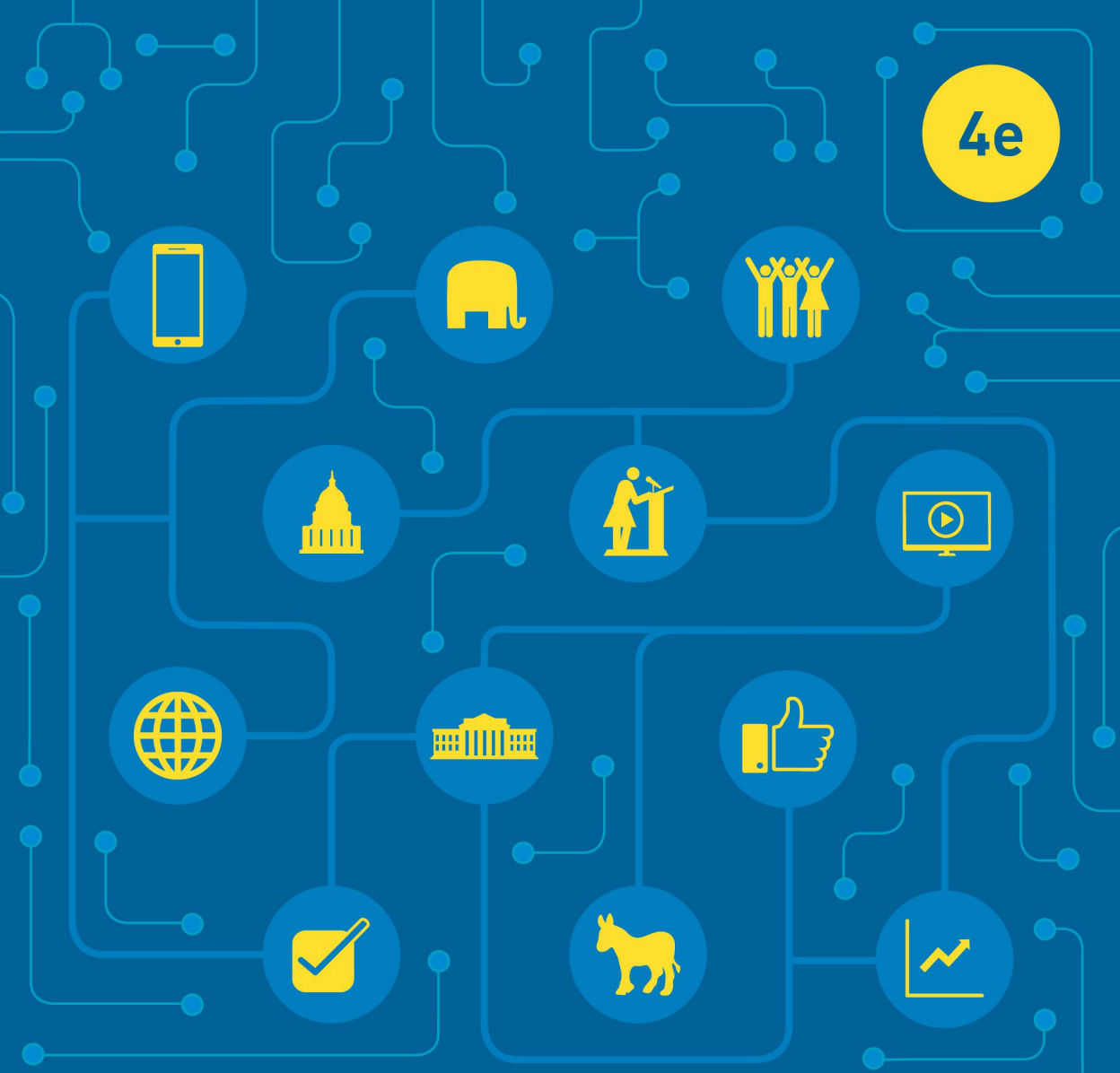

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MEDIA POLITICS

A Citizen's Guide

Shanto Iyengar

MEDIA POLITICS

A Citizen's Guide

FOURTH EDITION

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Shanto Iyengar
Stanford University

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The Media Politics video archive includes Video Features on the topics listed below. Each Video Feature presents clips that illustrate the discussion in the text. An icon in the margins of the text indicates when a corresponding clip is available. The video archive can be accessed at *mediapolitics.stanford.edu.*

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Shanto Iyengar
Palo Alto
July 2018

MEDIA POLITICS

A Citizen's Guide

FOURTH EDITION

1

Introduction

Image Is Everything

October 8, 2017—Attending the NFL game between the Indianapolis Colts and San Francisco 49ers, Vice President Pence pledges allegiance to the American flag.

In different ways, these incidents illustrate the basic maxim of contemporary American politics: image is everything. First, as in the case of Vice President Pence's flag salute and abrupt departure from an NFL game in objection to African American players kneeling during the national anthem, politicians exploit social divisions for political gain. Pence was not only positioning the Republicans as the party of patriots, he was also demonstrating his loyalty to President Trump, who had condemned athletes who exercise their constitutional right to make a political statement. Second, as in the case of President George W. Bush's premature claim of victory in Iraq, politicians feel no compunction about making exaggerated (and even false) claims before national television audiences because they understand that it is politically beneficial to associate

May 1, 2003—On the deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, President George W. Bush claims victory in the war against Iraq.

August 13, 2010—At a White House dinner with prominent members of the American Muslim community, President Obama announces his support for the proposal to construct a mosque near the site of the destroyed World Trade Center in New York City.

themselves with successful action and they expect that their claims of success will be taken at face value. Third, politicians often hesitate to support unpopular groups or become involved with controversial causes. President Barack Obama's advisers underestimated the risks associated with the mosque controversy. At that time, approximately 20 percent of the American people (and nearly one-third of all Republicans) mistakenly believed that Obama was a Muslim. Opposition to the mosque was strong among both Democrats and Republicans. Seventy percent of the respondents in a poll commissioned by *Time* magazine believed that the construction of the mosque represented an insult to the victims of the 9/11 attacks. Republican politicians immediately attacked the president's position as abhorrent. Former congressman Newt Gingrich compared the proposal to demands by Nazis that the swastika be displayed at the Holocaust Museum. Organizations representing the victims' families condemned the president for desecrating the sanctity of Ground Zero. Equally telling, not a single prominent Democratic politician defended the president for his position.

Elected officials' preoccupation with media imagery is hardly surprising, given that, for most Americans, the media are their only contact with the world of public affairs. In fact, from the perspective of the public, events not covered by the news media make no greater impression than the proverbial tree falling in the forest when no one is around to hear it. For the public, what's in the news is all there is to know.

MEDIA-BASED POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES

Video Archive 1.1
Image Is Everything

The power of media imagery reverberates throughout political life. The incidents illustrated in Video Archive 1.1 reflect situations at different points of the politician's comfort gradient. Vice President Pence's orchestrated "walkout" at the NFL game was meant to stir up support among President Trump's core supporters, many of whom are evangelical Christians and deeply patriotic. President Bush's declaration of victory on board the USS *Abraham Lincoln* was carefully staged to reinforce his own contributions to the successful invasion of Iraq at a time when the possibility of actual victory seemed plausible. President Bill Clinton's emphatic (and false) denial of a sexual relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky was an attempt to stem the rising tide of doubts about his fitness for office. President Obama's support for the World Trade Center mosque project landed him in political hot water in a debate that had less to do with what was constitutionally allowed and more to do with how the image of the mosque would be perceived. Using the media for political gain is a politician's major day-to-day focus and preoccupation.

No longer confined to elections and campaigns, media appeals have become standard fare in the day-to-day conduct of government and are used by private interests as well as by candidates. During legislative debates, as in the case of the contentious 2017 tax reform bill, spokespersons for both sides appear regularly on television news programs and talk shows to cast their individual spin on the policy or problem in question. Rather than relying solely on old-fashioned lobbying methods, private parties now sponsor television ads and social media posts intended to cue officials about issues such as healthcare, immigration, and gun control.

