit procedural constitutional signalling, reinforcing Congress as the legitimate authority for war authorisation and framing oversight as a non-partisan institutional norm.
2014- ISIS AUMF Debate (Media-Reported Floor Speech)	Military intervention / counterterrorism / ISIS AUMF authorisation	Communicative Action (reported floor speech via media coverage)	Electoral Position-Taking (Mayhew, 1974) + Anticipatory Blame Avoidance (Arnold, 1990)	Doggett frames opposition to ISIS authorisation through Iraq/Afghanistan precedent, warning that renewed military engagement will reduce long-term security and increase risks of entanglement. The intervention is reported during an election-cycle debate over the ISIS response.	This case illustrates electoral-cycle constraint behaviour, in which high-salience national security debates shape congressional signalling yet remain largely rhetorical due to executive dominance over the authorisation of force.
2014- ISIS Authorisation Debate (House Floor Speech)	War powers / ISIS intervention / congressional authorisation / military escalation	Communicative Action (House floor speech – formal debate intervention)	Procedural Constitutional Constraint Signalling + Electoral Position-Taking (Mayhew, 1974)	Doggett argues that existing presidential authority is sufficient for immediate defensive action but warns that the ISIS response is expanding into a broader war requiring explicit congressional approval. He highlights risks of escalation, mission creep into Syria, and unequal coalition burden-sharing, while urging Congress to assert its constitutional war powers.	This case demonstrates high-visibility constitutional constraint signalling in a major security debate, combining procedural enforcement of war powers with electoral positioning through public opposition to escalation and mission expansion.
2017- Syrian Chemical Attack Response (Media Interview)	Crisis response / Syria conflict / military escalation and chemical weapons retaliation	Communicative Action (media interview / public signalling)	Electoral Position-Taking (Mayhew, 1974) + Executive Accountability Framing	Doggett responds to the Syrian chemical weapons attack by opposing additional U.S. ground troop deployment and urging diplomatic pressure on Russia as the key external actor. He frames responsibility for response as resting with the sitting president under conditions of uncertainty.	This case demonstrates crisis-time rhetorical positioning focused on escalation avoidance and executive accountability, in which legislative actors signal a preference for restraint without formal procedural or legislative action.
2023- Türkiye–Syria Earthquake Humanitarian Response	Humanitarian relief / disaster response / foreign assistance	Legislative Action (roll-call vote under suspension of rules)	Consensus legislative behaviour / low-contestation signalling	House overwhelmingly supports H.Res. 132 responding to the Türkiye–Syria earthquakes, passed under suspension of the rules, reflecting bipartisan agreement and minimal policy contestation.	This case serves as a baseline for non-controversial foreign policy behaviour, in which humanitarian framing produces consensus-driven legislative signalling rather than ideological or institutional conflict.
2023- War Powers Resolution Vote on Syria Withdrawal	War termination / Syria military deployment / War Powers Resolution enforcement	Legislative Action (roll-call vote – non-binding concurrent resolution)	Constitutional constraint signalling + legislative position-taking	Doggett votes in favour of a failed War Powers Resolution concurrent measure directing withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria, reflecting congressional efforts to assert oversight over ongoing military deployment.	This case demonstrates symbolic war termination behaviour through non-binding legislative instruments, highlighting the gap between congressional preference signalling and executive control over force posture.
2025- TPS for Syrian Nationals (Congressional Letter)	Humanitarian protection / immigration governance / post-conflict displacement policy	Collective Action (congressional sign-on letter to executive agencies)	Collective executive advocacy + statutory humanitarian norm enforcement	A group of members of Congress urges extension of TPS for Syrian nationals, citing ongoing violence, unsafe return conditions, and statutory eligibility criteria under U.S. immigration law. The letter also highlights humanitarian need and economic integration of TPS holders.	This case demonstrates indirect legislative influence over immigration policy through collective advocacy, combining statutory interpretation with humanitarian framing to pressure executive agencies outside formal legislative channels.

