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The Influence of Television on Presidential Elections in the United States

Prof. Leonard R. Teel *

In the United States, controversy about the influence of the mass media upon Presidential Elections does not end when the election is over. In recent years much of this controversy focuses on network television coverage of the elections. The influence of television upon has become the focus of specialized media research documenting the problems and, at times, offering possible solutions.

During and after the 2000 Presidential Election, the controversy became intense. Television was both blessed for its benefits and cursed for its excesses in the extremely close election that was not decided until the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of Texas Governor George W. Bush rather than Vice President Al Gore. In fact, television had played a major role in four ways: (1) day-to-day news coverage, (2) paid campaign advertising, (3) three nationally televised Bush-Gore debates, and (4) election-night reporting before the voting was completed.

Bush-Gore Debates:

When in December Al Gore finally conceded defeat, media analysts praised his concession speech as more effective than his earlier performances in the debates. In defeat, Gore seemed genuinely earnest and straightforward, and, very importantly, warm and human. Generally, analysts believed that the debates helped

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establish Bush's legitimacy while diminishing Gore's likability. Especially in the first debate, witnessed by at least 46.6 million voters, the two candidates followed their prepared scripts Gore promising "a prosperity that endures and enriches" and Bush asserting that he wanted to "empower Americans to make decisions for themselves." On a personal level however, Gore appeared to be condescending by his gestures and sighs. He was satirized on a national comedy show as "an overbearing know-it-all." For the second and third debates Gore changed tactics and seemed to improve his television image. First impressions however, seemed to linger. After Gore's concession speech, analysts wondered if he might have won the election if he had been as effective in the debates as he was in conceding defeat.

In today's "media-rich" environment, the mass media influence almost every development in U.S. Presidential Elections. In a country as large as the United States, stretching across three time zones from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans, the media have become the primary means for creating a sense of national community. Indeed, for many Americans, their President and his Cabinet are "mediated personalities" existing primarily as images on the television screen, people they never actually see but follow through the media. In 2000, this mediated sense of community was enabled in part by cable television, the internet and the World Wide Web, but network television continued to maintain its major role in influencing public opinion.

Because the U.S. mass media are largely free from government control, their coverage of U.S. Presidential elections is attuned

mostly to the demands of their audiences. In addition to telecasting the Presidential debates, television network journalists race each other to declare the winner on election day. Television profits financially from elections, selling millions of dollars of advertising to the Presidential campaigners. In addition, throughout the election year, commentators in print and broadcast speculate about the merits of the serious candidates, sometimes uncovering and amplifying secrets the candidates have never mentioned. Examples of all four of these influences were witnessed during the 2000 Presidential Election.

Election Night: Declaring the winner.

The television networks' election-night influence on voters became the focus of media self-analysis and Congressional hearings. Although networks denied that frenzied competition contributed to their election night forecasting errors, the fact is that competition is keen among national networks that spend heavily to present election results and project winners. If anything, competition for audience has intensified and decision-making has become more mysterious since all the major networks NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN and Fox have merged into larger, parent organizations.

Competing against each other to declare whether Gore or Bush won specific states, the networks erred seriously in the critical state of Florida. All the major networks declared wrongly that Gore won the east coast state of Florida. They broadcast this "projection" before voting was completed in West Florida and in all the states of the Midwest and Western United States. Later that night, the networks declared Bush the winner, and hours later declared the

state "too close to call" for either candidate. Long after the election, Florida was still undecided, and whoever won it would win the Presidency. After some recounting of votes, Florida's officials awarded all its 26 electoral votes to Bush. This was not final, however, until weeks after the election when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that Bush had won, thus ending the Gore challenge.

During subsequent hearings in Washington, Congressmen wondered whether that early decision for Gore which the networks later retracted caused some people to think the election was already decided and that their vote would make no difference. If so, did these voters stay home instead of voting?

Responding to criticism, three election night network news anchors NBC's Tom Brokaw, CBS' Dan Rather and ABC's Peter Jennings admitted their mistakes. It was Rather who on election night had promised, "If we say somebody's carried the state, you can take that to the bank. Book it!" He and the others blamed bad information. "Junk in, junk out." one called it. They pledged to be more careful in the future. Brokaw, however, said he doubted whether any Florida voters turned their cars around and went home because of NBC's announcement that Gore had won their state.

