



# The Media

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American National Government  
Topic Seven



# Overview

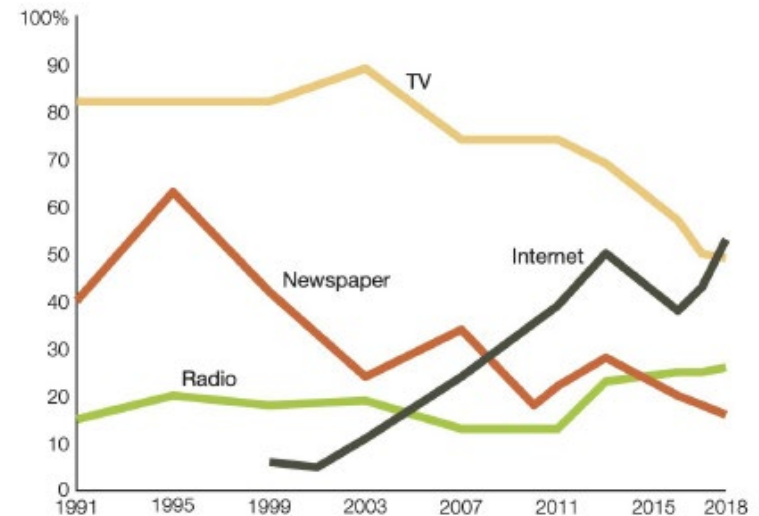
- The Media
  - What is the media's role in American democracy?
  - How does the media affect American politics?
  - What problems or challenges are there in media today?

I – What is the media's role in American democracy?

# What is the Media?

- What do we mean by the media?
  - The media includes all the ways people get information
- Traditional forms of media include:
  - Newspapers (national, regional, local), magazines, books, radio, TV\*
- New forms of media include:
  - TV\*, social media, niche journalism, online news sites (including newspapers and magazines), comedy talk shows
- (TV counts as both old and new because of changes in TV format and technology, especially the rise of cable TV and 24 hour news channels)

Where Americans get their Info



# The Media and Democracy

- To hold representatives accountable in elections, citizens must know what they're doing
  - Principal-agent problem
- Americans rely on the media to report on what's happening and to scrutinize the claims of representatives, exposing lies, broken promises, and other misleading statements
  - To best serve this role, Americans have to believe that the media is professional, fair, and trustworthy
- Without the media to provide critical coverage of representatives, **representative democracy is impossible**

II – How does the media affect American politics?

# Media's Influence over Politics

- Media influences politics in a variety of ways, but three of the most important and powerful are:
  - Agenda-setting
  - Framing
  - Priming
- Their influence operates through changing public opinion and, in the case of priming, voting

# Agenda-Setting

- One way the media shapes public opinion is by covering some stories and not others.
  - Attracting attention to some issues rather than others is known as **agenda-setting**
- The media does not have total control of the agenda
  - Some events and statements by public figures oblige coverage
- But the media does have wide discretion
  - When they cover something, that can actually make it a bigger deal than it would otherwise would have been
  - Example: Hillary Clinton's email server received more media coverage than any other issue in 2016 despite it being substantively trivial
    - (For a basic explanation of the issue, see this BBC explainer: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-31806907>)
    - (For evidence that it was the most covered news story in 2016, see here: <https://bit.ly/2UsIFmY>)

# Framing

- A **frame** is way of seeing an issue that emphasizes some considerations rather than others
  - This can greatly change public opinion about the issue
  - Example: coverage of the death penalty used to discuss it solely in terms of deterring crime, but later introduced an innocence frame by discussing those who have been executed for crimes they did not commit and support for it dropped
- The way the media covers an issue can “frame” the issue as being about one set of considerations
  - This implicitly communicates to citizens how they should think about the issue
    - Conflict frame suggests all of politics is about winning and losing, obscuring substance
  - So, was Obamacare an effort to make health insurance available to more Americans or a government takeover of the healthcare sector?
    - If the media focuses reporting on its new regulations, it may seem like the latter; if it reports on coverage expansions and subsidies to help people pay for premiums, it may seem like the former

# Priming

- When the media focuses on one issue, it can **prime** citizens to assess candidates on that issue (like priming a pump to get it going)
  - Related to framing but is about assessment of candidates
- Example: Lots of stories about terrorism after 9/11 primed performance on terrorism (or “national security”) as very important for next elections
  - George W. Bush and John Kerry were assessed in 2004 on how well they could “protect the homeland”
  - Similar story for 2008; how well one could handle the economy and financial crisis was primed as a vital criterion for the presidential election; Republican opposition to regulation hurt them severely

III – What problems and challenges are there in media today?