Table 1: Coded Dataset of Representative Lloyd Doggett's Syria-Related Congressional Behaviour (2013–2025)

The coding framework is organised across four analytical dimensions. First, each observation is classified by policy category to identify the substantive area of engagement. Categories include war powers and military intervention, executive oversight and accountability, humanitarian protection and displacement policy, war termination and force withdrawal, and post-conflict governance concerns. These categories allow comparison across different dimensions of Syria-related foreign policy while maintaining a consistent analytical structure.

Second, the dataset identifies the mode of communication through which congressional engagement occurs. These modes include floor speeches, roll-call votes, formal resolutions, congressional correspondence, media interviews, and public statements. This dimension captures the institutional channel through which political preferences are expressed and enables analysis of how different forms of action produce different levels of visibility, attribution, and political risk.

Third, observations are coded according to behavioural patterns. These categories are derived from the theoretical framework established in the literature review and include electoral position-taking, anticipatory constraint signalling, procedural or institutional signalling, crisis-responsive oversight, and collective legislative signalling. These categories are not treated as independent variables that determine behaviour, but as analytical tools for identifying recurring patterns within the evidence. They allow comparison between observations while remaining grounded in established theories of legislative behaviour.

Fourth, each observation includes an evidentiary summary that provides a concise synthesis of the relevant political action and its contextual significance. This ensures traceability from the source material to the analytical claims presented in the findings chapter, without reproducing extensive source material in the main analysis.

The interpretation of coded observations is guided by two central analytical dimensions: issue salience and behavioural observability. Issue salience refers to the degree of public attention and electoral significance associated with a foreign policy issue. Behavioural observability refers to the extent to which an action is publicly visible and attributable to an individual legislator. These dimensions provide the framework for analysing why some forms of engagement become more prominent under particular political conditions. For example,

highly visible position-taking may become strategically attractive when legislators can communicate a clear stance without assuming responsibility for uncertain policy outcomes.

The study applies Mayhew's (1974) electoral connection and Arnold's (1990) framework of strategic congressional behaviour, including credit-claiming and blame avoidance, as interpretive guides throughout the coding process. These theories do not function as hypotheses to be statistically tested; rather, they provide conceptual expectations about why legislators may prioritise visible actions, minimise political exposure, and adapt their behaviour in response to institutional incentives. Similarly, scholarship on congressional foreign policy constraints (Howell & Pevehouse, 2007; Tiefer & Clark, 2016) informs the interpretation of how institutional fragmentation and executive dominance shape available avenues for legislative influence.

Analytically, the study uses structured process tracing to examine behavioural change across three temporal periods: 2013–2014, 2017, and 2023–2025. These periods are selected because they represent distinct political contexts: early debates over military intervention, crisis-driven responses following renewed violence, and later humanitarian and administrative engagement during the post-conflict period. Comparing these periods allows examination of whether congressional behaviour changes in response to external events while assessing whether underlying patterns of signalling remain consistent.

For this study, Syria-adjacent foreign policy refers to congressional activity that is directly or indirectly connected to Syria through debates over military intervention, war powers disputes, humanitarian assistance, displacement governance, regional security concerns, and questions of executive authorisation. Post-conflict foreign policy is defined broadly as legislative activity related to reconstruction, humanitarian response, governance challenges, and conflict termination. These definitions establish consistent boundaries for case identification and prevent unrelated foreign policy actions from being incorporated into the dataset.

The study is designed to identify patterns of institutional adaptation rather than to measure congressional behaviour across the entire legislature. The small-N design reflects an intentional focus on depth, allowing each observation to function as a high-information case for tracing behavioural mechanisms. While the single-case design limits broad generalisation, it provides analytical leverage by demonstrating how legislative incentives and institutional structures interact within a complex foreign policy environment.

Overall, the methodology integrates structured qualitative coding with process tracing to examine how congressional engagement persists under conditions of low salience and fragmented authority. By analysing variation across institutional channels and over time, the study demonstrates how qualitative evidence can reveal the mechanisms through which legislators maintain political engagement without necessarily exercising sustained policy control.