What had gone wrong on election night? Two days later, the New York Times traced the problem largely to incorrect data supplied by "the Voter News Service, a little-known but influential consortium of television networks and the Associated Press." In an effort to find answers, CNN commissioned a report by journalism experts. Three months after the election, their report said the election night coverage was a "news disaster" and blamed the

networks for creating a political climate of "rancor and bitterness." At the Congressional hearing on Feb. 15, 2001, network news executives "walked a thin line between taking responsibility for the election - night debacle and seething under the surface at having to testify before Congress under oath on a subject that they asserted was strictly a journalistic matter." Roger Ailes, chairman and chief executive of Fox News, blamed the Voter News Service that "gave out bad numbers that night." He added, "In the closest race in history, the wheels apparently came off of rattletrap computer systems, which we relied on and paid millions for." The executives maintained that it was their responsibility, not that of Congress to correct the problem. Louis D. Boccardi, president and chief executive officer of the Associated Press, said, "We agree that there were serious shortcomings, call them terrible mistakes....But fixing them is a job for the nation's editors. not its legislators."

The only media persons happy about the outcome were comedians. One television critic concluded: "Along with talk-show hosts and constitutional lawyers, the comedy business is emerging as a major beneficiary of the presidential election deadlock with a slew of jokes."

Television Time: The Mix of Free News and Paid Advertising.

Early in the 2000 campaign, the influence of television news coverage, paid political polling, and paid television advertising was evident. Television news gave visibility to various political polling agencies that reported Bush as the leading candidate for the Republican Party nomination for President. Early in the year,

however, Republican U.S. Senator John McCain scored surprising victories in some states, stunning the Bush campaign. The media immediately focused on the McCain victories as evidence that Bush had a serious opponent. This directed more free news coverage to McCain.

All candidates seek free television time. Apart from the normal fare of press conferences, they try to attract extra television time with unusual events. Sometimes this backfires if the media focus on some negative aspect. While campaigning in South Carolina, Bush made a speech on the campus of Bob Jones University. The media publicized the fact that Bob Jones University still had anti-Catholic and anti-black policies, and that Bush appeared to be catering to the far-right fringe of the Republican Party for help in beating McCain. Very quickly, McCain used that angle as evidence that Bush was out of step with mainstream American values of religious and racial tolerance. While Bush did win South Carolina, he lost ground in other states. However, some of the damage was repaired when Bush was seen attending the televised funeral in New York of Catholic Archbishop John O'Connor.

In response to McCain's gains, the Bush campaign adjusted tactics. Taking McCain seriously, they spent much more than McCain could for television advertising. Bush eventually won enough states to secure the Republican nomination. In defeat, McCain agreed to support his Republican rival against the Democrats' Gore. To showcase McCain's support for Bush, Bush invited McCain to join him in a staged media event, a news conference. Together, in front of network television cameras, the two former opponents met. Because of all the negative things

McCain had said about Bush during the campaign McCain seemed to feel he needed to stress his endorsement.

"I endorse him enthusiastically!" McCain said three times.

"I enthusiastically accept!" Bush said.

McCain, however, reserved the right to fight for campaign finance reform. His stated goal was to seek controls on multi-million dollar contributions to political campaigns. These contributions make possible expensive television advertising such as the Bush campaign used to defeat McCain. Since the 1960s, as television has become the most effective means to reach U.S. audiences, candidates for President know they must raise millions of dollars for television advertising.

The issue of questionable campaign financing became prominent in U.S. political debate during the last term of President Bill Clinton and Vice President Gore. Both were alleged to have conducted improper if not illegal fund-raising. Both denied any wrongdoing. But their activities and the enormous amounts of money required, especially for television advertising, have made "campaign finance reform" a viable issue again.

By 2000, Presidential candidates were advised to have several million dollars for television advertising alone. Indeed, they were advised to have the money in hand by 1999. "The common mantra of most political sophisticates at the conference...was that the most important requirement for a presidential contender in 2000" was "\$20 million or so in 1999 mostly for, yes, television." wrote the former CBS News executive political director, Martin Plissner.