The habit of playing to the public has even spread to policy arenas not typically associated with partisan politics. The bipartisan Warren Commission, established to investigate the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy, conducted its business behind closed doors. In contrast, the Kean Commission appointed by President Bush to investigate the 9/11 terrorist attacks conducted its business in televised hearings (except for the testimonies of President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and some high-level intelligence officials). The substantive jurisdiction of both commissions involved sensitive matters of state, but our expectations about how an inquiry of this type should properly be conducted have changed greatly. Moreover, the media coverage of the Kean Commission's work was not limited to the actual hearings; several members of the commission appeared as regular guests on

news programs and talk shows, where they discussed the developing findings in partisan terms. Indeed, their daily media appearances were utterly predictable: Republican members denied that the Bush administration shared culpability at any level, and Democrats seized on the intelligence breakdowns as symptomatic of the general unpreparedness of the administration.

More recently, both natural and human-made disasters have become occasions for public posturing. The Bush administration's inexplicably slow response to Hurricane Katrina, which killed 1,833 people in 2005, generated a wave of negative publicity. In an attempt to stem the tide of bad news, the president ended his summer vacation early, dispatched high-profile spokespersons (such as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice) to the affected areas, and replaced the head of FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency). In addition, the government announced that news organizations would be prevented from covering the recovery of the dead. It was only the threat of a lawsuit by CNN that caused the government to abandon its effort to censor the news.

The lessons of Katrina were not lost on Bush's successors. Immediately after the explosion of the BP oil rig Deepwater Horizon in 2010, President Obama's top energy adviser appeared on NBC's *Meet the Press* and declared that the Obama administration was in control of the situation. President Obama made several visits to the Gulf Coast to signal his concern and intent to deliver relief. In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria and the sluggish delivery of emergency supplies to the people of Puerto Rico, President Trump toured the devastated areas and was filmed distributing paper towels to an appreciative crowd.

In what has become the latest twist in the annals of media politics, President Trump has taken to deriding news reports critical of his presidency as "fake news." In an interview on the Christian Television Network, he claimed that this label was "one of the greatest of all terms I've come up with." By denying the credibility of particular news organizations (including the venerable *New York Times*), President Trump hopes to inoculate his supporters from news accounts that portray him as a less than capable leader.

In sum, the use and frequent manipulation of the mass media for political purposes has transformed the practice of leadership and governance. Policy makers resort to the very same tactics that are used by candidates running for election. Advertising, credit taking, blame avoidance, finger-pointing, and other forms of political rhetoric air long after the election is over. Campaigns are continuous.

The unceasing use of the media to further partisan and self-serving objectives has a harmful effect on the collective welfare. Electoral victors are those who

excel at projecting powerful imagery and symbolism, but not necessarily those who offer substantive expertise, political experience, or pragmatism. The flood of attacks and counterattacks has increased partisan rancor and animosity among leaders and followers alike. The lack of goodwill in Congress and state legislatures makes it more difficult for elected representatives to bargain and compromise. The role of policy maker has devolved from decision making based on bargaining and accommodation to attempts to intimidate and coerce opponents. On more than one occasion, the result has been gridlock and paralysis in government. Thus, the practice of media politics amounts to a tragedy of the commons: individual participants may be able to manipulate the media to their advantage, but in the long run, both the body politic and the politician are weakened.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In this book we have the following goals:

- To explain the rise of media-based politics
- To describe the media strategies used to contest elections and to govern
- To document the payoffs associated with these strategies: increases in the candidate's share of the vote on election day, higher approval ratings while in office, and assured reelection
- To assess the liabilities of media-based politics, most notably the possibility of intensified party conflict and polarization, which makes it more difficult for leaders to govern
- To consider the importance of social media platforms as a new arena of media politics that features direct rather than mediated communication between politicians and voters
- To raise questions about how media politics and changing forms of mass communication affect the practice and future of democracy in America

We begin, in Chapter 2, by providing a theoretical perspective. In democratic societies, the news media are expected to contribute three important public services. First, they provide an electoral forum in which all candidates can solicit support from voters. In the United States, the forum is a combination of paid and free media appearances, but primarily the former. In most European democracies, on the other hand, the mix heavily favors the latter: most countries do not permit paid political advertising and instead award free broadcast time to all major political parties before elections. Second, the news

media are expected to create an information environment—sometimes called the public sphere—where voters can encounter a variety of perspectives on the issues that concern them. In effect, news and other forms of public affairs programming are expected to facilitate the expression of informed opinion. Third, the news media are expected to act as an agent of the public by policing the behavior of government officials. Citizens lack the resources to monitor the actions of their leaders on a daily basis; they delegate this watchdog task to the media. In countries with a free press, the fear of transparency (in the form of media publicity) is supposed to deter public officials from engaging in corrupt behavior (Besley & Prat, 2006). In short, democratic theory casts news organizations as multitasking public utilities.

Against the standards of democratic theory, most contemporary media systems fall short of meeting their civic responsibilities, but the American media appear especially inadequate. A distinctive feature of the American media system is that virtually all news outlets are privately owned. Private ownership creates an inherent tension between the profit motive and civic responsibility. The need to survive forces owners to value audience size over news content; they deliver content that sells rather than content that informs. Inevitably, infotainment takes precedence over serious coverage of national and international issues.

Most democratic societies deal with the dilemma of civic shirking by providing public subsidies to news organizations. The BBC in the United Kingdom, CBC in Canada, ARD in Germany, and NHK in Japan are giant television networks, watched by millions of viewers and financed by taxpayers. Freed from market forces, these organizations deliver more news, documentaries, and other forms of public-spirited programming than their privately owned competitors do. In many nations, the public broadcaster is the market leader, suggesting that people do not necessarily tune out serious and substantive news programming.

The United States has adopted a different approach to encouraging the free flow of public affairs information. Rather than encouraging the growth of public broadcasters (PBS and NPR), communications policy has evolved from early regulations requiring media outlets to provide at least some public service programming to a more laissez-faire reliance on the market. Supporters of regulation assume that the existence of multiple media organizations does not necessarily create a flourishing marketplace. In the early years of broadcasting, for instance, the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) required all national networks to provide a minimal amount of daily news

programming in exchange for their free use of the airwaves. The anti-regulation argument, on the other hand, rests on the assumption that the sheer number of news outlets—daily newspapers, national television networks, local television stations, cable networks, blogs, and online social networks—provides Americans with ample opportunity to encounter the proverbial marketplace of ideas.

On a more practical level, *media politics*—as exemplified by the American system—requires two conditions. The first is universal access to the media. No matter how independent or civic-minded the press, societies with low levels of literacy or relatively few television sets or limited Internet access will be characterized by alternative forms of political communication, simply because mass media will not be the most efficient means for politicians to reach voters. When the news media's reach is restricted, those who seek votes through media strategies are disadvantaged. The case of Howard Dean's Internet-based 2004 presidential campaign is revealing. Although he raised vast sums of money over the Web, and in so doing established himself as the early front-runner for the 2004 Democratic nomination, Dean's pioneering use of technology did not translate into a single primary victory. Fifteen years ago, most primary voters (unlike donors) remained on the wrong side of the digital divide.

The second necessary condition for the flourishing of media politics is the diminished role of political parties in selecting candidates. In most democratic societies, political parties recruit and sponsor candidates. Parties offer competing policy bundles; voters choose among parties; and, depending on the party's share of the popular vote, some number of the individual candidates running under the party banner are declared elected. When the party establishment loses control over the selection of candidates, as vividly illustrated by the "insurgent" candidacies of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in 2016, *free-agent candidates* turn to the media as the most efficient form of communicating with voters. Media politics becomes a substitute for party politics.

In fact, the rise of media politics in the United States coincides with the increased reach of the broadcast media and the weakening influence of party elites over the selection of candidates. Beginning in the 1960s, candidates became less dependent on their party organizations and migrated to the mass media as the principal means of reaching voters. Because candidates for elective office represent a significant revenue stream during political campaigns (in the form of paid television advertising), media owners have been only too happy to encourage this form of cash-on-the-barrelhead electioneering.

