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Travis N. Ridout, “New Directions in Media and Politics”, second edition, by
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Stephen F. Frantizich “Presidents and the Media, The Communicator in Chief”
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Negative Campaigns Are They Good for American Democracy?

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Over the past 40 years, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of negative ads broadcast during American campaigns.¹ While in the 1960 presidential election fewer than 10 percent of all ads could be classified as “negative,” by 2000 that number hovered closer to 40 percent.² In the most recent presidential election, nearly 96 percent of ads run by Democrat Hillary Clinton’s campaign and 83 percent of ads run by Republican Donald Trump’s campaign were negative.³ In fact, during the final days of the 2016 campaign, there were approximately 70,000 televised campaign ads, of which fewer than one in ten could be classified as positive.⁴ Congressional elections have also become increasingly negative. In 2010 about half of all the ads were positive (49.27 percent), yet by 2014, this number was only about 39 percent.⁵ It would be an understatement to suggest that people—be they voters, journalists, or politicians—do not like negativity. Former Senator Tom Daschle, for example, once described negativity as “the crack cocaine of politics.”⁶ Meanwhile, former President Jimmy Carter argued that “the spending of a lot of that money on a negative campaign to destroy the reputation and character of . . . opponents is what has divided our country.”⁷ Political candidates, too, treat negativity as a problematic component of a campaign. During a 2008 presidential debate, for example, both candidates commented on negativity. “Your ads, 100 percent of them have been negative,” Democrat Barack Obama told Republican John McCain. In turn, McCain argued “Senator Obama has spent more money on negative ads than any political campaign in history.”⁸ In survey after survey, ordinary Americans routinely report that they do not like negative ads.⁹ In a recent poll by CBS News and the New York Times, 82 percent of respondents said they were “disgusted” by the 2016 campaign.¹⁰ And, Americans believe that each election is even more overwhelmingly negative than the last. In 2016 92 percent of voters reported that the 2016 campaign was more negative than past elections—a higher rate than the 72 percent who had reported that the 2004 campaign was especially negative.¹¹ Given media coverage of negativity and given the fact that ordinary Americans routinely report that they do not like negative ads, it is easy to imagine that negative ads have serious, troubling consequences for American politics and for representative democracy. Indeed, as John Geer writes, “worries about negativity lie at the very center of concerns about the health of our electoral system and whether that system promotes a process that can be thought of as democratic.”¹² The key component of negative ads is that they are, in a word, negative, and it is easy to envision that something negative might have a harmful effect. It is reasonable to suspect, for example, that negativity might lead people to be disillusioned with politics, to disapprove of candidates who run negative ads, and, eventually, to turn away from political participation all together.¹³ Responding to

these concerns about the role of negativity in the political process, over the last three decades scholars in a variety of disciplines including political science, communication, and psychology, have amassed a large and diverse body of literature about the effect of negativity on voter behavior. This work has considered whether negative ads, in particular, change the way people respond to politics and the way they participate in the political process. This work has relied on numerous methodologies and has considered many national elections. Surprisingly, however, the effects of negative advertising have turned out to be quite elusive. After decades of research, scholars have found conflicting results. Sometimes negativity—as one might have initially predicted—does have negative consequences for the political process. Other times, however, negativity has no effect on people and, even more strikingly, sometimes negativity can actually increase voters' interest in the political process, leading them to be more knowledgeable and involved in elections. So which is it? Are negative ads as harmful and divisive as the media (and former President Jimmy Carter) suggest? Or are negative ads actually a helpful component of a campaign? And, as campaigns work to incorporate more Internet-based advertising, are the effects of negative campaign ads likely to change in the future? In this chapter we consider these questions. First, we define negativity. Second, we present the various effects negativity has on the political process. Third, we consider why scholars have found such conflicting results. Next, we turn to the digital future of negativity and consider whether the increased use of the Internet for campaigning will change the way negativity affects the political process.

Defining Negativity

In order to understand the effects of negativity, it is first important to define what we mean by a “negative ad.” At its most basic definition, a negative ad is one in which a candidate critiques another.¹⁴ Conversely, a positive ad is one in which a candidate promotes himself. In between a purely negative ad and positive ad is a contrast ad, which includes both a criticism of the opponent and positive information about the sponsor of the ad. Each of these types of ads—negative, positive, or contrast—can have different types of content. An ad may have issue content, which focuses on the issue positions, beliefs and/or past votes of either the candidate or the opponent. For example, a 2016 ad sponsored by the Trump campaign highlighted Clinton's financial backers, stating that “Hillary received \$48.5 million from Wall Street hedge funds,” while Clinton's campaign sponsored an ad focusing on Trump's policies on Muslims and abortion. Alternatively, an ad may be focused on image—personal characteristics or character traits of either the candidate or the opponent. In 2016, for example, Trump launched a negative television ad against Clinton that focused on her lack of “fortitude,” “strength,” and “stamina.” Similarly, Clinton launched an ad that juxtaposed Trump's negative comments towards women with video of young girls looking in the mirror, closing with, “Is this the president we want for our daughters?” Lee Sigelman and Mark Kugler have suggested that voters are more likely to identify negative image ads as being truly negative and are much more likely to believe that negative image ads are problematic.¹⁵ In contrast, voters are more likely to forgive negative issue ads. Further, scholars suggest that voters are more likely to judge negative issue ads as being more “fair” than negative image ads. Freedman, Wood, and Lawton report that while 81 percent of voters believe that it is fair

for an ad to criticize a candidate for “talking one way and voting another,” only 28 percent believe that it is fair for an ad to criticize a candidate for extra-marital affairs.¹⁶ Generally, negative issue ads have been more prevalent than negative image ads. In 2008, for example, only 21 percent of all ads sponsored by the Democratic candidates for Congress and 23 percent of all ads sponsored by the Republican candidates for Congress focused solely on the image attributes of the opponent.¹⁷ While this may have differed in the 2016 presidential election—Clinton, for example, relied less on issue ads and focused her campaign the personal traits of her opponents—this could be credited to the uniqueness of the two presidential candidates.¹⁸ The Many Effects of Campaign Negativity Relying on these definitions of negativity, scholars have identified a number of ways in which negativity can affect the political process. These effects range from very troubling to highly encouraging to completely minimal. It is these variations that have made the effect of negative campaigning one of the most enduring and interesting puzzles in political science. Below, we consider three possible broad effects of negativity.

Effect 1: Decrease in Voter Turnout Given the criticisms of negativity, it is quite reasonable to expect that this form of advertising could be harmful to the political process. In fact, Ansolabehere and Iyengar show just such an effect: in a series of experiments they find that people who see negative ads reported that they were much less likely to turn out to vote than people who see positive ads.¹⁹ This argument hinges on the way voters respond to negativity. Ansolabehere and Iyengar show that negativity makes voters feel less efficacious, or less like they have any power over the political process. When individuals no longer believe they have any power over the political process, they are much less likely to turn out to vote. Another possibility is that negativity leads to a “plague-on-both-your-houses.”²⁰ While the general goal of a negative ad is to criticize the opponent, it is possible that negative ads may have an additional, unintended effect. Since voters routinely report that they dislike negativity, it is possible that they may also express some dissatisfaction with the candidate who sponsored the ad. This effect is known as the boomerang effect. The boomerang effect occurs when a negative ad creates not only negative feelings toward the candidate being criticized by the ad, but also toward the candidate who sponsored the ad.²¹ Kahn and Kenney show that this happens to both challengers and incumbents: after the candidates sponsored negativity, voters gave them lower evaluations.²² Notably, however, individuals are much more forgiving when negativity is sponsored by a candidate of their own party.²³ This boomerang effect may be responsible for the “plague-on-both-your houses” effect. A voter may form negative perceptions of one candidate due to the information conveyed in a negative ad, but the same voter may also be frustrated with the other candidate for simply sponsoring negativity. This leaves the voter dissatisfied with both of his candidate options. In turn, this form of dissatisfaction may lead voters to lose interest and withdraw from the political process. The idea that negative ads can turn voters away from the polls certainly fits the image of negativity as a “problematic” component of a campaign. If individuals dislike negativity, and if negativity produces not only lower evaluations of the candidate being criticized, but also of the sponsor, then it stands to reason that negativity could have a harmful effect on American democracy. And, the

possibility that individuals are systematically less likely to vote as a result of negative ads is as harmful of an effect as any. Yet, as you will see below, additional research on the effects of negativity has led to very different results. Effect 2: Increase in Interest and Participation While Ansolabehere and Iyengar find that negativity leads people away from the polls, Freedman and Goldstein find that negativity does just the opposite—it increases the chance that individuals will turn out to vote.²⁴ How can negative advertising—something that so many voters actively report disliking—lead to such a positive outcome? There are a number of possibilities. First, as we already mentioned, negative ads are more likely to focus on issues rather than candidate personalities. Conversely, positive ads often are more likely to discuss candidate biographies and background.²⁵ This focus on issue content makes negative ads more informative and, in turn, may offer citizens more helpful political information. Koch summarizes this as follows: Scholars maintain that at least in presidential campaigns negative ads are characterized by a higher level of issue content than positive ads . . . Positive ads frequently aim to promote the personal qualities of the candidate and thus are viewed as fluff pieces that fail to provide citizens with information necessary for influencing the direction of government policy.²⁶ In sum, negativity may provide individuals with more helpful information, and this increase in helpful information may translate to voting. Another possibility is that negativity is simply more interesting than positivity. Psychologists have long shown that people are drawn to negativity; people find negativity more helpful in making decisions and organizing information.²⁷ People’s tendency to be drawn to negative information is termed the “negativity bias,” and this bias has been documented in numerous political situations.²⁸ This negativity bias may lead individuals to focus on negative ads, thus increasing people’s interest in the campaign, where an increase in interest may then lead to a higher chance of voting. The negativity bias may also have an additional effect. Because people are drawn to negativity, increases in exposure to negative ads may suggest to voters that they have all the necessary information they need to make political choices. Indeed, research has shown that higher exposure to negative ads leads people to make candidate choices more quickly and to have more certainty in their choice.²⁹ If people are more certain in their choices, they are potentially more likely to turn out to vote. In sum, despite the fact that individuals report dissatisfaction with negativity, this literature suggests that these ads may actually be quite helpful for democracy. By providing more information, increasing voter interest, and helping individuals make choices, negative ads may motivate voters who would otherwise retreat from the political process to get out and vote. In fact, we can see hints of this outcome in the most recent presidential election: in a June 2016 poll, 50 percent of Clinton supporters claimed that their future vote was mostly against Trump—rather than for Clinton—and 55 percent of Trump supporters shared the same sentiment—they would vote against Clinton rather than for Trump.³⁰ Effect 3: Null Effect It is also possible, however, that negativity has no effect on political behavior at all. Finkel and Geer find no evidence that negativity changes the way individuals behave during a campaign, and Lau and Geer reach a similar conclusion.³¹ In fact, Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner, after analyzing dozens of studies on the topic, conclude that there is “no general support for the hypothesis that negative political

campaigning depresses voter turnout,” though they note there is a bit more support for the possibility that negativity increases voter turnout.³² Again, there are a number of reasonable explanations for such an outcome. While it is possible that, as Ansolabehere and Iyengar show, individuals may feel less efficacious as a result of negativity, negative ads are just one part of a much larger campaign process. It is possible that other parts of the campaign—talking to friends and neighbors, getting visits from campaign staff—may lead individuals to feel some connection to politics and overcome the effects of negativity. Further, while the negativity bias is powerful, campaigns may be so highly saturated by various forms of media that people simply pay little attention to ads. In other words, again, the other factors in a campaign may simply be more important for people than the advertising.

