

IMPERSONAL INFLUENCE IN AMERICAN POLITICS

By Diana Mutz

The political and social climate in the United States is ripe for “impersonal” forms of social influence to play a substantial role. By impersonal influence, I mean that which derives from people’s perceptions of the attitudes, beliefs and experiences of anonymous others outside their realm of personal contacts.

This increased potential is due partly to changes in the nature of social interactions over the last century. Changes in both media structure and content have helped make information about mass, impersonal others more readily available. These shifts have resulted in a gap between the worlds of personal and impersonal experience. Politics has long been peripheral to most people’s day to day concerns, but the nationalization of American mass media has inadvertently furthered the perception that politics is something “out there,” divorced from day to day life experience.

Changes in the Nature of Social Relationships

Political and economic affairs used to be organized on the basis of local community and face to face economic exchange. As many social theorists have noted, however, one distinctive characteristic of 20th century society is the increasing number of indirect relationships in which we participate. Such relationships involve the mediation of communications technology, markets, or other complex organizations, as opposed to direct relationships which require face-to-face communication.

In the political realm, state and local party activities have declined in importance while the national party organizations have taken on increased responsibility. The shift away from person-to-person

politics was never more evident than in the 1992 presidential election. Despite claims of being a “grassroots” candidate, Ross Perot traveled little and made few personal appearances. He campaigned almost exclusively on television, and “if elected,” he promised to keep in touch with voters through an electronic town meeting. Perot ran his campaign without even the pretense of wanting to be out on the hustings.

Changing Nature of the Social World

As people increasingly interact with one another indirectly, their need for information about “others” also increases. Thus there is growing need for media-provided information about the attitudes, beliefs and experiences of people outside a person’s realm of personal contacts. Communication technologies have both increased the number of indirect relationships and provided a natural source of information.

Just as buyers and sellers of goods now communicate with one another indirectly, so, too, people promoting candidates and causes are less likely to communicate face to face than they were in the past. And just as economic signals representing the collective behavior of others communicate information in markets, the political actions and views expressed by others communicate information to those who observe them. Like traders who “free ride” on better-informed traders by watching stock prices, some citizens may “free-ride” on those more politically informed by relying on reports of the opinions and experiences of others.

More importantly, the gap between the worlds of direct and indirect experience has widened. Sociologist Craig Calhoun argues that distinctions between

“everyday life” and “the big picture” used in everyday speech are indicative of “divergent ways of trying to understand the social world” and “an experiential and intellectual split” in the way we think: “We contrast the quotidian no longer with the extraordinary days of feasts and festivals so much as with the systematically remote, with that which ‘counts’ on a large scale.”¹

The Gap Between Personal and Collective Perception

Public opinion surveys often capture the resulting gap between perceptions that people have of their own lives and the lives of impersonal others—especially when it comes to the economy. In 1988, for example, a Christian Science Monitor headline read, “I’m doing better than we are.” According to a poll conducted early that year, the American public perceived the nation’s economy to be in poor shape and getting worse. But the same poll also showed that most Americans felt that *their own* personal economic situations were in good condition and likely to improve.² As media coverage of the economy surged again in late 1991, most Americans pronounced the nation’s economy lousy, but their own economic position satisfactory.³ In short, there was a split between the worlds of direct and indirect experience.

This pattern is not limited to the economic realm. A Carnegie Foundation study found that when college seniors were asked about the state of the nation five years hence, most felt the prospects were pretty bleak—the ozone layer was being destroyed, nuclear war was going to break out, and so forth. When these same students were asked about their own futures, the results were quite different: *They* were going to obtain good educations, prestigious jobs, make a lot of money and

live well—never mind the ozone layer or the nuclear war.⁴

An accumulation of evidence across a wide variety of topics shows that people's personal experiences (including economic experience) rarely influence their political judgments.⁵ True, as George Bush discovered, incumbents face a very difficult uphill battle when the economy is seen as deteriorating. But surprisingly, neither losing a job, nor deteriorating family financial conditions, nor other personal experiences has much to do with candidate choice. Instead, people's perceptions of national economic conditions have an important influence on their political attitudes.⁶ As a result, mass media play an extremely important role. Citizens typically rely on media coverage to form perceptions of what economic conditions are like outside the realm of their own personal experiences. People exposed to media coverage of the economy typically do not generalize from their own life experiences in forming impressions of national economic conditions; they rely instead on media-derived impressions of the nation as a whole.⁷