BEHAVIOR AND PERFORMANCE OF THE PRESS

In Chapter 3, we examine the performance of the American media. First, we trace programming decisions to the pull of market forces and to the professional values and aspirations of journalists. Market forces compromise the public sphere, as we have noted already. Somewhat paradoxically, the independence that is so valued by modern journalism has also exacted a toll on press performance. As professionals, journalists seek autonomy and control over their work product. They are unwilling to act as mere stenographers for campaigns and instead go out of their way to resist candidates' efforts to use them as mouthpieces. The role of the campaign reporter today is not to describe, but to provide independent analysis of the candidates' actions. Presidential candidates still tour the country making as many public appearances as possible, but their voices are rarely encountered in news presentations. Instead of the candidates, whose speeches represent bias, journalists have turned to a coterie of expert commentators for objective analysis of the campaign. Interpretive or analytic journalism has largely supplanted the earlier standard of descriptive reporting.

Professional norms are but one element of a broader organizational model of journalism. In this view, the news is shaped by the culture of the newsroom and the routines of the workplace. The importance of authoritative sources makes journalists especially reliant on government officials. The Pentagon, State Department, and White House together account for the great majority of news reports on a daily basis. In the aftermath of the deadly terrorist attack at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, the FBI took control of all media releases about the ongoing investigation, including a rare press briefing led by then FBI director James Comey. A further element of the organizational model is journalistic prestige; the pecking order within journalism creates a strong copycat mentality: what is reported in this morning's *New York Times* and *Washington Post* is inevitably repeated in television newscasts and Internet news sites.

In Chapter 4, we extend the analysis of press performance to the question of adversarial journalism. We show that the stylized account of a watchdog press does not fit well with the facts, particularly reporters' heavy reliance on government officials as news sources. Every day, the Washington press corps converges on the White House press office for the official briefing from the presidential press secretary. In the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq, a similar daily ritual was played out at the Pentagon and, although only briefly, at the Iraqi Ministry of Information in Baghdad.

The dependence on government sources does not necessarily inject partisan bias into the news; after all, Democratic sources can easily be neutralized by

Republicans, and vice versa. But the preoccupation of the press with official sources means that incumbents have a sizable advantage over their challengers in gaining access to the press. Some official sources are more newsworthy than others. The president is the prime official source; any White House event—no matter how trivial or stage-managed—elicits considerable news coverage.

Even though coverage of government policy can be *indexed* or designed to reflect the degree of diversity among the opinions of elected officials, sometimes elite disagreement is quashed and one particular perspective achieves dominance. The prototypical case of elite consensus occurs during times of military tension or imminent conflict, when opponents of the incumbent administration tend to fall silent as the nation prepares for war. During these periods, the news becomes dominated by official accounts of events, and the press is generally in no position to scrutinize, discount, or otherwise cast doubts on these accounts.

In the aftermath of the military campaign in Iraq, news reports from American journalists embedded with the American invading force were overwhelmingly celebratory in tone and devoid of references to the pain and suffering inflicted on Iraqi civilians. Given the one-sided presentation, it was inevitable that a significant number of Americans would come to believe that Iraq did in fact possess weapons of mass destruction and that Saddam Hussein's regime was implicated in the September 11 attacks on the United States. As late as August 2004, nearly 30 percent of the public believed that the United States had *found* weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. When opposition sources fall silent, the news becomes a conduit for the official version of events. This is a far cry from watchdog journalism.

In our final look at the behavior of the press, Chapter 5 addresses whether the civic capacity of the media has been strengthened or weakened by the massive revolution in information technology. Paradoxically, public affairs information may flow even less freely in the aftermath of the technology-induced transformation of the media marketplace. In 1968, most Americans got their news from one of the three national network newscasts because they had no other choice. Today, the same newscasts compete with cable and satellite networks, local news programming, a variety of soft news programs, millions of websites the world over, and gigantic online social networks. This bewildering array of media choices makes it almost certain that exposure to the news will be more selective; like consumers of goods and services, people will seek out news from preferred providers or programs and tune out others. Information conveyed through social networks and recommended by "friends" is more likely to attract the receiver's attention. Because people typically prefer

being entertained to being informed, the enhanced media environment has substantially reduced the audience for public affairs programs. In 1960, some 60 million Americans—representing 55 percent of the voting-age population—tuned in to the presidential debates between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy. In 2016, the audience for the Clinton–Trump debates averaged around 70 million viewers, representing only 30 percent of the voting-age population.

The increased fragmentation of media audiences raises important questions about the motives underlying consumer behavior. Some have suggested that the explosion of online news encourages consumers to seek out and become dependent on news that reinforces their own opinions, which reduces chance encounters with unknown or disagreeable voices. The increased availability of news sources with a distinct slant on the news (Fox News or MSNBC, to cite two well-known instances) makes it possible for consumers to choose news programs on the basis of whether they expect to agree with the message being presented. No longer will all Americans be subject to the same media messages and believe in the same set of facts; instead, they will encounter their preferred party's or candidate's point of view. Their immersion in "echo chambers" leads people to believe in diverging accounts of the political world. In the aftermath of the hyperpolarized 2016 election, spokespersons for the Trump administration introduced the term *alternative facts* into the political lexicon. Thus, when a person's exposure to public affairs information is limited to only one perspective, political discord and division are inevitable outcomes.

Others have suggested, more optimistically, that the increasing use of the Internet will transform the nature of social interaction; people will substitute online encounters for in-person encounters with friends and neighbors. These scholars cite the popularity of online social networks such as Facebook (now with more than 2 billion members worldwide) and Twitter (with over 500 million tweets per day) as evidence of the revival of community and public spiritedness. By this account, the increased use of information technology strengthens *social capital* and allows individuals to belong to multiple communities and obtain information on demand rather than be limited by the availability of news programming.

Academic investigations into the effects of new-media use (which we summarize in Chapter 5) suggest conclusions somewhere between the pessimistic and optimistic accounts. The fact that Americans can choose from multiple news outlets does not necessarily mean that they tune in only to sources that share their own values. In addition to participating in gated communities to nurture their partisan preferences, consumers can resort to a more utilitarian form of screening by seeking out information on matters

that affect their daily life, such as the weather forecast and details about the daily commute. By this logic, local news will trump partisan commentary as a source of information. However, the emergence of huge online social networks has placed individuals in the path of messages from like-minded "friends," thus inserting considerable partisan bias into the flow of information.

More ominously, because social media platforms know no geographical boundaries, it is now possible for foreign actors to deliver biased messages in the hope of swaying Americans. In 2016, the Russian government sponsored a series of information campaigns on social media designed to advantage candidate Donald Trump at the expense of Hillary Clinton. In Chapter 5, we explain how the "weaponization" of social media occurred and the belated steps taken by Facebook and Twitter to prevent inaccurate and misleading information from entering their network. Whether the Trump campaign colluded—intentionally or unintentionally—with the Russians is the focus of the ongoing investigation led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller.

SHAPING THE NEWS

Having dealt with the theory and practice of press performance, we turn next to the second set of players in media politics: the candidates and advocacy groups that seek to shape the news. A candidate's overriding goal is to attract more votes than the opponent. For their part, interest groups and political activists seek to promote or prevent the passage of particular policies. Ever since the onset of media politics in the 1960s, political campaigns have become increasingly professionalized with cadres of media consultants, campaign managers, and strategists, all of whom are well aware of the norms and values of journalists and who hope to capitalize on this expertise to achieve the most favorable media treatment of their clients.

From the perspective of the candidate, there are two sets of media opportunities. *Free media* refers to news coverage, even though it is hardly cost free. Typically, campaigns hire well-known media consultants and public relations firms to maximize their client's visibility in the news. In 2016, both presidential candidates were especially newsworthy because they became ensnared in multiple controversies; the goal became one of damage control rather than greater coverage. Candidates also rely heavily on *paid media*, typically in the form of televised political advertisements. Candidate Trump attracted so much news coverage in 2016 that his team could afford to invest only token amounts on advertising. The content of the ads, their timing, and

even their appearance during specific television programs are all a matter of careful calibration and analysis.