Explaining Conflicting Results The fact that scholarship on campaign negativity leads to three very different results is, at first glance, unsatisfying. Negativity is a large part of any given national campaign; negative ads generally receive a great deal of scrutiny, both from the mainstream media and from the candidates themselves. Moreover, scholars have spent a great deal of effort to identify how negativity affects the political process. Between 1976 and 2006, for example, more than 110 separate analyses were devoted to analyzing the effects of negativity.³³ So why have these studies produced such different results? It is possible that at least part of the reason for these differing results is the methods scholars have used to conduct analyses. Analyzing whether or not a person has seen a particular negative ad is an inherently difficult process, and measures of exposure to negativity are generally imperfect.³⁴ Further, the effects of ads are fleeting—while a negative ad can have a strong immediate effect, its power may fade after several weeks, or even after several hours.³⁵ Finally, there is some reason to believe that scholars who conduct experimental research on negativity and scholars who rely on survey and observational campaign ad data often reach different conclusions because people are more likely to focus on ads when they are in an experimental laboratory.³⁶ Yet methodological differences cannot explain the full extent of the disagreement. Rather, the difference in findings hints at the possibility that the relationship between negativity and political outcomes is much more complex than scholars originally suspected. In other words, it is possible that there are additional factors that influence whether negativity affects voters, factors that can change whether negativity leads voters to or away from the polls. First, it is possible that different people respond differently to campaign ads. For example, it is possible that people who are strong partisans are much less responsive to negativity than weak partisans. Also, it is possible that women are much more responsive to negativity than men.³⁷ While we may not observe the effects of negativity over the entire population, we may see that negativity is particularly likely to lead certain voters away from the polls. Second, it is possible that negative ads have different effects when they are targeted, or deliberately designed to appeal to certain, specific voter groups. Advertisements that are targeted may discuss issues that are of specific interest to a specific voter group, while untargeted advertisements may consider issues that are of general interest to the public but may not be uniquely interesting to a specific voter. For example, an advertisement targeted toward voters with children may focus on issues of education, child

health, and other parental issues. To ensure that such an ad reaches its intended audience, campaigns may deliberately air this ad during programs that parents of young children are more likely to watch.³⁸ In contrast, campaigns may air ads that do not have specific group targets during television programs that have a more varied audience. This is a reasonable proposition; though studies show little evidence that targeting ads to specific groups changes the effect of negativity.³⁹ Third, individuals may treat negative ads sponsored by certain types of candidates differently. Specifically, it is possible that voters respond differently to negative ads sponsored by female or black candidates than to negative ads sponsored by white male candidates. While recent scholarship has attempted to trace the different responses to negativity due to the gender of the sponsor,⁴⁰ there has been considerably less work on the differential response to negativity by the race of the sponsor. Nonetheless, existing research on candidate race does suggest the possibility that individuals will be less forgiving when black candidates go negative.⁴¹ A fourth option lies in the packaging of negative advertisements. Ted Brader shows that some negative ads have a great deal more emotional content than others. For example, some ads rely on music and images to convey a message and thus lead voters to experience certain emotions. In turn, feeling emotions such as anger and fear can change the way people behave. Brader's work suggests that it is not simply negativity that can have an effect on the political process, but the emotional components of negativity.⁴² Next, it is also possible that voters are not quite as dissatisfied with negativity as they claim. Kyle Mattes and David Redlawsk, for example, find that survey respondents tend to overstate their dislike of negativity, simply because they believe it is appropriate to do so.⁴³ In other words, it is not that individuals mind negativity when it appears on their television screen, but rather that they think they should mind negativity. This leads people to report a strong dislike for negative ads, when in reality the effect of these ads may be inconsequential. Mattes and Redlawsk go further, even, claiming that voters actually benefit from negative advertising—learning both the qualities and flaws of each candidate that one could only learn from negative advertising and giving challengers the opportunity to critique incumbents. Finally, it is possible that the timing of negativity can change the way people respond. Negativity early in the campaign, for example, may help people to make choices among candidates. In contrast, negativity after a person has already made a candidate choice can suggest to individuals that they have selected a poor candidate and lead them away from the polls.⁴⁴ In sum, while it is surprising that scholars have reached conflicting findings about the role of negativity in politics, this does not in itself suggest that negativity has no effect. Rather, it is likely that the effect of negativity is highly nuanced, meaning that we cannot expect that negative ads have a uniform effect. Negativity, it seems, has a different effect under different political conditions.

Negativity in the Digital Age

To this point, we have focused on televised negativity as much of the existing scholarly research is based on these types of negative ads. Yet, the face of negativity continues to change with every election. More and more negative ads are now being transmitted via the Internet. Since campaign websites first appeared in 1994, online campaigning has grown exponentially.⁴⁵ It is not only that candidate websites are now ubiquitous, but candidates have taken advantage of several

new web technologies. Candidates now rely on blogs, Twitter, Facebook, web ads, and YouTube videos to translate their traditional campaign strategies to the web. Broadly speaking, this approach can be classified as “web campaigning” or “those activities with political objectives that are manifested in, inscribed on, and enabled through the World Wide Web.”⁴⁶ The Internet provides campaigns with several advantages over traditional campaign techniques. First, the Internet provides virtually limitless space to attack without having to sacrifice other parts of a candidate’s message.⁴⁷ Second, campaigns can reach voters at a lower cost.⁴⁸ Third, the Internet provides an interactive forum in that voters are able to respond to the candidate.⁴⁹ Finally, the Internet allows candidates to respond quickly to claims made by their opponents.⁵⁰ As with traditional campaigns, the development of online campaigning has raised additional concerns about negativity. How will this type of negativity affect the political process? Can we simply translate what we know about televised negativity to this very new medium of advertising? We consider existing research on both of these questions below.

Candidate Strategy In order to trace the effects of campaign negativity online it is first important to consider whether candidates treat web and television ads in a similar manner. Here, much like with televised negativity, scholars disagree. On the one hand, some have proposed the innovation hypothesis, which states that there will be significant differences between online negative campaigning and traditional negative campaigning because of the distinct types of media features.⁵¹ As a result of these media differences, we should expect a fundamental change in political campaigns. On the other hand, scholars have also suggested the normalization hypothesis, which states that negative online campaigning should closely resemble traditional negative campaigning.⁵² In other words, if the normalization hypothesis is true, candidates should extend traditional negative campaign techniques to online campaigning. Studies provide two types of support for the normalization hypothesis. First, research shows that both presidential candidates and congressional candidates go negative at similar rates on the web as on television.⁵³ For example, Druckman and colleagues conducted one of the most systematic studies comparing when congressional candidates go negative on their websites with when they go negative on television advertising. Forty-eight percent of congressional candidates went negative on their websites, while 55 percent of congressional candidates ran negative television advertisements.⁵⁴ The second type of support for the normalization hypothesis is that candidates go negative under similar conditions in both online campaigning and televised campaigning.⁵⁵ Much as they do with television ads, challengers are more likely than incumbents to go negative online.⁵⁶ Candidates, including incumbents, are also more likely to go negative online as competition increases, a finding that is echoed in research on televised campaign ads.⁵⁷ Other factors that have been shown to increase campaign negativity include open-seat races and having more campaign resources.⁵⁸ In other words, candidates go negative online under the same circumstances that they go negative on television. Further supporting the normalization hypothesis, evidence shows that even as online campaigning continues to grow, candidates have not abandoned traditional negative campaign techniques. Rather, candidates have extended traditional negative campaigning to online campaigning. Although the Obama

campaign was innovative in its use of web-based strategies in both 2008 and 2012, the campaign still set a record for the amount of money spent on televised ads. And spending on television advertising remains extremely high, an estimated \$4.4 billion in 2016, though that amount was less than the \$5.45 billion spent in 2012.⁵⁹ Effects of Online Negativity A second consideration is whether negative campaigning online has a similar impact on voters as negative campaigning on television. Even though online campaigning has substantially expanded, few systematic studies have examined the impact on citizens of negative campaigning online.⁶⁰ It is not clear to what extent findings from traditional negative campaigning will apply to negative online campaigning. For example, will negative online campaigning stimulate individuals to seek out additional political information, change political attitudes, or influence political behavior such as voting? Will the unique media features of the Internet have an impact on people's perceptions of politics or how they process information? This is an area of research that needs to be further studied. This is an important area of research because individuals are increasingly using the Internet to get political information. The percentage of individuals who report getting at least some of their news online is higher than ever, at 93 percent of adults.⁶¹ However, all individuals are not equally likely to access political information on the Internet. Rather, individuals who are better educated, more affluent, younger, and more partisan than the general population are more likely to access political information on the Internet and to visit candidate websites.⁶² Research indicates that people who pay attention to campaigns through the Internet are also paying attention through traditional media.⁶³ In other words, the Internet supplements traditional media for the majority of individuals, but it is unclear whether it has an additional, unique effect on citizens. The Future of Negativity In July of 2016, The Washington Post published an article titled: "Welcome to the next, most negative presidential election of our lives," drawing attention to the fact that campaigns seem to have gotten uglier and more negative with each campaign cycle.⁶⁴ As we have seen, campaign negativity has become a tradition in American politics, though the percentage of negative ads in the 2016 presidential race was, perhaps surprisingly, slightly less than in 2012.⁶⁵ Because of the January 2010 Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United v FEC*, corporations and unions can now sponsor ads to promote candidates during political campaigns. This ruling has led to the rise of "super PACs," or political action committees, that can gather unlimited funds from corporations, unions, interest groups, and even ordinary citizens and then spend this money on the sponsorship of campaign activity—most notably, campaign advertising. The creation of these super PACs has led to a tremendous increase in ads sponsored by outside groups. A comparison of a similar time-period in the 2008 and 2012 Republican primaries, for example, shows a 1627 percent increase in the number of ads sponsored by outside groups.⁶⁶ The ads sponsored by these external groups are overwhelmingly negative, which helps to explain recent rises in campaign negativity. What's more, research suggests that voters are likely to respond differently to negative ads that are sponsored by an outside group than ads sponsored by the candidate him or herself.⁶⁷ Moreover, the introduction of the Internet has further altered the campaign process. Negative ads are becoming more targeted and are taking on a different shape for the

online audience. While only time will tell if the effects of online negativity are different than the effects of televised negativity, it is quite likely that, at the very least, increased reliance on web-based sources means that voters will see even greater numbers of negative ads.

