A Theory of Media Politics

How the Interests of Politicians, Journalists, and Citizens Shape the News

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Chapter 2
The Players in the Game

The theory of media politics I propose is, in effect, an extension of Anthony Downs' study, An Economic Theory of Democracy. In this 1957 classic, Downs showed how party competition for the support of rational voters could explain many of the most salient features of democratic politics. But Downs' theory hardly mentioned journalists and gave them no independent role in politics. In the present study, I create a theoretical role for journalists within Downs’ democratic system and trace out certain effects of this change. Specifically, I require office-seeking politicians to communicate with voters at least some of the time through a journalistic profession whose interests are “voice” and audience share. Because both Downs' theory and my extension of it are rooted in basic political forces, it is plausible to believe that my theory of media politics applies to political news in the U.S. generally and not merely to presidential elections. I shall later offer some modest evidence for this view.

WHY INVOKE RATIONAL CHOICE?

In following Downs, my theory of media politics takes a loosely rational choice approach to its subject. That is, it treats media politics as the product of goal-oriented behavior on the part of key actors in the political system, namely, politicians, journalists, and citizens. The fact that the goals of these actors, as specified below, often conflict is what makes politics — and, as I hope readers will conclude, my theory of

A straightforward implication of rational choice is that individuals take account of the goal-oriented behavior of others with whom they interact. It is extremely hard, in my view, to overestimate the importance of this point for the understanding of media politics (or other forms of political struggle, for that matter). Everyone in politics does what he or she does in significant part because of what others are doing or expected to do. Thus, to take a commonplace example, candidates create the kinds of

1 Downs’ book is, in important respects, an incisive digest of prior theoretical and empirical work, notably that of Schattschneider (1942), Schumpeter (1942), Key (19xx), Black (1958), and Arrow (19XX).
campaign events they do because of their beliefs about how journalists are likely to cover the events. Or, to take an example that I will develop more fully below, journalists facing multi-candidate fields in presidential primaries routinely limit their coverage to the two or three contenders that they think voters are most likely to favor. When candidates do what they do because of how they think journalists will respond, and when candidates are covered (or ignored) because of how they are expected to fare with voters, one cannot provide a satisfactory explanation by focusing on any single actor in isolation from the others. Rather, one must take at least theoretical account of the full set of actors and, in particular, how the actions and anticipated actions of one set of actors affect the actions of others.

This is not easy to do, but it is more natural to attempt it within a rational choice framework than any other, for this reason: Whereas psychological theories tend to focus on the effects of internal drives and perceptions on individual behavior, and whereas sociological theories tend to stress the effects of external structure on behavior, the notion of strategic behavior that is inherent in rational choice posits that individual behavior is shaped by both external forces (what other individuals are trying to do in a particular situation) and internal drives (personal interests and goals).

Although taking a rational choice approach, I by no means assume that everyone's mind works like a computer, calculating all possible contingencies at each decision point and making the move with the best expected return. I make a much milder set of assumptions: That individuals at all levels of politics try to behave in ways that advance goals that are important to them; that individuals are embedded in groups, such as classes or professions, whose rules and values help them to achieve their goals; and that, thus assisted, individuals establish patterns of behavior that do generally reflect their goals.

Politicians are probably the only political actors who regularly and consciously calculate the expected gain for every important action. But voters who, for example, somewhat mindlessly support the party of their social class, or journalists who are equally mindless in their distrust of authority, may also be rational, in the sense that their basic patterns of behavior may have initially developed and continue to exist primarily because they serve individual goals.

Thus, in my use of rational choice, individual choices need not be calculated, or even self-conscious, in order to represent interest-oriented behavior and hence qualify as rational. A danger in this brand of
"soft rational choice" is that anything anyone does might be sloppily described as rational. But I am quite aware of this danger and do not believe that my theory will suffer greatly from this form of indiscipline.

My basic theoretical posture, then, is that politicians, journalists, and citizens behave in ways that generally reflect individual goals and interests; that in pursuing their various goals, individuals take account of the goal-oriented behavior of other individuals with whom they interact; and that the essential features of media politics can be usefully analyzed as the outcome of all this goal-oriented and strategic behavior.

Rational choice is often seen as a controversial perspective, especially when it invades new intellectual terrain. It is, however, hard for me to see what general objection there can be to the theoretical posture outlined in the preceding paragraph.

THE DOWNSIAN FRAMEWORK

Downs’ theory of democracy is based on a handful of theoretical postulates. The most important are that politicians are organized into party teams that care about winning office and nothing else, that voters wish to elect politicians who give them as much as possible of what they want out of government, and that both politicians and voters are cold-bloodedly rational in the pursuit of these goals. What voters want out of government is anything that happens to give them "utility," whether in the form of individual benefits (e.g., social security, low taxes), a prosperous national economy, or social justice for others. There is no requirement in Downs’ model that voters be selfish; the only requirement is that voters support parties that deliver what they, as voters, want.