By providing the means by which indirect relationships can be maintained, mass media help to widen the gap between personal and collective judgment. The pattern in which personal experience and perceptions of collective experience are maintained independent of one another is common to many western democracies with well-developed national media systems.⁸ Moreover, researchers examining similar relationships in countries without well-developed national media systems have found more of a link between sense of personal well-being and attitudes to government.

Although evidence is limited, to the extent that the development of a sophisticated national communications network widens the gap between the personal and political worlds, the sheer existence of such a network may contribute to turning

politics into something that goes on "out there" but is disconnected from most individuals' daily lives. Since it is easier for people to connect their perceptions of collective experience to political judgments, mass media take on an even more important role politically when this gulf widens.

From Individual Problems to Collective Societal Phenomena

In the last twenty years, the shift in newspaper styles has been away from reporting single events, toward creating news roundups and analyses. To the extent that the media now seek to portray

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issues and events as collective societal phenomena, rather than as individual problems and events, media's influence on people's perceptions of mass collectives should also increase.

In what has been dubbed the "new long journalism": "Individual lives...came to be treated as examples of larger problems, and the newspaper became distanced from the individual citizen. . . . In the long journalism, the house across town didn't burn, instead society confronted a chronic wiring problem in its aging stock of housing."⁹

The penny press of the last century reflected the view that news consisted of the local everyday happenings of police, crimes, fires and so forth. The front page of 1885 was "a dense jungle of news items...(that) gave an impression of diversity, randomness, and complexity, leaving it to the reader to make sure—or draw a map—of the world".¹⁰ The design of contemporary newspapers, on the other

hand, illustrates newspapers' desire to map the world for their readers. It organizes and contextualizes events so as to convey an impression of the "big picture."

From What Candidates Are Saying to What Journalists Are Saying

In his study of televised election coverage from 1968 to 1988, Daniel Hallin notes a similar change in the structure of broadcast news. Today the words of candidates and newsmakers "are treated as raw material to be taken apart, combined with other sounds and images, and integrated into a new narrative."¹¹ More efforts are made to put the candidates' statements into some kind of perspective, and the focus of the stories has been shifted away from what the candidates are saying to what the journalist is saying about the campaign.

The changes in broadcast news coverage of elections appear to be part of a more general trend. Thus

sound bite news—like the new "long print journalism"—seeks to portray individual occurrences as parts of larger societal phenomena.

Another factor contributing is the public's *belief* in a powerful media. Social scientists' attribution of power to media may have waxed and waned over the years, but there is now a strong popular belief in the United States that the media influence public opinion. In turn, this belief can influence people's perceptions of what others think.

Perceptions of Media Power

Extensive coverage of media power in politics has itself helped to cultivate this popular impression. Television has been touted as a key factor, if not the major influence, on American public opinion. National polls find that close to three-quarters of the American public think the media importantly influence national policies. The American public is more con-

vinced of media's importance than are the citizens of other western democracies. According to a multinational survey conducted in 1987, 88% of Americans perceived media's influence on public opinion to be "very large" or "somewhat large." Not only was this higher than the level found in Great Britain, France, West Germany or Spain, but Americans also saw media influence as markedly higher over the three branches of government.¹²

