Chapter 1
Introduction: Image is Everything

January 26, 1998. President Clinton declares that he did not have a sexual relationship with Ms. Lewinsky.

May 1, 2003. On the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln, President Bush claims victory in the war against Iraq.

Each of these incidents illustrates a basic maxim of American politics: image is everything. Politicians feel no compunction about making exaggerated claims before national television audiences; they expect their messages to be taken at face value. This is hardly surprising given that for most Americans the media is their only contact with the
world of public affairs. On the flip side, from the perspective of the public, events not covered by the news media make no greater impression than the proverbial tree falling in the forest. For the public, what gets on the news is all there is to know.

The power of media imagery reverberates throughout political life. The incidents above reflect extreme situations, at opposite ends of the politician’s comfort gradient. President Bush’s declaration of victory on board the USS Abraham Lincoln was carefully staged to reinforce his own contributions to the successful invasion of Iraq, at a time when the possibility of actual victory seemed plausible. President Clinton’s emphatic (and false) denial of a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky was an attempt to stem the rising tide of doubts about his fitness for office. Even though most officials usually find themselves between these two extremes, dealing with the media is their major day-to-day focus and preoccupation.

No longer confined to elections and campaigns, media appeals have become standard fare in the day-to-day conduct of government and are used by private interests as well as candidates. During legislative debates, spokespersons for both sides appear regularly on television news programs and talk shows to cast their individual “spin” on the policy or problem in question. Rather than relying on “old fashioned” lobbying methods, private parties now sponsor television ads intended to cue officials about issues such as healthcare, immigration, or social security reform.

The habit of playing to the public has even spread to policy arenas not typically associated with partisan politics. The bipartisan Warren Commission established to investigate the assassination of President Kennedy conducted its business behind closed doors. In contrast, the Kean Commission appointed by President Bush to investigate the
9/11 terrorist attacks conducted its business through televised hearings (except for the testimony of President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and some high-level intelligence officials). The substantive jurisdiction of both Commissions involved sensitive matters of state, but our expectations about how an inquiry of this type should properly be conducted have changed greatly. Moreover, the media coverage of the Kean Commission’s work was not limited to the actual hearings; several members of the Commission appeared as regular guests on news programs and talk shows where they were prepared to and did discuss the developing findings in partisan terms. Indeed, their daily media appearances were utterly predictable; Republican members denied that the Bush Administration shared culpability at any level, while Democrats seized upon the intelligence breakdowns as symptomatic of the general unpreparedness of the Administration.

More recently, media coverage of Hurricane Katrina was inevitably politicized. The federal government’s inexplicably slow response to the disaster generated a wave of negative publicity for the Bush Administration. In an attempt to stem the tide of bad news, officials resorted to a standard script; the President ended his summer vacation early, dispatched high-profile spokespersons (e.g. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice) to the affected areas, and replaced the head of FEMA. In addition, the government announced that news organizations would be prevented from covering the recovery of the dead. It was only the threat of a lawsuit by CNN that caused the government to abandon the effort to censor the news.

In sum, the use -- even the manipulation -- of the mass media for political purposes has transformed the practice of leadership and governance. Policy makers
resort to the very same tactics as candidates running for election. Television advertising, credit taking, blame avoidance, finger pointing and other forms of campaign rhetoric air long after the election is over. Campaigns are continuous.

The effect on the collective welfare of the unceasing use of the media to further partisan and self-serving objectives is problematic. The flood of attacks and counter-attacks has bred cynicism towards elections and the act of voting. The role of the voter has shrunk from foot soldier and occasional activist to disgruntled spectator. Electoral victors are those who excel at projecting imagery and symbolism, but not necessarily those who offer substantive expertise, political experience or pragmatism. The role of policy maker has devolved from decision making based on bargaining and accommodation to attempts to intimidate and coerce through media exposure. On more than one occasion, the result has been gridlock and paralysis, as rival elites are unable to reach negotiated solutions. Thus, the practice of media politics amounts to a tragedy of the commons -- individual participants may be able to manipulate the media to their advantage, but in the long run both the body politic and the politician are weakened.