From these simple assumptions, Downs deduces many theoretical expectations that most observers regard as true. For example, Downs argues that, in a two-party system, both parties will converge to the position of the “median voter,” that is, the voter who occupies the dead center of the ideological spectrum. This is because if either party moves left or right of center, the other party will then capture the votes of centrist voters and thereby win the election. The actual tendency of the Democratic and Republican party to stay near the middle of the road in most elections seems well-explained by this argument.
Another of Downs’ arguments is that producers are more likely to organize to get what they want out of government than consumers. Consider, for example, the case of dairy farmers. For such people, government policy toward milk is extremely important, since their whole livelihood depends on it. For consumers, on the other hand, milk is only one of hundreds or thousands of things that they purchase. At the same time, there are relatively few milk producers, which makes it easy for them to know one another and organize. Milk consumers, on the other hand, are more numerous and therefore harder to organize. For these reasons, milk producers are more likely to form effective lobbying organizations. This argument, which generalizes to businesses of all kinds, seems a plausible explanation for the advantages that many special interests have in getting their way with government.

Actually, these and other arguments in Downs’ book were originally proposed by scholars other than Economic Theory of Democracy is to pull many such arguments into a cohesive theory about how democracy works if everyone is rational in the pursuit of their political goals.

One of Downs’ most intriguing arguments is that it is rational for voters to pay little attention to politics and to rely on simple heuristics, such as party attachment and ideological labels, to decide how to vote. This argument will be especially important to my theory of media politics and so will be considered below in more detail.

Some four decades after it appeared in print, Downs’ study still captures some of the most important features of our political system. Politicians who cling to the middle of the road and voters who rely on party attachment remain, as they were in the 1950s, among the most salient features of the American political system. Notably, however, Downs specifies an entirely passive role for the journalistic profession in his theory. The assumption seems to be that reporters reflect the political biases of their publishers but do not otherwise affect the political process.

In the 1950s, this may still have been a plausible assumption. The partisan press of the 19th century, in which newspapers functioned as virtual adjuncts of the parties, had become far more neutral, but some vestiges of the old way remained. For the most part, the mass media seemed unaccountably unassertive, perhaps less assertive than at any other time in American history. In the nomination phase of presidential selection, reporters basically just stood around outside the "smoke-filled rooms" at which
the real decisions were made, hoping for crumbs of information. And they were scarcely more intrusive in general election campaigns. Even in *Time* and *Newsweek*, magazines known for their interpretive style, typical campaign news consisted of chronological accounts of what the candidates were doing, laced with lengthy verbatim quotes from their speeches. There were, to be sure, some publishers who played an active role in politics, but they were acting as agents of their "party team" rather than as members of an independent journalistic profession. In these circumstances, there was no need for Downs to posit an independent role for the mass media in the process of elections and governance.

Circumstances, however, have now changed. The old partisan press is fully defunct, and so, for the most part, is the "lapdog" press of the 1940s and 1950s (this apt term is from Sabato, 1993). Journalists no longer stand idly by while party nominations are made or mechanically relay candidate information to the voters in elections. They are key intermediaries in the process by which competing politicians attempt to mobilize public support in both the nomination and general phases of presidential elections.

The change in the role of the mass media is part of a much larger change in American national politics, a transition away from Party Politics as the predominant form of political organization and toward a new system in which media politics is also important. Elaborating on earlier definitions, I suggest that these terms be understood as follows:

*The defining characteristic of Party Politics is that politicians compete as members of organized teams. In strong forms of Party Politics, party leaders choose candidates for party nominations, conduct the campaigns for office, and coordinate their activities in office. Voters, recognizing that the parties compete as teams, cast "straight-party ballots" for one of the teams.*

*The defining feature of media politics, as the term is commonly used, is that politicians seek to gain office, and to conduct politics while in office, through communication that reaches citizens through the mass media. Parties and interest groups — formerly unchallenged kingpins of mass politics — are often left on the sidelines as independent politicians do battle by means of speeches, press conferences, advertisements, photo-ops, and various other "public relations" events.*

The basic dynamics of Party Politics have been well-understood for some decades through the work of E. E. Schattschneider, V. O. Key, Jr., Joseph Schumpeter, Kenneth Arrow, and Downs, but media politics is a relatively new form of organization and hence less well understood. My aim in this book is to develop a
theory of the new form and to accommodate it to traditional understandings of American politics, as encapsulated in the work of Downs.

The first step in developing the theory is to specify the general goals of each of the key actors — candidates, voters, and journalists. I begin with candidates, the group whose behavior is easiest to fathom. From the interests of all three types of actors, the dynamics of media politics will later be deduced.

**The Goals of Candidates**

Downs’ theory focused on parties and assumed that their only political goal was to capture and hold political office, formulating policies as necessary to achieve this goal. I make the same assumption, except that my focus will be on individual politicians rather than on party teams.

Going beyond Downs, I shall also deal with the process by which politicians communicate their policy proposals to voters, which is the defining feature of media politics. Let me begin with some historical background.

In the heyday of 19th century party politics, communication with voters was not something that presidential candidates worried about. As titular head of the Democratic or Republican party, they relied on their fellow partisans to conduct their campaigns for them (McGerr, 1986). For the most part, this meant turning the campaign over to city and state units which canvassed door-to-door for the party ticket and offered public entertainment, in the form of torch-light parades and family picnics, as a means of mobilizing support.