Analysis (Data)

Congressional Engagement with Syria: The Case of Representative Lloyd Doggett (2013–2025)

This section presents findings from eight verified instances of congressional activity by Doggett relating to Syria and Syria-adjacent foreign policy between 2013 and 2025 (see Table 1 and Appendix A). Rather than treating these observations as isolated political events, the analysis interprets them as part of a broader pattern of congressional behaviour shaped by changing levels of issue salience, institutional constraints, and the strategic incentives associated with visibility, attribution, and political responsibility. Consistent with the coding framework outlined in the Methods section, each observation was analysed according to four dimensions: policy category, communicative mode, behavioural pattern, and evidentiary content. This approach enables comparison across different institutional settings while maintaining a consistent analytical framework.

The dataset identifies three recurring behavioural patterns: constitutional position-taking, crisis-responsive oversight, and humanitarian-administrative signalling. These categories are not purely inductive descriptions of the evidence, nor are they rigid classifications imposed independently of the empirical record. Rather, they represent analytically derived patterns produced by applying legislative behaviour theory to observable congressional actions. Drawing on Mayhew's (1974) concept of the electoral connection and Arnold's (1990) framework of strategic congressional behaviour, including credit-claiming and blame avoidance, the analysis examines how legislators adapt their behaviour according to the political visibility of an issue, the uncertainty surrounding outcomes, and the degree of responsibility they are likely to bear.

The central finding is that congressional engagement with Syria between 2013 and 2025 is characterised less by changing policy preferences than by variation in the institutional forms through which relatively stable preferences are expressed. Across the dataset, Doggett consistently demonstrates opposition to unnecessary military escalation, support for humanitarian protection, and emphasis on congressional authority over foreign policy decisions. However, the mechanisms through which these preferences are communicated shift significantly over time. During periods of high salience, engagement occurs through visible constitutional debate and public position-taking. During periods of crisis, congressional activity takes the form of oversight and accountability claims. As Syria becomes a prolonged humanitarian and post-conflict governance issue, engagement increasingly occurs through administrative advocacy and collective signalling.

Temporal Variation in Congressional Engagement

As shown in Table 1, congressional engagement with Syria follows a pattern of structured variation rather than sustained legislative agenda-setting. The earliest observations from 2013 and 2014 are concentrated around debates over military intervention, executive authority, and the possibility of U.S. strikes against Syria. These events generated high political visibility because decisions about military action raised clear questions of responsibility and posed potential electoral consequences. In contrast, the 2017 observation reflects a different institutional environment, where congressional activity followed executive military action rather than attempting to prevent it. By 2023–2025, engagement had shifted toward humanitarian response, displacement governance, and post-conflict administrative concerns. This temporal movement reflects the interaction between electoral incentives and institutional constraints. In high-salience moments, legislators have stronger incentives to establish visible positions because voters, media actors, and political opponents can more easily attribute responsibility. However, as salience declines and policy outcomes become more complex, the incentives for sustained policy entrepreneurship weaken. At the same time, institutional fragmentation limits Congress's capacity to maintain unified foreign policy strategies over long periods. As a result, congressional engagement does not disappear; instead, it becomes concentrated in forms of action that allow legislators to maintain visibility while operating within restricted policy authority.

The Doggett case, therefore, demonstrates that changes in substantive preferences do not primarily explain variation in congressional behaviour. Instead, behaviour changes according to the institutional opportunities available at particular moments. The same underlying concerns regarding civilian protection, military restraint, and constitutional oversight are expressed differently depending on whether the political environment rewards intervention, accountability, or humanitarian advocacy.

Constitutional Position-Taking: Military Intervention and War Powers, 2013–2014

The first phase of congressional engagement occurred between 2013 and 2014, when Syria became a highly salient foreign policy issue due to chemical weapons use and debates over possible U.S. military intervention. Observations 1–4 in Table 1 demonstrate a consistent pattern of constitutional position-taking centred on congressional authority, uncertainty regarding military objectives, and concerns about escalation.