Conclusion So what do these ads mean for democracy? A recurring argument in media coverage of campaigns is that candidate negativity is so ubiquitous because “it works.” Indeed, the ads that have garnered the most media attention during campaigns have generally been negative. While anecdotal descriptions of negativity in a campaign setting may suggest its ultimate effectiveness, decades of scholarly research suggest a different story. The effects of negativity are too nuanced, too conditional, and too complicated to ever be summed up as either “it works” or “it doesn’t work.”

Discussion Questions

- 1 Have there been any trends in the use of negative campaign advertising over the past half century? If there has been a trend, can you think of any reasons for this trend? Do you believe this trend will continue? Why?
- 2 What are the different effects of negative advertising that have been identified? Why do you believe there are so many different findings about the effects of negative advertising?
- 3 Overall, do you believe the increase in negative advertising is good or bad for democracy? Why do you believe this?
- 4 What do we know to be different about the use of negativity online and in television advertising? What do we need to learn?
- 5 Do you believe that “going negative” works in different ways depending on the type of candidate, opponent, and election? When do you think it would be beneficial to a candidate to go negative, and when do you think it would be detrimental to a candidate to go negative? Why?

Notes

- 1 Erika Franklin Fowler and Travis N. Ridout, “Negative, Angry, and Ubiquitous: Political Advertising in 2012,” *The Forum* 10 (2013): 51–61.

Do the Media Give Women Candidates a Fair Shake?

Regina G. Lawrence

When Hillary Rodham Clinton lost the race for the Democratic presidential nomination to Barack Obama in 2008, many observers were quick to blame media bias and sexism for her loss. The Women's Media Center decried the "pervasive . . . sexism in the media's coverage" of Clinton's campaign and mounted an online petition campaign, urging television viewers to: call on the national broadcast news outlets (CNN, FNC, MSNBC and NBC) to stop treating women as a joke; to stop using inherently gendered language as an insult or criticism; and to ensure that women's voices are present and accounted for in the national political dialogue.² The National Organization of Women assembled an online "Media Hall of Shame," a video collection of "the most outrageous moments of sexism from mainstream media's coverage of the 2008 elections," accompanied by a "Misogyny Meter" so viewers could rate each one. Then in 2016, Hillary Clinton won her party's nomination and narrowly lost the general election (actually winning the popular vote but losing key Electoral College states). Media coverage of her 2016 campaign was less roundly criticized for sexism. But a study by Harvard University's Shorenstein Center found that Republican candidate Donald Trump won substantially more media coverage than Clinton, and that the coverage was more negative and critical toward Hillary Clinton than toward Trump. Moreover, the tone of coverage pertaining to both candidates' "fitness for office" was highly negative but precisely equal.³ Trump, a political novice, was essentially treated as Clinton's equal—a finding that echoed complaints from 2008 that relative novice Barack Obama won a level of media acclaim that a similarly inexperienced female candidate could never hope for. In both elections, there seems little doubt that Clinton was treated differently than her main competitors in certain respects, particularly on cable news.⁴ But a careful examination of Hillary Clinton's experience in 2008 and 2016 sheds a more complex light on the question of how the media cover female candidates for elected office.⁵ Indeed, in 2008, Clinton received, by some measures, fairer treatment in the mainstream press than previous research might have predicted.⁶ For example, she received as much or more coverage in leading newspapers and on national evening broadcast news shows than did her male rivals across most months of the nominating contest. And in 2016, despite the negative tone of much of the coverage, research also suggests that Clinton was treated as the presumptive winner in the weeks leading up to that election's surprise outcome.⁷ Beyond the context of that particular campaign, accumulating research reviewed below suggests that while the presidency presents a particularly tough environment for women candidates, media coverage of female candidates may be becoming less skewed against them. In fact, the answer to the question of whether the media give women candidates a fair shake appears to have two parts: "It depends," and "More so today than in the past." That is, the answer depends on which women we are talking about and

what kinds of elections they are competing in. But overall, recent research indicates that compared to their predecessors, today's women candidates can expect a fairer (if not a completely fair) shake. In order to understand this answer, and indeed to think clearly about the question, we need to review: 1 What it means for the media to give candidates "a fair shake." 2 The unique hurdles that women candidates may face in terms of public attitudes and gender stereotypes. 3 What the research suggests about how the media have covered women candidates, and how that coverage appears to be changing.

A Fair Shake: Media Bias and Sexism A starting point toward defining fairness in media coverage of women running for office is to recognize that "negative" coverage is distinguishable from "sexist" coverage. Negative coverage criticizes the candidate or paints her character, her policy positions, or her campaign tactics in an unflattering light.⁸ Negative coverage of female candidates that treats them in the same terms and by the same standards as male candidates is not sexist. For example, virtually every serious presidential candidate, particularly the "frontrunners," comes in for close media scrutiny of their electoral tactics and strategies, of their personal histories, and of their stated policy positions. Media coverage that subjected Hillary Clinton to this same scrutiny was not necessarily sexist. Sexist coverage explicitly or implicitly devalues female politicians (and women in general) in comparison to their male counterparts, including overt insults.⁹ Sexist coverage can be documented, for example, through a pattern of giving female candidates less coverage than their male opponents, reflecting or implying the presumption that their candidacies are less serious than men's. A foundational study from the 1990s by Kim Kahn found that across a number of races for the Senate, contests that included a woman candidate received less coverage than all-male contests—a difference not attributable to the size of the state or the competitiveness of the race.¹⁰ Sexist coverage can also manifest qualitatively, as when women candidates are criticized with terms alluding to sex and sexuality in ways that are not applied to men. For example, a study of coverage of Hillary Clinton and Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin during 2008 found coverage that assessed both women in terms of stereotypes about women.¹¹ While outright sexism may be less common in the mainstream media than in the past, more subtle and pernicious is the gendering of news, in which stereotypes about male and female attributes shape the content and tone of media coverage.¹² Gendering can be difficult to analyze rigorously because it often involves a perceived or implicit subtext. Given that prevailing gender stereotypes still associate women with traits like empathy, compromise, emotionalism, and weakness, gendered media coverage is not helpful to women seeking power—particularly in American presidential politics, with its usual focus on "manly men, doing manly things, in manly ways."¹³ Why Media Coverage Matters for Women Research has established the importance of news coverage to the success of women's bids for office.¹⁴ Though the media are not the lone determinant of election outcomes, evidence clearly indicates that "campaigns serve to activate predispositions and affect how citizens judge candidates,"¹⁵ particularly for voters who lack strong party and issue attachments. Gender clearly is not an insurmountable barrier to winning office, though gender-related barriers clearly still remain. Evidence of gender bias in electoral politics is offset to some degree by

substantial support for women's candidacies in a growing number of electoral contests,¹⁶ and by increasing evidence that gender stereotypes are dwarfed by other influences on voter choice, such as partisanship.¹⁷ Yet as of early 2012, women held only 17 percent of the seats in Congress and only 22 percent of all statewide elective executive offices, numbers that increased slightly to 19.6 percent and 24 percent respectively in 2016.¹⁸ For women of color, the numbers are much smaller. For example, "Of the 75 women serving in statewide elective executive offices, 7, or 9.3%, are women of color."¹⁹ One explanation for the continuing gender gap in politics is that enduring gendered attitudes continue to pose barriers to women candidates. Women and politics' scholars have argued that the unwritten requirements for holding political office are largely defined in masculine terms.²⁰ Deeply rooted stereotypes hold men as more assertive, decisive, and able to handle crisis²¹—in other words, more leader-like. Similarly, the public often associates women with particular competence in "compassion" issues such as health care, welfare, and education, rather than with more "masculine" issue competencies.²² Because women candidates may face greater challenges in establishing these implicit "qualifications" for office,²³ media attention can be particularly pernicious for women candidates—for example, when it focuses on candidates' personal traits and/or de-emphasizes their substantive qualifications for office.²⁴ For example, in the same study described above, Kahn found significantly more paragraphs per day in newspaper coverage of Senate races about male candidates' issue positions than those of female candidates.²⁵ Similarly, in her study of female presidential candidates throughout American history, Erica Falk found on average 16 percent of paragraphs focused on substantive policy issues in conjunction with women candidates, versus almost twice as many (27 percent) for male candidates.²⁶ Indeed, Falk concludes that "the extra issue coverage garnered by men is mostly converted to character coverage for the women."²⁷ Other research has found that women candidates receive more mentions of their personal lives, including their children and marital status. Research is mixed on the question of whether women candidates receive more coverage of their physical appearance, with some finding no significant differences,²⁸ and others finding more numerous references to their physical attributes.²⁹ Developments in Recent Research Until recently, research on media coverage of women candidates painted a rather unpromising picture, adding to the more challenging path to elected office that women often face. But recently, research has begun to indicate improvements in coverage of women candidates. One assessment published in 2010 found that the volume and tone of news about men and women candidates seemed to be getting more equitable over time.³⁰ More recently, a comprehensive analysis tested four key hypotheses grounded in an earlier generation of research: that news coverage of female candidates, relative to coverage of men, is 1) less plentiful, 2) more likely to include references to their sex, 3) more focused on personal traits, and 4) less focused on issues. These researchers find that journalists' portrayals (and citizens' assessments) of candidates stem primarily from the candidate's partisanship, ideology, and incumbency, not his or her sex.³¹ Along with those apparent real-world improvements has come research exploring new questions, and re-examining seemingly settled questions in new ways. In their study of electoral outcomes for women