Most newspapers in the 19th century had an informal party affiliation and openly boosted its party’s candidates. To the likes of Joseph Pulitzer, Robert McCormick, and Otis Chandler, fiercely partisan coverage was more a scared duty than a cause for embarrassment — and it was not a duty that was shirked any more in the news columns than on the editorial pages. Thus, in a study of partisan bias in the *Chicago Tribune* between 1900 and 1992, Burgos (1996) found that headlines attacking Democratic candidates at the turn of the century were ten times more frequent than ones attacking Republicans. For
example, following a dinner gathering of GOP luminaries during the election of 1900, the paper proclaimed on its front page:

Hosts Gather At GreatFeat  
President’s Position Correct,  
McKinley Was Right  
Bryan Denounced As Demagogue.

The person denouncing McKinley in the Tribune headline was Robert B. McArthur, the pastor of the local Baptist church. If there were other local pastors who felt that the Republican candidate was the demagogue, they were not given access to the Trib's news pages. As Burgos goes on to show, the Tribune’s blatant and one-sided partisanship declined gradually over the course of this century. As a result, the paper had become essentially balanced in its presidential campaign coverage, and at much lower levels of negativity, by the 1970s.

Despite its glorious past, the tradition of unabashedly partisan journalism has been in decline since about 1870, the point at which a group of dissident journalists founded a reform movement dedicated to the ideal of non-partisan and objective coverage (McGerr, 1986). The transformation in the 1960s of such partisan holdouts as the Los Angeles Times, the Chicago Tribune and Time magazine marked the final triumph of this movement.

The capacity of local party organizations to mobilize support for candidates has also declined greatly since the 19th century. The upshot is that candidates must now make their own way, both in presidential primaries and in the general election. That is, they must get out on the campaign trail and try to create events that a non-partisan press will see fit to report as news. The new situation is well-characterized by Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar:

Today, political leaders communicate with the public primarily through news media that they do not control. The news media now stand between politicians and their constituents. Politicians speak to the media; the media then speak to the voters. (1993, p. 1)

Paid advertising helps presidential candidates out of this bind (Jamieson, 1996), but does not eliminate the great need to achieve favorable notice in the “free media.”

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How politicians go about trying to create favorable news is fairly well understood: On the one hand, they attempt to take actions and create events that promote their campaign agenda and that are so compelling that reporters will feel obligated to report them as news; and, on the other hand, they attempt to avoid situations, such as news conferences, that make it difficult for them to control what gets reported as news.

The kind of coverage that politicians want is also fairly obvious. They seek to be associated with honesty, competence, likability, and popular policies.

Candidates, however, may not always be completely clear about the policies they favor. As Downs argued, a degree of ambiguity may increase their appeal to voters who might otherwise feel distant from them. As Downs put it,

Ambiguity . . . increases the number of voters to whom a party may appeal. This fact encourages parties in a two-party system to be as equivocal as possible about their stands on each controversial issue. And since both parties find it rational to be ambiguous neither is forced by the other's clarity to take a more precise stand.

Thus political rationality leads parties in a two-party system to becloud their policies in a fog of ambiguity (Chapters 7 and 8).

Subsequent scholars have not always agreed with Downs on this point (Shepsle, 1972; Bartels, 1988; Alvarez 1997; but also Page, 1978; Jamieson, 1992, Chapter 9). But whether or not it is rational for candidates to be deliberately ambiguous, it certainly is rational, if they can get away with it, for them to do something rather similar: To take different positions in front of different audiences. For example, during the 1968 presidential campaign, Nixon told northern audiences that he strongly supported the Supreme Court's 1954 desegregation ruling, but, in a TV broadcast beamed to southern audiences, he carefully suggested otherwise (Witcover, 1970, p. 385-86). Often because they are in danger of losing, candidates also sometimes change positions during campaigns; make extravagant or unrealistic promises; or distort the records of their opponents (Jamieson, 1992). When, for whatever reason, candidates do any of these things, they want journalists to report their statements as "straight" news, without any hint of challenge. Also, most politicians (like most non-politicians) have done things in the past that they find embarrassing to admit in public and that they therefore try to keep secret.
For politicians, then, the new goal of media politics is to get certain helpful kinds of campaign information reported as news and to keep other, unhelpful kinds of information out of the news. Put more simply, the goal of politicians is to

*Use journalists to "Get Our Story Out."*

As we shall see, this goal tends to bring candidates into more or less continuous conflict with journalists, who have no interest in running the kind of news that politicians would most like and some considerable interest in running stories that politicians typically do not like.

**The Goals of Citizens**

I shall assume that citizens have the same basic outlook in the age of media politics that they did in the earlier age of party politics, as theorized by Downs. That is, citizens want to elect politicians who will do what they, as individual citizens, want to have done. Yet, as Downs also argued, citizens are busy people, and they are sensible enough to appreciate that, as individual voters, their chances to affect election outcomes are minuscule. Hence, they instinctively minimize their electoral involvement, hoping for a good result but refusing to put significant effort into it, including the effort necessary to study the issues and candidates in the election. The payoff is simply not there. Voters are more likely to be mugged on the way to the polls than to actually affect an election or other political outcome. Thus, as Downs reasoned, for most citizens most of the time it is individually rational to be ignorant about politics. Citizens will prefer to use their limited time for matters that provide a more direct and certain return for the effort, such as playing with children, working overtime, or perhaps just watching a comedy on TV.

The question that now arises is the attitude of rationally ignorant citizens toward political news. The answer, in broad outline, is obvious: They will mostly disdain it. Yet the little attention voters do pay may be very important to politicians and journalists, since their livelihoods depend on the response of the mass audience to political news.

