

The new media's role in politics critical analysis

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Abstract

In US political contests, the term media can apply to a range of items that vary from newspaper articles to attack advertisements. This essay examines the role played by the free press- television news and newspapers- and traces the role that free media has come to play in the results and courses of US Presidential elections, refuting, in the process, the position that free media, and the press, acts as passive intermediaries between candidates and the voters.

Introduction

Protected by The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which reads ' Congress shall make no law...abridging thefreedom of speech, or of the press', free media, especially the press, through dissemination of opinions, facts and analysis of events concerning Presidential candidates and their campaigns, has come to play a large role in the results and courses of presidential elections. Although Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt (2008: 111) have argued that ' the media's role as an intermediary is most evident at election time, when the media are the primary conduits for information on the campaign', the common recognition that the press acts as part of the ' Fourth Estate', a term originally coined by Edmund Burke (quoted in Carlyle, 1841) to acknowledge the noticeable influence of the media upon politics, suggests that the role of the press and media far exceeds the simple passivity of intermediation that Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt suggest is media's primary role during an election.

Role of Free Media and the Press in US Presidential Elections

Even in the initial stages of an election, prior to official party nominations, the press can begin to directly influence public knowledge of the candidates through the frequency and detail in which the candidates are mentioned. Name recognition, in the early stages of a campaign, is of vital importance and is directly effected by, and dependent upon, the media. Ramsden (1996) notes that the victor of the 1984 New Hampshire primary, the relatively unknown Gary Hart, succeeded because he convinced the press, through intense and unprecedented amounts of canvassing, that he was a more viable candidate for the nomination than his opponents John Glenn and Walter Mondale. As such, the media concerned themselves more with Hart's campaign than with the campaigns of Glenn and Mondale, both established Democrats, and simultaneously increased Hart's name recognition and the viability of his claim. This media attention added momentum to Hart's campaign and ultimately allowed him to challenge for, but narrowly lose, the Iowa caucus, and to win the New Hampshire primary by ten percentage points. Although Hart eventually succumbed to the financial superiority of Mondale, and to questions concerning the vagueness of his policies, his victory in the New Hampshire primary, over an already established Democrat, is testament to the power of the media and to the influential role they play even in the early stages of election campaigns.

After candidates have officially received party nominations, the role of the media shifts slightly from effecting the nomination to effecting the course of the nominees' campaigns. Although many believe that the bias of individual press and media networks can effect public opinion, Robinson (1996: 101)

instead argues that ' whilst the media can play an important role in changing voters' perceptions, information, attitudes, and even behaviour', it is more often the case that media bias simply reinforces, rather than dislodging or replacing, preconceived notions and opinions. Further, Della Vigna and Kaplan (2007: 2) have observed that it is often the case that ' right-wing voters are more likely to expose themselves to right-wing media, giving an impression that the right-wing media persuades them' and as such, media-bias and the partisan opinions of the press, in terms of long term impact, has little contribution towards changing the political opinions of the public.

Instead, free press, to some extent, controls the course of the campaign and decides whether it become a horse-race or an issue based campaign. Whilst the media can turn campaigns into horse-races, reporting polling numbers and statistics, making the story less about the ideologies, policies and ideas of the candidates and more about their viability and chances of success, it can also, as Ramsden (1996) argues, act ' as a spotlight' for issues (66). Ramsden's suggestion that media acts as spotlight for issues and ideology, which is itself more in keeping with the spirit of democracy than reporting election campaigns as horse races, argues that the media has the power to select, and cover, certain issues and topics that are not at the top of the campaign's political agenda and to reposition them as central to the campaign. As Page (1996: 22) notes, ' a large body of evidence now indicates that what appears in print or on the air has a substantial impact upon how citizens think and what they think about: e. g., what they cite as important problems', and it is this guidance towards ' important problems' that allows the media to shape the campaign paths of the candidates.

The public, in general, become more politically active and aware during campaign time (Riker, 1989), and, as Wood and Edwards (1999: 328) note that “ the public’s familiarity with political matters is closely related to the amount and duration of attention these affairs receive in the mass media”. In a sense, the press and free media are somewhat able to dictate and influence the agenda of presidential elections, and to choose which issues are central to the debates and campaigns. Ramsden (1996) cites President Jimmy Carter’s victory over the incumbent President Gerald Ford, in which Carter’s inexperience could, and perhaps should, have played a large role in deciding the outcome of the campaign but was largely ignored by the public because the media did not make it a concern, in order to demonstrate the control that free media can exercise over topics and issues during campaigns.

Conclusion

Therefore, whilst the media may hold a negligible amount of power to convert and transform the public’s political opinions, the real power of the media, or the free press at least, in an election, lies in its editorial, or ‘ spotlight’ role. By choosing and highlighting which areas of policy, issues or character concerns receive attention, the free press are able to guide the public towards matters which could determine both their opinions and, as a result, the outcome of the election. Thus, within a political campaign, however undemocratic it may seem, the press and free media are strong and active political agents that can change and dictate not only the agendas and issues during an election, but to some extent, the result itself.

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