

7

The Mass Media and the Political Agenda

□ Chapter Overview

The power of the mass media has expanded dramatically since the beginning of the twentieth century. In this chapter, we examine how the mass media function as part of the American political process. We begin by examining the way in which political campaigns and political leaders use the media to communicate their messages. Then, we explore the historical evolution of the media in the United States. Next, we consider the major factors that influence media coverage and attention, and analyze how media coverage affects politics and public policy. Along the way, we also examine how policy entrepreneurs try to use the media to influence the public agenda. We conclude by assessing the effect of the media on the scope of government and democracy in America. By the end of the chapter, students should have a good understanding of how the media function as a political institution, and how they interact with other political actors and institutions to affect politics in the United States.

□ Study Outline

7.1 Learning Objective 7.1: Describe how American politicians choreograph their messages through the mass media. (p. 227)

The Mass Media Today

- Political leaders have learned to use the media to set their agendas.

- A **media event** is an event that is staged by a political leader with the purpose of getting it covered in the media to shape an image or draw attention to a chosen issue.
- In addition, they can more deliberately use the media to run advertisements.
- Such advertisements are often 30 seconds in length and make up the majority of spending on political campaigns.
- Presidents also use the media to make direct appeals to the public.

7.2

Learning Objective 7.2: Outline the key developments in the history of mass media and American politics. (p. 229)

The Development of Media Politics

- Politics and the mass media go hand in hand.
- However, whereas they once worked together to communicate with the public, today they often oppose each other.
- The mass media came into existence in the 19th century with the birth of the daily newspaper, and blossomed with radio and the television in the middle of the 20th century.
- Franklin Roosevelt (FDR) built a close relationship between the office of the president and the press.
- **Press conferences**, now a common means by which presidents convey their goals and opinions to the public, began with FDR in the 1930s.
- He was also the first president to address the electorate directly through radio broadcasts.
- The Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War changed the government's relationship with the press, as the press became more suspicious about political motives.
- Today the media engage in **investigative journalism**, often with the intent of revealing political **scandals**.

The Print Media

- Only a few corporations own most of the newspapers in the United States, as well as radio and television stations.

- These major corporations have significant control over information conveyed in the media.
- Newspaper readers tend to be politically informed, active citizens, but newspaper circulation has been declining since the advent of television and the Internet.
- Most daily city newspapers are struggling financially.

The Emergence of Radio and Television

- Now, most Americans, especially young people, get their information from the **broadcast media**.
- Television shifts the public's focus from a politician's achievements and political views to his or her **appearance** and performance in front of the cameras.
- Cable television encourages **narrowcasting**, which allows viewers to select what information they do and do not want to see.
- Critics fear that this will lead to an even less informed electorate that can selectively avoid politics.
- Media in America is free and independent because it is privately owned, but that also means it is totally dependent upon advertising.
- Over four-fifths of the newspapers in America are owned by large corporations (**chains**), as is much of the broadcast media, as well.
- The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is a regulatory agency that monitors the use of the airwaves.
- While it is independent, the FCC is subject to many political pressures.
- Congress controls the funding of the agency and presidential appointments to the agency are made with political considerations in mind.
- The FCC prevents monopolies, conducts periodic examinations of stations as part of its licensing authority, and issues fair treatment rules concerning access to the airwaves for political candidates and officeholders.
- If a person is attacked on the air, they have the right to respond on the same station; however, the fairness doctrine that was once in place (which required equal time to differing views) was abolished.

From Broadcasting to Narrowcasting: The Rise of Cable News Channels

- The first major news networks were described as “broadcasting” because messages were sent to a broad audience.
- With the development of cable TV, narrowcasting (media programming on cable TV or Internet that is focused on one topic and aimed at a narrow audience) is a more appropriate term.
- While there is now a wide variety of news programs available, the quality of content has not necessarily improved. The profit motive is still the driving force behind most news programs.

The Impact of the Internet

- The Internet has made political information easily accessible.
- Citizens can use it to easily retrieve voting records and text of legislation, for example.
- However, researchers have discovered that few Americans are taking advantage of the technology to be better-informed citizens.
- The Internet has also changed reporting.
- Being faced with competition from everyone who has an opinion on a topic, the rise of blogs and Twitter has made it more difficult for traditional reporters to file well-researched, objective, and in-depth stories.
- The most popular blogs, though, are written by people who are well-informed and educated, with strong analytical and writing skills.