How do campaign managers inject their spin into the news when facing a hostile press corps? Among other things, they take advantage of competition among news sources to identify outlets that are likely to provide the most sympathetic treatment for their candidates. When the national press was hounding candidate Trump over a tape featuring the candidate's use of lewd language and his willingness to grope women, the Trump campaign invited three women who had accused former president Clinton of unwanted sexual advances to be his guests at the second presidential debate. Of course, the women were given prominent coverage in conservative media outlets. In addition, campaigns adapt to the more aggressive behavior of journalists. Following the 1988 presidential campaign, when reporters for the first time decided to take off the gloves and publish hard-hitting ad-watch reports challenging the veracity of campaign advertisements, consultants responded by producing ads with a veneer of objectivity (by citing newspaper reports in the ads, for instance). More interesting, campaigns began to produce ads that were designed as bait to elicit ad-watch coverage, with the aim of generating more free media coverage for their candidates. Because they take a strategic approach to adapting their game to the prevailing actions of the press, campaign consultants generally succeed in getting coverage that is beneficial to their clients.

The continuing struggle between journalists and campaign operatives to control the news provides a classic instance of a collective action dilemma. Society benefits when journalists and campaigners cooperate: the news focuses on what the candidates say, the candidates focus on the issues, and voters learn about matters of substance rather than strategy. Because presidential campaigns typically feature two evenly matched sides, old-fashioned descriptive reporting guaranteed that the electorate would be exposed to equal amounts of opposing (and offsetting) spin. Today, in contrast, journalists prefer to inject their voices into the news to tear away the façade of the campaign and reveal the candidates' vote-seeking strategies. The end result is that voters come away with a cynical sense of the process.

Dealing with the press is but one element of campaign strategy. Candidates also have access to the paid element of media—namely, advertisements. In the most general terms, all advertising campaigns are idiosyncratic. Advertising strategy varies depending on the stage of the campaign, the persona and reputation of the sponsoring candidate, and the overall state of the political race. Even allowing for these contextual variations, however, there are several tried-and-true tactics in campaign advertising, including setting the campaign

agenda, focusing attention on the candidate's strengths, and attacking the opponent relentlessly. We outline these strategies in Chapter 6 using a series of illustrations from recent presidential and statewide campaigns.

Advertising is the largest expenditure incurred by candidates. No account of advertising strategy is complete without reference to the complex rules governing campaign finance. We close Chapter 6 with a brief survey of federal lawmaking on the subject—from the 1974 amendments to the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, which established the system of public financing of presidential campaigns (and associated expenditures and contributions limits); to the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, which eliminated *soft money* (money raised by political parties rather than by specific candidate organizations) and which banned the airing of *issue ads* (ads advocating the passage or defeat of particular legislation) in the weeks preceding the election; to the 2013 decision of the US Supreme Court in *McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission*, striking down the cap on the total amount individuals could donate to multiple campaigns.

MEDIA EFFECTS

Having considered how journalists craft their coverage of politicians and how candidates in turn make use of the media, we turn next to assessing the consequences of their actions. How do the content and form of news coverage influence public opinion, and do candidates and elected officials who wage more sophisticated media campaigns secure more votes and influence as a result?

We present the evidence in two separate chapters, beginning in Chapter 7, where we take up the question of campaign effects. Despite the enormous investments in advertising and the scrupulously choreographed nature of every campaign event and utterance, there remains considerable doubt over the capacity of campaigns to sway voters. Political scientists can forecast presidential election outcomes quite precisely (with the notable exception of the 2000 and 2016 elections) using indicators that seem to have little bearing on the candidates' media strategies. The state of the economy and the approval level of the incumbent administration, for instance, are among the factors used to forecast the vote. If the annual rate of growth in per capita GDP (gross domestic product) in 2015 yields an accurate prediction of the vote count in 2016, surely the time and effort committed to changing voters' opinions is of secondary importance!

In fact, we show that the forecasting models are consistent with the arguments that campaigns matter. The so-called fundamental forces used

by forecasters—the state of the economy, the level of presidential popularity, public concern over the continued involvement of the United States in a foreign war—are precisely the issues on which the candidates campaign. "It's the economy, stupid!" became the slogan for the 1992 Clinton campaign because voters expressed pessimism over the national economy. In 2012, as the American economy floundered, the Obama reelection campaign adopted "road to recovery" (rather than the 2008 mantra of "hope and change") as its designated slogan. More notably, in 2016, despite the nomination of the first woman candidate and the cloud of controversy that swirled around both Clinton and Trump, the result (at least in the Electoral College) was consistent with standard forecasts that call for change when one party has held the White House for eight successive years. In short, presidential campaigns are debates about the fundamentals; over time, as more voters encounter the candidates' messages, their opinions on the fundamentals become more closely aligned with their candidate preference.

Campaigns do more than activate voters' positions on the state of the economy or the performance of the incumbent. Voters acquire considerable information about the candidates' personal qualities as well as their positions on the issues. Campaigns also shift the salience of particular issues in the minds of voters. Finally, campaigns can also affect the level of election turnout. On the positive side, get-out-the-vote efforts can mobilize large numbers of voters. Simultaneously, negative campaigning can be used to demobilize voters whose partisan attachments are weak and who might find the spectacle of attacks and counterattacks sufficiently distasteful for them to drop out. In the current era of intense party polarization, there is evidence that campaigns get more bang for the buck from attempts at mobilization and demobilization than from efforts to persuade voters to switch sides.

Next, in Chapter 8, we provide a panoramic view of the entire field of media effects research. Following an initial preoccupation with political propaganda campaigns, researchers gradually adopted a more encompassing definition of *media effects* that ranged from influencing what Americans see as the important problems facing the country (*agenda setting*), to shifting citizens' take on public issues (*framing*), to altering the criteria by which voters make their choices (*priming*). And when conditions were ripe—namely, during periods of one-sided news coverage favoring a particular candidate or policy position—the evidence demonstrated considerable change in public sentiment (*persuasion*). Thus, the initial expectation of wholesale changes in public sentiment was replaced by a more cautious definition of the effects of political communication. Against this more realistic baseline, study after study demonstrated that the

news media exercise considerable leverage over public opinion. We summarize this evidence in Chapter 8, including a set of recent studies documenting the intensified state of partisan polarization in American society.

GOING PUBLIC

The same media revolution that swept through the arena of campaigns has similarly transformed the nature of governance and leadership. In the premedia era, the campaign ended on election day. The president-elect (or governor-elect) would assemble a broad-based coalition consisting of legislative allies and supportive interest groups, who would work together to implement the administration's policy initiatives. The process typically involved bargaining and accommodation between rival camps.

As described in Chapter 9, bargaining with the opposition has fallen out of fashion in Washington and state capitals. Elected officials now prefer to go public. They resort to public relations tactics designed to cultivate the appearance of responsive leadership—through rhetorical posturing, credit claiming, and avoidance of blame. In the case of President Trump, he takes to Twitter on a daily basis to berate and demean his critics. Key behind-the-scene confidants are no longer party leaders but the legions of spokespersons, commentators, and media consultants who make their daily rounds on television news shows and the editorial pages of our newspapers.

The acceleration of going public can be traced to the gradual encroachment of election campaigns on the policy process. Elected officials and interest groups have accumulated considerable expertise in the use of public relations strategies while attempting to win elections, and it is only to be expected that they seek to capitalize on this expertise when formulating and debating legislation. Campaign techniques such as television advertising are now used long after Election Day. While Congress was considering the Affordable Care Act in 2010, the Chamber of Commerce launched a significant ad campaign (at a cost of nearly $200 million) in an unsuccessful attempt to derail passage of the bill. Not unexpectedly, when Republicans sought unsuccessfully to repeal the ACA in 2017, groups opposed to their efforts spent $15 million on ads in May and June alone.

Going public is designed to maintain elected officials' popularity. A president who attracts high marks from the American public can use that personal popularity as leverage to get policy agendas passed. The premium on popularity has led chief executives to avoid putting themselves on the media firing line. They avoid televised press conferences, where they may be asked tough questions,

in favor of the more scripted opportunity of the presidential speech. President Obama held only 20 press conferences a year during his tenure. During the first 10 months of the Trump administration, the president held only two solo press conferences. Today, the preferred mode of presidential communication is the speech; naturally, these are scheduled for maximal political gain. The great majority of a president's domestic speeches occur in states that are in play in the next election.

