

Introduction

Fox Populism in the Great Recession

Shortly after Barack Obama's 2008 presidential victory celebration, *Time* magazine put on its cover a parody of the iconic cigarette-smoking Franklin Roosevelt photo, this time with a photo featuring not FDR but a smiling Obama and a caption reading: "The New New Deal."¹ Indeed, given the Democrats' control of the presidency and both branches of congress, analysts speculated that the party would soon be able to pass a policy program as bold as FDR's New Deal. Yet in a relatively short period of time the national debate over the financial crisis would dramatically shift from one targeting Wall Street greed and corporate malfeasance to one centered around fiscal policy and the national debt, taxpayer victimization, and the "sweetheart" benefits of public-sector workers.

This rhetorical turnaround had grave and lasting political consequences for Democrats. The "Republican tsunami" that swept the nation in 2010 caused Democrats to lose more congressional seats than in any midterm election since 1938.² In addition to giving Republicans the House of Representatives and 6 seats in the Senate, Democrats lost 6 governorships and more than 700 seats in state legislatures, handing Republicans the power to redraw voting districts in their favor. The conservative political resurgence during the Great Recession was punctuated by Obama's signing into legislation an extension of the Bush-era tax cuts – a scene that would have been unthinkable two years prior. Somehow the transformative economic agenda that progressives had hoped for was dead in its tracks. What explains this political turnaround?

¹ TIME Magazine Cover (November 24, 2008). ² Tomasky (November 3, 2010).

Conventional wisdom tells us that severe economic downturns like the recession of the late 2000s tend to push the nation's politics leftward, as was the case during the Great Depression of the 1930s. But as cultural theorist Stuart Hall has pointed out in his writings on the rise of the British Right during the 1970s, market failures and the dire material conditions they create do not automatically unfurl leftist political responses. How crises are resolved, Hall stresses, is contingent on the representational work done in what he terms "the 'theatre' of political and ideological struggle" (1988a: 4).

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the US political "theatre" has been largely founded on and expressed through the mass media. Since the 1960s, the medium of television has been the single most dominant form of political communication. Even with the rising influence of the Internet, this remains so today.³ Within the televisual terrain, cable news is a particularly important battlefield in the contest for ideological hegemony. True, cable news is far from being the number one media source Americans rely on for *general* information; the audiences for local and network news programs are nearly three times as large. It is, however, the primary source Americans turn to for *political* information.⁴ The 24-hour format allows cable news programs to relentlessly push policy positions and devote sustained coverage to a narrow set of politically contentious issues in a way that local and network news formats simply cannot match.⁵ Hence, politicians pay special attention to cable news⁶ (President Donald Trump is particularly known for his "obsession" with cable TV⁷).

In political television, one network towers above all others: the Fox News Channel. Since surpassing CNN as ratings leader in 2002, Fox has utterly dominated the cable news arena. In the course of this seventeen-year winning spree, the conservative network has not only beaten its more liberal competitors, CNN and MSNBC, but has consistently garnered

³ Mitchell et al. (July 7, 2016).

⁴ Gottfried et al. (February 4, 2016); Huffington Post (February 7, 2012); Blumenthal (May 21, 2010); Pew Research Center (October 30, 2009).

⁵ Fitzgerald (November 5, 2013).

⁶ As *New York Times* columnist Matt Bai writes in his article "Cable Guise," "a sizable portion of ... [the] paltry cable viewership comprises nearly every congressional aide, White House official and assignment editor in Washington, where it is rare to find a political or news office that doesn't have multiple televisions tuned to the punditry parade" (2009: 13). For academic research on Fox News' special influence on the congress and the political class, see Clinton & Enamorado, 2014; Bartlett, 2015; Arceneaux et al., 2016.

⁷ Parker & Costa (April 23, 2017).

higher ratings than both these networks *combined*. Today, the company earns a jaw-dropping 2.3 billion dollars annually, making it the most profitable asset in Rupert Murdoch's global media empire.⁸ And these commercial milestones say nothing of the network's political and cultural impact.

