

5.13 Changing Media

Explain how increasingly diverse choices of media and communication outlets influence political institutions and behavior.

American government and politics have always given a preferred position to free speech and free press. Our First Amendment rights demand free and independent channels of communication. The Supreme Court said as much in the case *Associated Press v. United States* (1945):

...The indirect possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public.

From the earliest days of our representative democracy we took measures to assure diverse channels of communication. As early as 1792 our Postal service subsidized newspaper distributions. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) consistently has regulated against concentrated control of broadcast ownership. But most importantly, today we are experiencing an uninhibited Information Revolution.

Today's global citizen has access to an unprecedented number of media options and outlets. Political participation is influenced by a variety of media coverage. Newspapers, radio and television continue to provide political communication but we now have access to electronic media outlets too numerous to count. The Internet provides an unparalleled number and variety of means to get educated about policy and to exchange ideas. These choices polarize our preferences in new ways.

Political scientists rightfully hesitate to simply blame our polarized politics on partisan media outlets. They suggest, "Greater media choice polarized elections even before choices began to include more partisan news and opinion formats." We have become more polarized, in part, because we pay less attention to political messaging. Electronic media has provided us with more distractions. We have access to new forms of mobile entertainment. Well over 150 million watch the Super Bowl while less than 2 million turn on a cable news program each night. The least informed citizenry in history might characterize this Information Age.

Cable news, talk radio and the Internet have brought more partisan formats into our daily lives. An objective press was probably never a realized standard. Democratic debates along with levels of political knowledge are now at our fingertips. Because of increased media choices, we select the information we like. Ideologically oriented programming along with consumer driven media outlets increasingly make centrist policy choices elusive. Increasingly we struggle with the uncertainty over the credibility of news sources and information. There are indeed consequences for our insatiable desire for more and more media options.

Presciently forecasting about the future of electronic media, Zbigniew Brzezinski opined about the coming of a Technetronic Era:

The technotronic era involves the gradual appearance of a more controlled society. Such a society would be dominated by an elite, unrestrained by traditional values. Soon it will be possible to assert almost continuous surveillance over every citizen and maintain up-to-date complete files containing even the most personal information about the citizen. These files will be subject to instantaneous retrieval by the authorities...

...In the technotronic society the trend would seem to be towards the aggregation of the individual support of millions of uncoordinated citizens, easily within the reach of magnetic and attractive personalities exploiting the latest communications techniques to manipulate emotions and control reason.

Sounding a bit like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931), the development, implications and consequences of modern media is changing our politics in ways we are still trying to process. One thing is certain, with unprecedented numbers of media options available to all of us, "we the people" have increasingly taken on the role of gatekeeper. Whether or not this advances public policy to a higher ground is subject to debate. Stay tuned.

Throughout this course we have studied the ark of power. It has been an appraisal of American government and politics. Life is a power struggle. Collectively government reflects how we as a people resolve that struggle. The essence of our government has been codified in the words of the United States Constitution. Our limited government was and is rooted in historical tradition, theory, conflict and compromise. Both the writers of our constitution and the vast majority of voters today have settled upon a representative democracy. **A balance between governmental power and individual rights has been a hallmark of American political development.** Political disputes invariably collide at the intersection of power and rights, legitimacy and authority. If "we the people" are to overcome life's struggles together, if our democracy is to succeed at all, it will depend upon putting into practice the knowledge and skills learned here.

Our biggest ideas, as studied here, include:

1. **CONSTITUTIONALISM:** *The U.S. Constitution establishes a system of checks and balances among branches of government and allocates power between federal and state governments. This system is based on the rule of law that seeks to balance majority rules with minority rights.*
2. **LIBERTY AND ORDER:** *Governmental laws and policies balancing order and liberty are based on the U.S. Constitution and have been interpreted over time.*
3. **CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN A REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY:** *Popular sovereignty, individualism, and republicanism are important considerations of U.S. laws and policy-making and assume citizens will engage and participate.*
4. **COMPETING POLICY-MAKING INTERESTS:** *Multiple actors and institutions interact to produce and implement possible policies.*
5. **METHODS OF POLITICAL ANALYSIS:** *Through various types of analyses political scientists measure how U.S. political behavior, attitudes, and ideologies are shaped by a number of factors over time.*

The words of the wise seem appropriate here: *Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.* Look forward to exercising your voice in our political process. Act on your political sentiments even today. A two-hundred-year-old document has empowered you. Here we have no kings, just citizens.