I should add that there are many kinds of news besides political news. These varieties include entertainment news, consumer news, sports news, and medical news. Most business advertising is also

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2 My colleague, Tom Schwartz, claims credit for this formulation of the classic problem.
a form of news, namely, product news. My theory of media politics is concerned only with political news, by which I mean news that is primarily about public policy-making and leadership selection.

So what do rationally ignorant citizens want out of the relatively small amount of political news they consume? I suggest several interests, each following in a loosely deductive sense from the basic notion of rational ignorance.

Rational voters want to keep tabs on political events, if only to know how their tax bills or benefit checks are likely to change. They just don't want to devote much energy to it. Hence, rational voters do not want to be immersed in details, nor do they want large quantities of dense substantive information and analysis, nor do they want news reports that attempt to be encyclopedic and comprehensive, full of context and history about every aspect of the public affairs. Stated negatively, the overriding message of rational voters to their information providers is:

"Don't waste my time!"

Stated affirmatively, the message is:

"Tell me only what I really need to know!"

Remember that this imperative concerns political news but not necessarily other kinds of news. Indeed, the contrast with other kinds of news is illuminating. It is probably not rational for citizens to ignore or mostly ignore health news, since it conveys information that can tangibly improve the length or quality of their lives. Even if most health news were boring or irrelevant to one's personal condition, it could still be worth paying close attention to it since the individual benefits of even an occasional story that is personally relevant can be very great. But the same cannot be said for political news. A citizen can spend his entire waking life digesting political news and, in consequence, make extremely wise political choices — and yet be no better off than if he or she had done no studying at all.

What the rational voter wants, then, is help in focusing as efficiently as possible on those matters that absolutely require attention. But what requires attention?

As indicated, voters know — or at least intuitively appreciate — that it is not worth their time to give careful consideration to their vote choices because their power to affect events is tiny. Yet despite this, election outcomes can have quite large effects on individual voters. Depending on who wins, taxes may
be cut or raised, welfare or Medicare benefits may be expanded or slashed, the government may draft young people to fight in overseas wars. In light of this fundamental asymmetry — *elections can affect individual voters far more than individual voters can affect elections* — I reach the following conclusion:

*The rational citizen will be more interested in information about how the election is likely to come out than in information that will help him to cast a wise vote.*

To whatever (modest) extent rational voters seek information whose purpose is to help them form an informed opinion or cast a wise vote, they will seek information about matters that are controversial. When elites achieve a consensus on a policy, the policy is likely to be adopted no matter who wins the election, and if this is so, there is no reason for each voter to try to figure out for herself or himself which side is best and which candidate favors it. If, on the other hand, elites disagree, the election outcome may determine what policy is adopted, thus giving voters an incentive to pay some bit of attention. By this reasoning I reach the conclusion that

*The rational voter is engaged by political conflict and bored by political consensus.*

When elites do disagree, each side works hard to articulate the best arguments for its position and to expose the weaknesses of the other side's position. And they have every incentive to state their arguments in terms that ordinary people can readily understand. By monitoring such disagreements, citizens can often get incisive information on the basis of little effort. Of course, even a little bit of effort may be more than most voters want to make. Yet they know that some of their fellow citizens will be paying attention, if only for the entertainment value of politics, and they want this minority of politics junkies to be able to see what it going on. And finally, even if voters do not themselves want to pay attention to most conflicts, they want to retain the option of paying attention, in case some really important issue should come up. For all these reasons, rational voters do not want political conflict swept under the carpet, away from public view; nor do they want any elite group — politicians or journalists — to monopolize public discourse with its own point of view. Rather:

*When political elites disagree, rational citizens want exposure to both sides of the argument, and under no circumstances do they ever want to see one side monopolizing public discussion.*
Nonetheless, rational citizens are ambivalent toward elite conflict, including conflict between politicians and journalists. They are, as indicated, engaged by it and (insofar as they pay any attention) wish to know both sides. But they also want to limit their attention to politics, and if elites engage in too much fighting, then paying attention to conflict loses its value as a heuristic. Much like the harried parent who scolds bickering children to "just work it out among yourselves," citizens wish to avoid being called upon to arbitrate all of the numerous issues on which ideologically contentious and often self-interested elites may get into fights. Hence,

Rational citizens become impatient with elites who disagree too much, withdrawing attention, trust, or votes, as appropriate.

Synthesizing the last three of these points, we may say that:

Rational citizens want to be exposed to some but not a great deal of elite conflict.

An important difficulty with this line of argument is that, although I have claimed that citizens wish to focus on controversial matters because their vote or opinion is more likely to be consequential in such matters, the possibility that an individual voter could ever be pivotal is extremely remote, even in a close election turning on a controversial issue. Thus, as my UCLA colleague Tom Schwartz has observed, the claim that a voter is more likely to be pivotal in a close election is like the claim that a tall man is more likely to bump his head on the moon. In light of this basic political reality, it seems prudent to develop an alternate rationale for the propositions just offered.

Since the difference between news and entertainment is often a subtle one,3 the most promising line of argument is that citizens watch political news in order to be entertained. The question then arises: What kinds of political news will citizens find most entertaining?

