

Political Media in the United States - Course Description

This course examines how American Presidents, Presidential candidates, and prominent political players have used the media to advance their prospects, and how the changing nature of the media has--and has not-- changed what these major players say and do, and how they say and do it.

While we may think of "the media" as a term that refers to modern methods of communication--the TV, the computer, mobile devices--it in fact refers to any method of communication. Unsurprisingly, political players have turned to whatever tools were at their disposal to argue on their behalf, and to disparage their opponents (if you think "negative campaigning" is a modern-day phenomenon, prepare to be quickly disabused). Newspapers, books, pamphlets, posters, cartoons, songs, and symbols were significant weapons in the political wars long before the 20th century brought what we now think of as "media" (movies, radio, TV, computers).

We will start at the beginning and see how the 200-year-old fight between Federalists and Democrat-Republicans was fought out in the press; we'll also see the role the media of the day played in America's first sex scandal, involving the man whose picture adorns the \$10 bill. We'll see how symbolic "messaging" developed early on, and examine the way those symbols were used to communicate political messages--about leadership, about links to the American heartland, about traits of personality and character. Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt will all make guest appearances.

The 20th century innovations made a different kind of political message possible: radio and TV came into the home, which meant audiences heard and saw these messages alone, or with a few family members, not in large halls. Franklin D. Roosevelt understood this, which is why his radio "chats" were so different from traditional speech. Television moved that line further, as Richard Nixon's classic "Checkers" speech demonstrated.

Our look at TV, will be the most extensive of any medium--we will examine advertising, televised debates, the way politicians have sought audiences beyond the politician, and the way a single moment, captured by a camera, can launch or end a political career.

And we will look at the newest forms of media--the Web, the blogosphere, social networks--have altered the landscape of political media.

A key question that drives this course is: how have the media changed our political life, and how have they not. It is a contention of your professor that many common themes in political campaigns remain constant through the ages, and can be found in the media of 1840 and (likely) in the media of 2040. You may find yourself disagreeing with this idea, and such disagreement will be welcomed, provided you can make the case with evidence.

COURSE POLICIES

Cellphone, texting, web-surfing during class: Don't. There is a 10-15 minute break built into each class. Feel free to text or call during that period--or talk to a living human being.

COURSE WORK

Week One: Introduction to course: What it's about, who I am. A look at the early days: split between Federalists and Democrat-Republicans; America's first sex scandal.

- Reading: "Flying Too Near the Sun"

Week Two: Image-making in the early days.

- Reading "Countdown to the Nomination."

Week Three: The arrival of "new media" in early-to-mid 20th century in the form of radio and motion pictures.

- Reading: "Flight to Chicago" and Crisis in Winter from "The Defining Moment", "Just the Next President of the United States" from "Five Days in Philadelphia"

Week Four: Television Arrives

- Readings: "Television's Great Leap Forward" (from "From Whistlestop to Soundbite"); "The Checkers Speech" from "Nixon's Shadow"

Week Five

- Readings: TV as the Battleground (posted online).
- The Chicago convention, from "The Making of the President, 1968" by Theodore H White and from "The Selling of the President, 1968" by Joe McGinnis. (Blackboard or Handout).

Week Six: Political advertising

- Readings: Greenfield's "Advertising in the primaries" from "The Real Campaign" (Blackboard or Handout)

Week Seven Debates

- Readings: Debate chapter from "The Making of the President, 1960" by Theodore White (to be posted online); The Reagan-Carter debate from Greenfield's "The Real Campaign." The Gore-Bush debate chapter from Greenfield's "Oh, Waiter-- One Order of Crow." (Blackboard or Handout)

Week Eight: How politicians turned to entertainment media to reach beyond traditional forums; and how entertainment shows embraced once-taboo political subjects.

- Readings: TBD

Week Nine: Where We Are, Where We May Be Going

- Readings: "Crashing the Gates" and "An Army of Davis". Also, essays to come from Jeff Jarvis and Clay Shirkey.

Week Ten: A summation

- Readings: TBD

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INTROS FOR THE READER

America's First Sex Scandal

While the Founding Fathers were unhappy at the very idea of political parties--the "factions" James Madison warned of in the most famous of the Federalist Papers (#10), contending parties formed in the very first days of the new Republic. The Federalists, including future President John Adams and Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, were, in general, proponents of a strong central government, including government's role in promoting private economy. The Democrat-Republicans, including future Presidents Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe, were highly skeptical about a strong central government, and about large financial concentrations of power. In addition, they were deeply divided about the French Revolution; Federalists, in general, saw it as the rise of "Jacobinism," mob rule. Democrat-Republicans saw it as the godchild of the American Revolution. Both factions used the media of the day--newspapers and printed publications--to advance their cause, often with highly "negative" attacks on their opponents. Federalists saw in Jefferson the agent of theism, immorality--and raised pointed questions about his relationship with Sally Hemmings, a slave. Democrat-Republicans used their newspapers to fire at Hamilton, the most brilliant and prolific of Federalists, who penned endless essays and broadsides. The attack on Hamilton centered on his work as Treasury Secretary--was he in effect stealing public money. As you'll see, Hamilton's answer was to publish an extensive defense of himself, which included the acknowledgement that his bad behavior was not linked to public misconduct, but to

misconduct of a highly private nature. Unlike Bill Clinton in the Monica Lewinsky affair, Hamilton was arguing "I did have sex with that woman--Mrs. Reynolds."