In 2013, Doggett publicly expressed hesitation toward authorising military action, stating that he was "leaning against supporting" intervention because he had not been convinced there was a "military mission that is well defined and planned" (Appendix A, Observation 1). He further warned that intervention risked involving the U.S. in a "regional civil war" and requested additional intelligence before supporting military action. In a separate interview, Doggett argued that President Obama "must get approval from Congress before using military force against Syria" (Appendix A, Observation 2). These statements demonstrate the central characteristics of constitutional position-taking: the emphasis was not only on whether intervention was desirable, but on who possessed legitimate authority to make the decision.

This behaviour aligns with Mayhew's (1974) theory of the electoral connection, particularly the concept of position-taking. When policy outcomes remain uncertain, legislators can create visible records of their preferences without assuming responsibility for implementation. Syria provided precisely this type of political environment. Military intervention involved significant uncertainty regarding consequences, while responsibility for success or failure would remain difficult to attribute. By emphasising congressional approval and strategic uncertainty, Doggett established a clear public position while limiting exposure to potential blame associated with military escalation.

Arnold's (1990) framework of strategic congressional behaviour, including the management of credit and blame, further explains why Doggett framed opposition through procedural and constitutional arguments. Rather than simply rejecting intervention, Doggett focused on whether the administration had demonstrated a clear objective, whether Congress had fulfilled its constitutional role, and whether prior military experience warranted caution. This framing allowed opposition to be justified through institutional responsibility rather than partisan disagreement.

The same pattern continued in 2014, when congressional debates shifted toward ISIS and possible expansion of U.S. military involvement in the region. In his House floor speech, Doggett argued that Congress had a "constitutional obligation to approve military action," criticised reliance on a "twelve-year-old resolution" referring to the 2001 Authorisation for Use of Military Force and warned against being "stampeded into war" (Appendix A, Observation 3). These statements reinforced a logic of legislative gatekeeping, presenting Congress as a necessary institutional constraint on executive action.

However, these observations also demonstrate the limits of congressional influence. Although these interventions created visible institutional records, they did not represent sustained policy control or long-term agenda-setting. Instead, congressional activity intensified around specific decision points when executive action created an opportunity for intervention. Once these decision windows closed, engagement declined. This pattern illustrates how high-salience foreign policy issues can temporarily increase congressional visibility without overcoming broader institutional constraints.

Crisis-Responsive Oversight: Executive Accountability in 2017

By 2017, congressional engagement shifted from anticipatory opposition to crisis-responsive oversight. Following renewed chemical weapons attacks in Syria and U.S. military strikes under the Trump administration, Doggett's activity focused less on preventing intervention and more on criticising escalation and questioning executive decision-making.

As recorded in Observation 5, Doggett opposed deploying additional U.S. ground troops, argued for restraint, and emphasised pressure on Russia rather than expanded American involvement (Appendix A, Observation 5). He also criticised the administration's approach

by stating that President Trump "does not really know what to do." Unlike the 2013–2014 period, in which congressional activity preceded a military decision being finalised, the 2017 response occurred after executive action had already taken place.

This shift reflects the institutional asymmetry between Congress and the presidency in foreign affairs. Although Congress possesses formal constitutional powers, including war powers and oversight authority, presidents often have significant advantages in agenda-setting, access to information, and speed of response (Howell & Pevehouse, 2007). Consequently, congressional influence is frequently exercised through reactive mechanisms rather than direct policy initiation.

The 2017 observation, therefore, demonstrates crisis-responsive oversight. Doggett's engagement served to communicate opposition to escalation and hold executive decision-making accountable, but it did not substantially alter the trajectory of U.S. policy. From a legislative behaviour perspective, this reflects a strategic response to a high-uncertainty environment. Public criticism provides a visible mechanism for legislators to demonstrate responsiveness while avoiding ownership of unpredictable policy outcomes.