candidates, women and politics scholars Linda Fowler and Jennifer Lawless noted the “theoretical and empirical challenges created by the interaction of gender, media, context, and electoral institutions.” The landscape in which women compete for office is a complex one, and Fowler and Lawless cited an “emerging consensus” among scholars that “greater focus on the political context is likely to produce bigger scholarly payoffs than is continued attention to observable differences between male and female candidates.”³² Along these lines, recent research has examined how gender interacts with other factors to explain the kinds of coverage women candidates receive. Key variables include the type of office women seek, the party they represent, and whether they are incumbents or challengers, as well as the issues they emphasize in their campaigns and the gender of the opponents they face off against. Also important are the other identity axes that minority women candidates must navigate. For example, the type and level of office women candidates seek may be an important variable influencing the kinds of news coverage they get because of the phenomenon of “gender-office congruency.”³³ If this theory holds, governorships should be more attainable for women because state executive offices are generally associated with domestic issues such as education and health care—issues at which women are stereotypically thought to be competent.³⁴ Yet similar logic suggests, to the contrary, that governorships and other executive offices—particularly the presidency—may be more challenging for women to attain because they are associated in the public’s mind with leadership traits more readily attributed to men.³⁵ Similarly, factors such as incumbency and the level of competition a female candidate faces may influence the level of gendered coverage she receives. High competition leads to a higher overall volume of election news and to more horserace coverage and less issue coverage,³⁶ while increasing the divergence between issues the candidates emphasize and the issues the media emphasize.³⁷ With regard to gender, these findings suggest that highly competitive races, ironically, may decrease female candidates’ ability to get the press to focus on the issues they want to emphasize. Recent research also suggests the crucial role of party in determining how voters respond to female candidates, thus potentially either undercutting or enhancing the media’s role.³⁸ Democrats are generally associated with particular traits, such as empathy and compassion, and issues, such as health care and education, which overlap with women’s stereotypical traits and competencies; Republicans are associated with defense, crime, and economics, all policy areas more readily associated with men.³⁹ These overlapping considerations may create particular challenges for women of either party. For example, it is possible that because typical Republican issues are not generally seen as “women’s” issues, female Republican candidates might not campaign on these issues to avoid sending mixed signals to voters⁴⁰—also creating the possibility for less convergence between the candidate’s messaging and the news media’s coverage. It is also crucial to note that a key influence on media coverage of candidates may be the candidates’ own communication strategies. How female candidates present themselves in their speeches, ads, and social media feeds is likely to influence, to some degree, how they are covered by traditional media. While a complete review of the pertinent literature is beyond the scope of this chapter,

research suggests that women candidates face particular challenges in deciding how to present themselves to voters. One dilemma is whether to de-emphasize their femininity so as to deactivate damaging gender stereotypes, or whether to feature themselves in stereotypically feminine roles (as mothers and caregivers in their household, for example) and postures (i.e., noncombative and nurturing) in order to conform with gender expectations.⁴¹ Another dilemma is whether to “run as a woman”—that is, to emphasize issues, like reproductive health, that are particularly resonant for women, or appeal to women specifically as a key voting bloc—or to avoid evoking gendered notions altogether, emphasizing a gender-neutral equality with their male competitors.⁴² Some recent research suggests that women candidates do not shy away from going on the attack against their opponents, for example,⁴³ even though some price might be paid for violating that gender norm.⁴⁴ More research is needed to demonstrate the variety of communications strategies women candidates pursue and to track their effect on news content. Finally, it must be noted that most research has not closely considered the potential role of candidates’ race and ethnicity in shaping coverage. Much research has looked simply at the binary of women versus men and hasn’t factored in the potential effect of racial identity. One recent study suggests that minority women’s intersectional identity is a double-edged sword, giving minority female candidates a “visibility advantage” in the news compared with white female candidates, but perhaps also evoking coverage narrowly focused on these candidates’ ethnicity and gender.⁴⁵ Indeed, a related study found that news coverage of minority women candidates is twice as likely to explicitly foreground their gender⁴⁶—the very dilemma that the earlier generation of scholars theorized was holding women back in politics. Conclusion Overall, opportunities for women in electoral politics have expanded, though clear challenges remain. And as the political landscape for female politicians has evolved, research has evolved as well. Meanwhile, there is much we don’t know about how the rapidly changing media landscape is affecting women’s bids for office. Note that virtually all of the numerous studies cited above focus on the traditional media (newspapers and television). Less is known, for example, about how social media may affect women’s electoral chances. Social media offer female candidates pathways around mainstream media coverage—a potential boon considering some of the research reviewed here—but the effects of candidates’ social media feeds may be limited to that percentage of voters who follow politics via Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites. Meanwhile, the sometimes mean-spirited and divisive rhetoric of online communications might render it a mixed blessing for female politicians. Some studies have indicated that more “hard sexism” can be found on blogs and other sites that do not color inside the lines of standard journalistic objectivity.⁴⁷ Thus, the answer to whether the media give women candidates a fair shake is still open, and the research agenda for the next generation is evolving. It is safe to say that women are getting a fairer shake than they did in the past. Even in the near term, it is intriguing to imagine that the next woman candidate to come within striking distance of the White House may not face the same terrain faced by Hillary Clinton in 2016, let alone 2008. The task for future research is to expand the research agenda beyond simplistic binaries (male versus female) and traditional arenas

(newspapers and network television) and beyond an implicit focus on white women, and to better describe the conditions under which women can compete fully as equals with men. In a “post-feminist” era⁴⁸ of shifting gender presentations conveyed through numerous social and traditional media, the landscape of constraints and opportunities for women candidates is not yet clearly charted. Discussion Questions

Fake News What Is the Influence of Fabricated Stories and Efforts to Undermine Media Credibility?

Travis N. Ridout and Erika Franklin Fowler

Here are two news stories that you may have seen: While filming a segment for The Rachel Maddow Show on MSNBC, Hillary Rodham Clinton was caught on tape speaking about the potential victims of Hurricane Irma, which struck Florida in September 2017. Said Clinton: “To be honest, Rachel, it would probably be good for the country if Irma were to just wipe every Florida hillbilly off the map. I mean . . . they live in trailers by the water, right?” On June 25, 2016, then-candidate Donald Trump and Russian leader Vladimir Putin were seen together at an exclusive spa in the Swiss Alps. Nathan Sjögren, a 42-year-old employee of the spa, described seeing the two politicians hanging out and enjoying the resort’s amenities. Both of these stories are false. They were fabricated. There is no truth to either of the stories. Nonetheless, both spread rapidly across the Internet. Have you come across one or both of these stories, perhaps in your Facebook feed? Did you at one point believe them? Do you still suspect that one of them might be true in spite of our insistence to the contrary? These stories are examples of what has been called “fake news,” a phenomenon that has received a lot of attention in recent years. Donald Trump, for instance, has repeatedly used the term, both as a candidate and as president. For example, on February 6, 2017, Trump tweeted: “Any negative polls are fake news, just like the CNN, ABC, NBC polls in the election. Sorry, people want border security and extreme vetting.” On February 18, 2017, he followed up with the tweet: “Don’t believe the main stream (fake news) media. The White House is running VERY WELL. I inherited a MESS and am in the process of fixing it.” Although Trump frequently uses the term “fake news,” what he is referring to is

quite a bit different from the first two news stories that we mentioned. Trump is not calling out false or fabricated stories but instead is trying to discredit mainstream news organizations and information with which he disagrees. We will further clarify this distinction later, but it is worth noting that the recent burgeoning in media and public attention to “fake news” stems from at least three different factors. First, as we have discussed, President Trump has popularized the term “fake news” in a series of tweets in which he has criticized stories and news organizations with which he disagrees. Second, technological changes, including the spread of social media, have allowed false stories to disperse rapidly across the Internet. Finally, investigations into Russian attempts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election, in part by distributing false news stories, have heightened Americans’ attention to the topic. What Is Fake News? (And Why We Shouldn’t Use the Term) A report on fake news that was issued by a group of academics in 2017 defines it as “misinformation that has the trappings of traditional news media, with presumed associated editorial processes.”¹ Political scientist Brendan Nyhan and colleagues define “fake news” as “intentionally false stories created for profit by dubious websites.”² Under these definitions “fake news” is news that is verifiably not true and intentionally produced in such a way as to make it appear that it was generated by a traditional news organization, which may lead people to believe the news is true. This is very different from the way in which President Trump uses the term “fake news,” which he uses to both 1) label mainstream media as a whole and 2) label news stories produced by legitimate news organizations with which he disagrees. Largely because the term is often used as a tactic to politicize and discredit news organizations and legitimate (but negative) information, we will not use the term “fake news” in the remainder of this chapter except when we cite it in quotes. Instead, we will use the labels “false news” or “fabricated news” to refer to the first kind (another commonly used term for this is disinformation³), and we will use “politicization of news” to refer to efforts like Trump’s. This chapter will begin by tracing the origins of false news before turning to news politicization. Admittedly, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish a fabricated news story from one that heavily frames the story in a certain way. Take, for instance, a story that appeared on the website The Daily Caller during the 2016 presidential campaign. The headline proclaimed: “Hillary Clinton Praised Former KKK Member Sen. Robert Byrd.” The headline is 100 percent correct, but it implies that Clinton in some way was endorsing the racist views of the KKK. In truth, the praise that Clinton gave to Senator Byrd was at his funeral in 2010, and Byrd left the Klan in the 1950s. But because this story is true, even though framed in a misleading way to make Hillary Clinton look bad, we would not label it false or fabricated news. Though false news has received much attention lately, it is not something new. Indeed, disinformation masquerading as news has been around since the founding of the United States. Eighteenth century elites, including John and Samuel Adams, planted exaggerated and false stories in