It is beyond my power to develop an original theory of entertainment, so I will work from the conventional view of what citizens find enjoyable in non-political domains of entertainment: sex, violence, and so forth.

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3 As Neuman (1991, p. 114) observes, “Theories of education and mass communication have been troubled by a naive distinction between information and entertainment. Although in common parlance we all routinely make such distinctions, in the practice of day-to-day mass communications the two elements are inextricably intertwined. Neither the communicator nor the audience can meaningfully determine which element of a message or which characteristic of the delivery medium is most successful in attracting attention or in amusing or informing the audience.”
suspense, humor, and human drama. Perhaps unfortunately, politics offers relatively little sex or humor — though it must be said that journalists are quick to exploit what there is of them — but politics does offer an abundance of a near-equivalent to violence, namely, political conflict. And where there is conflict, there is often suspense and drama as to how it will be settled. Hence, one might argue that journalists would tend to focus on political conflict because their audience will find conflict more entertaining than consensus.

But how much conflict? To judge from movies and sports, the taste for conflict probably varies greatly across individuals. Some people watch movies like The Texas Chain-Saw Massacre and go to ice hockey games, while others prefer The Sound of Music and golf. Yet even in the most violent movies, one rarely sees more than one episode of major violence every 15 minutes or so, and the same may be true even for ice hockey. Boxing is more violent, but it has a small audience. If we take something like Star Wars as the exemplar of a successful mass entertainment offering, we might infer that the taste of the median entertainment consumer is for some but not a great deal of violence that is well-organized and not too brutal. From this reasoning, I infer that entertainment audiences prefer political news having some but not a great deal of conflict.4

As a separate matter, I note the widespread — but by no means universal — popularity of sports broadcasting and sports news. Most sports offers some sort of violence, and all offer the distinctive element of organized competition. From this one may infer that many citizens find competition per se to be entertaining and that, by extension, many will be attracted to political news that describes such competition.

To keep my parallel lines of argument clear, let me recapitulate: Reasoning from the notion of rational ignorance, I infer that citizens want 1) to avoid wasting time on political news whose only purpose is help them develop informed opinions and cast wise votes, and that insofar as citizens want any political

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4 Violent entertainment nearly always includes stereotypically good guys and bad guys, thus suggesting that having someone to cheer for and against is essential to the enjoyment of conflict. If today’s citizens fail to enjoy political conflict as much as my discussion suggests — or as much as they seem to have enjoyed it in the 19th century — it may be because the non-partisan press, unlike its 19th century counterpart, does not frame domestic political conflict as a battle between good guys and bad guys. See McGerr, 1986.
news at all, they want news that 2) emphasizes what government is likely to do to citizens more than how citizens can affect what government will do, and that 3) provides some but not a great deal of conflict. Because the latter two or these inferences derive from the debatable assumption that rationally ignorant citizens want any political news at all, I provided an auxiliary justification for them, which is that citizens derive pure entertainment value from news that stresses competition and some but not too much conflict.

This analysis of mass preference for news is not based on the direct testimony of the citizenry, as expressed in public opinion surveys. Such testimony seems to suggest higher levels of public interest in politics than can be justified from the notion of rational ignorance. For example, 49 percent of respondents to a 1992 survey said that they were "very much interested" in that year's political campaigns, while 40 percent professed to being "somewhat interested" and only 11 percent said they were "not much interested." Another question found that 27 percent claim to follow what's going on in government and public affairs "most of the time," 41 percent follow it "some of the time," and 32 percent follow it only "now and then" or "hardly at all."

These numbers, though not extremely high, nonetheless indicate more interest than my theory can comfortably accommodate — but also more than probably really exists. For there is a clear tendency of many citizens to attribute more interest to themselves in verbal statements than they exhibit by their actual political behavior. Thus, Doris Graber (1984) found in her study of the news consumption habits that ordinary citizens were often bored by the news, but that they nonetheless . . . grumbled frequently about the oversimplified treatment of all news, including elections news, on television. Yet when the debates and other special news programs and newspaper features presented a small opportunity for more extensive exposure to issues, they were unwilling to seize it. For the most part, the [study subjects] would not read and study carefully the more extensive versions of election and other news in newspapers and news magazines. Masses of specific facts and statistics were uniformly characterized as dull, confusing, and unduly detailed. Such attitudes present a catch-22 situation. If more detail and specificity is resented, how else can the demand for greater depth be satisfied? (p. 105)

Over the years, journalists have occasionally tried schemes to increase the attention citizens pay to news, mostly without success. But as Lance Bennett (1996) reports:
...many editors and marketers think that the few noble experiments to improve election issue coverage and offer more in-depth political reporting are up against a basic obstacle: People really do not want more serious news, even when they say they do. (p. 22-23)

W. Russell Neuman (1991) makes the same observation:

Those who call for public-affairs programming on television do not tend to watch it when it is made available... Those who claim to attend to the media for purposes of acquiring information do score slightly higher on tests of learning and recall, but the differences are surprisingly small...