Countdown to the Nomination

How could a former one-term Congressman from the Midwest, who'd lost an election to the US Senate just two years earlier, defeat some of the most powerful, well-connected politicians in the still-new Republican Party and win the Presidential nomination in 1860? That's exactly what Abraham Lincoln did, and this excerpt from Doris Kearns Goodwin's "Team of Rivals" spells out how. Crucial to Lincoln's success was the role the media of the day played. First, transcripts of his famous debates with Stephen Douglas were widely circulated, as were copies of the speeches he gave in his travels around the country. Second, newspaper accounts of those speeches increased his stature. Third, newspaper editors and publishers played a direct role in advocating for different candidates. Pay special attention to the role of Horace Greeley, publisher of the influential New York Tribune, and how his falling out with front-runner William Seward proved a powerful factor in weakening Seward. (In 1872, Greeley would become the Democratic Presidential candidate, losing in a landslide to President Grant. Greeley is also famous for his advice to: "go West, young man," as America expanded Westward). In addition to this material, you will see in class how the business of "image-making" is hardly new; Lincoln's past as a man of the rural heartland was a key element in his campaign. The "rail-splitter" image was meant to convey that Lincoln was "one of us."

FDR and A Gripping Media Moment

Franklin Roosevelt won the Democratic Presidential nomination in 1932 as the US was in the grip of the Great Depression--more than one fourth of all Americans were out of work, and incumbent president Hoover seemed utterly impotent. FDR was looking for a way to dramatize his campaign. So he broke with tradition, and actually went to the convention to accept the nomination. Even more dramatic, he flew to the convention, becoming the first candidate (not to mention President) ever to fly in an airplane. In an age when millions saw their public leaders via the newsreels that played in movie theaters, this was breathtaking stuff. The description of this, and the mood of America as FDR's inauguration neared, comes from Jonathan Alter's "The Defining Moment."

How a Brokered Convention Worked

Imagine a business leader who had never run for office emerging from a field of better known politicians to win a Presidential nomination. One time utility executive Wendell Wilkie did just that in 1940--and the enthusiastic backing of publishers like Henry Luce (TIME and LIFE magazines) and eastern newspaper publishers was critical. This account from Charles Peters'"Five Days in Philadelphia" recounts the kind of politicking almost unimaginable today. After losing in 1940, Wilkie became one of FDR's most important Republican allies in mobilizing the country for World War II, at a time when many Republicans were adamantly opposed to any involvement.

Television Comes to the Campaigns

In 1948, TV cameras covered the national conventions for the first time (both major parties met in Philadelphia to accommodate the new medium). But only a relative handful of homes actually had TV. By 1952, however, the TV was in millions of households; and for the first time, millions of Americans could watch the proceedings from their homes. It proved to be a significant factor in the tumultuous Republican convention, where Sen. Robert Taft and Gen. Dwight Eisenhower battled ferociously for the nomination. In this excerpt from his book/memoir "From Whistlestop to Soundbite" TV news pioneer Sig Mickleson details how TV's presence played out in the conventions, and in the ensuing fall campaign.

The Checkers Speech

No event dramatized the power of the new medium of TV than did Richard Nixon's "Checkers" speech of 1952. This chapter from David Greenberg's book "Nixon's Shadow" details the events, but in brief: Sen. Nixon, the vice-presidential nominee, was accused of being the beneficiary of a secret "slush fund" financed through contributors. As the pressure mounted to remove him from the ticket, Nixon went on national TV and gave an extraordinary speech, detailing his personal finances. He also mentioned that there was one gift to his family, a little dog his children named Checkers, whom he would under no circumstances return. While many found the speech maudlin, the popular reaction was hugely favorable, and Nixon stayed on the ticket. The speech was a powerful example of just how personal a message TV could convey; it helped set the template for a whole new kind of campaigning.

The TV Debates

While many believe that Abe Lincoln and Stephen Douglas debated during the Presidential campaign of 1860, the reality is different; their famous debates happened when they competed for US Senate seat from Illinois in 1858. The only debates prior to the Nixon-Kennedy debates were:
--a 1948 radio debate between New York Gov. Tom Dewey and Pennsylvania Gov. Harold Stassen, competing for the GOP nomination. It was a debate held just before the crucial Oregon primary and it was a one-issue debate: should the Communist Party of the USA be outlawed (Dewey said "no", won the debate, the primary, and the nomination).

In the spring of 1960, Sens. John Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey, battling for the Democratic Presidential nomination, debated before the West Virginia primary. And during the convention, Kennedy and Sen. Lyndon Johnson, the two main rivals, debated before a joint audience of the Massachusetts and Texas delegations.

But the fall of 1960 saw the first televised debates between the two major party candidates. In this excerpt from his classic "Making of the President, 1960," Theodore White describes what happened, and how the visual overwhelmed the substantive in terms of judging the debate.