the press to help revolutionary efforts in Massachusetts.⁴ Others, like Ben Franklin, printed racially charged stories, alleging that the English King George collaborated with Native American tribes to butcher American settlers on the frontier.⁵ Why Is False News Created? There are many reasons that intentionally false news is created. Sometimes false news headlines serve as “clickbait,” providing stories so enticing that you find it difficult not to click. For example, one website ran the headline: “BREAKING: Malia Obama Sex Tape Surfaces And It’s GROSS.” Another proclaimed: “Woman’s Lips Explode After Doing Kylie Jenner Challenge!!” By clicking, you end up seeing ads, which produces ad revenue for the website. Clearly, earning dollars is the top priority of those who produce these kinds of false news stories.⁶ Indeed, the profit motive can be strong: one writer who penned fabricated news about Hillary Clinton admitted to being a registered Democrat.⁷ Some false news websites are designed as satire. They want to provide you with a laugh. The Onion, for instance, which began as a printed newspaper in the late 1980s and now has a website, routinely mocks politicians. One recent headline read: “Aides Clip Toenails, Wash Hair of Mumbling, Bed sore-Ridden Trump As President Enters 155th Straight Hour Of Watching Cable News.” Few readers would believe that such a story was real, and the intent was not to deceive, and thus it might be a stretch to label the content false news rather than satirical news. The third reason false news is created is to deceive and thus to influence or reinforce people’s views. During the summer of 2016, several false news stories appeared that questioned Hillary Clinton’s health. One report suggested that she had dementia. Another suggested that a physician had confirmed that she had Parkinson’s disease. There were even reports that Clinton had died on September 11 and was replaced by a body double. It is difficult to know how many people were exposed to this misinformation about Clinton’s health (Clinton’s doctor pronounced her healthy and fit to serve as president), but these stories appeared to have had wide circulation. How Is False News Disseminated? Several websites have popped up in recent years that peddle in false news. Many of them have names that make one think they are legitimate news sources, such as The DC Gazette, The Boston Tribune, The New York Evening and Now 8 News (which sounds like the name of a local television stations). Many of these websites also resemble the websites of real news organizations. For instance, the New York Evening has sections on sports, technology, travel and health, along with U.S. and international news. Some of the false news websites contain disclaimers that the information provided has not been verified, but given their realistic-sounding names and formats that resemble the webpages of real news organizations, it is highly likely that many news consumers do not realize that the news is being fabricated. Yet relatively few people check these false news webpages on a daily basis like they might with the New York Times, CNN or Fox News.⁸ Rather, people are more likely to access the fabricated articles on these webpages through links, often obtained through social media. One social media website in particular, Facebook, has become the

key hub of false news distribution. In the three months leading up to the 2016 election, the top 20 false news stories on Facebook were shared more often than the top 20 real news stories from sites like the New York Times and The Washington Post.⁹ It is a friend's post of an enticing news headline on Facebook that draws one to click on a link and be transported to the false news website. Indeed, clicking may not be necessary; just reading the headline or first sentence of an article posted on Facebook may be sufficient to convey the message. Allcott and Genzkow provide several reasons why using social media is a particularly effective way to disseminate false news.¹⁰ For one, the costs of entering the market and producing "news" are both very low. There is no need to set up a sophisticated website or to hire well-trained journalists. Second, the format of social media makes it difficult for users to detect that a story is untrue. When people view a small piece of information in their news feeds or on their mobile phone, they do not have access to a broader set of information that might clue them that the news story is fabricated. Third, people's social media networks tend to be ideologically homogeneous (i.e., most people within the network agree when it comes to politics). Because of this, it is less likely that someone within the network will point out that the information is false. According to the journalist Craig Silverman, who reports on false news, fabricated news websites have recently tried several new tactics to try to get you to click on links to their stories.¹¹ Silverman speaks of a "local virus hoax" in which a story is made to seem as though it is taking place close to your home so as to generate more interest. For instance, a story might report that there was a mass shooting in Denver, while another version of the story might report that there was a mass shooting in Dallas and still another version might report that the shooting took place in Detroit. Another version of this tactic involves suggesting that a celebrity is moving to a particular city, e.g., Justin Bieber is moving to Des Moines, Iowa. A second tactic false news websites use is mixing real news with fabricated news. Perhaps the presence of legitimate news lends credibility to the website, making it more likely that you will believe the untrue story. Third, some fabricated news websites are mixing satire with the intentionally false. The satirical stories may draw you to the website where you will also encounter the fabricated news stories. Reporting has also revealed that many of the Russian-backed Twitter accounts that were active in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign first established themselves as trusted local news sources by using handles such as @TodayMiami and tweeting real news headlines. This tactic allowed them to develop a following before they started peddling false stories.¹² How Widespread Is False News? Although false news is produced and disseminated at all times of the year, many researchers are interested in understanding the role of fabricated news during the 2016 presidential election campaign, and thus our best evidence on how widespread it is comes from the study of that campaign. In short, scholars believe that false news was widely viewed during that campaign. One study of fabricated news dissemination on Facebook found that false

news stories that were beneficial to Donald Trump were shared 30 million times, and false news stories that were beneficial to Hillary Clinton were shared 7.6 million times.¹³ The authors estimate that these shares resulted in 760 million instances of readers clicking through and reading a fabricated story. That translates to about three stories for each American adult, which is a small number considering the total number of stories that each adult viewed during that time period. Of course, false news is not limited to the United States. Prior to the British general election of June 2017, fabricated news stories about Prime Minister Theresa May and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn were rampant.¹⁴ Indeed, Google and Facebook partially paid for a 25-person-strong “war room” of fact checkers in London that would weed through trending news stories and issue alerts to the (real) news media about the misinformation being spread. There is also evidence of Russians spreading false news in Finland, which responded by hiring social scientists who specialize in misinformation to train Finnish government officials on how to combat the fabricated news stories.¹⁵

What Is the Influence of False News? It is now clear now that Russia was trying to influence the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and one of the tactics used was generating false news stories that were distributed over social media. And a majority of Americans polled in September 2017 believed that Russian interference did indeed influence the election results.¹⁶ But did false news, generated by Russia or domestic sources, have any influence on the outcome of the presidential race? More broadly, what potential does exposure to fabricated news have to influence the public’s views on political issues? Answering these questions is not easy, but we can start to gain some leverage on answering them by considering reasons why false news might—and why it might not—be influential. One reason false news might be influential is because of how it is spread, namely, often over social media. When a message is disseminated by a “friend” on social media, it carries with it a social endorsement. Scholars know that one key feature of the message that makes it persuasive is the credibility of the source.¹⁷ Sources that are credible—seen as trustworthy and having expertise—are known to have more persuasive power. We often trust our friends more than people we don’t know because we believe they have no incentive to mislead us. Moreover, our friends often share similar life circumstances—if you are a college student then it’s likely many of your friends are as well. If you are a strong Democrat, it’s likely that many of your friends are as well. Thus, we infer that if a friend endorses something (maybe a fabricated story indicating that Donald Trump wants to eliminate all student loans), it must be relevant for him or her, and because you share similar circumstances, it must be relevant for you, too. Second, false news might be especially influential when it cues one’s partisan attachments. Americans are increasingly polarized nowadays. Instead of liking their own party and feeling indifferent to the other party, many like their own party and loathe the other party (a phenomenon also referred to as negative partisanship).¹⁸ In some ways, then, a fabricated article that

preys on one's ideological or partisan attachments is hard to resist. Even a Republican who should know better might believe an article that asserts that Hillary Clinton suffers from dementia or abuses dogs—just because that person is predisposed to dislike Hillary Clinton. You might think that people who know more about politics would be protected against these types of false beliefs, but it turns out that having high levels of political knowledge does not shield one from believing misinformation.¹⁹ There is another reason false news might be effective, and this is the fact that computer algorithms increasingly determine news placement. That is, the news judgment of professional journalists rarely determines what news is made most prominent on a social media site or in a news aggregator; rather, it is how many other people have clicked on or endorsed a story. Thus, stories that are popular (or provocative) among viewers can quickly move to the top of a webpage or become prominent in a Facebook feed—before skeptics and fact checkers have a chance to weigh in on their veracity. Yet there are important reasons to believe that false news may not be all that influential. The first one is obvious: many individuals just do not find the articles credible. Perhaps the claims made in the article are too outlandish for all but the most gullible to believe. How many people would really believe that a drunk school principal, a registered Democrat no less, defecated on the flag while children said the pledge of allegiance, as one article contended?²⁰ More generally, people's confidence in the news media is quite low. A Gallup poll from 2017 found that only 27 percent of Americans had “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in newspapers; the comparable percentage for television news was 24 percent, and the comparable figure for “news on the Internet” was 16 percent.²¹ This is important because the less confidence people have in the news media, the less likely they are to be persuaded by them. Trump's declarations against “fake news” may work to reduce the influence of articles in the *New York Times* or *The Washington Post* that are critical of him, just as he intends (which we discuss more explicitly in the next section), but it also may reduce the influence of completely fabricated news stories that are designed to look as though they have come from legitimate news organizations. We now turn explicitly to Trump's claims of “fake news,” and the broader phenomenon of news politicization. What Is the Politicization of News and/or Information? The politicization of information involves the strategic, selective use of facts or rhetoric to bolster a particular political agenda and arguments supporting it. This is accomplished, in part, by casting doubt on the truthfulness of evidence and arguments that undermine that agenda, creating public conflict. In short, actors seeking to politicize a particular issue for political gain will often work to decrease consensus in the public sphere by raising controversy. This is done by explicitly attacking both evidence and particular sources of information that counter the attacker's point of view in an effort to discredit both the evidence and its source. Many examples of politicization involve issues of science or technology. For example, despite widespread scientific consensus that climate change is real and poses a threat and that

