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978-0-521-85872-4 - Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections

Markus Prior

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

In 1935, commercial television did not exist. Two-thirds of all American households (and 9 percent of all automobiles) had a radio. Almost 600 AM stations were broadcasting throughout the country. Print media continued to be the most widely available source for news. The combined circulation of the roughly two thousand daily newspapers was about 41 million, one for every three Americans.¹

Thirty-five years later, in 1970, television was universally available. In the average household, the television set was on for six hours each day. In more than half of all households, those hours were still in black and white. People's freedom to choose the content they liked was minimal: only half a dozen channels were available in an average household, a number that included noncommercial stations such as PBS affiliates and UHF stations, which were often received at poor quality, if at all. The three broadcast networks and their affiliates dominated television, capturing 80 percent of all viewing (with most of the remainder going to independent stations). Cable television, which delivered the lineup to about 6 percent of all homes, was still only a means to connect remote areas out of reach of over-the-air broadcast signals.

There was little to choose from, and choosing was work. Before the remote control revolution, couch potatoes had to cross the room to change channels. Perhaps it was healthy to have so little choice, as competing viewing preferences might have spelled trouble for the two-thirds of households with only one television set. News was the norm in American homes in the early evening. Of those who had their televisions on, three-quarters watched one of the network news programs.

¹ The sources for the data in this and the following paragraphs are Stanley and Niemi (2006), Sterling (1984), Media Dynamics (2001), Nielsen Media Research (2000), Project for Excellence in Journalism (2004), and the Television Bureau of Advertising (at www.tvb.org).

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Another 35 years later, in 2005, the television is on for eight hours per day on 2.6 screens in the average household. Over 85 percent of all households subscribe to cable or satellite television. The average viewer has a choice of about 100 channels. Several of those channels offer 24-hour news coverage. The broadcast networks and their affiliates capture less than 40 percent of all viewing, even though there are several additional networks. More than half of all viewing now goes to cable channels.

The audience for network news has declined. Less than a fifth of all households watch one of the network newscasts on an average weeknight. Many viewers turn to cable television for their news. Not counting prime time news magazines, the average American watches about 4 hours of broadcast news and 5 hours of cable news each month, according to data for the first eight months of 2005 collected by Nielsen Media Research. But these averages conceal growing inequality in news viewing. Many people watch a lot less than those 9 hours and have largely deserted the news audience, while cable has allowed others to become devoted television news junkies.

In 2005, it is possible to follow the news on cell phones, on iPods, and online. More than two-thirds of all Americans have access to the Internet. About half of those two-thirds connect via high-speed broadband that can conveniently deliver video content. Even though per-capita newspaper circulation has continued to drop to about one paper for every five Americans, many people are reading newspapers' online editions. The *New York Times*, for example, had a daily circulation of about 1.1 million in early 2005, but its website was accessed by 1.7 million unique visitors on an average day (and about 12 million in a month). Over the course of a month, the Web sites of newspapers in the top 125 U.S. markets are visited by about 45 million people. The most successful Web sites run by cable news channels, CNN.com and MSNBC.com, reach about 20 million different people per month.²

The differences between the media environments in 1935, 1970, and 2005 are impossible to miss. Americans in 1935 had to wait for newspapers to be printed and delivered if they wanted more than short radio news summaries. Newscasters and politicians were right in the living room of many Americans in 1970 on a routine basis, but they left at seven o'clock. For Americans in 2005, they stand by at every hour of the day, ready to

2 Data on online newspaper audiences is based on tracking of Internet use by Nielsen/NetRatings available from the Newspaper Association of America's Newspaper Audience Database (www.naa.org/nadbase) and from Timothy Williams, "NYTimes.com to Offer Subscription Service," *New York Times*, May 17, 2005. For online audiences for cable news channels, see Geraldine Fabrikant, "CNN Will Add Free Video to its Web Site," *New York Times*, May 16, 2005.

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drop a mountain of information at the click of a mouse or the push of a remote.

It is difficult to imagine that differences as stark as these have no effect on politics. But how do they affect whether and how people encounter politics? Do they influence how much people learn about politics? Or how they make political decisions? Political science has surprisingly few answers to these questions.