Our goals in this book are first, to explain the rise of media-based politics in America. Next, we describe the media strategies used to contest elections and win over policy opponents. Third, we document the “payoffs” associated with these strategies: increases in the candidate’s share of the vote on Election Day, higher approval ratings while in office, and assured reelection. In closing, we assess the liabilities of media-based politics, offer some modest proposals for making news coverage of campaigns and governance more issue-oriented, and speculate over the emergence of a new, technology-
based system of campaigning featuring direct communication between candidates and voters.

**Outline of the Book**

We begin (in Chapter 2) by providing a theoretical perspective. In democratic societies the news media are expected to contribute three important public services. First, they provide an electoral forum in which all candidates can solicit support from voters. In America, the forum is a combination of paid and free media appearances, but primarily the former. In most European democracies, on the other hand, the mix favors the latter -- free television time is awarded to all the major parties before the election. Second, the news media are expected to erect a so-called “public sphere” where voters can sample from a variety of perspectives on the issues that concern them. In effect, news and other forms of public affairs programming are expected to facilitate the expression of informed opinion. Last, the press is expected to act as an agent of the public by policing the behavior of government officials. Citizens lack the resources to monitor the actions of their leaders on a daily basis; they delegate this “watchdog” task to the media. In short, democratic theory casts news organizations as multi-tasking, public utilities.

Against the standards of democratic theory, most contemporary media systems fall short in meeting their civic responsibilities, but the American media appear especially inadequate. A distinctive feature of the American media system is that virtually all news outlets are privately owned. Private ownership creates an inherent tension between the profit motive and civic responsibility. The need to survive forces owners to value audience size over news content; they deliver content that sells rather than content that
informs. Inevitably, “infotainment” takes precedence over serious coverage of national and international issues.

Most democratic societies deal with the dilemma of civic shirking by providing public subsidies to news organizations. The BBC in the United Kingdom, CBC in Canada, ARD in Germany, or NHK in Japan are major television networks, watched by millions of viewers and financed by taxpayers. Freed from market forces, these organizations deliver a greater supply of news, documentaries, and other forms of public-spirited programming than their privately-owned competitors.

The American approach to encouraging the free flow of public affairs information has evolved from early day regulations requiring “public service” programming to a more laissez-faire reliance on the market. The regulatory perspective posited that a multiplicity of media organizations does not necessarily create a flourishing marketplace. In the early years of broadcasting, for instance, the FCC required all national networks to provide a minimal amount of daily news programming in exchange for their free use of the airwaves. The anti-regulation argument, on the other hand, rests on the assumption that the sheer number of news outlets -- from daily newspapers, national television networks, local television stations, cable networks, to Internet blogs -- provides Americans with ample opportunity to encounter the proverbial “marketplace of ideas.”

On a more practical level, “media politics” -- as exemplified by the American system -- requires two conditions. The first is universal access to the media. No matter how independent or civic-minded the press, societies with low levels of literacy or with relatively few television sets will be characterized by alternative forms of political communication, simply because mass media will not be the most efficient means for
politicians to reach voters. When the news media’s reach is circumscribed, those who seek votes through media strategies are disadvantaged. The case of Howard Dean’s Internet-based presidential campaign is revealing. Although he succeeded in raising vast sums of money over the Web, and in so doing established himself as the early front-runner for the Democratic nomination, his use of technology did not translate into a single primary victory. In 2004, unlike donors, most primary voters remained on the wrong side of the digital divide.

The second necessary condition for the flourishing of media politics is the diminished role of political parties in selecting candidates. In most democratic societies, it is the political party that recruits and sponsors candidates. Parties offer competing policy bundles, voters choose between parties, and depending on the party’s share of the popular vote, some number of the individual candidates running under the party banner is declared elected. When party organizations lose control over the selection of candidates, “free agent” candidates turn to the media as the most efficient form of communicating with voters. Media politics becomes a substitute for party politics.

In fact, the rise of media politics in the United States coincides with the increased reach of the broadcast media and the weakening of party elites’ influence over the selection of candidates. Beginning in the 1960s, candidates became less dependent on their party organizations and migrated to the mass media as the principal means of reaching voters. Since candidates for elective office represent a significant revenue stream during political campaigns (in the form of paid television advertising), media owners were only too happy to encourage this form of “cash on the barrelhead” electioneering.
In Chapter 3, we examine the performance of the American media in two stages. First, we trace programming decisions to the pull of market forces, and to the professional values and aspirations of journalists. Market forces compromise the public sphere as noted above. Somewhat paradoxically, the independence so valued by modern journalism has also extracted a toll on press performance. As professionals, journalists seek autonomy and control over their work-product. They are unwilling to act as stenographers for campaigns and actively resist candidates’ efforts to use them as mouthpieces. Instead, they prefer to provide their own professional analysis of the candidates’ actions. The presidential candidates still tour the country making as many public appearances as possible, but their voices are rarely encountered in news presentations. Instead of the candidates, whose speeches represent “bias,” journalists have turned to a coterie of expert commentators for “objective” analysis of the campaign. Interpretive or analytic journalism has largely supplanted old-fashioned, descriptive reporting.