Some media critics and scholars have downplayed Fox's significance by pointing out that the cable news audience makes up only a small slice of the national television audience and an even smaller slice of the voting population.⁹ However, attempts to correlate Fox's audience size to its political effects miss one critical thing. They assume Fox's influence ends at the borders of its loyal audience's living room. According to Terry McDermott of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, cable news outlets can capture an "outsized portion" of the national "mindshare" because journalists, as a group, are avid news consumers who are highly "self-reflective" (2010: 8). In other words, journalists heavily influence other journalists, and what they say in particularly dominant national news outlets sways the editorial decisions of smaller, local news organizations – a process scholars have called "inter-media agenda setting."¹⁰

Several content studies on Fox News support this idea showing how, on different occasions, the network, on its own, could drive the editorial agenda of the national press.¹¹ By the late 1990s, Fox News would begin to demonstrate both its inclination and, more importantly, its ability to help conservatives gain conceptual control over key national issues, such as the Lewinsky-Clinton scandal and Clinton's ensuing impeachment, the

⁸ Pew Research Center (June 16, 2016).

⁹ In *Changing Minds or Changing Channels* (2013), Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson argue that the perception of cable news' influence is overblown. They show how small the cable news audience is in relation to the network news programs and in relation to the US voting population. As they cite, in January of 2012 *Hardball with Chris Mathews* on MSNBC garnered 0.8 million viewers while cable news' number one show of that year, *The O'Reilly Factor*, garnered 3.4 million. By comparison, the network evening news programs dwarf these ratings numbers. In same period, NBC and CBS posted 7.4 million viewers and 10.2 million respectively (4–5).

¹⁰ According to David McKnight, Fox's role as a "inter-media agenda-setter" is the true source of Fox News' influence, not its persuasion over its audience (2013: 13, 27–29, 70). For literature on the concept of "inter-media agenda setting," see Castells, *Communication Power* (2009), p. 91, 164. Also see McCombs, 2005.

¹¹ Notable examples include: the Iraq War, see Schechter, 2003; Rutenberg, 2003c; Calabrese, 2005. The Swift Boat campaign, see Shaw, 2006; Cappella & Jamieson, 2008: 143, 211–212. The ACORN controversy, see Dreier & Martin, 2010. The Tea Party movement, see Skocpol & Williamson, 2012: chapter 4. The 2009 controversy over President Obama's "green jobs czar" Van Jones, see Levendusky, 2013.

2000 presidential election, and the Iraq invasion. However, Fox's role in shaping the national debate on the late 2000's economic crisis may be its most impressive rhetorical feat to date.

The Great Recession posed a far greater political communication challenge for Republicans than attempts to secure public support for the Bush administration's "War on Terror." The 9/11 attacks of 2001 had already primed the American public for war, significantly assisting Fox's patriotic programming strategy and its hawkish, Republican foreign policy stance. But the 2008 financial collapse and the historic recession that followed presented an entirely different set of political conditions. This was now becoming an environment rife with anti-corporate sentiment as poll after poll showed the public's trust in business dipping to all-time lows.¹² Economy-related news stories now came to utterly dominate the national media,¹³ and income inequality – a topic Democrats had "owned" for decades (Petrocik et al., 2003) – was about to become the central political issue of the moment, pushing the national security and "culture war" politics (e.g. God, guns and gays) of the Bush era far to the wayside.

In such a political climate, one might assume a conservative network like Fox News would downplay issues of income inequality. Instead, Fox's top programs placed the topics of wealth distribution and class hierarchy at the top of their editorial agenda but approached these issues in such a way that ingeniously reconfigured the meaning of socioeconomic divisions so as to negate the market's role in producing them. In the place of economic antagonisms, Fox News pundits advanced a *cultural-normative* understanding of class conflict that has been a staple of conservative populism since the McCarthy era.

One of the long-standing political narratives of the conservative movement has focused on how "over-educated elites" use government power to both expropriate the wealth of "producing" Americans and impose non-traditional cultural values on them. Fox News' top hosts have seized

¹² A Marist College Public Opinion poll showed, "More than three-quarters of Americans said the moral compass of corporate America is pointing in the wrong direction, compared to 58 percent of business executives." See Carroll (2010). According to the Yankelovich marketing consulting firm, in the year 1968, 70 percent of Americans answered "Yes" to the question "Does business act responsibly?" In 2011, by contrast, a Harris Poll showed that only 13 percent of respondents expressed confidence in "large companies." See Argenti (2013). The public's confidence in Wall Street reached all-time lows as well. See Owens (October 7, 2011).

¹³ Pew Research Center (October 5, 2009).

these conservative narratives and skillfully interconnected and rationalized them with the “lowbrow-taste” politics of tabloid media. This potent mix of tabloid taste and populist moral reasoning is the crux of how Fox News has interpellated its audience as the “authentic,” working-class majority, thus allowing it to effectively re-present narrow conservative political demands as popular and universal. And indeed, in the most pivotal years of the Great Recession, this rhetorical strategy seemed to be working. In 2009 and 2010, Fox News would post some of the highest ratings in its twenty-two-year history¹⁴ and would help redirect public anger away from corporate America toward government.