It is not that political scientists fail to recognize the magnitude of the changes. Looking back in the early days of television, Converse (1962, 591), for example, states that

[t]he dramatic changes in information propagation are too familiar to require much elaboration. . . . The cumulative change has been of awesome proportions. . . . [C]onditions of information propagation have shifted in ways that affect a vast majority of the population.

Kinder (2003, 357) begins his recent review of mass communication and politics with the observation that

[o]ver the last half of the twentieth century, mass communications have transformed the landscape of American politics, vastly increasing the information about public affairs that is available to ordinary citizens. Through multiple channels . . . the volume of information relevant to politics circulating through American society is massive and increasing.

Yet the acknowledgement of these “massive” changes “of awesome proportions” has not been accompanied by an understanding of their political repercussions. Differences in media environments are rarely considered in theories of American politics. Kinder (2003, 376) concludes that “change in our thinking about mass communications and politics over the last 40 years has had to do with alterations in social science more than [with alterations] in communications technology.” Methodological and conceptual shifts in social science have certainly been tremendously valuable, perhaps most refreshingly so in overcoming the prevailing view that media had little effect on political behavior at all (see also Iyengar and Simon 2000). But new findings that look like the result of methodological progress can sometimes be the effect of technological change. If changes in communications technology are consequential, neglecting them in our theories of the political process is a consequential mistake. Political science tends to treat ordinary people’s political behavior as if it can be explained without reference to the media environment in which they live. Accepted generalizations about political behavior – that the actions of politicians and the reporting of the news media affect what people consider to be important political issues, that people can reach meaningful voting decisions even in the absence of comprehensive political knowledge, that party identification is a major determinant of vote choice, to name only

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three – become ingrained in the literature as invariant patterns. Yet as the environment changes, so might the behavior.

With this book, I aim to give the media environment a more central place in our theories of the political process. My goal is to offer a systematic treatment of how the media environment affects political behavior. Before I introduce the general framework that connects the media environment to the political process, I offer two examples to illustrate how the availability of particular media affects political behaviors that scholars often assume are invariant. The first example emphasizes that many people do not voluntarily consume a lot of news. But when the media environment offers them political information as they go about their daily business, they often absorb it. The second example points out that some people do not go to the polls because a thorough examination of both parties' positions leads them to well-reasoned voting preferences. Instead, they vote if the environment reminds them of the upcoming election and provides them with a few simple reasons to pick one side or the other. In both examples, the media environment works in the background, but its effects can be substantial.

THE DEPENDENCE OF POLITICAL BEHAVIORS
ON THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

“By-product learning” and the “floating voter,” two concepts that have come back into fashion lately, were introduced at least half a century ago. Both are catchy ideas that have helped us understand how people learn and make political decisions. They have developed and expanded over time, but they were both conceived at a time when broadcast television had barely outgrown its infancy. As both concepts rely on the availability and flow of political information, it seems worth analyzing whether they apply to Americans in 2005 in the same way as they did to Americans in 1970, or 1935.

By-product Learning

Whether people learn about politics (and if so, how much) depends on the efficiency with which they can find the media content they seek. Due to a lack of efficiency, people often learn politically relevant facts as a by-product of nonpolitical routines. In his theoretical treatment of information seeking, Anthony Downs (1957) presents two subtly different scenarios to illustrate this point. First, free political information is sometimes obtained from entertainment-seeking behavior, as when, in Downs's example, moviegoers sit through a newsreel even though they came to be entertained by the main feature. Second, people may acquire political information “in the course of making production or consumption

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decisions.” People learn about price developments while grocery shopping, even when they are not willing to engage in costly searches for information on the inflation rate (Popkin 1991). In both cases, individuals obtain political information for free, even though that was not the objective of their behavior. Hence, “accidental data are by-products of the non-political activities of a citizen; they accrue to him without any special effort on his part to find them” (Downs 1957, 223). The idea that people acquire political information in the course of other activities featured prominently in several recent studies of political learning (e.g., Baum 2003b; Popkin 1991).