# The Rise of New Media

- The rise of the internet puts enormous pressure on the finances of newspapers
  - Online news replaced newspaper subscriptions; online ads killed print ads
  - Dozens of small newspapers have closed, thousands of journalists put out of work
- Has had at least two major effects:
  1. Caused an immense loss of investigative power in the media
    - It shrinks the group investigating governments, in particular, local and state governments
    - Hard-to-discover misconduct is very likely going undisclosed to the public
      - Makes corruption and abuse of power more likely
  2. New sources of news may lack skills, resources, and incentives to do quality reporting
    - Fewer, less lucrative jobs lead to more to cover by less qualified staff
    - Incentives are for “clickbait” to chase revenue-enhancing traffic

# The Rise of New Media

- Social media is particularly problematic
  - Social media “disintermediates” content, so there are fewer editorial controls by professionals (“gatekeepers”) to filter out nonsense
    - This allows unreliable reports, outright falsehoods, and hateful messages to circulate freely on social media
    - Research shows that content that elicits outrage is shared and propagated most widely in social media
  - The business model of social media is advertising
    - Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, etc. make their money by selling access to you, the user
    - Above all, they want to keep you engaged & spending time on the platform
      - Example: Facebook changed its algorithm in 2018 to favor engaging content, drastically increasing content that made people angry
    - Aids the circulation of misinformation and targeted political ads
      - Examples: COVID-19 misinfo; Russian interference in the 2016 election used Facebook ads
  - Social media enhances extremist voices
    - Without filtering or gatekeepers, extremist content can spread and radicalize
    - Example: ISIS recruitment appealed to large audiences via social media, convinced some to kill; right-wing online radicalization (white supremacist, incel, Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, etc.)

# Working the Refs

- To “**work the refs**” is a political media strategy used by politicians to manipulate the media to report on one’s side favorably and to report negative stories about one’s opponent
  - How it works:
    - The media’s role is to report on what’s happening and to scrutinize representatives
      - Media knows reputation for fairness and objectivity is essential to serve this purpose
    - When a candidate or rep claims the media is biased against them, their supporters may distrust its coverage and stop listening to it
    - To silence such claims & maintain reputation, media may step up critical coverage of the opponent and/or publish flattering stories about the original accuser



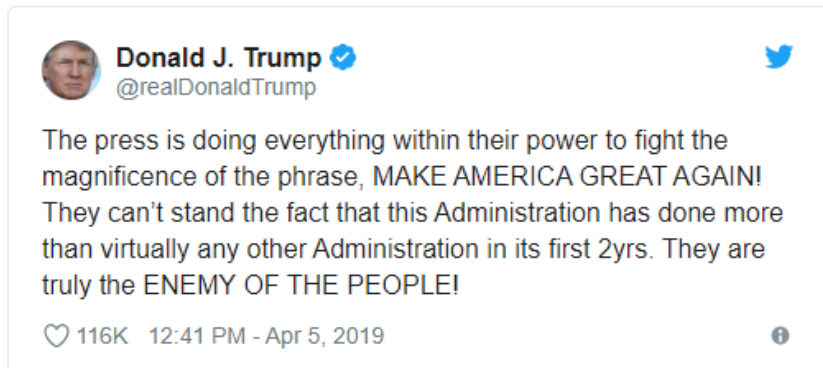
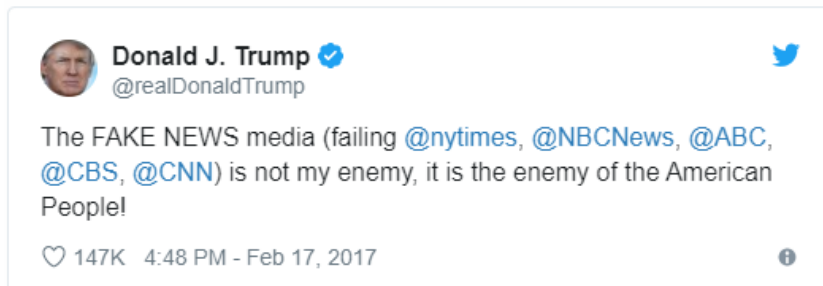
# Working the Refs

- When politicians complain about media bias, they're usually trying to pressure the media to cover them more sympathetically and/or do critical coverage of opponents
  - Who does this? Conservatives have long complained about liberal media bias; liberals say Fox News is biased
- Has gone beyond the media to other 'refs'—law enforcement
  - Ex: FBI Director Comey released letter on Hillary Clinton's emails a week before 2016 election due to worries about criticism if he waited. Evidence this letter shifted enough late deciding voters to elect Trump



# Working the Refs

- Trump's rhetoric as president shifted from criticism to threat



- Why is this a danger to democracy?