Humanitarian-Administrative Signalling: Syria's Post-Conflict Transition, 2023–2025

The final period of engagement represents a shift from military and constitutional debates toward humanitarian protection and post-conflict governance concerns. Observations 6–8 demonstrate that congressional attention persisted even after Syria ceased to be a major military issue, but the form of engagement changed substantially.

In 2023, Doggett supported congressional humanitarian responses following the Türkiye–Syria earthquake, recognising civilian suffering and supporting relief efforts (Appendix A, Observation 6). This action differed from earlier military debates because it occurred in a lower-conflict legislative environment focused on humanitarian assistance rather than on executive authority or military escalation.

Similarly, Doggett supported efforts concerning Temporary Protected Status for Syrians through collective congressional advocacy in 2025. The letter argued that Syria remained unsafe for return due to continuing instability, displacement, and humanitarian concerns

(Appendix A, Observation 8). Unlike earlier speeches, this action took the form of collective correspondence directed to executive agencies rather than direct legislative contestation. These observations demonstrate humanitarian-administrative signalling: a form of congressional engagement that maintains political attention while operating within institutional limits. As Syria moved into a prolonged post-conflict environment, issue salience declined, and electoral incentives for sustained attention weakened. However, congressional activity continued through politically feasible and institutionally available mechanisms.

Collective letters and humanitarian resolutions are particularly suited to low-salience environments because they allow legislators to demonstrate responsiveness while distributing responsibility among multiple actors. This reduces individual political exposure while preserving visibility. Rather than indicating congressional withdrawal, this pattern represents adaptation to a different political environment in which direct policy control is limited, and outcomes are difficult to attribute.

Institutional Channels and the Structure of Congressional Behaviour

Across all eight observations, the most consistent finding is that congressional behaviour varies by institutional channel rather than by substantive preference. Doggett's core position remains relatively stable throughout the dataset: opposition to unnecessary military escalation, support for humanitarian protection, and emphasis on congressional responsibility. What changes is the mechanism through which these preferences are communicated. Floor speeches and media statements provide high visibility and allow legislators to establish clear public positions. Votes and resolutions create formal institutional records but often produce limited direct policy change. Collective letters provide opportunities for advocacy while reducing individual attribution. These differences demonstrate that congressional institutions create distinct pathways through which political incentives are translated into observable behaviour.

The dataset therefore challenges a simple distinction between active and inactive congressional engagement. Although much of the observed behaviour is symbolic or procedural, this does not mean it is politically insignificant. In low-salience foreign policy environments, signalling itself becomes a central function of legislative action. Congressional

behaviour remains meaningful because it communicates preferences, establishes accountability claims, and maintains institutional attention even where direct policy influence is constrained.

Overall, the Doggett case demonstrates that the interplay of electoral incentives, institutional fragmentation, and fluctuating salience shapes congressional engagement in post-conflict foreign policy. Congressional behaviour persists across time, but its form changes according to the opportunities and constraints created by different political environments. The central pattern is therefore not inconsistency or disengagement, but adaptive institutional signalling: legislators continue to participate in complex foreign policy debates, but primarily through channels that balance visibility, responsibility, and limited policy control.

Discussion

This study addresses a core problem in democratic governance: how political institutions sustain attention to foreign policy domains that are temporally extended, causally complex, and weakly attributable. Post-conflict environments require long-term political commitment, yet democratic incentive structures tend to privilege short-term, visible, and electorally salient issues. The Doggett case shows that this tension is not resolved through disengagement or a simple shift toward symbolic politics. Instead, it produces a more specific institutional outcome in which political communication is systematically differentiated across channels that carry distinct logics of visibility, responsibility, and control.