Private Control of the Media

- In the United States, control of virtually all media outlets is in private hands. Media in America today tend to be part of large conglomerates, such as Disney or General Electric.
- In the newspaper business, chains control newspapers that together represent over 80 percent of the nation’s daily circulation.
- Because of private ownership of the media and the First Amendment right to free speech, American journalists have long had an unfettered capacity to criticize government leaders and policies.

- But the American media are totally dependent on advertising revenues to keep their businesses going, which means that getting the biggest possible audience is the primary objective.

7.3

Learning Objective 7.3: List the major criteria that determine which news stories receive the most media attention. (p. 242)

Reporting the News

- Newscasting is a business geared toward achieving high ratings.
- This can have detrimental consequences for both the political agenda addressed in the news and for the political knowledge of Americans.
- Profits largely determine what is considered news, and sensational, unusual, or negative events usually receive more attention than more positive or everyday policymaking does.
- This leads the public to believe that most of politics is scandalous and to distrust political leaders.
- Journalists usually have regular **beats**, such as the White House, the Senate, or the Pentagon.
- Most of their information comes directly from press secretaries at these institutions.
- This has significant advantages for politicians, who can control how much information is reported to the public, including intentional leaks (**trial balloons**), which can gauge political reaction.
- News reporting, especially through the broadcast media, has very little depth of content.
- Information is reported in **sound bites**, which gloss over the complexity of issues and focus the public's attention on politicians rather than on their policies.
- Sound bites allow politicians to craft political personas without having to directly address an issue.
- They do not have to say much when a typical sound bite is only seven seconds long and this contributes further to Americans' lack of political knowledge.
- **Bias** is not apparent so much in the way news is presented, but it is a factor in determining what news is reported and what news is not.

- There is little evidence of bias toward an ideological position or political party, but dramatic or sensational stories are more likely to draw an audience, so they are more likely to be featured in the news.

7.4

Learning Objective 7.4: Analyze the impact the media has on what policy issues Americans think about. (p. 248)

The News and Public Opinion

- The mass media have an enormous influence over the **public agenda**.
- When they select what issues to focus on, news organizations define which are the most pressing political topics and thereby determine the political priorities of the public.
- By selectively assigning importance to certain issues, the media essentially tell Americans what to think about.
- The media have shifted attention to individual politicians and away from government as a whole.
- The biggest consequence of this is the increasing amount of attention paid to the president, which as a result enhances his power.
- The media perform a watchdog function by forcing the government to be answerable to the public.
- However, they strongly discourage Americans from thinking critically about politics.
- At the same time, because the news is based on ratings, its content reflects what citizens want to see and read—and they seem to express little interest in politics.

7.5

Learning Objective 7.5: Explain how policy entrepreneurs employ media strategies to influence the public agenda. (p. 249)

Policy Entrepreneurs and Agenda Setting

- Policy entrepreneurs seek to influence the policy agenda by getting the media to pay attention to the issues that they are particularly concerned with.

- They employ a variety of strategies to obtain media coverage, including press releases, press conferences, and letter writing.
- Sometimes they will resort to staging dramatic events that are so interesting and unusual that reporters can hardly resist covering them.

7.6

Learning Objective 7.6: Assess the impact of the mass media on the scope of government and democracy in America. (p. 250)

Understanding the Mass Media

- The media acts as a key linkage institution between the people and government.
- The media's watchdog function also helps to restrict politicians.
- The watchdog orientation of the press can be characterized as liberal or conservative.

For Additional Review

As you are reading, take notes on how the media and its role in American society have changed over the last century. Your notes should indicate a "change over time" not only in the types of media, but in the financing, ownership, control and influence of the media. Use these notes to prepare for the unit test and for the AP Government and Politics exam.

Create a chart in order to compare and contrast the impact of the media on public opinion. List the sources of information along the side of the chart (internet, television, blogs, radio, etc.) and across the top of your chart, create two columns where you will discuss the "pros" and "cons" of each type of media as a source of information. Be sure to address narrowcasting and selective exposure when rating the use of the media. Use this chart when studying for the unit test and when preparing for the AP Government and Politics exam.