## Suspect arrested after explosive devices sent to Trump critics and CNN

By Meg Wagner, Veronica Rocha, Sophie Tatum, Eric Levenson, Brian Ries, Paul P. Murphy and Jessie Yeung, CNN

Updated 2:25 p.m. ET, November 5, 2018

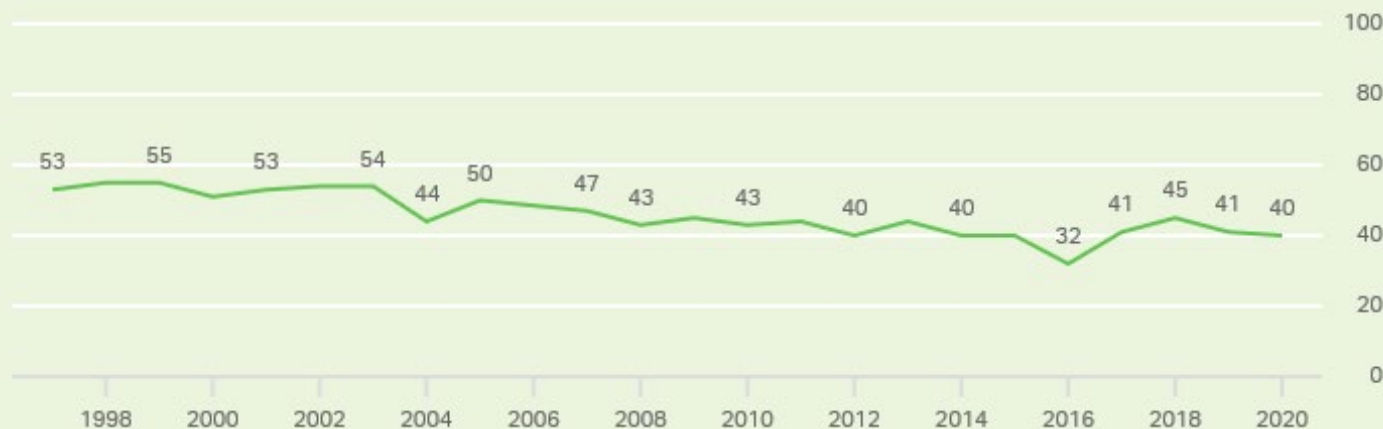
# Effects of Working the Refs

- Major side effect of working the refs media strategy is to undermine public confidence in the media
  - Overall confidence is down more than 10% from the late 1990s

## Americans' Trust in Mass Media

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?

■ % Great deal/Fair amount



Data from 1972, 1974 and 1976 not shown

GALLUP

# Effects of Working the Refs

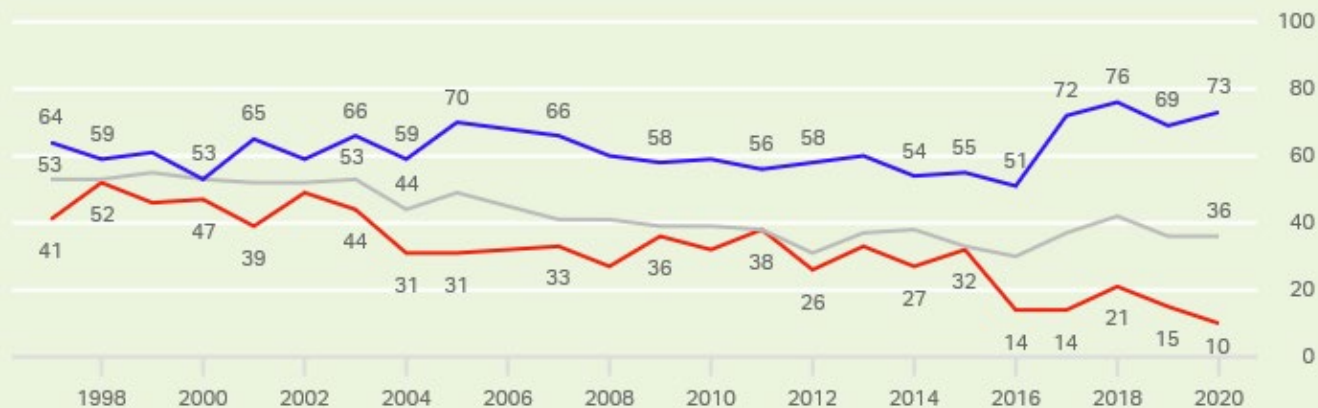
- The past five years saw a polarization in trust in the media
  - Republican trust dropped by nearly 20% between 2015 and 2016
  - Democratic trust increased by about 20% after 2016
  - Trump's attacks on the media polarized attitudes toward it

## Americans' Trust in Mass Media, by Political Party

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?

% Great deal/Fair amount

■ Republicans ■ Independents ■ Democrats



Data from 1972, 1974 and 1976 not shown

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# Summary

- Media serves a vital democratic purpose of informing the people so they can hold representatives accountable
- Media influences democracy through agenda-setting, framing, and priming, among other ways
- Contemporary challenges facing the media stem from new communication technologies, business models, and political strategies