genetically modified foods (GMOs) are safe, actors on the right (for climate change) and the left (for GMOs) have sought to politicize news and information about these topics in order to increase uncertainty and discredit scientific information. However, politicization can occur on a broad range of issues and can vary over time. For example, political scientist Arthur Lupia points to the use of child labor as an issue that was heavily politicized in public discourse in an earlier period but has moved from a contentious issue to a consensus, moral one today.²² Information politicization may be explicitly partisan but does not have to be. For example, vaccine skepticism arises from both the left and the right²³ with celebrities like Jenny McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., promoting concerns. While high-profile support for anti-vaxxer views certainly fueled additional public debate over vaccine safety, the politicized issue wasn't aligned with either party. During the 2016 presidential campaign, however, when Trump²⁴ and a few other Republican candidates also expressed concern about vaccination, some speculated that people's beliefs on the safety of vaccines would polarize along party lines as many citizens follow cues from leaders of the parties with which they identify.²⁵ This possibility has not played out yet, likely because the partisan messaging did not persist; if it had been repeated, it is more likely that polarization would have followed. For example, in 2017 President Trump took issue with National Football League (NFL) players kneeling during the national anthem, an act of protest against racism in the United States, and he continually and repeatedly mentioned kneeling throughout the fall. This attention and the media coverage of Trump's tweets against the players' kneeling corresponded with dramatic polarization of Americans' views of the NFL, with a 35-percentage point spike in the percentage of Trump voters viewing the NFL unfavorably following his comments.²⁶ Recent years have seen a rise in the politicization of information coming from mainstream news organizations and the politicization of the news media organizations themselves. To be sure, the politicization of news (and claims of media bias) is not new, as Chapter 4 details. Political scientist Jonathan Ladd argues that the age of a widely respected, independent media institution is more of a historical anomaly than the norm.²⁷ Overtly partisan newspapers were prominent in the nineteenth century, and trends in media fragmentation may simply be returning us to a partisan media age aided by explicit news politicization, which questions the notion that media can ever fully be unbiased. Republicans, in particular, have long questioned "the ability of an independent press to equally represent their views."²⁸ Barry Goldwater made news media criticism a central component of his campaign, and his supporters founded an organization called Committee to Combat Bias in Broadcasting and Accuracy in Media, which tracked media bias.²⁹ Other studies have found that Republican candidates³⁰ and talk radio hosts³¹ consistently and repeatedly claim media bias. In this light, Trump's claims of "fake news" are just an extreme version of earlier efforts to discredit information and organizations perceived to be more favorable to political opponents, namely, liberals.³²

Why Does Information Politicization Occur? As implied by the definition, efforts to politicize an issue occur because of a desire to promote a particular agenda. Information and news politicization might make sense as a political strategy whenever the information environment (and the organizations that control and distribute information) is perceived to be contrary to that agenda, especially if the information may affect the likelihood of the agenda's success. To some extent, a powerful, independent media always represents a challenge for political leaders no matter their partisan affiliation. One reason for this is because scrutinizing leaders and their policy proposals is part of the media's job. Moreover, the news media have a bias toward negative information (which stems in part from citizens' own preferences in paying more attention to negative than positive news). Political leaders, who would prefer to control the narrative, have therefore always developed strategies to deal with unfavorable media coverage. When national media scrutiny and/or evidence in the public sphere is unlikely to produce popular support for policy proposals, political leaders can try to persuade the public directly through campaign-style tours or through speaking to local media organizations, which tend not to be as harsh as their national counterparts (in part, because they have fewer resources and the reporters have less experience). President George W. Bush took this strategy in trying to persuade the public to favor social security reform, while President Barack Obama used it in pushing a deficit reduction plan. Alternatively, those wanting change might simply try to discredit the evidence or the media organizations themselves. By provoking controversy and promoting skepticism about media information that might have a negative impact on their goals, politicians or governments try to disrupt the information environment and/or to fragment public attention in order to distract from the traditional stream of information or from further developments that (if publicized without politicization) might otherwise hinder their agenda. Trump is often noted for his ability to disrupt media coverage—constantly provoking controversy in the public sphere, which in turn garners media attention, often taking it away from something else. For example, some claimed that Trump's tweeting about kneeling NFL players was a deliberate attempt to take media attention away from the federal government's botched response to the devastation in Puerto Rico in the wake of a hurricane. More broadly, the tactic of distraction is a classic strategy of authoritarian governments to keep attention away from negative developments.³³

How Is News Politicization Disseminated? Structural changes in media over last few decades—specifically the increasing number of outlets, which fragment public attention and decentralize the distribution of information, the rise of social media platforms and the speed of information dissemination—also make information and mainstream media politicization much easier. Through his Twitter feed, Trump can instantaneously and directly communicate with over 43 million people, many of whom are reporters who can further amplify those messages by repeating them in their stories. Armed with platforms

and technology to spread their own messaging, we might expect information politicization to increase as a strategy, further promoting partisan media. As described above, the politicization of mainstream news media and its information is spread through partisan media sources and social network platforms that allow for more direct and interactive communication between politicians and special interests and the public. In the earlier heyday of broadcast television, political leaders could still attempt to politicize particular issues through their campaign rhetoric, advertising and coverage in media, but there is no doubt that the avenues available to them today—especially those that allow for more direct, unedited communication—have greatly increased in number. How Widespread Is Information and News Media Politicization? It is challenging to quantify exactly how widespread efforts to politicize news are. One study examining news media reports from the 1988, 1992 and 1996 campaigns found that 95 percent of all claims of media bias reported in news came from elites who suggested that the coverage favored liberal or Democratic candidates. Moreover, the number of these claims rose over the three cycles (from 87 in 1988 to nearly double that—160 claims—in 1992 to 189 in 1996).³⁴ Quantifying Trump’s efforts to politicize news media through the use of the term “fake news” is also challenging, but limiting our investigation to his use of “fake news” on Twitter is much easier. Trump’s first tweet using “fake news” occurred in the early hours of January 11, 2017, in response to media reports that intelligence officials had briefed the president-elect and then President Obama on concerns over Russian interference, calling the media coverage a political witch hunt. Between that time and November 30, 2017, Trump used “fake news” in 157 tweets, which collectively were retweeted over 3.4 million times,³⁵ and the term “fake news” has spilled into the common vernacular. What Is the Influence of News Media Politicization? Research confirms that partisan elites can increase disdain for³⁶ and polarize attitudes about news media.³⁷ In addition, rhetoric about “fake news” may also make it harder for citizens to distinguish between real and fabricated news.³⁸ In October 2017, a poll by Politico/Morning Consult found that nearly half of voters, 46 percent, believed that the news media fabricated news stories about President Donald Trump and his administration.³⁹ Trump promptly took credit for this finding, tweeting, “It is finally sinking through. 46% OF PEOPLE BELIEVE MAJOR NATIONAL NEWS ORGS FABRICATE STORIES ABOUT ME. FAKE NEWS, even worse! Lost cred.”⁴⁰ Experimental evidence does not necessarily support the notion that Trump’s direct attacks on news media decrease trust in news among the general public overall; however, there is evidence to suggest that his attacks (along with articles merely mentioning the Russia investigation) decrease trust and confidence in media among his supporters in particular.⁴¹ One consequence of news media politicization, then, is the polarization of attitudes about news between partisans. This polarization can reduce trust in mainstream media organizations (and the information they provide) among some members of the public and

jeopardize journalists' ability to contribute to a shared public understanding of reality. Of course, these trends can spill over to affect expertise in areas beyond news, too. More broadly, evidence from a variety of contexts suggests that increased exposure to expert conflict results in more audience uncertainty, which increases both information overload and paralysis in decision-making among citizens.⁴² Broader Impacts While false news and news politicization may have the ability to influence people's thinking on specific issue—or influence their evaluations of specific politicians—there are some broader potential impacts of fabricated news as well. A primary concern is the ability of false news and news politicization to promote misperceptions among the public about what is true. There have been many studies that have looked at the ability of fact checkers or journalists to correct misinformation (and new research on combatting disinformation—intentionally false information—is growing). Much of this research is quite pessimistic about the chances of disabusing people of false notions. The chief reason for this is that people, when exposed to new information, tend to accept information that confirms their existing worldview. New information that challenges one's worldview—or information that comes from sources that challenge one's worldview—tends to be ignored.⁴³ Because of this, new information that challenges information gained from a false story may be ineffective in changing one's beliefs.⁴⁴ Ironically, attempts to correct the record—to fact check a story that contains misinformation—may only serve to reinforce that fabricated information in the minds of individuals who are predisposed to believe the story. One reason that corrections may be ineffective is that they repeat the false information, which only makes that information more familiar to the recipient. Research in social psychology suggest that as a piece of news becomes more familiar, it is more likely to be accepted.⁴⁵ Moreover, even if a correction is successful—that is, the recipient accepts that original information was false—this success may be short-lived, especially if the individual is exposed to the fabricated information again. People may be more prone to remember the fabricated information than the actual correction. While the correction of misinformation may be successful in some instances, it seems almost doomed to fail when the issue at stake is highly politicized. For example, fact checks on charged topics like healthcare and President's Obama birth certificate—two topics that deeply divide left and right in the United States—tend to exacerbate, rather than correct, misunderstandings.⁴⁶ On less politically charged issues, however, such as education spending, the potential for the correction to work is much higher.⁴⁷ The spread of false information and the politicization of real information can also undermine the quality of public debate. Adjudicating fact from fiction moves public discussion from discussion of substance and competing policy proposals on a given issue to debate over truth. Similar to the tension between journalists' covering tactics and strategy on the campaign trail as opposed to policy proposals and their potential impact, public debate over the veracity of key facts can focus limited public attention on the personal character and

motives of the sources rather than on the policy details that might better inform citizens about how particular actions may affect them and others around them. Finally, fabricated news and news politicization can corrode trust in journalism. As noted earlier, reducing trust in journalism is one goal of those who seek to politicize the news. It would be difficult for citizens to maintain trust in news organizations that are constantly being accused of bias and prevarication. More broadly, the spread of fabricated news—and warnings about false news and how to spot it—can make one question what, if anything, is true, reducing the perceived accuracy of news that is not false.⁴⁸ If one's Facebook feed is being filled by untrue stories, then it is no wonder that citizens might fail to trust news organizations—whether mainstream or not.