Professional norms are but one element of a broader “organizational process” model of journalism. In this view, the news is determined by the culture of the newsroom and the routines of the workplace. The importance of authoritative sources makes journalists especially reliant on government officials. The Pentagon, State Department, and White House together account for the great majority of news reports on a daily basis. And the pecking order within journalism creates a strong “copy cat” mentality; what is reported in this morning’s *New York Times* and *Washington Post* is inevitably repeated in the evening network newscasts.
Next, we extend the analysis of press performance to the question of adversarial journalism. In Chapter 4, we show that the stylized account of a “watchdog” press does not fit well with the facts, particularly reporters’ heavy reliance on government officials as news sources. Every day, the Washington press corps converges on the White House Press Office to receive their official briefing from the presidential Press Secretary. In the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq, a similar daily ritual was played out at the Pentagon and, although only briefly, at the Iraqi Ministry of Information in Baghdad.

The dependence on government sources does not necessarily inject partisan bias into the news; after all Democratic sources can easily be neutralized by Republicans. But the preoccupation of the press with official sources means that incumbents have a sizeable advantage over their challengers in gaining access to the press. Some official sources are more newsworthy than others. It is the president who is the prime official source; any presidential event -- no matter how trivial or stage managed -- elicits considerable news coverage.

Even though coverage of government policy can be “indexed” to reflect the degree of opinion diversity among elites, in some circumstances elite disagreement is quashed and one particular perspective achieves dominance. The prototypical case of elite consensus occurs during times of military tension or imminent conflict when opponents of the incumbent administration tend to fall silent as the nation prepares for war. During these periods, the news becomes dominated by official accounts of events, and the press is generally in no position to scrutinize, discount, or otherwise cast doubts on these accounts. In the aftermath of the “shock and awe” military campaign in Iraq, news reports from American journalists embedded with the American invading force
were overwhelmingly celebratory in tone and devoid of any reference to the pain and
suffering inflicted on Iraqi noncombatants. Given the one-sided presentation, it was
inevitable that a significant number of Americans would come to believe that Iraq did in
fact possess weapons of mass destruction and that the Hussein regime was implicated in
the September 11th attacks on America. As late as August 2004, nearly 30 percent of the
public believed that the US had found weapons of mass destruction. When opposition
sources fall silent, the news becomes a conduit for the official version of events. This is a
far cry from “watchdog” journalism.

A third and final chapter on the behavior of the press, Chapter 5, addresses
whether the civic capacity of the media has been strengthened or weakened by the
revolution in information technology. Paradoxically, public affairs information may flow
even less freely in the aftermath of the technology-induced transformation of the media
marketplace. In 1968, most Americans got their news from one of the three national
network newscasts because they had no other choice; today, the same newscasts compete
with cable and satellite networks, local news programming, a variety of “soft news”
programs, and millions of websites the world over. This bewildering array of media
choices makes it almost certain that exposure to the news will be more selective -- like
consumers of goods and services, people will seek out “preferred” providers or programs
and tune out others. Since people typically prefer to be entertained than to be informed,
the enhanced media environment has substantially reduced the audience for public affairs
programs. In 1960, some 60 million Americans tuned in to the presidential debates
between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy. In 2000, the audience for George Bush and
Al Gore was a third less.
The increased fragmentation of media audiences raises important questions about the nature of consumer behavior. Some have suggested that the explosion of online news sites encourages consumers to seek out news that reinforces their own opinions and reduces chance encounters with unknown or disagreeable voices. The increased availability of news sources with a distinct slant on the news (Fox News, for instance) makes it possible for consumers to choose news programs on the basis of their anticipated agreement with the message. No longer will all Americans be subject to the same media messages; instead, they will encounter their preferred candidates or point of view.

