

Media and American Politics (PSCI 398-302)
University of Pennsylvania Washington Semester (Spring 2006)

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Introduction

The mass media are an increasingly ubiquitous, yet still poorly understood, presence in American politics. Most citizens learn about issues, political leaders and institutions from the media, who distill, report, and interpret events for the public. Although the public relies heavily on the media for its understanding of the American political scene, surveys show widespread distrust of the journalistic profession. In this course we shall critically examine the various roles that the media play in American politics. Among the topics covered: media effects, media bias, elections coverage, the press and the presidency, presidential rhetoric and communications, the press and Congress, media and democracy, among others.

Requirements

Students will be evaluated in the seminar based on: attendance and qualitative participation in class discussion (25%); a substantial research paper (50%), and two examinations (25%).

Readings

The following books are required reading for the seminar and may be purchased from the university bookstore:

James Fallows, Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy

John Anthony Maltese, Spin Control: The White House Office of Communications and the Management of Presidential News

Mark J. Rozell, ed., Media Power, Media Politics

Thomas Patterson, Out of Order

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, The Press Effect

Marvin Kalb, One Scandalous Story

Bernard Goldberg, Bias

Al Franken, Lies, and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them

Seminar Schedule

Week 1: Media and American Politics

Introduction to the seminar. Discussion of expectations, requirements and topics covered.

Week 2: Media and Democracy

Topics: media effects; evolution of the U.S. media; news as entertainment; celebrity journalism and its effects.

Reading: Fallows, Breaking the News

Weeks 3-4: Media and Elections

Topics: covering campaigns; reporters' v. candidates' issues; expectations and hype; impact of the presidential nominating process; proposals for reform; measuring media effects; media and political knowledge.

Reading: Patterson Out of Order

Stuckey, "Presidential Elections and the Media"; Vinson, "Political Parties and the Media"; both are in Media Power, Media Politics

Weeks 5-6: Media Bias

Topics: is media coverage of politics ideologically tilted? Do reporters and editors have political agendas? Or, do they merely allow personal preferences to slip into news judgments? Is there really a "liberal press" or have the conservative media become ascendant in the U.S.?

Readings: Goldberg, Bias and Franken, Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them

Weeks 7-8: Media and the Presidency/Media and Congress

Topics: presidential coverage and its evolution; journalistic expectations of presidential leadership and performance; media images of presidents; White House media strategies; the White House Office of Communications; presidential popularity and its impact on media coverage; congressional coverage and its evolution; media strategies of congressional offices; media impact on Congress.

Readings: John Maltese, Spin Control and Rozell, "The Press and Congress", in Media Power, Media Politics

Week 9: Media and the Courts

Topics: coverage of the courts; effects of limited coverage and understanding.

Reading: Richard Davis and James Strickler, "The Supreme Court and the Press", in Media Power, Media Politics

Weeks 10-11: Media and the Politics of Scandal

Topics: how groups employ media strategies; coverage of the role of interest groups in politics; effects of stereotypes of groups and their influence.

Reading: Kalb, One Scandalous Story

Maltese, "The New Media and the Lure of the Clinton Scandal"

Weeks 12-13: Media Effects

Topics: are the media all-pervasive and powerful? How do the media alter the political landscape? How can the media enhance democratic institutions?

Readings: Jamieson, The Press Effect

Klarevis, "Media Impact" in Media Power, Media Politics

Week 14: The New Media/Media and Foreign Policy

Topic: how have the new media changed the reporting of political news?; media diplomacy; the "CNN effect"; reporting terrorism

Readings: Mayer and Cornfield, "The New Media", in Media Power, Media Politics

Cusimano-Love, "Global Media and Foreign Policy", in Media Power, Media Politics