In theory, popular leaders are more able to persuade their opponents. Congresspersons may defer to a popular president's legislative proposals, fearing that opposition could jeopardize their reelection. Conversely, when the president's opponents sense that majority opinion is on their side, they seize the opportunity to push their own policy agenda. President Trump's weak standing in the polls may have emboldened Republicans Susan Collins and Lisa Murkowski to vote against the repeal of Obamacare in 2017. But judging a president's popularity can be tricky. In the aftermath of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, congressional Republicans mistakenly assumed that the public would approve of their efforts to remove President Clinton from office. In fact, the scandal did little to weaken public approval of Clinton's performance as president, the impeachment effort failed, and the Republican Party suffered unprecedented losses in the 1998 midterm elections.[1]

Does the strategy of going public help elected leaders get things accomplished? We end Chapter 9 by considering competing theories of popularity. One theory proposes that political leaders are relatively powerless to shape public opinion on their own. In this view, Donald Trump's level of popularity has less to do with his communication skills and social media activity and more to do with the fact that he is disliked by almost everyone who voted for his opponent. Presidential popularity has become caught up in the vortex of polarization; no matter what they say or do, voters evaluate presidents based on their partisanship. A related theory, which also discounts the role of media strategies, holds that popularity derives mainly from the course of events. Peace and prosperity lead to strong approval, whereas prolonged recessions and involvement in military campaigns increase disapproval of the president's performance. Finally, there are those who believe that the considerable investment in media appearances does have payoffs and that leaders can use the media to insulate themselves from any rising tide of public discontent or to even improve their standing in the aftermath of policy failures. In this view, events do not speak for themselves. In many instances, political events are ambiguous (representing neither a major success nor a debacle), and how the public views an event and the actions of a president or governor very much depends on media presentations of that event and those

actions. In 1983, President Reagan was able to justify the American invasion of the tiny island of Grenada as a response to a communist threat. Ten years later, President Clinton convinced Congress and the American people that there were several compelling reasons to send American troops to Somalia. In both cases, the president's ability to command media attention, coupled with the willingness of administration critics to remain silent, created a one-sided flow of news in favor of the administration.

We consider all these arguments concerning the dynamics of presidential popularity—polarization, events and conditions, and media management—in the context of recent presidencies. We show that, over time, presidential popularity varies with the actual state of the national economy rather than news coverage of economic affairs. In the domain of national security, however, popularity is more sensitive to news coverage of national security than to actual security-related events. In the case of President George W. Bush, for instance, the increased unemployment rate diminished his public approval while the frequency of news reports on terrorism served to boost his popularity. We conclude that while polarization has weakened the capacity of US presidents to shape their public image, media management remains a significant resource; all else being equal, the ability to direct and shape news coverage can make a difference to a president's political fortunes.

CONCLUSION

To close the discussion, in Chapter 10 we consider the implications of media politics for the democratic process. On the bright side, there is the real possibility that media politics has made policy makers more responsive to public opinion. Democracy presumes the consent of the governed, and in the era of going public, elected officials are preoccupied with gaining the approval of their constituents. In this sense, media-based politics approximates policy making by referendum. Other beneficial outcomes include the development of new forms of politician-to-voter communication that not only enable elected representatives to reach their constituents without going through the media, but also lower the costs of mobilizing citizens and potentially reducing age and wealth-related biases in the rate of political participation. In this sense, media politics facilitates democratic politics.

Critics of media politics point to more ominous prospects. The preoccupation with imagery leads elected officials to propose cosmetic over genuine problem-solving actions. American society faces any number of deep-seated,

structural problems: the massive budget deficit, persistent racial biases in policing and law enforcement, degradation of the environment, an epidemic of mass shootings, and increasing economic inequality, to name but a few. Solving any of these festering problems will require actions that carry significant short-term political costs (such as increased taxes) or that arouse the wrath of entrenched interests (such as the National Rifle Association in the case of firearms control). In this era of media politics, elected officials generally cannot afford to bear these costs. Rather than formulating policy on the basis of a coherent theory or systematic evidence-based analysis, officials pander to public opinion. We describe the consequences of pandering in the case of crime, where policy makers have rushed to adopt punitive policies that make them look tough on criminals.

A different but no less threatening scenario concerns the growth of polarization. The primal sense of "us against them" makes partisans fixate on the goal of defeating and even humiliating the opposition at all costs. This bias in voting behavior undermines traditional theories of electoral accountability that rest on incumbents' abilities to deliver policy and performance benefits. When distrust of the opposing party becomes the primary motive underlying vote choice, candidates are less likely to be sanctioned for demonstrating incompetence, dishonesty, and unethical behavior. In the words of Donald Trump, "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters."

Media politics takes on added significance when we factor in the interplay between polarization and the increased availability of news and commentary with a clear partisan slant. As documented in Chapter 8, partisans prefer to hold beliefs that sustain rather than challenge their strong sense of dislike for the opposition. This has created incentives for news providers to offer biased reporting, catering to only one side of the partisan divide. For the majority of news organizations that remain dedicated to the practice of dispassionate, point-counterpoint journalism, as described in Chapter 3, they face an increasingly hostile audience, as partisans dismiss their reporting as biased. The declining credibility of the news media, coupled with the all-out assault by the Trump administration on the integrity and competence of reporters, has created the potential for voter manipulation. Elected officials can put out disinformation, knowing that it will be circulated without challenge by sympathetic media outlets. President Trump persuaded millions of Republicans that he was subject to illegal wiretaps during the campaign and that "some very fine people" marched with white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The growing disconnect between the tribalism of partisan discourse and evidence-based reasoning can only undermine fundamental tenets of democratic governance and the rule of law. When media reports are routinely rejected as biased, it becomes easier to undermine press freedoms. It is no accident that dictators across the globe from Russia to Venezuela to Myanmar have taken up the Trump slogan of fake news. Meanwhile, here in the United States, Republican leaders and commentators are increasingly calling into question the legitimacy of the investigation into the relationship between the Trump campaign and the Russians. They allege that Special Counsel Robert Mueller and his team are biased against Trump. Among Republicans surveyed in December 2017, 40 percent stated they had "no confidence" in Mueller's fairness and objectivity. And even if the investigation does result in charges being brought against members of the Trump inner circle, it is more than likely that a majority of Republicans will continue to support President Trump, leading to the possibility of a major political and constitutional crisis. Juxtaposing the present era with 1975 is instructive. Had 40 percent of Republicans refused to accept as accurate the reporting of the *Washington Post* on the Watergate scandal, Republican members of the House Judiciary Committee may have thought twice about bringing charges of impeachment against President Richard Nixon. Would Nixon have seen fit to resign?

American politics stands at a critical crossroads. For decades, candidates and elected officials depended on the news media to get out their message—with predictable consequences. Journalists took advantage of their gatekeeping influence to develop new forms of reporting that weakened candidates' control over the news while enhancing the voice of the journalist. In the process, voters were left confused and cynical. The development of new forms of candidate-to-voter communication has unquestionably strengthened the hand of the politician in the ongoing struggle between politicians and reporters to control the message. But in the era of polarized politics, politicians have no reason to moderate their views and propose legislation that might elicit bipartisan support. Their supporters' strong hostility toward the opposition sends a clear signal to party leaders. Not only are they to avoid cooperating with the opposition (seen as appeasement), but they must also take every opportunity to reinforce their supporters' fears and prejudices. The dominance of negative advertising in political campaigns and the proclivity of incumbent congresspersons to "taunt" the "out" party in their press releases (Grimmer and King, 2011) provide stark testimony to the rhetorical responsiveness of leaders to their voters' sense of team identity. This tactic of demeaning opponents has become central to the Trump administration's daily messaging via social media.

The spiral of mass and elite negativity can only lead to gridlock and policy dysfunction (Ornstein and Mann, 2016).