Of course, Fox did not accomplish this all by itself. Its free-market interpretation of the Great Recession was reinforced by the other major pillars of the “conservative media establishment,” such as the *Rush Limbaugh* talk radio show, the news website the Drudge Report and the op-ed pages of the *Wall Street Journal* (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Going beyond media, Fox News’ ability to drive the national discussion on the economic crisis was significantly assisted by an actual, on-the-ground protest movement named after the “Boston Tea Party” of the American Revolution. The Tea Party mobilizations of early 2009 provided a real-world referent for Fox’s narrative depiction of its audience as being the central protagonist of the economic crisis, the political community most entitled to moral outrage and populist anger. In a reciprocal fashion, Fox News gifted this anti-tax, anti-government movement with a steady stream of life sustaining publicity. Fox News’ early and repetitious coverage of Tea Party protest events in February and March of 2009 ultimately pressured CNN and other major news organizations to devote more coverage to the Tea Party than they would have otherwise (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012: chapter 4).

In anticipation of the first nationally coordinated Tea Party protest on Tax Day, April 15, 2009, Fox News shifted into full “advocacy” mode, going from merely reporting Tea Party events to promoting them. The network even sent several of its popular hosts such as Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck and Neil Cavuto to broadcast their programs live at various protest locations across the country (see Figure 1.1). “This is the moment,” Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson wrote in one of the most definitive books on the Tea Party, “that many people we interviewed got involved [in the movement] for the first time” (2012: 8).

¹⁴ See Holcomb et al. (2012).

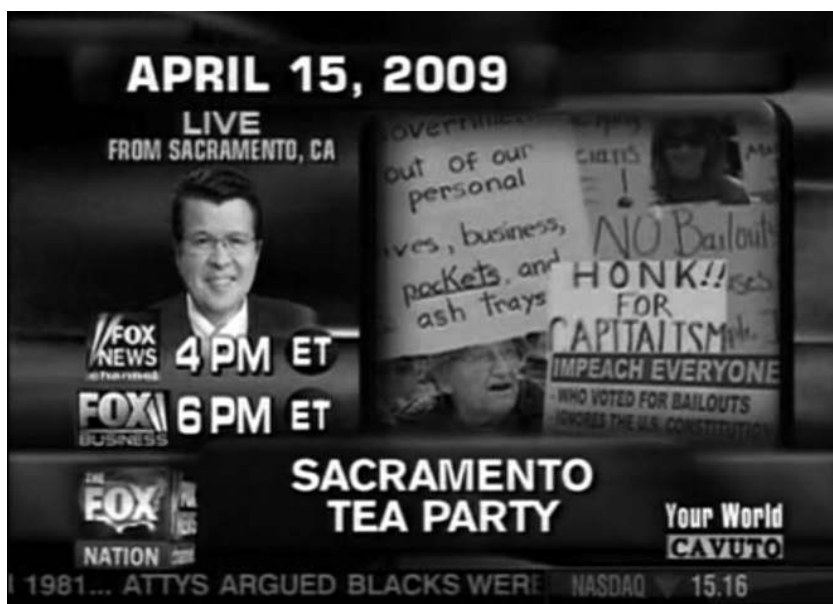


FIGURE 1.1 Fox News' promotion of Tea Party events

On Tax Day 2009, Fox News fans morphed into activists, and the activists became marketing vehicles for Fox News. This was the fullest expression of a decades-long trend toward an increasingly partisan news industry, the perfect marriage between a media corporation's branding strategy and a political movement's media strategy.¹⁵

In the summer of 2009, Tea Party protesters besieged town hall events designed to promote Obama's signature healthcare reform bill, the Affordable Care Act, or what became known as "Obamacare." Fox News' top programs gleefully broadcasted camera phone footage showing rank-and-file conservatives overwhelming Democratic Representatives with critical questions that, in many instances, devolved into shouting matches. "Throw the bums out," a crowd of Tea Partiers chanted at one event in Long Island, New York. The protest march, known as The Taxpayer March on Washington, on September 12,

¹⁵ Williamson and Skocpol cite a poll taken in April 2010 showing that "63% of Tea Party supporters watched Fox News, compared to 11% of all respondents" (2012: 135). For an in-depth analysis of the intersection between conservative media branding and the political activism of the Tea Party see Khadijah Costley White's recent book (2018) *The Branding of Right-Wing Activism: The News Media and the Tea Party*.