This insight directly exposes a gap in the existing literature. Post-conflict governance scholarship explains why sustained attention is normatively necessary for durable outcomes, but it does not fully theorise how domestic political institutions actually structure that attention in practice. Conversely, legislative behaviour theory accounts for incentive responsiveness, but is less able to explain how strategic behaviour is distributed across multiple institutional environments in low-salience foreign policy domains. Taken together, these limitations suggest that engagement does not decline under conditions of weak salience and attribution; rather, it is reorganised into channel-specific forms of political expression.

From this perspective, the analytical focus shifts from whether legislators engage to how engagement is structured. Whereas conventional accounts suggest that low salience leads to legislative withdrawal, the Doggett case demonstrates a different dynamic in which congressional involvement remains evident but is redistributed across institutional forms.

Importantly, the key transformation is not a shift from substantive to symbolic action, but a reconfiguration of expressive modes shaped by institutional constraints and opportunity structures.

From a theoretical perspective, existing incentive-based models remain essential but incomplete. Mayhew's (1974) electoral connection explains why legislators prioritise visible behaviour, while Arnold's (1990) framework of strategic congressional behaviour clarifies why they may avoid high-risk policy ownership under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguous attribution. However, neither fully captures how these incentives are filtered through and reorganised by institutional architecture. The evidence suggests that institutional form does not merely constrain behaviour; it actively structures the pathways through which incentives are translated into observable political action.

Collectively, these findings also refine assumptions within post-conflict governance literature. Sustained attention is often treated as a precondition for effective reconstruction, yet the evidence here suggests that democratic systems maintain attention in fragmented rather than continuous forms. Continuity of engagement, therefore, should not be conflated with continuity of influence, as attention is dispersed across communicative and procedural channels, producing uneven policy effects. Overall, the study reframes democratic foreign policy behaviour by showing that legislative engagement is distributed across institutional spaces, with each channel shaping what form it can take. Rather than a binary distinction between activity and inactivity, or between substantive and symbolic action, the central mechanism is the institutional reallocation of attention under conditions of weak attribution and fragmented authority, offering a more precise account of how democratic institutions remain engaged in complex foreign policy domains without producing sustained or unified policy control.

Conclusion

This study has examined how electoral incentives and institutional constraints shape congressional engagement with post-conflict foreign policy through a structured qualitative case study of Representative Lloyd Doggett's engagement with Syria between 2013 and 2025. It has been argued that congressional behaviour in low-salience foreign policy domains is best explained not by changes in individual preferences or levels of political commitment, but by the interaction among weak electoral incentives, uncertain policy outcomes, and

fragmented institutional authority. Together, these conditions shape not only whether legislators engage but also the institutional forms through which engagement occurs.

The Doggett case demonstrates that congressional attention to Syria is continuous but irregular in form. Rather than sustained policy entrepreneurship, engagement is redistributed across distinct channels, including constitutional position-taking, crisis-responsive oversight, and humanitarian-administrative signalling. These forms of action allow legislators to maintain visibility, communicate preferences, and exercise accountability while operating within institutional environments where direct control over foreign policy outcomes is limited. Congressional behaviour is therefore not characterised by absence or simple symbolic activity, but by structured adaptation to different political and institutional conditions.

The findings extend existing theories of legislative behaviour by demonstrating that electoral incentives and blame-avoidance mechanisms are filtered through institutional structures. Mayhew's (1974) electoral connection explains why legislators prioritise visible and attributable forms of action, while Arnold's (1990) framework of strategic congressional behaviour explains how legislators manage political risk through mechanisms such as credit-claiming and blame avoidance. However, the Doggett case further demonstrates that institutions do not merely constrain these incentives; they organise the pathways through which they are expressed.

Overall, congressional engagement with post-conflict foreign policy should be understood as distributed rather than dichotomous. It represents neither sustained legislative leadership nor disengagement, but a patterned form of institutionalised attention that persists through fragmented communicative and procedural channels. This provides a more precise understanding of how democratic institutions respond to complex, long-term foreign policy challenges where responsibility is diffuse, outcomes are uncertain, and sustained policy control remains difficult to achieve.