Does our level of polarization represent a new and permanent—if not already calcified—"equilibrium" founded largely on modern media realities? What other factors may still play a role? American politics has witnessed significant periods of polarization before (during the Civil War, for example, and the early twentieth century) as well as periods of relative harmony (typically during international crises and in the aftermath of major wars). Other societies have undergone similar changes, from periods of convulsive and violent conflict to eras of peace and stability. Will it take a war or economic crisis to restore a more general commitment to tolerance and open democratic processes? Are there other ways to promote greater mutual respect among all of the identity groups making up our polity? For anybody concerned about the future trajectory of American politics, it is important to reflect on these issues and to identify the circumstances and actions with the potential to move us toward a period of greater civility and partisan collegiality.

NOTE

1. The Republicans lost only a handful of House seats. However, it is quite remarkable for the party of the incumbent president to pick up House seats in a midterm election—a circumstance that has, in fact, arisen only three times since the Civil War, most recently in 2002.

2

The Press and the Democratic Process

The American System in Comparative Perspective

The news media can, and arguably should, contribute to the democratic process in several important ways. First, the media can provide a forum for candidates and political parties to debate their qualifications for office before a national audience. Second, even when there is no forthcoming election, news outlets can contribute to an informed citizenry by providing a variety of perspectives on the important issues of the day. Third, acting as agents of citizens, the media can monitor the acts of public officials, thus helping deter them from violating the public trust.

In modern industrialized democracies, the broadcast media reach virtually all adults and provide a national forum for politicians and political parties. From country to country, however, politicians' practical ability to access this forum varies significantly. In the United States, entry costs are significant barriers; there is no guaranteed minimum level of free access. In most European democracies, access is provided at no cost, and broadcasters typically are obligated to provide an equal (or proportionate) amount of free airtime to major political parties shortly before the election.

In the delivery of the electoral forum, the extent to which candidates' messages are *unmediated* or *mediated* also varies across countries. American parties and candidates must reach voters through news media that interpret and scrutinize the candidates' rhetoric and actions. In performing this function, the media have become increasingly hostile and unwilling to permit candidates to speak for themselves. In European countries, by contrast, in part because of free access, party spokespersons have greater ability to reach voters without going through the filter of news organizations; their messages are delivered without accompanying analysis or commentary.

As social media expands its reach on a global scale, a phenomenon we take up in Chapter 5, we can anticipate greater use of direct politician-to-voter communication.

A closely related civic responsibility of the media is to keep the citizenry abreast of public affairs. The news media are expected—again, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the country—to supply programming that encompasses a broad range of political perspectives and to provide citizens with opportunities for expressing their own viewpoints. This dialogue is viewed as necessary if citizens are to make informed decisions about public issues. This idea has been eloquently stated by Peter Goldmark (2001, p. 9):

> News is for the citizen. The citizen is that dimension of each one of us that is responsible for, contributes to, and benefits from the cooperative endeavor of self-government. The citizen is the basic constituent element of the public dimension of human activity. Without the citizen, there is no self-government, no individual basis for responsibility, choice and values; there is only the state in all its fearful, unchecked power and unaccountability. And without the independent news function, the citizen is starved, paralyzed, neutered, rendered insensate, ineffective, and robotic.

Of course, the democratic ideal of fully informed citizens is rarely realized. Ordinary people are preoccupied with their personal affairs and have little time for keeping abreast of public issues. Indeed, most television viewers prefer sitcoms or sports over news. At the other extreme, there are people whose political views are so intense that they refuse to accept information that challenges their views. Naturally, the ability of the media to perform the function of keeping the public informed is compromised when citizens are uninterested or fanatically partisan. In the final analysis, as we show in Chapter 3, privately owned news media cannot be expected to deliver a steady stream of in-depth public affairs programming that no one will watch.

Over time, the idealized notion of attentive citizens who scour the media for political information has given way to a more realistic argument that democracy can function through "efficient" citizens who either pay attention only to issues of personal importance or rely on a variety of psychological cues, such as a candidate's party affiliation, to compensate for a lack of in-depth factual information. A related alternative to the classic ideal of informed citizenship is that of citizens who pay attention, but only when the media sound a sufficiently loud alarm alerting them to issues that threaten the well-being of society or the nation.

Even when judged by these weaker standards, however, the performance of the American media can be questioned. Widespread famine in Ethiopia in the early 1980s went unnoticed until a BBC television report caught the attention of an NBC News producer based in London. The collapse of the American savings and loan industry in the late 1980s was similarly ignored and ultimately cost taxpayers $175 billion in the form of a government bailout. The widespread sexual harassment of women in the entertainment industry was generally ignored until the issue implicated major figures in the industry, including Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein. No matter how low one sets the bar for the delivery of public affairs information, the American media do not rate a high grade.

A third important function of the media is to serve as a watchdog on behalf of citizens, scrutinizing the actions of government officials and blowing the whistle when those officials cross the bounds of political propriety. Individual citizens do not have the means to keep abreast of their numerous elected representatives; they delegate this task to the media. Maintaining an adversarial posture toward government is one of the core principles of modern journalism.

The best evidence of the successful exercise of the watchdog function comes from studies of corruption. Countries with a free press are characterized by lower levels of corruption. And more generally, the presence of a free press makes government officials more responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens (Besley & Prat, 2006).

The ability of the news media to deliver on the electoral forum, public sphere, and watchdog functions (or, more broadly, civic performance) varies considerably across societies and media systems. Two key factors affect media performance: regulatory policy and market forces. Regulatory policy derives from a society's position on the "free market" versus "social welfare" ideological continuum. In the United States, a country that has lagged behind the rest of the world in accepting a social welfare role for government, the agency charged with regulating the media (the Federal Communications Commission, or FCC) has taken an increasingly laissez-faire approach, arguing that free market competition is sufficient to ensure the delivery of diverse perspectives on public affairs issues. Since the election of Donald Trump, the FCC has weakened the rules governing ownership of media companies and, most recently, has abandoned regulation of Internet service providers ("net neutrality"). Most other advanced industrialized democracies, on the other hand, while also moving in the direction of deregulation, have maintained much tighter control over media owners and programming, with the aim of ensuring the delivery of welfare-enhancing public goods.

IN FOCUS

Three Important Functions of Media in Democratic Societies

- To provide a forum for candidates and political parties to debate their qualifications for office before a national audience
- To contribute to informed citizenship by providing a variety of perspectives on the important issues of the day
- To serve as a watchdog, scrutinizing the actions of government officials on behalf of citizens—most of whom do not have the opportunity to closely follow the actions of politicians and the government

Market forces have a significant effect on levels of civic performance. In societies where the media are predominantly privately owned (as in the United States), competitive market pressures compel media owners to shirk their civic responsibilities. To be profitable, the media must deliver more entertainment than news; and when they do deliver news, they must use formats that are designed to be entertaining rather than informative on substantive issues. The alternative to exclusively private ownership is a mixed model consisting of both privately owned and publicly subsidized media. In most European democracies, at least one television network is financed with government revenues. Public subsidies offer broadcasters significant protection from market forces, enhancing their ability to deliver serious (rather than entertaining) news programming. Thus, societies in which media ownership is mixed rather than entirely private are more likely to support informed citizenship.

Both regulatory policy and market forces influence the production of news. The political significance of media programming, however, ultimately depends on the strength of political parties. Countries with strong political parties are less dependent on the news media to provide an electoral forum and guide voters' choices. Parties control the selection of their candidates and can rely on their supporters to cast informed (party-line) votes. In these systems, accordingly, what the media might offer by way of public affairs presentations is likely to be of little consequence to the outcome of elections.

Compared with most other democracies, the United States is characterized by weak political parties. Most notably, party leaders have little say over the selection of candidates. For American voters, candidate and issue considerations compete with party affiliation as important voting cues. Some Americans lack strong ties to a party, although the sense of party identification has intensified among partisans (as discussed in Chapters 7 and 8), making them highly reliable party-line voters. We'll outline the effects of news coverage on voter attitudes

and behavior in later chapters; in the rest of this chapter, we'll put the American system in perspective by comparing the role of political parties and the media in the United States and Europe. Regarding political parties, we'll focus on American reforms that have undermined the influence of party organization and contrast the weakened party system of the United States with the strong party systems that predominate in Europe. Regarding media systems, we'll contrast the American and European models in terms of the extent of government regulation and the structure of media ownership.