It is more difficult to say whether perceptions of media power have increased over time. After all, according to popular legend, Roosevelt's victories were attributed to his "superb radio voice," which enabled him to exploit the medium better than Landon or Willkie. No survey questions bearing on this have been repeated over a sufficient period of time to make historical comparisons possible. But what's clear and important, people *perceive* the impact of the news media on public opinion to have increased over the years. Politicians are also convinced of the media's power, typically awarding its importance a "10" on a 10-point scale.¹³

There is a tendency to believe in the "third person effect," that is, that media's "greatest impact will not be on 'me' or 'you,' but on 'them'—the third persons."¹⁴ This tendency has cropped up in many different contexts. Policy makers may be a population especially prone to third person perceptions, in that they often respond to media coverage as a surrogate for public opinion.

Several years ago, in the state of Minnesota, the Dayton Hudson corporation was being threatened with a hostile takeover attempt. Their lobbyists attempted to pressure state legislators to support anti-takeover legislation by producing a series of ads featuring the Dayton-Hudson mascot, the stuffed "Santabear" that was given away with

certain purchases. The ads featured a tearful teddy bear in various precarious positions—for example, Santabear with a gun to his head, with a tag line reading, "Stop this takeover or they'll shoot the bear."¹⁵

The ads never ran. Lobbyists simply showed them to key legislators in order to "provoke visions of panicked constituents ringing their phones off the hook at the prospect of injury to the furry one."¹⁶ Interviews with legislators indicated that the (threatened) ads were an important motivation in passing the legislation. In this particular case, the legislation might well have passed anyway. Nonetheless, there are an increasing number of examples where the mere anticipation of media influence is enough to motivate policy makers.

In sociologist W. I. Thomas's oft-quoted words, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." The consequences of media power in politics are real because politicians, journalists, and the American public have few doubts about media's importance. The American *belief* in a powerful media encourages politicians and the mass public to use media coverage as a surrogate for public opinion, simply assuming a transference that may or may not have a basis in political reality.

Endnotes

¹ Craig Calhoun, "Indirect Relationships and Imagined Communities: Large-Scale Social Integration and the Transformation of Everyday Life," in P. Bourdieu and J.S. Coleman (eds.), *Social Theory for a Changing Society* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 96.

² Everett C. Ladd, "Voters and the U.S. Economy: Boom and Gloom," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 12, 1988, p. 6.

³ *The Public Perspective*, January/February 1992, p. 21.

⁴ Al Levine, *When Dreams and Heroes Died*

(San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980).

⁵ D.O. Sears and C.L. Funk, "Self-Interest in American's Political Opinions," in J.J. Mansbridge, ed., *Beyond Self-Interest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 147-70.

⁶ D.R. Kiewiet, *Macroeconomics and Micropolitics: The Electoral Effects of Economic Issues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁷ D.R. Kinder, "Presidents, Prosperity, and Public Opinion," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 45, 1981, pp. 1-21.

⁸ Compare, for example, F.M. Hayward, "Perceptions of Well-being in Ghana: 1970-1975," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 22, 1979, pp. 109-25; and M. S. Lewis-Beck, "Comparative Economic Voting: Britain, France, Germany, Italy," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 30, 1979, pp. 315-46.

⁹ K.G. Barnhurst, "The Great American Newspaper," *The American Scholar*, Vol. 60, pp. 106-12; see also, K.G. Barnhurst and J.C. Nerone, "Design Trends in U.S. Front Pages, 1885-1985," *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 68, pp. 796-804.

¹⁰ Barnhurst and Nerone (See Endnote 9.)

¹¹ D. Hallin, "Sound Bite News: The Television Coverage of Elections, 1968-88," Occasional Paper, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1991, p. 7.

¹² Laurence Parisot, "Attitudes About the Media: A Five Country Comparison," *Public Opinion*, January/February 1988.

¹³ F. C. Arterton, *Media Politics* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1984).

¹⁴ W. P. Davidson, "The Third Person Effect in Communication," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 47, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Corporate Report Minnesota*, September, 1987, p. 60.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

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