Others have suggested that the increasing popularity of the Internet will inevitably curtail social interaction; instead of conversing with friends and neighbors, people will engage in the solitary act of surfing their favored websites, in many cases taking the opportunity to consume pornography and other anti-social messages. By this account, the increased use of information technology weakens “social capital” and individuals’ sense of belonging to a community.

Scholarship on the effects of new media use (which we summarize in Chapter 5) suggests that pessimistic reports about the increasing isolation and fragmentation of new media users are exaggerated. The fact that Americans can choose from multiple news outlets does not necessarily mean that they only tune in to those that share their own values. Rather than constructing “gated communities” to nurture their partisan preferences, consumers resort to a more utilitarian form of screening by seeking out information on issues they care most about. For elderly voters, paying more attention to the issue of healthcare or social security is hardly an impediment to deliberation. Similarly, there is considerable evidence that the availability of the Internet has not
significantly diminished Americans’ participation in more conventional forms of mass or interpersonal communication. Regular users of the Internet are not misanthropes who prefer to remain closeted with their computer than interacting with their friends and neighbors.

Having dealt with the theory and practice of press performance, we turn next to the second set of players in media politics -- the candidate and advocacy groups that seek to shape the news. A candidate’s overriding goal is to attract more votes than her opponent. For their part, interest groups seek to promote or prevent the passage of particular policies. Ever since the onset of media politics in the 1960s, political campaigns have become increasingly professionalized with cadres of media consultants, campaign managers, and strategists, all of whom are well aware of the norms and values of journalists, and who hope to capitalize on this expertise to extract the most favorable media treatment of their clients.

From the perspective of the candidate, there are two sets of media opportunities. “Free” media refers to news coverage, even though it is hardly costless. In fact, campaigns invest extensively in hiring well-known media consultants and public relations firms to maximize their client’s visibility in the news. Candidates also rely heavily on “paid” media, typically in the form of televised political advertisements. The content of the ads, their timing, and even their appearance within specific television programs, are all the matter of careful calibration and analysis.

Facing a hostile press corps, how do campaign managers inject their spin into the news? Among other things, they take advantage of competition among news sources to seek out outlets likely to provide more sympathetic treatment. When the national press
was hounding candidate Clinton over various allegations of marital infidelity and
womanizing, his campaign turned to local news stations and other “offbeat” outlets such
as MTV to get out their message. In addition, campaigns adapt to the more aggressive
behavior of journalists. Once reporters decided to take off the gloves and publish hard-
hitting “ad watch” reports challenging the veracity of campaign advertisements,
consultants responded by producing ads with a veneer of objectivity (by citing newspaper
reports in the ads, for instance). More interestingly, they began to produce ads that were
designed as “bait” for eliciting ad-watch coverage, with the aim of generating more free
media coverage for their candidate. Because they are more strategic at adapting their
“game” to the prevailing actions of the press, campaign consultants generally succeed in
getting coverage that is beneficial to their client.

The continuing struggle to control the news between journalists and campaign
operatives provides a classic instance of a collective action dilemma. Society benefits
when journalists and campaigners cooperate; the news focuses on what the candidates
say, the candidates focus on the issues, and voters learn about matters of substance rather
than strategy. Because presidential campaigns typically feature two evenly matched
sides, old-fashioned descriptive reporting guaranteed that the electorate would be
exposed to equal amounts of opposing (and offsetting) “spin.” Today, in contrast,
journalists prefer to inject their voices into the news to tear away the façade of the
campaign and reveal the candidates’ vote-seeking strategies. The end result is that voters
come away with a cynical sense of the process.

Dealing with the press is but one element of campaign strategy. Candidates also
have recourse to the “paid” element of media -- namely, advertisements. In the most
general terms, all advertising campaigns are idiosyncratic. Advertising strategy varies depending upon the stage of the campaign, the persona and reputation of the sponsoring candidate, and the overall state of the race. Even allowing for these contextual variations, however, there are several tried and true tactics in paid media strategy, including the use of advertising to set the campaign agenda, to focus attention on the candidate’s strengths, and to attack the opponent relentlessly. We outline these strategies in Chapter 6 using a series of illustrations from recent presidential and statewide campaigns.