The key finding ... that must be dealt with candidly if we are to understand the nature of low-salience learning in regard to politics and culture is simply that people are attracted to the path of least resistance. For knowledge acquisition in general, and for public-affairs knowledge in particular, people are not inclined to give such matters a great deal of effort. (p. 95, 103)

Politicians seem to have arrived at a similar conclusion. In the 1996 election, the major party candidates were offered free TV time on an experimental basis by several networks, provided they use it for a serious discussion of the issues. But Dole claimed only about three quarters of the time allotted him and Clinton used his time for what seemed like boilerplate excerpts from his stump speeches. In the last election in Britain, neither party used the full two hours of free TV time they are guaranteed by law, and in Israel, there is a joke that when the candidates claim their free TV time, water pressure throughout the country falls as viewers seize the opportunity for a bathroom break.

The little attention citizens pay to the serious news they currently get suggests that they may want even less. As Bennett writes of newspapers in particular:

All over the country the trend is to hire market research firms to find out how to win more subscribers. The main casualty of packaging the press has been the amount of space devoted to hard news — whether local, state, national, or international — which has dropped sharply as publishers bend to popular tastes and business pressures. (p. 20)

Perhaps the clearest indication that many citizens are not as interested in politics as they claim to be is how few citizens possess even a rudimentary knowledge of the political system and its leading figures. Only about a quarter can typically name the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and only ten percent the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court — information that is scarcely obscure. In 1992, after nearly four decades of continuous Democratic control of the House of Representatives, only about half
knew which party controlled the House.\textsuperscript{5} It is easy to multiply such examples of citizen ignorance (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1995).

The fact that citizens know something about government and politics shows that many pay passing attention to public affairs. But it is hard to make the case that more than a few — more than, say, the mere 10 percent who can name the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court — pay much more than that.

\textbf{THE GOALS OF JOURNALISTS}

Journalists are a highly differentiated group. They are spread across newspapers, news magazines, TV, and radio, and they vary in style from "happy talk" TV news anchors to the erudite Robert MacNeil of PBS. My theory of media politics primarily concerns elite journalists, by which I mean journalists who specialize in coverage of national politics or who work for a nationally prestigious organization such as the \textit{New York Times}, CBS News, or \textit{Newsweek}. I focus on this group of journalists because, by common observation, they tend to set the news agenda for other media. I shall sometimes refer to other journalists, especially local journalists who do not specialize in national politics but do sometimes cover it, because they may also affect media politics. But unless I specifically say so, all of my references to journalists should be understood as references to elite journalists.

What, then, do elite journalists want? How, if at all, can their "interests" be generally characterized?

A simple answer to this question is that, like politicians and just about everyone else, journalists want career success. In the case of journalists, career success means producing stories that make it onto the front page or get lots of airtime on the evening news, from whence flow fat salaries, peer respect, and sometimes a degree of celebrity status.

What, we must then inquire, gets onto the front page and the top of the evening news?

\textsuperscript{5} Actually, 59 percent named the Democrats in the 1992 survey, while about 10 percent named the Republicans. If, as seems prudent, we assume that the 10 percent who named the Republicans were guessing, there must have been another 10 percent who guessed Democrats and happened to hit the right answer. Subtracting the likely percentage of guessers from 59 percent yields 50 percent — an impressively low number for such an obvious piece of information
Certainly one part of the answer is that, in the competitive business of journalism, the stories that make it onto the front page are the ones that the public is interested in. From this it follows that the most successful journalists are the ones who are most adept at appealing to the tastes of the mass audience.

Yet this is scarcely the whole story. For although the tastes and interests of the mass audience must certainly affect the kind of news that journalists provide, it would be very dubious to assume that "what elite journalists want" is to provide the mass audience with exactly what it wants. Indeed, the opposite assumption may be closer to the mark: That what journalists want is to be freed from subservience to the mass audience, so that they can provide the public with the kind of news that they, as professional journalists, feel the public needs. "Too many of us in hard news," as CBS news anchor Dan Rather has bluntly written, "are looking for that extra tenth of a ratings point" and thereby "blurring the distinctions and standards between news and entertainment." In a similar vein, NBC anchor Tom Brokaw has openly pined for the early days of TV news when journalists could dictate to a captive audience. "When I started out in the 1960's," he said in an interview, "there were effectively two network news programs, and at 6:30 P.M. people turned on either Huntley-Brinkley or Walter Cronkite and got their news for the day. And I'd like to have that back again."

The ambivalent attitude of elite journalists toward their clientele – that is, wanting a large audience but not wanting to kowtow to its low brow preferences – is, I believe, similar to that of many other professional groups, including architects, doctors, lawyers, and professors in research universities. What professionals want is to sell their customers the most sophisticated product they can — whether the imaginative structures of elite architects, the heroic scientific medicine of top doctors, the hypercomplex legal instruments of corporate lawyers, or the scientific research of university professors.

By sophisticated, I mean products that are complex, non-routine, and dependent on the special skill of the provider. The reason that, as I suggest, professionals want to offer products that are sophisticated

in this sense is that they can charge more money for them, find them more interesting to work on, and can more readily use them as vehicles for showing off to their peers.

Consider architecture. If an architect had a choice between designing a no-frills "box" or a building, or instead an irregularly shaped, subtly shaded, and elaborately styled "structure" of her own design, which would she choose? The latter, of course, since architects can get higher fees, more intellectual satisfaction, and greater peer recognition for producing the latter type of building. The major constraint on this professional impulse is the consumer, who might want "just a box", or at least something that costs what a box costs.