Combatting False News What can you as a news consumer do to avoid being taken in by a fabricated story? Probably the most important piece of advice is to consider the source. Is it a source you have heard of before? Is it a news organization that has existed for a long time, such as the BBC, the New York Times or NBC News? Even though you might quibble with the way the New York Times frames an article, it is in the business of getting the facts right. If you have not already heard of the source, then it is time to do some investigating. Is the source on the list of organizations that produce fabricated news that is maintained by snopes.com? In addition to considering the source, consider how you arrived at the article. Much of fake news is distributed over social media. If an article came to your attention because of a post on a friend's Facebook page, then you should be more suspicious of the article than if you arrived via a link from a website of an established news organization or a respected blogger. Third, consider whether other news organizations are reporting the story. Can you find verification of the information from elsewhere online? If only one website is reporting a “bombshell” piece of news, then it likely is not true. If it truly were a bombshell, then you'd find the article on the websites of established news organizations as well. Fourth, move beyond the headlines to inspect the content of the article. Most real news organizations will not use four exclamation points to end a sentence or use ALL CAPS!!!! Most real news stories will list a reporter and that reporter's email address (and that email address should not end in yahoo.com or gmail.com). Most real news stories will refer to people by name, that is, instead of just citing “the Dallas County sheriff” they will cite the name of the Dallas County sheriff as well. A lot of typos, poor grammar and misspelled words are also clues that the article might not be real. In addition, check the date on the article.

work to educate ourselves and help to stop the democratically harmful spread of disinformation. Doing so can help to build back trust in those news organizations that seek to be even-handed.

PRESIDENTS AND THE MEDIA IN A REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

Representative democracy is a multidirectional conversation between citizens and elected officials. Presidents play a preeminent role in this conversation, suggesting topics, promoting solutions and reacting to events. In order to play a role, the president's message must be received by the target, understood, seen as relevant and credible.¹ The Public's Need for News Many of the president's efforts fall into the category of "munication," that is, communication without the "co." If no one is paying attention, or sloughing off the messages as irrelevant or not credible, the president's efforts are wasted. It is the media that help identify issues, frame problems, outline solutions, and crystallize opinions. Effective conversations are based on the exchange of valid information. A fully informed electorate is a luxury to be sought but seldom reached: The founders of our country saw a well-informed citizenry as the bedrock of our system, and assumed that the communication among citizens and between citizens and elected representatives would take place in a way that lifted the best available evidence to the top, where it received more attention than all the noise below.² Unless we share some information it is impossible to carry on a meaningful political conversation. We need to define terms and share some assumptions about how the world works. These shared islands of understanding fill in the gaps between bits of new information we glean in the political conversation. The media play an important role in creating these shared understandings on which useful conversations are based. Few of us experience American politics directly. "Almost all of what Americans know about national politics, the U.S. Government, their fellow citizens, and the larger world is communicated through the media ... for practical purposes, media reality is political reality."³ In our vicarious viewing of politics and government we are dependent on media choices and interpretations. As Grossman and Kumar stated in their classic study, presidential "[r]eality as refracted through the lens of the news media is for most people their only glimpse at what is going on at the White House."⁴ It is hard to overestimate the importance of the media in a political system. "Democracies are fragile. ... They need informed and engaged citizens to survive."⁵ Citizens cannot form their views or make an educated choice among candidates without good information. The media are the only feasible way to spread objective information to the public. Relying on political leaders alone to raise issues and promote solutions threatens to provide biased information supporting current policies and regimes. Political participation has relatively little value in the abstract. Politics is a method by which societal problems are discovered and support for solutions created. From the individual citizen's perspective, participation is important when the issue is relevant to them and they have the tools to affect the outcome. If one cares little about an issue and its possible solution, participation is little more than a hollow ritual. On the other hand, failure to participate in the development and solution of an issue of personal interest creates frustration and dissatisfaction. There is such a thing as "rational apathy" when the individual has no interest in an issue that will not affect him or her and/or lacks the knowledge and tools to participate. Knowing that the issue has already been decided or that the system is completely stacked against your interests is an invitation to concentrate one's efforts elsewhere. It is the media that helps individuals

understand the issues under consideration, the potential impact of proffered solutions, and the tools for getting one's voice heard. Political observers both among the public and the media are tempted to ask, "Why can't the media and the president just work together to provide the information needed to understand what is going on?" Such a position ignores the inherent tension stemming from the different goals of each of the three players. From the public's perspective the goal is to "satisfice" one's information, gathering enough to understand realms in which they are interested. Few news consumers seek to maximize information for fear that it will overwhelm them. For many members of the news audience, the goal lies in reinforcing one's current opinions rather than challenging them. For the president, the goal lies in good media coverage to undergird his leadership capabilities. The media, on the other hand, seeks to make a profit by maximizing both the size and content of its audience. While this book will focus primarily on presidents in office, numerous commentators have pointed out that modern presidents are involved in a "permanent campaign," with every action taking into account either their reelection and/or the fate of their fellow party members in congressional campaigns.⁶ Drawing the line between presidents acting as presidents and them acting as candidates becomes more difficult to draw. In a representative democracy, the public plays a role in selecting, directing, and evaluating the president. Ideally the media "peels back the curtain," to provide the public the ability to carry out their task. In the words of George W. Bush, "We need an independent media to hold people like me to account."⁷ The President's Need for Media Coverage Presidents do not crave media attention for the sake of attention. Positive media attention has the potential for increasing the president's power relative to other political players and to eventually lead to the adoption of his preferred policy outcomes. Negative media attention, on the other hand, has the opposite effect, threatening to take resources away from the focus of the president and his staff on the issues in which they are most interested. The ability to use the media to set the agenda has the potential to enhance the president's success in Congress.⁸ Discussions of contemporary presidents' "permanent campaign" activity⁹ point out the difficulty of separating campaigning from governing. As Bill Clinton's press secretary put it: Campaigns are about framing choices for Americans. ... When you are responsible for governing you have to use the same tools of public persuasion to advance your program, to build public support for the direction you are attempting to lead.¹⁰ From the earliest days, presidents have used the news media to communicate with the public. At George Washington's request, his farewell address was published in a daily newspaper. Two centuries later, President Ronald Reagan chose the medium of the day—television—to give his farewell address.¹¹ President Jefferson played a key role in developing a new newspaper for the nation's capitol when he encouraged the creation of the National Intelligencer as an outlet to get his message to the people.¹² Presidents are acutely aware of the importance of positive media coverage and the support it generates among the people. President Clinton pointed out that the key to political success was the president's unparalleled "access to the people through his communications network."¹³ Clinton viewed positive coverage as the ability to "create new political capital all the time."¹⁴ His staff sought to "deliberately and

relentlessly communicate [the president's] program to the public."¹⁵ Presidential Approval A president's popularity, whether measured by specific public opinion polls or in general terms by the media, is more than a vehicle for massaging the president's ego or warning him of shortcomings in his performance. Popularity is "said to be a political resource that can help him achieve his program, keep challengers at bay, and guide his and other political leaders' expectations about the president's party's prospects in presidential and congressional elections."¹⁶ When the president receives positive coverage, his approval remains high, while negative coverage is associated with a decline.¹⁷ Correlation, though, does not necessarily mean causation. A president's news coverage may be negative because of declining popularity, rather than vice versa. It is also clear that high presidential popularity is associated with legislative success,¹⁸ but again it is not clear whether popularity leads to success or vice versa. Two decades ago, researchers concluded that "a president's overall reputation, and to a lesser extent, his apparent competence, both depend upon the presentation of network news programs."¹⁹ Today that is still true with television news being augmented by other news venues such as blogs and news alerts. Presidential approval by the public is an important power resource for a president. As one staff member put it, "When you go up to the Hill and the latest polls show [the president] isn't doing well, then there isn't much reason for a member to go along with him."²⁰ A member of Congress chimed in his support by saying, "The relationship between the President and Congress is partly the result of how well the President is doing politically. Congress is better behaved when he does well."²¹ There is a temptation to view seeking fame and adulation as a self-serving activity incompatible with the idea of unselfish public service. As far back as the Constitutional Convention, James Wilson argued that: the love of honest and well-earned fame is deeply rooted in honest and susceptible minds. Can there be a stronger incentive to the operation of this passion than the hope of becoming the object of well founded and distinguishing applause?²² Thus the promise of fame can be seen as a psychological motivator for presidents to do well. Policy Leadership Presidents have a choice of how they carry out their task as a national leader. They can deal with other power holders directly through a bargaining approach or they can attempt to use the media to indirectly put pressure on members of Congress and the bureaucracy by harnessing the power of the citizenry through "going public."²³ While few argue that presidents are not going public, there is considerable disagreement as to its effectiveness and consequences. Edwards²⁴ questions the ability of the president to change public opinion, arguing that the so-called "bully pulpit" is "more baloney than bully."²⁵ It may well be that presidents are "mainly effective when [they] are pushing Congress to do something the public already favors."²⁶ Farnsworth worries that the demands of going public encourage presidents to simplify issues, papering over the nuances and making compromise more difficult as the media focuses on who wins and who loses.²⁷ There is more consensus on the assertion that presidents use the media to set the policy agenda, even if they cannot control public attitudes (see Chapter 9). Agenda setting is crucial to presidents. "If presidents cannot affect news coverage of their top priorities, then they are even less likely to influence the public's priorities."²⁸ Lacking awareness of an issue means the lack of public opinion and the

motivation to act. As Maxwell McCombs put it, “If the media tell us nothing about a topic or event, then in most cases it simply will not exist on our own personal agenda or in our life space.”²⁹ No president uses only one approach, but they differ in the amount of emphasis they give to inside-the-Washington-Beltway bargaining versus broader public appeals through the media. Bargaining and the Media Even the bargaining model requires some use of the media. The targets for many presidential media initiatives are members of Congress or bureaucrats. Presidential statements carried by the media send signals as to what the president is willing to bargain over and his starting position. The media also play an important role in setting the national agenda, by pointing out problems in need of presidential attention (see Chapter 9) and by reporting public reaction to suggested solutions. Harnessing public support is often difficult. Media attention to the president and his preferences means little in the abstract. The goal of positive coverage lies in its potential to effect and activate the public. In his policy battles with Congress, the president attempts to use the media to put pressure on Congress to support the president’s policy initiatives. This two-step influence strategy is fraught with many challenges. Negative media stories may well undermine the president’s goals. The public may not be paying attention. The routines of everyday life often crowd out concerns for public policy. “For many citizens budgets are boring, lawmaking is tedious and international problems seem distant.”³⁰ Even if citizens are listening they may not be motivated enough to take action. For many, the costs seem too