Advertising is the largest expenditure incurred by candidates. No account of advertising strategy is complete without reference to the rules governing campaign finance. We close Chapter 6 with a brief survey of federal legislation on the subject, from the 1974 amendments to the Fair Elections and Practices Act that established the system of public financing of presidential campaigns (and the associated expenditures and contributions limits) to the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2003 which eliminated so-called “soft money” (money raised by party rather than candidate organizations) and which also banned the airing of “issue ads” (ads advocating passage or defeat of some particular legislation) in the weeks preceding the election.

The very same media revolution that swept through the arena of campaigns has similarly transformed the nature of executive leadership. In the pre-media era, the campaign ended on Election Day. The President-elect (or governor-elect) would assemble a broad-based coalition consisting of his legislative allies and supportive interest groups who would work together to implement his administration’s policy initiatives. The process typically involved bargaining and accommodation between rival camps.
As described in Chapter 7, bargaining with the opposition has fallen out of fashion in Washington and state capitals. Elected officials now prefer to “go public.” They resort to public relations tactics designed to cultivate the appearance of responsive leadership -- through rhetorical posturing, credit claiming and avoidance of blame. Their key advisors are no longer party or interest group leaders, but the legions of pundits, spokespersons, and media consultants who make their daily rounds on television news programs and the editorial pages of our newspapers.

The acceleration of “going public” can be traced to the gradual encroachment of election campaigns on the policy process. Elected officials and interest groups have accumulated considerable expertise in the use of public relations strategies while attempting to win elections, and it is only to be expected that they seek to capitalize on this expertise when formulating and debating legislation. Campaign techniques such as television advertising are now used long after Election Day. The “Harry and Louise” ad campaign mounted by the health insurance industry proved instrumental in swaying moderate Democrats and Republicans in Congress against the Clinton health reform package in 1994. More recently, the pharmaceutical industry launched a “high volume” ad campaign in opposition to Congressional attempts to extend prescription drug benefits to Medicare recipients.

“Going public” is designed to maintain elected officials’ popularity. A president who attracts high marks from the American public can use his popularity as leverage to achieve passage of his policy agenda. The premium on popularity has led chief executives to avoid putting themselves on the media “firing line.” They avoid press conferences where they may be asked tough questions in favor of the more scripted
opportunity of the presidential speech. During the Clinton and George W. Bush presidencies, the ratio of speeches to press conferences was more than 20:1! Naturally, presidential speeches coincide with the color of the electoral map; the great majority of a president’s domestic trips take him to states that are “in play” in the forthcoming election.

In theory, popular leaders are more able to persuade their opponents. State legislators may defer to a popular governor’s legislative proposals, fearing that opposition could jeopardize their re-election. Conversely, when the president’s opponents sense that majority opinion is on their side, they seize the opportunity to push through their own policy agenda. In the aftermath of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, for instance, Congressional Republicans mistakenly assumed that the public would approve of their efforts to remove President Clinton from office. In fact, the scandal did little to weaken public approval of Clinton’s performance as president, the impeachment effort failed, and the Republican Party suffered unprecedented losses in the 1998 midterm elections.¹

Having outlined how candidates and elected officials use the media, we turn to assessing the consequences of their actions. How does the content and form of news coverage influence the state of public opinion, and do candidates and elected officials who wage more sophisticated media campaigns secure more votes and influence as a result?

We present the evidence in three separate chapters, beginning in Chapter 8, where we take a panoramic view of the entire field of “media effects” research. From an initial

¹ The Republicans only lost a handful of House seats. However, for the party of the incumbent President to pick up House seats in a midterm election is a remarkable event that has occurred only once since the Civil War.
preoccupation with political propaganda campaigns, the field gradually adopted a more
encompassing definition of media effects that ranged from influencing what Americans
see as the important problems facing the country (“agenda-setting”), shifting citizens’
take on public issues (“framing”), to altering the criteria by which voters choose
(“priming”). And when conditions were ripe, i.e. periods of one-sided news coverage
favoring some particular candidate or policy position, the evidence demonstrated
considerable change in public sentiment (“persuasion”). Thus, the initial expectation of
wholesale changes in public sentiment was replaced with a more circumspect definition
of the effects of political communication. Against this more realistic baseline, study after
study demonstrated that the news media exercise considerable leverage over public
opinion. We summarize this evidence in Chapter 8.