MEDIA POLITICS AS THE SUCCESSOR TO PARTY POLITICS

How and why did the mass media become so central to political life in the United States? Certainly the sheer size of the country contributed to the situation. It would be difficult for any presidential candidate to traverse all 50 states to meet and greet each eligible voter in person. Congressional candidates, too, would have a hard time connecting with all their constituents in person; most US senators represent many millions of citizens (over 25 million in California, for example), and the average population of a US House of Representatives district is 710,000 (the US Constitution originally suggested one representative for every 30,000 citizens).

However, the reliance on the mass media is not simply a result of population growth, as candidates relied more on personal campaigning than media until recently, despite the country's size. In the 1896 presidential campaign, for instance, the candidates relied on "retail" politics, "crisscrossing the country to deliver hundreds of public speeches to a total audience estimated to exceed 5 million people" (Iyengar, 1997, p. 143). Certainly the population at that time was smaller and the media options were fewer, but even as late as the 1960s, when radio and television were widely available, campaigns relied more heavily on teams of volunteers who organized local appearances for the candidate, canvassed neighborhoods, knocked on doors, distributed campaign flyers, and transported people to the polls on Election Day. What was it, then, that precipitated the switch to media-based campaigns?

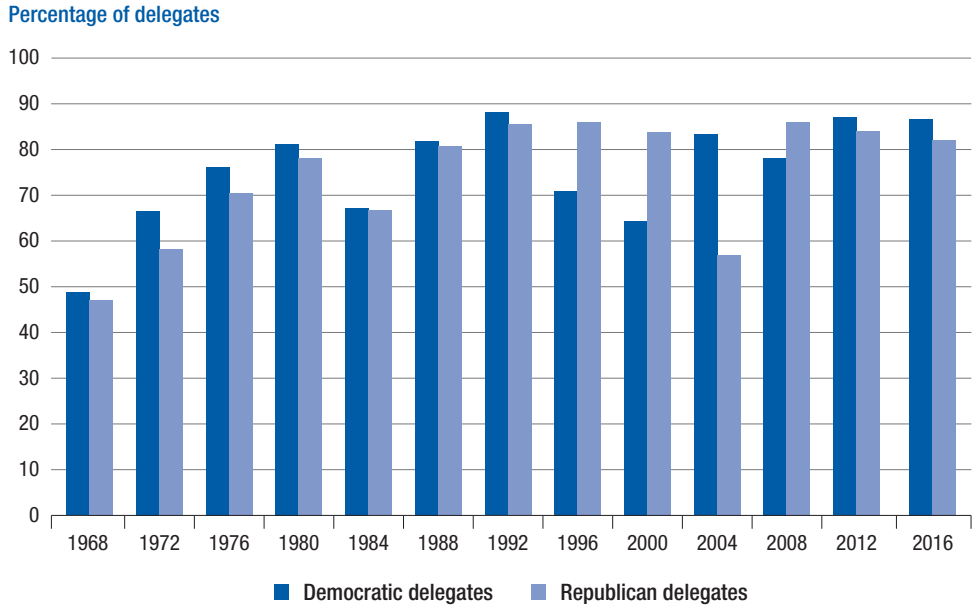
The explanation is rooted in the candidate nomination process. As documented by Nelson Polsby (1983), rule changes adopted in the late 1960s weakened the influence of party elites on the selection of candidates and created a void that was filled by the news media. Before 1968, the selection of delegates to the national party conventions, and therefore the nomination of the party's presidential candidate, was controlled by state and local party organizations.

Although some states did hold primary elections, the great majority of the convention delegates were selected by the party leadership.

The turmoil that engulfed the 1968 presidential campaign—the protests over the Vietnam War, the unexpected withdrawal of President Johnson as a candidate for nomination, the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the ensuing clashes between supporters of Eugene McCarthy and Hubert Humphrey, and the climactic suppression of the protests outside the convention hall—led the Democratic Party to establish a commission to reform the delegate selection process (for a detailed account, see Polsby, 1983). This commission recommended primary elections as the means of democratizing the selection of candidates. The widespread adoption of primaries, along with changes in campaign finance regulations after the 1972 Watergate scandal, fundamentally altered the incentives of presidential hopefuls in such a way as to diminish the role of party organizations and increase the importance of the media. By 1972, as Figure 2.1 shows, a majority of the delegates to both party conventions were selected on the basis of primary elections.

FIGURE 2.1

National Convention Delegates Selected in Primary Elections



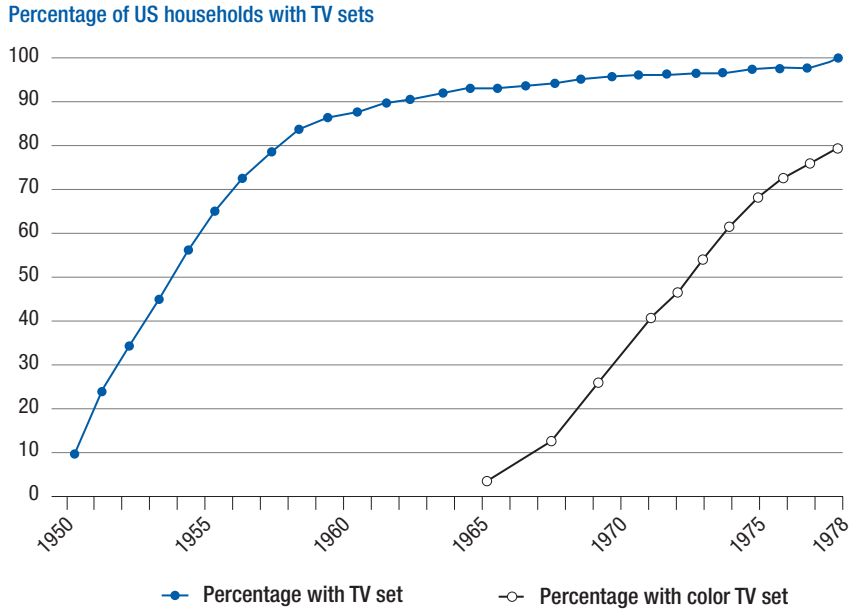
Source: 1968–2012 data from H. W. Stanley & R. G. Niemi. (2015). *Vital statistics on American politics 2015–2016.* Los Angeles: Sage. 2016 data compiled from https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/republican_delegate_count.html

The adoption of primaries meant that instead of cultivating party activists and leaders, candidates had to appeal directly to the public. At the same time, technological developments—in particular, the widespread proliferation of television—made it possible for candidates to reach statewide and national audiences. By 1963, 91 percent of American households had at least one television set, up from only 45 percent just 10 years earlier (see Figure 2.2).

Although radio had been almost as widespread (more than 80 percent of American households had a radio set in 1940) and had also commanded huge audiences, it was no match for television's visual imagery. This new medium allowed its audiences to experience major events (such as the Army–McCarthy hearings involving allegations of communists serving in the military and the aftermath of the assassination of President Kennedy, including the on-air shooting of his assassin) in real time, almost as though they were at the scene. It wasn't long before television supplanted radio and newspapers as the public's principal source of information. Politicians could not

FIGURE 2.2

TV Ownership, 1950–1978



Source: Data from C. Steinberg. (1980). *TV facts*. New York: Facts on File.

ignore this new mass medium even if they were inclined to do so, particularly in light of the weakening of political parties and the fact that other social institutions (clubs, newspapers, and so on) that had been important in grassroots-type politics were declining at the same time.

The end result of party reform and the rapid spread of television was a shift from party-based campaigns to candidate-based campaigns waged on television. Those who seek elective office covet exposure to large audiences; increasingly it was television that delivered the goods. As the public became entirely dependent on television for political information, candidates altered their campaign strategies to maximize their television exposure.