A primary difference between professionals and others kinds of business people is that professionals are, to some extent, free of market constraints. They achieve this freedom by developing standards of what good professional work consists of, socializing fellow professionals into accepting and applying these standards, and educating the public to accept the standards. To whatever extent they can, professionals also seek institutional support for their standards, whether in the form of favorable government regulation, monopolistic control over work in their jurisdiction, or private sweetheart arrangements. These professional standards may, of course, serve the socially useful purpose of limiting charlatanism and quackery. They may also result in higher quality service than would be produced in a purely competitive market, though any such judgment needs to be made on a case-by-case basis. But they also help professionals to do more lucrative and interesting work than they otherwise could. In economic terms, professional standards constitute an attempt to create cartels in restraint of trade. Or, as George Bernard Shaw more colorfully put it, "every profession is a conspiracy against the laity."

There is a venerable tradition of studies in the sociology of the professions that emphasizes these unsavory aspects of professional life (e.g., Larson, 1978). Yet professional cartels — by which I mean control of a work jurisdiction by an exclusive group — are difficult to maintain, particularly under conditions of rapid social or technological change, and they are doubly hard to maintain in the presence of free market competition (Abbott, 1988). Consider briefly again the case of architecture: Because architects, like journalists and many other professionals, must deal with clients having lamentably unsophisticated "taste," and because even clients who have been socialized into accepting architects'
notion of good taste may lack the money to pay for it, there is always a market for architects willing to forsake elite values by putting up no-frills buildings at low cost. Thus, within architecture and many other work jurisdictions, there can be intense competition between higher and lower status providers.

Frequently, moreover, new groups rise to challenge old ones. Thus, as Abbott has described, social workers challenge psychiatrists for control of the mental health jurisdiction. Likewise, accountants have taken over a large part of the business formerly done by lawyers. Information technologists are displacing traditional librarians. Solo practice physicians have lost ground to numerous groups, from nurses to anesthesiologists and most recently to accountants. Throughout the professional world, there is a continuous jostling among service providers and resultant reshuffling of both work jurisdictions and the rewards that go with them (Abbot, 1988).

The constant challenge for high status or elite professionals, then, is to develop sophisticated services, to fend off competition by lower status and non-professional providers, and to get the consuming public to accept their high status product. Acceptance may be achieved through open market competition, but more often it is achieved by restraining competition through professional codes of conduct and, where possible, legal protection.

All of this applies in a straightforward manner to political journalism. Elite reporters would like to produce a highly sophisticated news product, which in their case means a product rich in journalistic interpretation and critical analysis. They want to do this because – for reasons of pay, status, peer recognition, and intellectual interest – it is more personally rewarding to do so.

Thus, journalists have an interest in creating and selling a form of journalism that offers more than stenographic transcription of what others have said, or one that appeals to the lowest common denominator of the mass market. What elite journalists want is a profession that adds something to the news — a profession that not only reports, but also selects, frames, investigates, interprets, and regulates the flow of political communication. What journalists add should be, in their ideal, as arresting and manifestly important as possible — if possible, the most important part of each news report, so as to call attention to journalists and to the importance of their work. Commenting in this vein on the rise of interpretive reporting in recent years, Patterson (1996b) writes:
The interpretive style empowers journalists by giving them more control over the news message. Whereas descriptive reporting is driven by the facts, the interpretive form is driven by the theme around which the story is built. As Paul Weaver notes, facts become “the materials from which the chosen theme is illustrated.” The descriptive style casts the journalist in the role of a reporter. The interpretive style requires the journalist to act also as an analyst. The journalist is thus positioned to give shape to the news in a way that the descriptive style does not allow.

The interpretive style elevates the journalist’s voice above that of the newsmaker. As the narrator, the journalist is always at the center of the story ... (p. 102)

The extent to which journalists can, in practice, get away with elevating themselves above the newsmakers they cover is limited, since the news consuming public tends to be more interested in the newsmaker than in the news reporter. Yet, as description of the journalistic ideal, Patterson’s observation is exactly right.

Summarizing my general argument in a form specific to journalism, I propose as a cornerstone of the theory of media politics that

Journalists aspire, individually and collectively, to maximize their independent and distinctive “voice” in the news.

By “voice” I mean any sort of distinctively journalistic contribution, whether it be hidden information, analytic perspective, or simply personality. It is not necessary for my model to work that every journalist have a realistic chance to become Bob Woodward or George Will or Sam Donaldson, whose voices are renowned throughout the land. It is enough that ordinary journalists find it materially and psychologically rewarding to express as much voice in the news as they can persuade their audiences to accept.

The drive for journalistic voice is far from innocuous. In ways I will describe more fully below, it leads journalists to adopt an adversarial stance toward others, most notably politicians, who venture onto their turf and who, as already noted, also wish to control the content of the news; it leads them to create and emphasize distinctive news products over which they can maintain control and which affirm their status as being “in charge” of political communication; and, because so much political conflict now consists of what are, in effect, propagandistic battles for public opinion, the desire for voice leads journalists to contest political parties for “the organization of political conflict.” By the organization of political conflict, I mean
the selection of issues and candidates for voter attention; the criteria for so selecting; and the kinds of appeals that are made to voters. As I argue below, reporters often end up selecting the same candidates and issues that party professionals select or would select, but they also make a distinctively journalistic contribution to the process.