Appendix A: Doggett Evidence Record Set

Purpose of this Appendix

This appendix contains the full evidentiary base for all coded observations used in the analysis. It provides source identification, contextual information, extracted evidence, and extended coding notes for each observation included in the dataset. These materials are not analysed directly in the findings section but provide the traceable empirical foundation for all claims and thematic classifications presented in the paper.

Observation 1: 2013 — Syria Intervention Hesitancy

Source

Gonzalez, J. W. (2013, September 4). *Doggett hesitant on U.S. intervention in Syria.* MySA. https://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local/politics/article/doggett-hesitant-on-u-s-intervention-in-syria-4787406.php

Context

- Public-facing media interview following congressional debate over possible U.S. military intervention in Syria.
- Pre-ISIS escalation period.
- Early congressional deliberation over proposed U.S. strikes following Assad regime chemical weapons allegations.

Full Evidence (verbatim excerpts and extracted notes)

- Doggett stated that he was "leaning against supporting" authorisation for U.S. military intervention in Syria.
- He stated that he was "yet to be convinced" there was a "military mission that is well defined and planned."
- He requested additional intelligence and classified briefings before supporting military action.
- He warned that intervention could involve the United States in a broader "regional civil war."
- He questioned whether airstrikes would represent an effective or proportionate response.

- He distinguished condemnation of Assad's actions from support for military intervention.

Extended Coding Notes

- Procedural threshold framing of legitimacy.
- Early constitutional constraint signalling.
- Conditional opposition rather than absolute rejection of intervention.
- Anticipatory concern over escalation and military entanglement.

Observation 2: 2013 — Syria Authorisation Requirement

Source

Davies, D. M. (2013, August 30). *Doggett wants Obama to get congressional approval before any action in Syria.* Texas Public Radio. https://www.tpr.org/government-public-policy/2013-08-30/doggett-wants-obama-to-get-congressional-approval-before-any-action-in-syria

Context

- Radio interview concerning proposed Obama administration military action in Syria.
- Congressional debate regarding executive authority and war powers.
- Pre-authorisation period before possible U.S. strikes.

Full Evidence

- Doggett argued that President Obama "must get approval from Congress before using military force against Syria."
- He called for Congress to be reconvened if necessary.
- He argued that congressional approval requirements should apply regardless of party control.
- He referenced the Iraq War as a precedent for caution.
- He warned that conflicts are "easier to get into than to get out of."
- He referred to the United Kingdom Parliament's rejection of military action as an example of legislative oversight.

Extended Coding Notes

- Cross-party constitutional norm enforcement.
- Procedural war powers assertion.
- Legislative primacy framing.

- Institutional constraint signalling.

Observation 3: 2014 — "Don't Be Stampeded into War"

Source

Doggett, L. (2014, June 20). *Don't be stampeded into war.* U.S. House of Representatives. https://doggett.house.gov/media-center/speeches/rep-lloyd-doggett-dont-be-stampeded-war

Context

- House floor speech.
- Debate concerning military authorisation and expanded U.S. involvement in Syria and Iraq.
- Iraq War precedent framing.

Full Evidence

- Doggett argued that Congress has a "constitutional obligation to approve military action."
- He criticised reliance on a "twelve-year-old resolution" referring to the 2001 Authorisation for Use of Military Force.
- He warned against being "stampeded into war."
- He argued that the President should present a "specific case to Congress."
- He framed previous military interventions as cautionary examples.

Extended Coding Notes

- Article I authority assertion.
- Legislative gatekeeping.
- AUMF expansion critique.
- War termination framing.
- Anticipatory blame avoidance.

Observation 4: 2014 — ISIS Authorisation Debate

Source

U.S. Representative Lloyd Doggett. (2014, September 18). *U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett: House floor speech on Syria* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrOgYqwJVb8

Context

- House floor intervention.

- ISIS authorisation debate.
- High-salience national security environment.