2009, was another flashpoint. An estimated 75,000 conservative activists filled the United States Capitol standing as one of the largest political demonstrations against Obama in his entire eight-year presidency. As indicated by its date, this event was intimately tied to Glenn Beck, a rising star at Fox News at the time who created the Tea Party affiliated organization called the “9/12 Project.”

Recognizing Fox’s special role in rallying Tea Party protestors against him, President Obama vented his frustration in a June 16, 2009, interview with CNBC telling correspondent John Harwood, “I’ve got one television station [Fox News] that is entirely devoted to attacking my administration. . . . You’d be hard pressed if you watched the entire day to find a positive story about me.”¹⁶ That fall, Anita Dunn, the Communications Director of the Obama White House, explicitly named Fox as the culprit. On CNN’s *Reliable Sources*, Dunn said bluntly, “the reality is that Fox almost operates as either the research arm or the communication arm of the Republican Party.” Fox, she charged, takes Republican “talking points” and “put[s] them on the air.”¹⁷ In the recession years, it seemed liberals and conservatives had switched their traditional rhetorical roles. Now liberals were the ones most readily lamenting the “media bias” against them. This reversal was a testament to how much the conservative media sector had grown and matured since the half-baked film and broadcasting ventures of ultraconservative groups from the 1950s and 1960s, such as the John Birch Society (Hendershot, 2011).

In the wake of an unpopular Bush presidency and amid one of worst economic crises in eighty years, Obama and the Democrats assumed they would enjoy bipartisan support for the Stimulus Act and other Keynesian policy measures they were proposing to address the nation’s economic woes. In hindsight, however, they clearly underestimated the ability of Fox News to activate the Republican base and push Republicans in congress further to the right, injecting the party with a zeal for fiscal austerity that surpassed anything seen during the Bush era.

By the time President Obama took office in January of 2009, Fox News’ founding CEO Roger Ailes, himself a former Republican media strategist, had raised Fox’s political stature to such heights that even some conservatives (mostly moderates) were beginning to complain about the network’s disproportionate sway over the Republican Party. In 2010, former Bush speech writer David Frum went so far as to suggest that

¹⁶ *New York Times* (June 16, 2009).

¹⁷ CNN (October 11, 2009).

Fox had usurped the party itself telling ABC's *Nightline*, "Republicans originally thought that Fox [News] worked for us and now we are discovering we work for Fox" (Schoestz, 2010, para. 1). That same year *Politico* used the term "Fox primary" to describe the network's role in directing the candidate selection process for Republican primaries. One basic way this was done, the article noted, was by giving or denying an aspiring candidate a paid position at Fox News as a pundit or "contributor" (Hagey & Martin, 2010). Because of Fox's reputation as conservative kingmaker, Republican politicians have been careful not to cross the network's corporate leadership and top stars, that is, until Donald Trump entered the political scene.

During the 2015–2016 Republican presidential primary, Trump openly feuded with Ailes and Megyn Kelly, one of Fox's most popular hosts at the time. Trump even boycotted a Fox News debate in Des Moines, Iowa on January 28, 2016, a move every other Republican candidate viewed as political suicide. But just as Trump warned, Fox would be the one to pay the price for his absence. This Trump-less panel of primary candidates yielded one of the lowest ratings of the twelve debates held. In addition to using the drawing power of his established celebrity status to bend Fox to his will, Trump benefited from an emergent "alt-right" media sector led by online news sites such as InfoWars and Breitbart News. During the primary season, these sites painted Fox News as part of the anti-Trump "Media Establishment." A 2017 study published in the *Columbia Journalism Review* demonstrates how the majority conservative shares and retweets on Facebook and Twitter originated from Breitbart, not Fox News.¹⁸ According to Harvard Law School Professor Yochai Benkler, one of the study's authors, Breitbart's online proliferation pushed the entire conservative media ecosystem in a pro-Trump direction, which isolated #NeverTrump conservatives and compelled Fox News "to join the bandwagon."¹⁹ The outcome of the Republican primary revealed that Fox's hold over conservative voters was not as unassailable as previously thought.

Other events in the Trump era, unrelated to the presidential election, would test Fox News like never before. In 2016 and 2017, we witnessed the ousting of not one but *two* of the network's most important figures, as both CEO Roger Ailes (now deceased) and longtime number one host Bill O'Reilly were forced to leave in the wake of multiple sexual harassment

¹⁸ Benkler et al. (March 3, 2017).