Downs’s two paths differ in one important aspect. The second path does not entail any sacrifices or loss of utility. If, in the course of buying your groceries, you learn about price inflation – information that you can use later when you decide how to cast your vote – you do not bear any additional costs just because you notice the price of groceries. In fact, it would probably be more costly to avoid noticing large price changes. “Just as exposed portions of the skin get tanned by the sun when people walk around out of doors, so people become informed as they go about their daily business” (Fiorina 1990, 338). The first path, on the other hand, does entail costs. Watching an unwanted newsreel imposes opportunity costs in the form of lost entertainment value. For most moviegoers, these opportunity costs would probably exceed the utility from exposure to the newsreel. Hence, they would have preferred to skip the newsreel and start the movie earlier, but many movie theaters did not offer the feature without the newsreel. (And moviegoers who arrived late to skip the newsreel risked not getting a good seat.) As far as Downs’s first path is concerned, people who do not intend to learn about politics still do so because they cannot find exactly the media content they prefer.

This book is about the first path: about obtaining political information as a by-product in inefficient media environments. If you go to see a movie to satisfy your desire for entertainment, the newsreel is an inefficiency. People’s exposure to political information and their political learning depend on these inefficiencies. The efficiency of the media environment – and hence the likelihood of non-political activities yielding political information as by-products – varies over time, often in response to technological change. Moviegoers today are no longer accidentally exposed to political information.³

3 In the case of newsreels, Downs may have overestimated both the opportunity costs and the amount of by-product learning. Newsreels rarely focused on political or social issues. (I provide a brief summary of newsreel content in Chapter 3.) Even so, most moviegoers presumably came for the movie, not the newsreel. According to Fielding (1972, 220), “theater owners generally viewed the newsreel as nothing more than a convenient house-clearing device to be inserted between feature attractions.”

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Downs (1957, 223) offers the newsreel example to illustrate a more general point:

Anyone with time to spare can acquire endless amounts of sought-for data, but variations in the quantity of accidental data received can result from other factors as well. In fact, systematic variations in the amount of free information received and ability to assimilate may strongly influence the distribution of political power in a democracy.

My central claim throughout this book is that the media environment – the types of media to which people have access – explains many “systematic variations in the amount of free information received.” The media content available to people, its quantity, and the ease with which it can be obtained varies over time. Different media environments provide the media content people want at different levels of efficiency. For example, the available broadcast channels in 1970 were less likely than today’s television lineup to offer programs that closely matched a viewer’s ideal content – and even if they did, they rarely did so at the viewer’s ideal time. Choosing one’s preferred content was much less efficient in 1970 than it is today. Different media environments therefore offer different opportunities to obtain free information as a by-product. As it becomes easier to find the ideal content at the ideal time, the chances that viewers encounter political information as an unintended consequence of watching a less-than-ideal program, perhaps even a news program, dwindle. Changes in the set of available media thus affect who follows the news, who learns about politics, and who votes – in short, they affect “the distribution of political power in a democracy.”

The Floating Voter

The floating voter is another concept that has attracted the continued attention of political scientists and, especially, campaign strategists and journalists. It, too, depends more on the media environment than commonly recognized. Floating voters are voters whose decisions are not noticeably influenced by a stable liberal or conservative ideology or a strong adherence to one party. As a result, they seldom approach an election with a firm sense of whom to vote for and do not always vote for the same party. Describing these patterns of fluctuations in voting behavior or vote intention, scholars have used many different terms, including “swing voters” and “marginal voters.” Key (1966, 9–28) used the term “stand-patters” to describe those who voted for the same party in successive elections. “Switchers,” on the other hand, voted for two different parties in the last two presidential elections. A third category, “new voters,”

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includes those who voted in the current, but not in the preceding election. Campbell (1960, 399) made a similar distinction between “core voters” and “peripheral voters.”