Full Evidence

- Doggett warned against mission expansion into Syria.
- He argued that the "danger of escalation is very real."
- He urged Congress to exercise its constitutional war powers authority.
- He questioned whether American service members should "carry the load."
- He emphasised concerns regarding prolonged military commitments.

Extended Coding Notes

- Anticipatory blame avoidance.
- Electoral position-taking under heightened salience.
- Escalation prevention framing.
- Cost attribution framing.

Observation 5: 2017 — Syrian Chemical Weapons Response

Source

Short, S. (2017, April 5). *Congressman Lloyd Doggett responds to Syrian attack.* Texas Public Radio. https://www.tpr.org/news/2017-04-05/congressman-lloyd-doggett-responds-to-syrian-attack

Context

- Response following Syrian chemical weapons attack.
- Trump administration military response.
- Crisis-response media commentary.

Full Evidence

- Doggett opposed adding "additional U.S. ground troops."
- He emphasised restraint in responding to Syria's civil war.
- He argued that pressure should be placed on Russia.
- He criticised uncertainty in executive decision-making, stating that Trump "doesn't really know what to do."

Extended Coding Notes

- Executive accountability framing.
- Crisis-response signalling.
- Low-cost rhetorical positioning.

- Reactive oversight behaviour.

Observation 6: 2023 — Syria Earthquake Humanitarian Response

Source

GovTrack.us. (2023, February 27). *H.Res. 132 (118th): Responding to the earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria on February 6, 2023*.
https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/118-2023/h132

Context

- Türkiye–Syria earthquake humanitarian response.
- House humanitarian resolution.
- Suspension of the Rules procedure.

Full Evidence

- Supported humanitarian relief efforts following the earthquake.
- Recognised the scale of civilian suffering and humanitarian need.
- Resolution passed overwhelmingly through a non-controversial legislative procedure.
- Demonstrated bipartisan congressional attention to humanitarian consequences of the Syrian conflict.

Extended Coding Notes

- Humanitarian signalling.
- Low-contestation legislative behaviour.
- Symbolic affirmation.
- Administrative humanitarian engagement.

Observation 7: 2023 — War Powers Withdrawal Vote

Source

Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives. (2023, March 8). *Roll call 136: On agreeing to the resolution (H.Con.Res. 21): Directing the President, pursuant to section 5(c) of the War Powers Resolution, to remove the United States Armed Forces from Syria*.
https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2023136

Context

- Invocation of Section 5(c) of the War Powers Resolution.
- Congressional debate over continued U.S. military presence in Syria.
- Attempt to assert legislative authority over troop deployment.

Full Evidence

- Doggett voted in favour of directing withdrawal of U.S. Armed Forces from Syria.
- The resolution attempted to use congressional war powers authority to constrain executive military deployment.
- The measure failed, demonstrating limits on congressional ability to compel foreign policy change.

Extended Coding Notes

- Constitutional signalling.
- Institutional asymmetry between Congress and the executive.
- War termination signalling.
- Procedural constraint under limited enforcement capacity.

Observation 8: 2025 — Syrian TPS Advocacy Letter

Source

U.S. Members of Congress. (2025, November 18). *Congressional letter on redesignation and extension of TPS for Syria.* Center for Civil Society and Democracy. https://www.ccsd.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Congressional-Letter-on-Redesignation-and-Extension-of-TPS-for-Syria.pdf

Context

- Collective congressional advocacy letter.
- Addressed to executive agencies responsible for immigration and foreign policy decisions.
- Post-conflict humanitarian protection environment.

Full Evidence

- Requested extension and redesignation of Temporary Protected Status for Syrian nationals.
- Argued Syria remained unsafe for return due to ongoing instability.
- Highlighted continued conflict impacts, displacement, and humanitarian needs.
- Referenced legal requirements governing TPS decisions.
- Framed protection as necessary due to continued insecurity.

Extended Coding Notes

- Collective executive advocacy mechanism.

- Humanitarian norm enforcement.
- Coalition-based signalling.
- Indirect policy influence pathway.

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