In the spring of 2000, the Bush-McCain contest aroused a sleepy electorate. Although U.S. Presidential election preliminaries continue for almost a year before the election the general public pays attention only at certain times. Interest in the ongoing campaigns rises and falls. For most of the year, the candidates do whatever they can to focus positive news coverage on their campaigns, with the hope of raising additional funding. They save most of their advertising money for the critical times as the primary and final elections near. Indeed, some advertising aims simply to persuade members of their political party to exercise the right to vote. Despite appeals, rarely does 50 percent of the electorate vote. This means that the President of the United States and the "leader of the free world" is almost always chosen by a minority of those eligible to vote.

So, despite criticism of the national television networks, they do help to mobilize the electorate by giving national attention to the candidates. Television brings the candidates "into the living room." Networks are the principal "mediators" between candidate and populace. Indeed, U.S. Presidential elections require two fundamental ingredients a free and wide-ranging media and an audience with media literacy capable of understanding the candidates' messages.

In this sense, U.S. Presidential candidates offer their programs via television as though it were a "marketplace of ideas." In the ideal marketplace, as conceived by the Englishman John Milton in 1643, wisdom would ultimately result in people choosing the better ideas and candidates. For this to work well, the audience needs to

possess a media literacy which can sort through all the communicated information. Both media freedom and media literacy are variables which have risen and fallen during periods of the history of the United States. At bottom, whether the audience has been correctly informed or misinformed, the democratic system trusts the ultimate choices of the voters.

National television coverage of Presidential candidates' secrets has always been an influential factor. A free media must be able to expose secrets and hidden agendas as well as what is presented or advertised on the surface of things, as well as to offer analysis and commentary. In 2000, the media discovered a Bush secret that several years earlier Bush was arrested for driving under the influence of alcoholic beverages.

In response, the Bush campaign deflected the discovery as the deed of a youthful George W. Bush with no relevance to the mature Governor Bush.

Increasing Importance of Televised Debates:

Since 1960, arguably the most influential television impact comes from the televised Presidential debates. In 2000, critics argued that Bush gained credibility and legitimacy by not making any major mistakes in the debates. In 1960 the same was said for Kennedy when he went up against the then Vice President Richard Nixon. In both cases, the challengers were seeking to establish that they were at least as capable as their opponents both of whom had been vice presidents for eight years.

In 1960, however, national television was relatively new. During the decade of the 1950s when coast-to-coast broadcasting

was initiated, Americans for the first time watched the national presidential conventions and politicians began recognizing television as, first, an opportunity and, then, a necessity. "The first Kennedy-Nixon debate", Plissner noted, "remains to this day...the most memorable political event of the television era Viewership broke an records. "

Since 1960, the face-to-face debates on television have been considered crucial in highlighting the issues, and especially the candidates. In the first debate in 1960, Kennedy emerged victorious in part because appearance and attitude counted for so much on television. "Whereas Kennedy had been schooled carefully on how to address the camera and on composing his own features when the other man spoke, Nixon seemed unaware that his reactions to Kennedy might appear on camera." Nixon appeared to be less attractive, struggling and sweating. Nixon improved in the next three debates, but Kennedy's first debate was credited with boosting him toward his very narrow election victory.

Few who watched Nixon-Kennedy debates realized the dramatic change in America's national political scene. This experiment became a fixture in presidential races. In as sense, the debates became a "reality check" to the exaggeration of television advertising. Certainly the Nixon of 1960 learned a lesson. In 1968 he returned and won, professionally "packaged" for television as the "new Nixon."

Ever since the Nixon-Kennedy debates, presidential candidates have been expected to meet each other in televised forums. It is no longer a question of whether to debate. but just when and where

and how. If a presidential candidate were to refuse, he would risk losing votes to his opponent on the grounds that he was afraid to debate. In 2000, William E. Kinard, the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, the regulatory agency concerned with broadcasting, declared that only by carrying presidential debates would networks "serve the needs of citizens.... "

Findings of Media Researchers and Professionals

Those seeking to analyze the effects of mass media upon U.S. presidential elections include both academic researchers and experienced media professionals. A survey of the literature now turns up numerous studies and inside testimonials documenting the problems and suggesting solutions. One recent book (1999) is Kenneth Dautrich and Thomas H. Hartley's academic study, *How the News Media Fail American Voters: Causes, Consequences, and Remedies*. Based at the University of Connecticut, the work by Dautrich and Hartley was sponsored by the Media Studies Center in New York, funded by the Freedom Forum. In the same year, the just-retired executive political director of CBS News, Martin Plissner, published *The Control Room: How Television Calls the Shots in Presidential Elections*.