THE WHITE HOUSE PR MACHINE

To a large degree, the White House is one large public relations organization designed to promote one brand (the president) and one product (the president’s policy preferences). The job of the White House communications staff is to “ensure positive news coverage and to mitigate the harm of negative stories through what is generally referred to as ‘spin control’.”¹ Concern about media coverage is omnipresent in the White House. “Although presidents have long worried about how they are portrayed by reporters, today’s hyperactive executives have turned what was once merely an area of White House concern into an overriding obsession.”² As one press secretary put it, just about everybody who has any serious, consequential role at the White House, from the chief of staff on down, has to be mindful of, cognizant of playing a role in how we are going to communicate, how are we going to present

our message, how we are going to put our best argument forward.... The modern presidency revolves around this question of how you use or how you penetrate the filter of the press to go directly to the American people, which is your ultimate source of political strength.³ Long-term White House correspondent Helen Thomas offered a more cynical evaluation, stating "Every day they work on a story of the day and how to shape it.... They don't believe in the right to know but people's right to know some things at some times."⁴ Presidents do not arrive in the Oval Office as blank slates. They are experienced politicians who have just come victoriously through a strategically successful battle. Ex-candidates "carry their campaign into the Oval [Office]."⁵ Media strategies that outside observers, presidential staff, and the president himself saw as effective in the campaign are likely to be continued once in office. "Campaigning is not the presidency, but it's definitely prologue."⁶ The campaign serves as a rehearsal for actions once in office. Anyone watching the 2016 campaign should not be surprised at President Trump's actions toward the media. He dealt with negative coverage by creating a blacklist of a half-dozen news organizations that were banned from receiving media credentials establishing a strategy he would carry with him to the White House. During campaign rallies, he also regularly encouraged his supporters to boo and demonized the mainstream media.⁷ As president Donald Trump kept up the attacks on the media and tried to freeze out certain disfavored outlets, such as CNN, by not giving their reporters the ability to ask questions. From the onset of his administration, the President Trump ordered his press secretary, Sean Spicer, "to conduct his first press briefing as a frothing attack dog."⁸ He bragged to his supporters that they were the "last line of defense against the media's hit jobs."⁹ As one publication editorialized, the White House should never be the arbiter of which media outlets are right and wrong, fair and unfair, acceptable and unacceptable. That goes against the grain of the Constitution, which establishes the press as the people's check on the government; if we lose that, we lose democracy.¹⁰ Without direct access to the president, White House reporters are severely handicapped in playing their intended role. Organizing for Action The White House communications operation has to perform four functions to be effective. "It advocates for the president and his policies, explains the president's actions and thinking, defends him against critics and coordinates presidential publicity."¹¹ Communications operations take on, or perhaps lead, the character of the rest of the administration. "Communications operations reflect the president they serve. The White House staff is not a complement to a president but a reflection of him."¹² Democrats such as Bill Clinton tended to emphasize flexibility and adaptability. Republicans such as George W. Bush opted for structure and control.¹³ At least part of this can be explained by the backgrounds of presidents and their staffs. Coming from a corporate background, Republicans value hierarchy and chain of command. Democratic presidents create organizations in which they serve as the focal point, with a large number of staff reporting directly to them.¹⁴ President Trump began his administration with a loose organization chart, but over time tightened the lines of authority. For much of the nation's history relations with the media and the commitment of presidential staff to press relations was a second thought. President William McKinley gave George B. Cortelyou the task of dealing with the media in terms of

providing information and reporting back press coverage among his other duties.¹⁵ The growth of the total White House staff facilitated the ability to designate more of them for media relations. When Franklin Roosevelt entered office in 1933, the White House staff numbered thirty-five. It has grown to over 400, with about 25% directly carrying out press-related tasks.¹⁶ President Trump has opted for a somewhat smaller staff (377), but pays them more than the larger (472) Obama total.¹⁷ No matter the White House structure, “[a]lmost all of the White House senior staff are concerned in one way or another with presidential publicity.”¹⁸ President Clinton’s press secretary Mike McCurry points out the “I’d say 25–30 percent of the paid White House Staff devotes at least two-thirds of its time to communicating and shaping the storyline.”¹⁹ A significant amount of staff time is spent “talking to the press, plotting press strategy, or reviewing how their latest efforts had played in the press.”²⁰ On the media side, presidents tend to be judged more and more by their effectiveness in dealing with the media as opposed to the impact of their efforts on solving problems. The Office of Communications

When it comes to formal responsibilities in dealing with the media, two White House offices stand out. While a clearly designated White House press secretary has been around since President Herbert Hoover’s term (see following discussion), the Office of Communications was not created until 1969 under Richard Nixon. From the outside, it may look like having a communications staff with a director and a press secretary and his or her staff means considerable duplication. In reality their jobs are quite different. Under President Clinton, George Stephanopoulos attempted to fill both positions but it ended up angering the press, which had become accustomed to direct access to the press secretary, a condition not amenable to a director of communications.²¹ Early on in the Trump administration, Sean Spicer tried to play both roles, but was overwhelmed with the duties.²² The pressure on the Director on Communications is intense. Turnover is relatively frequent. As opposed to the press secretary, communications directors work behind the scenes and are comparatively unknown outside of the White House community. They increasingly bring with them public relations more than journalistic experience (see Table 4.1). The communications director position encompasses a broad purview both in terms of tasks and time. The communications director deals with the long-term strategy of providing information to the entire range of media and coordinating the media outreach beyond the White House press corps. The Office of Communications also attempts to synchronize the president’s message from within the White House and among the broader executive branch. The press secretary, on the other hand, is on the daily operational firing line, providing information about emerging issues. As one long-time White House communications observer put it, “The press secretary and the communications director each have more tasks than he or she can accomplish. It is not possible for one person to successfully undertake both jobs.”²³

Communications Directors	Name	President	Tenure	Most Relevant Previous Work Experience
George Stephanopoulos	Clinton	1993	Political consultant	
Mark Gearan	Clinton	1993–1995	Campaign worker	
Don Baer	Clinton	1995–1997	Media lawyer/ journalist	
Ann Lewis	Clinton	1997–1999	Congressional staffer/ interest group activist	
Loretta Ucelli	Clinton	1999–2001	Journalist	
Karen Hughes	G.W. Bush	2001	Journalist/campaign worker	
Dan Bartlett	G.W. Bush			

2001–2005 Campaign worker Nicolle Wallace G.W. Bush 2005–2006 Journalist/campaign worker Kevin Sullivan G.W. Bush 2006–2009 Public relations Ellen Moran Obama 2009 Interests group activist Anita Dunn Obama 2009 Congressional staffer/campaign worker Dan Pfeiffer Obama 2009–2013 Government spokesperson/ campaign worker Jen Psaki Obama 2015–2017 Campaign press secretary Sean Spicer Trump 2017 Congressional and party information aide Anthony Scaramucci Trump 2017 Financier Hope Hicks Trump 2017–2018 Public relations consultant Sources: Matthew Kerbel, Dom Bonafede, Marth Joynt Kumar, and John L. Moore, “The President and the News Media,” in Michael Nelson (ed.), *Guide to the Presidency*, Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2008, p. 959; Dale W. Nelson, *Who Speaks for the President?* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998; updated by the author The director of communications usually operates behind the scenes, leaving the press secretary to serve as the public face of the administration. That does not always work. Anthony Scaramucci’s short term as White House communications director for President Trump arose out of two fatal errors on his part. In the first place, he showed considerable ignorance about what “off the record” means. He launched a profane attack on other members of President Trump’s staff, without having an agreement as to whether he could be quoted. About all the White House press office could say was that his words were “colorful.”²⁴ Second, he broke the cardinal rule for a press spokesperson: don’t become part of the story. The press spokesperson is charged with making the president look good, not to grab headlines, either positive or negative. President Trump turned to long-term aide and loyalist Hope Hicks as his next director of communications. After less than six months, she resigned after telling a congressional committee that her position required telling “white lies.” The pressure on the media operations has increased in recent years as media have changed. To a large degree, what a president gives affects what he receives. Presidents vary in their attentiveness to the news media. Presidents Ford and Carter “failed to appreciate the importance of courting the press.” Early images of Ford literally and figuratively “stumbling” were impossible to overcome.²⁵ President Carter tended to keep the media at arm’s length. Presidents who feed the media with reasonably relevant material from which to fashion a story are more likely to have their story told. Early on, President Clinton and his staff failed to fill reporters’ “days and nights with a continuous flood of press releases, briefings, and interesting stories about the president ... his family, appointments and policies.”²⁶ The twenty-four-hour news cycle places heavy pressure on the White House communications operations. In many ways, the term “twenty-four-hour news cycle,” underestimates the need for timeliness. The news cycle has in reality shrunk to minutes.²⁷ The White House is faced with the insatiable demand for information on an hourly basis as they attempt to “feed the beast.”²⁸ The demand is not only for information but for new information to keep the journalists’ stories fresh enough to sell them to their editors. The need to provide information on a constant basis requires the press office to establish rotations where everyone serves as a “duty officer” for some period of the day or night.²⁹ Avoiding the media is not a real option for modern presidents. They increasingly focus some of their staff resources to help meet the media’s needs, even when they feel coverage is unfair or inappropriate. The Press Secretary Serving as a presidential

press secretary is a high-pressure and high-visibility job. Errors may have significant consequences since what one says represents the president's thinking. Dealing with the day-to-day demands of the media requires full-time effort.³⁰ The Role of the Press Secretary The presidential press secretary is the first line of defense for the president, fielding questions and deflecting jabs. The White House briefing room is unintentionally symbolic with its fire alarm over the door since press secretaries spend the much of their time preventing, controlling public relations "fires." Farnsworth³¹ likens the press secretary to a "first responder to a crisis, sort of like a fire fighting crew.... Like firefighters entering a burning building, a press secretary has to be careful where he or she steps." Disclosing all the available information could make future decisions more difficult. The press secretary is more interested in putting out the "fire" than solving the long-term problem that caused it. In a classic case of standing "between a rock and a hard place," the press secretary stands between opposing forces, explaining, cajoling, and sometimes pushing both sides toward a better understanding of each other."³² The press secretary serves as a mediator between the media and the rest of the White House staff. He or she is often put in a difficult position of both advocating for the president and serving as an advocate for the press.³³ Neither side trusts the press secretary completely, suspecting that their loyalty is to their adversary. Too much catering to the media by the press