Next, we take up the parallel question of campaign effects. Despite the enormous
investments in advertising and the scrupulously choreographed nature of every campaign
event and utterance, there remains considerable doubt over the efficacy of campaigns to
sway voters. Political scientists can forecast presidential election outcomes quite
precisely (with the notable exception of 2000) using indicators that seem to have little
bearing on the candidates’ media strategies. The state of the economy and the approval
level of the incumbent administration, for instance, are among the factors used to forecast
the vote. If the annual rate of growth in per capita GDP in 1999 yields an accurate
prediction of the vote count in 2000, surely the time and effort committed to moving
voters is epiphenomenal!

In fact, we show that the forecasting models are consistent with the arguments
that campaigns matter. The so-called “fundamental” forces used by forecasters -- the
state of the economy, the level of presidential popularity, or public concern over the continued involvement of the United States in a foreign war -- are precisely the issues on which the candidates campaign. “It’s the economy, stupid!” became the slogan for the 1992 Clinton campaign because voters expressed pessimism over the national economy. “Multilateral,” rather than unilateral intervention was a buzzword of the Kerry-Edwards ticket because of widespread concern over continued American military involvement in Iraq. In short, presidential campaigns are debates about the fundamentals; over time, as more voters encounter the candidates’ messages, opinions on the fundamentals become more closely aligned with vote preference.

Campaigns do more than activate voters’ positions on the state of the economy or the performance of the incumbent. Voters acquire considerable information about the candidates’ personal qualities as well as their positions on the issues. Campaigns also shift the salience of particular issues in the minds of voters. Finally, campaigns can also affect the level of turnout. On the positive side, get-out-the-vote efforts can mobilize large numbers of voters. Simultaneously, the use of negative campaigning can be used to “demobilize” voters whose partisan attachments are weak and who might find the spectacle of attacks and counter-attacks sufficiently distasteful to drop out.

Our final round of evidence on media effects concerns the impact of “going public” on incumbents’ level of public approval (Chapter 10). We evaluate two competing theories. The first proposes that political leaders are prisoners of events and relatively powerless to shape public opinion on their own. In this view, Ronald Reagan’s popularity had less to do with his communication skills and more to do with the fact that
he presided over events that reflected well on his leadership. Popularity is simply a matter of good fortune for those who hold office during peace and prosperity.

The opposing argument is that leaders can use the media to insulate themselves from any rising tide of public discontent or to even improve their standing in the aftermath of policy failures. In this view, events do not speak for themselves. In many instances, political events are ambiguous (representing neither a major success nor a debacle) and how the public views the event and the actions of a president or governor is very much dependent upon media presentations. In 1983, President Reagan was able to justify the American invasion of the tiny island of Grenada as a response to a communist threat. Ten years later, President Clinton convinced Congress and the American people that there were several compelling reasons to send American troops to Somalia. In both these cases, the president’s ability to command media attention coupled with the willingness of administration critics to remain silent, created a one-sided flow of news in favor of the administration.

We consider both these arguments -- history versus media management -- in the context of recent presidencies. Using polling data that extends back to the 1940s, we trace the ebbs and flows of presidential popularity. We show that over time, popularity has become less tied to the state of the national economy and more sensitive to news coverage concerning national security. In the case of President Bush, economic indicators such as the unemployment rate or the performance of the stock market exerted little impact on changes in his public approval. The frequency of news reports on terrorism, on the other hand, served to boost the president’s popularity. In the aftermath of 9/11, the president’s performance as Commander-in-Chief appears to be the major
ingredient of his public image. Thus, media management is a significant resource for presidents; at the margin, the president’s ability to direct and shape news coverage makes a difference to his political fortunes.

On the surface at least, the increased importance of public approval to the exercise of leadership suggests a more plebiscitary form of government. On issues where clear majorities exist -- as in the case of “law and order” -- policy makers must converge on the majority position if they are to remain in office. Thus, there is bipartisan consensus on the merits of “three strikes” legislation. However, the fact that media politics has made policy makers more sensitive to public opinion does not necessarily mean that opinion drives policy.