Zaller’s (2004) chapter entitled “Floating Voters in U.S. Presidential Elections, 1948–2000” and Mayer’s (2005) *The Swing Voters in American Presidential Elections* illustrate that the electoral significance of relatively uncommitted voters continues to interest political scientists. These works show that the behavior of floating voters has a disproportionate impact on the election outcome, especially in close elections (see also Burden and Kimball 2002; Kelley 1983). Many voters who do not consistently vote for the same party are less educated, less interested, less knowledgeable, and “more passive in their orientation to politics than . . . voters generally” (Kelley 1983, 149).⁴

Many floaters, swingers, and switchers behave capriciously not only when choosing between two candidates but also when deciding whether or not to vote. Even though he does not pursue the distinction, Key (1966, 22) notes that only some “new voters” have never voted before. Others just did not vote in the last election. He calls these voters “in-and-out voters.”⁵ While some of them “were prevented from voting four years earlier by causes beyond their control . . . , [o]thers, doubtless far more numerous, are persons with a low interest in politics, the apolitical, the apathetic, the indifferent, and those who vote only under the pressure of powerful stimuli.”

The intensity of a campaign and the amount of political information that (potential) floating voters encounter thus affect their tendency to vote at all. Campbell’s (1960) notion of “surge and decline” rests firmly on this connection between the strength of the campaign stimulus and the level of turnout. He distinguished between “high-stimulus” and “low-stimulus” elections. High-stimulus elections prompt even less interested citizens to cast a vote, while only the most interested vote in low-stimulus elections. Unfamiliar with ideological debates, floating voters – if they vote – decide based on candidate images or the controversy of the day. Both Campbell (1960) and Converse (1962) suggested this association as a way to explain why people’s voting behavior in off-year elections is more consistent with their partisan identification and their ideology. Because the “stimulus” is not strong enough to inform less interested citizens, many of them are not sufficiently motivated to vote because they perceive

4 Key finds switchers about as interested and opinionated as standpatters, while new voters rank lower on measures of engagement. See Converse (1962) and Mayer (2005) for data supporting Kelley’s conclusion.

5 Campbell (1960, 409) also used this term.

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few differences between the political alternatives (e.g., Palfrey and Poole 1987). The weaker the stimulus, the greater the likelihood of “abstention due to indifference” (Fiorina 1999). This argument implies that a strong stimulus encourages higher turnout of Key’s “in-and-out voters” – and hence less partisan voting behavior: “The volume of information flow can be seen as an important governor upon the magnitude of oscillations in party fortunes” (Converse 1962, 591).

If the magnitude of vote swings depends on the flow of information, the fundamental changes in the media environment over the last half-century may alter the significance of floating voters. Converse (1962, 598) recognized this and argued that “there should be an increasing amplitude of these [vote] swings as the information flow has increased during the current century.” But even though Converse grappled with the dependence of electoral volatility on the flow of information, neither he nor Campbell considered the possibility that even a strong stimulus might be ignored or diluted. The amount of news coverage available today, the length of campaigns, and the money spent on advertising all suggest that the signal produced by election campaigns has increased in strength. Yet the opportunities to watch movies, sports, sitcoms, and crime shows have also increased. Even a signal that is arguably stronger than ever does not necessarily get through the noise of everyday distractions. The noise has also grown louder and more distracting in recent decades.

Although the presidential campaign in 2004 was regarded as intensely contested and very close until the end, it did not reach as wide a share of the electorate as past “high-stimulus” elections did. The presidential debates between George W. Bush and John Kerry in 2004 broke a long decline in the size of debate audiences. On average, about one in three households watched the three debates. This audience was large by comparison to presidential debates in the 1990s, but it still pales next to the roughly 60 percent of households that tuned in to watch Nixon and Kennedy in 1960.⁶ The signal was certainly not weaker in 2004 than it was in 1960, but the debates reached a much lower share of the population. In 1966, 84 percent of all households watched coverage of the congressional election returns, according to Nielsen Media Research (Variety 1969). Congressional elections may have been “low stimulus” compared to presidential contests, but an audience of this size is unheard of today for any kind of election. In short, both on- and off-year elections have become increasingly “low-stimulus” in recent decades in the

6 The estimates for 1960 are from Nielsen Media Research (2000). The 2004 estimates come from press releases available on the company’s Web site (www.nielsenmedia.com). The average rating for 2004 was 33.9, which does not include viewers on PBS stations and C-SPAN. About 5 percent of all debate viewers watched on PBS.