The most fundamental consequence of party reform was a transformed relationship between candidates and party leaders. Today, after meeting only the most perfunctory requirements, any American citizen can seek a party's nomination for president, senator, or other public office. To qualify for the primary ballot in California, for example, a would-be Republican candidate for president must gather signatures from only 1 percent of the state's registered Republicans (for the Democratic Party, the California signature requirement is 1 percent of registered Democrats or 500—whichever is fewer—in each of the state's congressional districts). In Vermont, a prospective nominee needs the signatures of only 1,000 voters of any partisan affiliation. In the primary election system, moreover, any voter who has simply checked a box on a registration form to claim affiliation with a party has a say in selecting the party nominee. In states that have *open* primaries—in which any registered voter can vote in the primary for any party—voters don't even have to be registered with the party to participate in candidate selection. In addition, some states hold *modified open* primaries, in which registered partisans can vote only in their own party's primary, but independents can vote in any primary (in all of these systems, each voter may vote in only one party's primary). Another primary system, long in use in Louisiana and recently put in place by ballot initiatives in Washington and California, is the nonpartisan blanket primary, which consolidates all party primaries onto one ballot. In this system, only the top two vote-getters move on to a general election, regardless of political party, which opens the possibility that candidates of the same political party will face off in the general election. In the 2016 elections in California, the US Senate race pitted two Democrats running against each other in the November election, with a similar situation applying to 7 of the state's 53 congressional districts.

Although candidates who are not established party figures (and who may lack support from party leaders) may be at some disadvantage when seeking the presidency, they have proved quite capable of winning—or at least seriously competing for—statewide and national office. Movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger easily won the special election for governor of California in 2003 by using his *Terminator* image to win over California voters. And in 2016, businessman and reality television host Donald Trump stunned the entire world by winning the Republican nomination for president and then defeating seasoned politician Hillary Clinton.

Moreover, parties now realize that if they want to win in the general election, they are well advised to embrace candidates who are capable of funding and operating an effective media campaign. Thus, some party elites may choose to support and endorse candidates who have not played much of a role in the party or whose ideology is inconsistent with that of the party if they have more resources with which to fight a media battle against their general election opponent. It is not surprising, therefore, that the median net worth of US senators in 2015 was $15 million, while the comparable figure for the median House member was more than $2 million, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a Washington-based, nonpartisan think tank that tracks the effect of money on elections and public policy.

In contrast with the American model, party organizations in most other industrialized democracies exercise decisive control over candidate selection. As a result, campaigns are run primarily on the level of the party rather than on the level of the individual candidate. In many cases, candidates are prohibited from making individual appeals separate from the party message and can be sanctioned (or expelled from the party) for doing so.

To maintain rigid control over candidate selection, parties in other democracies impose strict eligibility requirements. In general, only party members can be potential candidates. In most countries, party membership represents a much greater political commitment than in the United States. At a minimum, members are required to pay monthly dues to the party organization, but expectations are typically more comprehensive, including representing the party in the community and campaigning for the party.[1] Often there are additional requirements for candidate eligibility; Hazan (2002) cites the case of the Belgian Socialist Party, which, in addition to requiring party membership for at least five years, specifies that potential candidates must, among other things, have been regular subscribers to the party newspaper and have sent their children to state schools.

Merely meeting the eligibility requirements in no way guarantees selection by the party; would-be candidates still have to survive the selection process. In most democracies, the procedure for selecting candidates is adopted at the discretion of political parties, and the *selectorate* (the group that actually selects the candidate) is much more restrictive than in the United States. In their most inclusive form, selectorates include all registered members of a party (defined, again, in the strict sense and not in the loose American sense); a slight variation on this model requires an additional condition to be met by members—such as a minimum length of party membership—before they become eligible to participate in the selection of party candidates. However, cases of even more exclusive selectorates—consisting of small party committees—are common, as are *multistage* systems, in which a small body either preselects a group of candidates (from which a broader selectorate, consisting of all party members, selects one) or selects from candidates nominated by a broader selectorate. In many countries (including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom), some political parties give their national leaders the power to veto or otherwise alter the roster of candidates selected by a broader selectorate.

The degree of party control over candidate selection also depends on the electoral system. Whereas the United States employs a single-member-district plurality voting system,[2] in which whoever wins the most votes in a district wins the office, many other countries use multimember-district and proportional representation systems, in which parties compete for multiple seats within a single district and the number of seats each party wins is allocated in proportion to its share of the vote. In the common *closed party list* version of proportional representation, parties determine the order in which the candidates are listed on the ballot, but the voter simply casts a vote for the party. For most major parties, candidates appearing at the top of the list are assured election, and those at the bottom have little chance of winning. Candidates who lose favor with the party leadership may find themselves consigned to the bottom of the candidate list.

Thus, in countries with strong parties, it is important for candidates to defer to party leaders. Accordingly, political campaigns in European and other democracies—and media coverage thereof—are more party oriented than are campaigns in the United States. It is true that the media are becoming increasingly important in campaigns around the world, that there is a growing global cadre of political professionals, and that political parties in more and more countries are adopting American-style campaign techniques. Indeed, there is mounting concern in many European countries about the mediatization or Americanization of political campaigns—the increasing emphasis on party

leaders rather than on party policies, for example. Nonetheless, traditional methods of campaigning—such as door-to-door canvassing by candidates and party activists—still play a significant role in other industrialized democracies. And perhaps more important, party-centered campaigns are more likely to generate issue-focused news coverage by the media, because campaign events are themselves more issue oriented (such as the release of a party manifesto in Ireland, as opposed to the release of a new attack ad in the United States).

Although weak political parties and universal access to media were both necessary to the development of media-based politics in the United States, they do not alone explain the civic performance of American news organizations. In Chapters 3 and 4, we will describe how a combination of professional norms and economic pressures have severely limited candidates' access to media audiences, constrained both the sheer amount and the range of perspectives represented in news programs, and contributed to the weakening of watchdog journalism. But before we examine the supply and content of news programming, let's take a moment to put the American media system in some comparative perspective.

PATTERNS OF MEDIA OWNERSHIP AND REGULATION

American media differ from most other media systems in two fundamental respects: they are much less subject to government regulation and are almost entirely privately owned. These differences hold the key to explaining why American media are less likely to make good on their civic obligations.

IN FOCUS

What's Different about American Media?

- **More private ownership.** Media entities in the United States, including broadcast media, are almost entirely privately owned and operated; most other democracies have at least one government-funded broadcast network.
- **Less regulation.** The regulatory structure governing the behavior of American media is considerably more lax than that in most other democracies.

The structure of the media industry—in particular, whether media are owned and operated by government organizations or by private enterprises—has a major impact on the supply of news because government-subsidized media outlets are typically required (by statute) to provide minimal levels of public affairs content, whereas privately owned outlets are generally free to do as they please. Although the issue of public versus private ownership generally applies only to broadcast media, other regulations governing aspects of ownership apply to all forms of media. In the case of election coverage, for example, explicit regulations may directly spell out the subject matter to be covered, as well as when and where the coverage is to occur.

PUBLIC VERSUS COMMERCIAL OWNERSHIP OF BROADCAST MEDIA

There are three models of ownership of broadcast media: purely public, mixed, and purely commercial. The rationale for publicly owned television (and radio) is that the electromagnetic spectrum, as a scarce public resource, must be utilized for the public good.[3] The concept of public service broadcasting was first put into practice in the United Kingdom with the establishment of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1927 and was soon emulated in some form by most democracies in Western Europe and beyond. In most cases, this entailed the creation of a state-owned broadcasting system that functioned either as a monopoly or as a dominant broadcaster. Typically, the public broadcasting network was financed from radio or television license fees or taxes.

Although these publicly owned media entities are generally free from political interference, they are expected to follow certain principles (the exact details of which vary by country), such as providing universal service and informative, educational, and diverse programming.

In 1979, all but three countries in Europe had monopolistic public television channels; and two of the three that did not (Great Britain and Italy) had mixed systems, with both publicly owned and commercial television channels. By 1997, however, as a result of significant deregulation across Europe, only three countries had exclusively public-sector television markets. Still, even in the now dominant mixed model, public television channels enjoy large audience shares. In 15 of the 17 European Union countries with mixed-ownership television markets, the public television channels hold the number one market spot and capture larger audience shares than would be expected from the number of commercial channels with which they compete. The audience share enjoyed by