Media politics might encourage officials to resort to polling in order to identify the issues on which they have more or less leeway. On issues where the public has strong opinions, such as crime, officials may go to great lengths to avoid the wrath of the electorate, even if that means proposing or endorsing bad public policy. No doubt many elected officials were moved to support three strikes laws on the grounds that the public demanded nothing less. But, as we point out in the case of the defeat of Proposition 66 (a measure that would have weakened the provisions of the California three strikes law), public support for harsh treatment of violent criminals is driven more by hysteria spawned by advertising and sound bite news, than by any well-considered judgment over the pros and cons of punishment versus rehabilitation as elements of criminal justice policy. The annual cost of incarcerating a prisoner in New York State in 2001 was
$36,835\textsuperscript{2} -- approximately the same as the cost of sending a student to Harvard -- yet 61.7\% of those committed to prison in the state in 2000 were non-violent offenders\textsuperscript{3}. Why, then, should they be kept in prison at enormous expense to taxpayers? Elected officials do not raise the question for fear of providing sound bites that label them “soft on crime.” Thus, one of the effects of media politics is to weaken the ability of public officials to lead: to enact policies on the merits and then persuade voters to concur.

In sum, media politics encourages public officials to engage in cosmetic rather than genuine problem-solving behavior. American society faces any number of deep-seated, structural problems -- the working poor, the urban underclass, racial disparities in the criminal justice process, health care based on economic status, to name but a few. These festering problems cannot be treated without incurring short-term political costs (i.e. increased taxes) or arousing the wrath of entrenched interests (i.e. the pharmaceutical industry). Under media politics, elected officials generally cannot afford to bear these costs.

In closing, we consider how society might short circuit the escalating use of media appeals in public life? Asking public officials to moderate their rhetoric, scale back on attack advertising, and advocate policies that are unpopular with voters is hardly


plausible. One possible pathway to reform is to restore political parties to their rightful place as the principal link between voters and policy makers. A campaign featuring extensive televised advertising from the two political parties on behalf of their entire team of candidates would free individual candidates from the burden of anticipating and avoiding attacks on their record, making it more likely that they tackle rather than side-step pressing political issues. As is the case in Europe, party advertising would necessarily be less personalized since the message would be an appeal on behalf of hundreds of candidates. By running on their platforms, parties would encourage substantive rather than image-based voting.

We do not see any imminent resurgence of parties in American politics. The leaders of the campaign reform movement have worked hard to undermine the voice of the party in election campaigns. Just as the national party committees were poised to regain a semblance of influence in presidential campaigns -- through their use of soft money -- Congress enacted the BCRA of 2003 banning soft money. With “reforms” such as these, the prospects for media-based politics remain excellent.

The more realistic design for reform would re-impose significant public service requirements on the media. Since the 1970s, Congress and the Federal Communications Commission have stripped away the obligations of the broadcast media to contribute to serious, substantive discussions over the issues of the day. In return for the unrestricted use of the publicly-owned airwaves, broadcasters owe society a minimal level of public affairs programming. Yet, while media revenues from campaign advertising have soared, news coverage of issues has shrunk to negligible proportions. Clearly, the media cannot be counted on to voluntarily live up to their civic obligations. Hence, it is time for
legislation that would require the broadcast media to provide significant amounts of free air time for all candidates and in a manner that maximizes public exposure. In the case of the presidential election, for example, requiring that the major networks air the free time presentations simultaneously would have the effect of increasing the “captive” audience.

The revolution in information technology provides the seeds of a more radical solution to the problem of superficial and issueless politics. As the personal computer begins to rival the television as the center of Americans’ information universe, politicians and interest groups will regain the ability to communicate directly with voters. Candidates, political parties, political action committees and non-profit civic groups have all turned to the Internet to publicize their cause, raise money, and recruit activists. Given the distractions of the Internet, we do not see web-based campaigns as capturing a large audience in the near term. A potentially more promising approach is candidates’ use of digital campaign “handbooks” that can be mass produced at trivial cost but which provide the same breadth of information, interactivity, and appealing, easy to browse multimedia presentations. Research conducted during the 2000 and 2002 elections shows that access to multimedia campaign CDs featuring the public speeches, debates, and televised advertisements of the major candidates served to empower voters; use of the campaign CDs resulted in greater interest in the campaign, a greater sense that one’s opinions mattered and, most importantly, higher levels of turnout. Extrapolating from these preliminary studies, we suggest that the increased use of direct candidate-to-voter communication will better realize voter autonomy, and will increase the breadth and depth of the policy debate, and candidate control over their messages. These gains,
significant in themselves, may ultimately be overshadowed by the collective benefit of having a more enthusiastic, informed, and engaged citizenry.