¹⁹ Milano (August 31, 2017).

charges against them. Many analysts wondered if Fox News could continue its dominance over cable news without Ailes' leadership and O'Reilly's talent. Despite the drastic changes to its management structure and primetime lineup, Fox News was still able to close out 2017 on top. In fact, during the tumultuous years of 2016 and 2017, Fox broke its own ratings records surpassing the stratospheric numbers it had set in the Great Recession era (Otterson, 2017).

However, the news organization's future is far less secure than it was a decade ago. Trump has incensed liberal audiences, which has boosted the ratings of CNN and MSNBC to unprecedented heights. To make matters worse, for the first time Fox is beginning to feel competitive heat from its right flank, as a crop of new conservative television ventures have recently emerged (e.g., One America News Network, Newsmax TV, Sinclair Broadcasting Group). The growing trend toward "cord-cutting" poses possibly the greatest threat to Fox News' long-term existence (and all of cable television for that matter) as media consumers, especially younger Americans, are rapidly dropping pay-TV services for Internet-based news.

Where Fox News is headed at this precarious juncture of its history is uncertain and one can only speculate about when and if Fox will lose its title as conservative America's main news source.²⁰ What is certain, however, is the central role that the network has played in spearheading the conservative media revolution of the last two decades and, at a deeper level, in changing how news is presented and marketed in the United States. The example of Fox's breakout commercial success demonstrated its domino effect, since it encouraged other news outlets, namely MSNBC, to also take up a partisan branding approach and, with that kind of linkage, a programming model that favors a politically charged, opinion-based news format over the dispassionate, "straight" newscast of the past.²¹ This study asks *how* Fox News pioneered a new style of television journalism and *why* this style has created such a compelling political identity for conservative audiences. To answer these questions, *Fox Populism* examines Fox's institutional history and conducts a close textual analysis of the network's top three programs – *The O'Reilly Factor*, *Hannity*, and *Glenn Beck* – during the pinnacle years of

²⁰ Gottfried et al. (February 4, 2016).

²¹ Kurtz, 1997; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Schudson, 2003; Rutenberg, 2003: 112; Collins, 2004; Wormald, 2005; Pew, 2007; Baum & Groeling, 2008; Jaramillo, 2009: 36–38; Peters, 2010; Norton, 2011; Sherman, 2014.

2009 and 2010, a moment when Fox's engagement in American politics was dramatic and undeniable.

The historical sections of this book engage the biographies of Rupert Murdoch, the owner of Fox's parent company News Corp. (now Twenty-First Century Fox, Inc.), founding CEO Roger Ailes and star host Bill O'Reilly, and spotlight how the earlier media enterprises these figures took part in foreshadowed the unique broadcasting formula Fox News would develop. However, this study adopts a "cultural genealogical method"²² that gives less weight to the individual geniuses of the "great men" of Fox's history and instead focuses on understanding the rhetorical traditions and media styles that these figures wielded as marketing tools and political weapons. This method reveals how Fox built its counter-elite news brand by combining two class-based traditions of public culture – one native to the political field in *populism* and one native to the commercial media field in *tabloid journalism*. Donald Trump, a reality TV star-cum-populist politician, embodies this stylistic synthesis through and through. Yet, he is less the trigger and more the capstone of a populist discursive trend that Fox News set in motion decades before Trump and Breitbart were making headlines.

The historical scholarship on the postwar conservative movement has blossomed in recent years, shedding light on the forces behind the rightward political shift of the last four decades.²³ However, few scholars have mapped the points of convergence between this political history and the history of American media (Hendershot, 2011:13). As a result, the media dimension of the political right's ascendancy remains insufficiently explained. By marrying political theory with cultural theory and by bridging literatures on populism and the postwar conservative movement with journalism and television studies scholarship, *Fox Populism* seeks to account for the complexity of Fox News' populist rhetorical address and the overdetermined nature of its unlikely rise to cable news dominance.

As discussed in the following section, one of the primary objectives of this book is to offer a new conceptual approach to media partisanship and to question the extent to which its popular conceptualization is really about political ideology. To rely only on a left-right ideological schema to define Fox News is to miss how it constructs partisanship as an identity *style*.

²² Nietzsche, 1956; Foucault, 1965, 1970, 1977; Mukerji, 2007.

²³ Davis, 1986; Carter, 1995; Kazin, 1998; McGirr, 2001; Frank, 2004; Phillips-Fein, 2009; Cowie, 2010; Perlstein, 2001, 2008, 2014.