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sense that they reach a declining share of the electorate.⁷ It is more difficult for the same signal to get through to people who take advantage of increased media choice to avoid exposure to political information. From the point of view of these entertainment fans, the flow of political information has become much weaker in recent years as media choice has increased.

Because in-and-out voters vote only when the political stimulus they receive is strong enough to overcome their indifference to politics, the political significance of floating voters should thus change over time. A media environment that routinely reaches many floating voters will generate more fickle, less partisan voting behavior. If media messages reach committed voters, but are easy for less interested would-be floating voters to miss, elections should become increasingly dominated by partisan considerations. Changes in the media environment may therefore change the proportion of highly partisan voters and the variability in election outcomes over time. The assumption that Americans in 1935, 1970, and 2005 were all equally likely to be floating voters seems tenuous in light of the difference in what they could see, read, and hear about politics.

THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT, 1920–2005

By-product learning and floating voters are just two examples of political behaviors that, upon closer view, seem to depend on what kind of media are available and how much choice they offer. The purpose of this book is to examine more systematically how the media environment affects political behavior. I chose 1935, 1970, and 2005 to emphasize the dramatic changes in the media environment that play leading roles in the next six chapters. The advent of television midway through the twentieth century and the expansion of choice for television viewers and new media users in its last two decades are arguably the most fundamental changes. But they are of course not the only ones, nor are technological advances the only reason for variation. In this section, I explain my main independent variable, the media environment.

A media environment is defined by the media available to people at a particular place and time and by the properties of these media. For a new medium to be available, the technology for local access must exist. In the early days of cable television, for example, availability was constrained by the physical infrastructure of cable systems, which did not pass all households immediately. Today, almost all U.S. households are physically

⁷ An exception may be the amount of political advertising. Of all news and campaign communications, advertising is most likely to reach less-interested segments of the electorate. I discuss this point more fully in Chapter 7.

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ready to receive cable or satellite television. The media environment is thus partly determined by the state of technology.

The media available to people at a particular place and time often correspond to the availability of content that is necessary for political learning to occur: news programs, news channels, newspapers, and Web sites with political information, for example. Broadcast news was unavailable to people until a television station began operating somewhere close to them. Cable news channels are available only in households with cable or satellite access.

Once a medium is technically available, people often have to decide whether to obtain access to the medium. After broadcast signals become available, people have to buy a television set to watch television in their homes. To enjoy cable channels, viewers still have to subscribe to a cable or satellite system. At this stage, people's preferences and their ability to afford access begin to influence individual media environments. Though some of these decisions may be driven by the desire for specific content, buying a television set or subscribing to cable increases availability of many different types of programming. Broadcast channels, basic cable, and the Internet all bundle a variety of content – including some content that appears to media users to have little value. The content available through the medium often changes even after people have made the decision to gain access. This distinguishes the decision to gain access from the availability of specific content even further.⁸

8 The distinction between the decision to gain access and the availability of content is less meaningful when the decision to gain access and the decision to use the medium are made at the same time or when the content is highly specialized. People who subscribe to a newspaper find it on their doorstep every morning, regardless of whether they intend to read it that morning. Nonsubscribers who buy a paper at the newsstand, on the other hand, will have a strong inclination to read the paper that particular day. In a strict sense, the paper could still be thought of as part of the media environment, but it is no longer justified to treat the environment as largely independent of the particular content people like. This argument suggests a further distinction between two kinds of environments, the immediate media environment and the standing media environment.

The standing media environment refers only to the media that are *routinely* available to a person. The standing media environment would thus include the cable channels that are available to a cable subscriber and the paper that lands on the subscriber's doorstep every morning. It would not include the newspaper that a nonsubscriber buys occasionally. That paper would only be included in the immediate media environment, of which the standing environment is a subset. Throughout this book, I try to stay away from immediate media environments because they are difficult or even impossible to measure and because they make causal interpretation extremely difficult. Most of my analyses involve comparisons of people with different standing media environments.