Dautrich and Hartley focused on the 1996 Presidential election in which Clinton was re-elected over former Sen. Robert Dole. The professors documented a proliferation of "non-network news" options from which voters could get campaign information in different formats. These sources included what they labeled as "tabloid" television and radio shows ranging from elite commentary to partisan talk shows. They concluded that the proliferation of

sources does not necessarily mean "higher information content." Further, they asserted that, in an audience - driven market, if "the public does not change its viewing behavior, then we would not expect news organizations to provide more content. "

The voters they interviewed shared many of the political communication scholars' criticisms. Voters were skeptical of the reporting of news and media interference in the election process. Many perceived a "tendency of the press to give an advantage to frontrunners. " Voters on the study panel perceived too much coverage of the main candidates' strategy and tactics and too little coverage of issues and of third-party candidates. Others thought the media had "too much control in defining campaign issues, and lead candidates to avoid issues and perform for the news cameras." Other studies have concluded that "the media can alter the foundations of political support by increasing the importance of one issue...."

Dautrich and Hartley had two main findings. Although "voters are generally satisfied with the news media, especially as the presidential campaign progresses, they have a long list of specific criticisms of the news media...." However, viewers do not assert their criticism by discontinuing their viewing of television. As a result, "we do not find that criticism of the news media has a major impact on changes in media use...."

Asserting that their findings were important for democracy and policy makers, Dautrich and Hartley made several recommendations. The public, they said, wants more "direct information and less information that is mediated through journalists." This might be done

with more "free air time," facing up to the cost of television time. The authors suggested that niche information providers viewed mainly by elites be marketed more aggressively to wider audiences. "To the mainstream news, we suggest that they focus not only on ratings but on customer satisfaction." This could include experimenting with new formats that separate analysis of strategy from the reporting of issue positions. "If news organizations do not respond to the voters' criticisms, they may leave themselves vulnerable to competition" including the emerging use of the internet.

The 1996 election was in fact a turning point for the influence of network television, according to Plissner. His insider report on the 2000 election confirms the erosion of the influence of network television and the rising use of the internet. During the 2000 election year, one U. S. survey showed that 89 percent of candidates for senator or governor had internet web sites. The Presidential candidates had web sites as well. On election day 2000 millions of Americans logged on for news from the web sites of news organizations. "It is hardly news," he concluded, "that the political reach and influence of the major broadcast networks are not what they have been in the past."

Plissner envisions far-reaching we-based campaigns. "Party-run primaries and chat rooms on line are anything but far-fetched notions for the presidential... politics of the next century," he declared. With increasing web-wired households, with the "vastly lower costs of Internet communication and so much of the public's future life itself likely to occur on the Net, with campaign funds

and volunteers destined to be largeh, raised and recruited and then deployed on line. there may eventually, be littel off-line politics for the soon-to-be-dinosaurs of network television to cover."

For the present, however, Plissner notes the serious problems of campaign financing for television. He noted how "all the candidates will spend themsehes silly" to avoid faring poorly in the early Presidential primary elections. He blames the mass media for making a "media circus" of the earliest elections.

The Presidential debates remain one of television's strongest contributions to voter information, Plissner asserts. The problem is that Presidential candidates often seek to reduce the number of debates. He said it was a bad precedent in 1996 when Clinton "an incumbent with a large lead in the polls" agreed on only two debates with Dole. "And for those who feel there was not enough airtime provided for the candidates to convey their views on public policy to the voters... it was a serious loss."

The networks could improve Presidential campaign coverage by shifting the focus of their coverage. Rather than cover the national political conventions which today have become staged shows for candidates already selected in the primary, elections they should provide hours of free air time for the candidates to discuss one key issue per week. In 1963 CBS proposed such programming, offering an hour every Sunday night at 9 p.m. President Kennedy favored the idea but died before it could be started. His succesor. President Lyndon Johnson. told CBS. "I'm not going to do it." Thus, as Plissner notes. change is a two-way street, depending on the candidates as much as the media.