The Press as Adversary

In 1964, conservatives in the Republican Party, long frustrated by their inability to prevail over the moderates and liberals in getting a nominee, finally had their triumph; by winning enough crucial

primaries and caucuses, Arizona Sen. Barry Goldwater beat New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller and others to win the nomination. What emerged from that convention was a clear feeling among many conservatives that the press-- the "media" had become dominated by liberals who were hostile to their cause. And, as White describes, the mood toward the press was anything but friendly. That adversarial feeling among conservatives toward what is now called the "mainstream media" survives and flourishes to this day. More broadly, White traces the movement of power in the GOP from Eastern seaboard well-born aristocrats and media powers, to the Southern and Western regions, and to what would become known as social conservatives.

A Contrarian View of Political Advertising

By 1980, it had become commonplace for journalists and academics to decry the influence of advertising on political campaigns; to worry about both their influence and their content. While this may be a majority view, your instructor has a "contrarian" view of this notion. In a book, The Real Campaign, I argue that advertising is neither as powerful, nor as necessarily malevolent, as others believe. That book was written almost 40 years ago...does the advent of social media, Facebook, etc, make that argument obsolete, (assuming it was ever right in the first place).

Note: you are not required to believe what I believe because I am teaching this course. Indeed, I welcome your dissent, provided only that it is supported by evidence, rather than a vague feeling.

The Debates Become A Permanent Campaign Feature

After 1960, three consecutive campaigns were conducted without debates. In 1964, President Johnson was so far ahead of Goldwater that he saw no reason to take a risk; in 1968, Richard Nixon wanted to sit on a big lead in the polls; in '72, he was so far ahead of George McGovern that he did not want to take the risk. But in 1976, President Gerald Ford, well behind Jimmy Carter, challenged him to a series of debates; and they have been a permanent part of the campaign ever since. Four years later, President Carter believed that a debate with Ronald Reagan would show his challenger as ill informed and reckless. (It did not work out that way).

The institutionalization of debates led to the growth of advisors and experts who sought to wring every possible advantage from debates. This chapter details the kinds of strategic preparations across a series of presidential (and vice presidential) debates.

The Coming of "The Great Communicator"

The political career of Ronald Reagan seemed to some to demonstrate the media centric nature of American politics. After all, Reagan was an actor, host of a weekly TV anthology show, a man who made commercials and endorsed cigarettes.

As his biographer, Lou Cannon argued, Reagan was something far different; an intensely political man, who had converted from liberalism to conservatism, who had gained fame with a televised 1964 speech on behalf of Barry Goldwater, and who had served two terms as California governor before winning the Presidency.

This chapter, devoted to the Inaugural Address of 1981, is a concise presentation of

Reagan's political ideas. And while he and his advisors were acutely conscious of the media and how to use it, that aspect of Reagan's career is far from the only explanation for his success in the political arena.

The 1992 Campaign

One of the more important aspects to understand about a Presidential campaign is the difference between strategies and tactics. To oversimplify, a strategy is a broad approach to victory--the message, the positioning of a candidate. A tactic is a specific method of executing that strategy.

This chapter from a book about the 1992 campaign describes in detail the strategic imperatives for President George HW Bush, and for Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton, and how they sought to bring those imperatives to life. Threaded through the chapter are media issues: where to spend campaign advertising money, and on what messages; what media outlets to pursue; how a candidate should appear on those outlets.

Where Politics and Culture Meet

In 1996 Bill Clinton faced re-election just two years after his party suffered a devastating loss of Congress in the '94 mid-term elections. In 2004, President George W. Bush was facing a difficult reelection campaign. The economy was middling at best; the war in Iraq had turned sour; so had the public mood. Both candidates won re-election; and, this book chapter argues both did it by tapping into deeply-held values of the American electorate. Of special interest is the way the Bush campaign "data-mined facts about the preferences and habits of voters (e. g., what magazines and TV shows they preferred) to figure out where untapped pools of Bush voters might be found."

A "New Media" Leader's Hard Look at "Old Media"

As newer players began to have an impact on the political world--such as Markos Moulitsis' "Daily Kos" blog--a tension developed between these news voices and traditional players, such as the media consultants who create TV advertising, which consumes so much of any campaign's resources.

In this chapter from "Crashing the Gates", the authors turn a skeptical eye on these consultants, especially those toiling in the vineyards of the Democratic Party. A similarly skeptical look can be found in author-journalist Joe Klein's "Politics Lost."

As Social Media Grows, is Old Media Dying?

Even before the Arab Spring, enthusiasts of the new media world were suggesting that traditional media were in their death throes. And certainly the decline in newspaper circulation and advertising, the movement away from TV to web-based computer offerings, and the closing of bookstores gives weight to such ideas.

Here Glenn Reynolds creator of the influential conservative website Instapundit, gives a measured analysis of where traditional media may (or may not!) be in the years ahead. This reading will be supplemented in coming weeks by articles by Jeff Jarvis and Clay Shirkey, which, while not directly linked to this course, provide food for thought about the radically changed media landscape.