

The role of the media in democracy

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



How much does your vote really count? As a voter, does your choice really matter? How much influence does the media have on your vote? How many choices does the media actually make when it comes to our nation's leadership? These are questions pondered by both political scientists and the average American citizen each year as the second Tuesday in November approaches. Though we know that the framers founded this nation on the principles of representing it's citizens, and on the ideals of a nation for the people and by the people; it is obvious that the people feel that their vote doesn't always count. In this paper I plan to expand on these questions and the justifications behind asking them, and I plan to follow up with a specific example in which the media played a highly significant role in the choice of high government officials. How much does your vote really count? Does your choice really matter? According to the framers, your choice does matter. They say that one man equals one vote. Congress also seems to believe that the American vote should count. They have passed Amendments to the Constitution in order to give more people the chance to vote and the chance to make a choice of their representatives. But why then does the people actually directly elect so few officials? Perhaps they agree with the ideas of Converse and Lane and are using voting only as a way to attempt to get the citizens out of the voting slump they seem to be in. Converse stated that voters are minimally informed, minimally capable, and therefore incompetent of voting. Lane claims that this is not the problem, but that instead, voters are simply lazy in their ideology. (Muraca, July 13, 1999) I tend to agree with both, but I don't feel that the fault lies on the shoulders of the people. Rather, I feel that the burden of voter incompetence lies on the

shoulders of the media. Voters are not uninformed perse, but they are limited in the amount in information that they posses. The reason that this information is limited is because of the media. Media makes the choice everyday what they do and do not want the public to know. The power to make the choice of our knowledge rests in their hands. Without the information they pass on from day to day, we, as voters know nothing about the happenings of our government. Yet on more than one occasion the media has held back information that could be crucial to decisions we make about our democracy. A prime example occurred during the Gulf War. Thousands of our nation's men and women were fighting for their country, yet the media limited the amount of information that they chose to pass on to the public. Each day the media is faced with the choice of making decisions of what news to pass on, when that news could make a significant difference in someone's life, or in the fate of our nation. How much does the media effect your choices in voting? When we first ask this question, we think of the obvious. The media informs us of canidates, their personal backgrounds, their ideology, their stances on issues, things they do in the community they represent, and the platform on which they plan to run. However, once they get past the initial introduction, they " tend to be highly critical of politicians; they consider it their job to find inaccuracies in fact and weakness in argument." (Janda et al., 192) They force the faults of politicians on us, seldom speaking of the positive aspects from that point on. This, in turn, gives the voters a negative vision of their representatives as leaders. If faults are constantly being pointed out, voters begin to think that all politicians are incompetent and unable, and therefore see no need to vote.

The media does not intentionally force these negative views upon the mass public; rather they point out the faults because it makes a better story. Although the media does not directly create or change opinions, it tells the public what to think about. By using priming techniques, we can see the media directly swaying the direction of the voters' choices. By looking simply at these facts we can see that the media is quite possibly the most influential tool available to regulate voter choice. How many choices does the media actually make when it comes to choices in leadership? The media doesn't stop with making attempts to sway voter choice. Occasionally we see a rare example that goes in the history books because of its unique characteristics and powerful influence on the nation. A prime example of a case of powerful media influence can be found in the recent activities of Larry Flynt. Flynt, of Hustler Magazine, used his power and influence to uncover the hypocrisy lying deep beneath the surface of the Republican Party. He placed an \$85, 000 full page ad in the Washington Post, offering up to \$1, 000, 000 (Shepard, March 1999, 2) for "evidence of illicit sexual relations" involving high ranking members of Congress or upper level government officials. His plan was that if anyone could give solid proof that someone high in the rankings of the impeachment trial were found to have committed the same acts as the President himself committed, he could get this person removed from office also. The responses flooded Flynt's desk, and he narrowed them down from 2, 000 to 12. He hired two full time investigators for \$100, 000 a piece, and sent them to look into the allegations. These investigators dug up the unfaithfulness of the Speaker of the House-elect, Bob Livingston. However, before Flynt even had the chance

to publish the faults of the Representative, Livingston resigned. By resigning, he indirectly admitted that the allegations were true and proved that there was hypocrisy in the House Majority party, and even among those they choose as their leaders. Flynt didn't stop with the investigation of Livingston however, instead he continued on well into the impeachment trial of the President. Not only could the Republicans not find a member that had not had some form of sexual unfaithfulness, which forced them to elect the most conservative of their party to represent them, but they also had problems with their prosecution for the impeachment trial. This time the focus was on Bob Barr, one of the 13 members of the Senate chosen to act as prosecuting attorneys on the impeachment of the President. Not only had Barr been unfaithful to his wife, but he also refused to admit so when he was placed on the stand. To make matters worse, Barr had at one point stood on the House floor and said that abortion was equivalent to murder, yet later, he admitted to taking his own wife to have an abortion. (Shepard, March 1999, 2) In the mind of Flynt and many others, these actions were acts of pure hypocrisy and Barr should have no right choosing the fate of our President on a moral basis. Eventually, Barr resigned and Flynt had another victory under his belt. If a man like Larry Flynt can determine the people that step on to the House Floor, and those who represent the prosecution of the President of the United States of America, obviously the media plays an important role in the democratic society in which we live. Basically, Larry Flynt proved that with enough power, money, and publicity, any task could be accomplished, even if it is evicting the representatives that the people elected. All in all we have learned that no matter what way we look at it, the media is one of the most

influential and important tools that enters our democratic nation. It is a nation founded on free speech and freedom of the press, and the media uses these freedoms to influence some of the most important decisions that may ever occur in our country. It is somewhat scary that the fate of our nation could be put in the hands of the King of Porn, but at the same time it is somewhat invigorating. As citizens, the framers entrusted everyday citizens with the right to influence the actions and fate of our government, even if only through a small article in the newspaper. Even though they did give the media this right, and we as citizens the right to use it, they still found fault with the nation as a whole. Otherwise, citizens would have been given the chance to directly elect those they feel represent them the best. The question of why they did this remains, but the fault lies at the feet of the media for keeping the citizens left uninformed and unable to cast a reasonable vote. Works Cited Janda, Berry, Goldman. *The Challenge of Democracy*. Sixth Edition. Houghton Mifflin, 1999. Muraca, Stephanie, T.. In-class-notes. July 13, 1999. Shepard, Alicia, C.. " Gatekeepers Without Gates", *American Journalism News Link*. March 1999.