Like other professionals, journalists would not describe their motivations in such self-interested terms. They would instead stress their commitment to supplying the hidden information and analytic perspectives necessary for ordinary citizens to understand what is really happening. In their eyes, their aggressive and increasingly interpretive styles of reporting serve to "protect" their news audiences, "who cannot gather their own news," from politicians and others who have "axes to grind" and are trying to mislead the public. But while such motives can lead to the same type of news product as the motive of maximizing voice, it is tempting to interpret them as simply an ideological justification of the role they would like to play. This justification has more than a little validity — most successful ideologies do — but its validity is not the main point for journalists. The main point is the sophisticated conception of journalism that it tends to legitimate.

Yet reporters are constrained in their desire to produce sophisticated product by the need to sell the product to a consuming public that has, as noted, relatively little interest in political news. They are further constrained by their inability to restrict competition from low-brow providers, such as tabloids, "happy talk" anchor personalities, and talk radio. And, as we will see in a moment, journalists must also contend with the challenge of an extra-professional group, politicians, who would also like to control the content of mass communication. Ross Perot's brilliant use of interview programs like the Larry King Show and Today is only one of many indications of this challenge. Hence, when elite journalists like Rather and Brokaw complain about the decline of news standards, they are, in effect, complaining about their inability to maintain control over their work jurisdiction. What they would like is to return to the days when,

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8 The general thrust of this paragraph, along with the particular words in quotations, are adapted from an insightful discussion in Gans (1979, 186) on the importance journalists attach to objectivity. I have altered Gans' meaning by claiming that journalists see the background and analytic perspectives they supply as serving the same function as objective information, namely, "protecting" the public from deception.
owing to the limited number of news outlets, they could do so on the basis of what was, in effect, a professional cartel in restraint of trade.

Although elite journalists project an air of great dignity and cool self-confidence, their most important mass outlets — top newspapers, national news magazines, and network news shows — are all losing audience share. In contrast, local TV news and other forms of soft news are gaining market share. Writing of network TV news, *New York Times* media critic Walter Goodman has written,

> Television news, as your local anchor might put it, is under fire. The target is not the violence that is agitating viewers and politicians, but a creeping tabloidization, not only of local news, which serious observers have never considered of much account, but of national news too, pride of the networks.⁹

What is true of network TV news is, to a lesser but still significant extent, true as well for other mass outlets. Elite journalism is under fire — more-or-less continuous fire — from a mass audience that isn't much interested in politics, lower-status journalists willing to meet the mass audience on its own level, and politicians vying to control their own communication and increasingly adept at doing so. Elite journalists are no patsies in this struggle, and they certainly do not appear to be in danger of going the way of homeopathic healers, mediums, and other once successful but now defunct professional groups. At the very least, they will survive as niche providers in a few big city newspapers, off-peak television hours, PBS, and various cable and small-circulation venues. But elite journalists are in a more precarious position than many outsiders realize, and they know it.

**BASIC CONFLICTS IN MEDIA POLITICS**

Let us, then, assume the existence of a citizenry with an interest in holding politicians accountable on the basis of minimal political involvement or attention to the news; a journalistic profession with interests in attracting large audiences and expressing journalistic voice; and politicians with an interest in building political support via communication that reaches citizens through the news media. What follows from these assumptions?

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What follows, generally speaking, is a great deal of tension and sometimes open conflict among the players. The key actors have quite different interests and they frequently jostle with one another in the pursuit of them. The three most basic conflicts may be identified as follows:

- **Conflict between the interests of journalists and citizens.** Journalists would like to produce a more sophisticated news product than many citizens wish to consume.

- **Conflict between the interests of politicians and journalists.** Politicians and journalists both have an occupational interest in controlling the content of the news.

- **Conflict between the interests of politicians and citizens.** The basic interest of citizens is to hold politicians accountable on the basis of what the politicians have accomplished while in office or say they will accomplish if elected to office. Depending, however, on their accomplishments in office or ability to deliver on their promises, some politicians may have an interest in bamboozling the public.

In these and other ways, media politics is rife with actual and potential conflicts between the major actors. But it does not follow that any problem necessarily exists. Perhaps, for example, politicians have an interest in bamboozling the public but are unable, because of journalists’ interest in exposing them, to do so. Or perhaps it would be good for democracy if journalists were able to sell the public a little more news than “rationally ignorant citizens” really want to consume. Before we reach any conclusions about whether the conflicts I have identified are helpful, harmful or merely innocuous for democratic politics, it is necessary to know how they play out in practice.

In the course of this book, I argue that these conflicts play out in the form of three patterns of recurring behavior, which I describe as behavioral rules. The rules are:

- **The Rule of the Market,** or the tendency of market competition to force journalists to lower the overall quality and amount of political news.

- **The Rule of Anticipated Importance,** or the tendency of journalists to devote attention to occurrences in proportion to their anticipated importance in American politics.

- **The Rule of Product Substitution,** or the tendency of journalists to substitute their voice for that of politicians in deciding what’s news.
The next chapter takes up the Rule of the Market. Chapters 4 and 5 then develop the theoretical and empirical groundwork necessary for testing rules of anticipated importance and product substitution. This testing occurs in Chapters 6 and 7. Finally, Chapter 8 assesses the big question of how media politics helps or harms or otherwise affects the operation of democracy.