Media Affecting Public Opinion Essay, Research Paper

The media is an intricate part of American government, intertwined with the practice of democracy, but to what extent does the media influence public opinion? To answer that several aspects of media coverage have to be explored. The media is America’s basic resource for all the news concerning American politics. Also, the opinion expressed by the press influences the opinion adopted by the public. Lastly the issues the media deem important help set the national agenda and to affect the publics opinion of voting.

The most basic way the media influences public opinion is by offering knowledge about government decisions and access to government information. Daily the press delivers the raw information to the nation, who then in turn forms that into opinions. The media sends messages across the nation. Without the media it would take the public longer to become educated about governmental proceedings. Before the advancement of such media as the television, radio, and the Internet, a much smaller percentage of Americans were informed about the issues concerning the nation.

Another affective way the media impacts the public opinion is through agenda setting. Because of the vast number of issues plaguing America today, the press has to decide which they will cover and which they will not. Their reporting has a vital connection to what the public comes to believe are the important issues in the country. If the press repeatedly covers the gun control issue, then the nation itself comes to believe that it is significant. Because the nation sees it as being important, then it is introduced into legislature quite rapidly. The press possesses the capability to create the impression that certain problems are of greater urgency than others. Those certain problems are usually about political strategy, political scandal and the private lives of politicians. These tend to over take the less entertaining, but more substantial stories because the public is not interested in them and they do not make money for the news company.

One of the most ironic ways the media influences public opinion is by presenting the candidates personality through the use of television and radio. Could one honestly say that Abraham Lincoln might not be elected if he were running today. Lincoln was not a very attractive man and did not have a very refined voice. How would Lincoln have looked and sounded on television and radio? The public may be stubborn to admit it, but it is true; the nation judges possible candidates upon appearances and performances (mass media). If a presidential candidate could not speak in front of large groups, they could never be elected in today’s society. It would not matter that his or her policies were better than their opponents.

Furthermore, the media can influence public opinion is through their ability to convey an overall tone to their readers and viewers according to their own sentiments. Often a newspaper’s own feelings on a certain issue are expressed in their articles. When the public reads about such issues they can adopt the attitude which the media portrayed. The press may frame stories in a way that enhances the overall tone toward government and politics. Unfortunately the most common trend is to hold a negative attitude toward government. This negative tone has led to a national decline in voter participation. A greater portion of the country now attains a skeptical view of the American government.

However, News programs constantly bombard the public with campaign coverage that negatively affects the way people vote. The most noticeable effect the TV news media causes is a decrease in voter attendance at the ballot boxes. News coverage of political campaigns reduces voter turnout because of the negative campaign tactics used by candidates and their parties. Voter turnout has significantly dropped from 75 %-85% in during the 19th century to fewer than 55% in modern day elections (Lewis). The result of low voter turnout reveals a negative attitude towards politics from America’s citizens. The most effective discouragement to voting is exit polls that predict the outcome of an election or in modern terms “electronic forecasting.” Exit polling on or before Election Day has become the predominant method used by mass media in American politics for predicting outcomes of elections (Bishop). In most recent elections exit polling has grown into an even more complex mass survey medium with institutions such as Voter Research and Surveys of New York who provide polling results for massive television networks like ABC, CBS, and CNN. In addition to TV networks, many television affiliates, newspapers, and newsmagazines also use this polled data to inform the public. Since exit polls predict the winners of elections, vast numbers of citizens don’t even bother to vote because they already know who’s going to win and that their vote wouldn’t make a difference (Bishop).

Another reason that causes low voter turnout is news media coverage that broadcast negative campaign tactics politicians and their parties use to attack to opposing candidate or party. According to Laurence I. Barrett of Time magazine, “presidential candidates are sliding on their word of not using negative campaign tactics; in fact, negative advertising is becoming trendier among those running for election.” Negative campaigning in the news media is perceived by most as boxing ring where candidates can put on gloves and knock each others ideas or beliefs down. The most affecting aspect of negative campaign to the public is that candidates and parties only point out the opposing side’s flaws to avoid the issue at hand which often occurs in debates. Since negative campaigning causes a great deal of arguing between candidate, a great percentage of the public tends to separate themselves from the political process of voting because of the excessive attacks candidates inflict on one another. The public expects a degree of professionalism from running candidates that should not include negative tactics. They only discourage the public’s outlook on voting participation.

Lastly, public perception of a bias and favorable media also contributes to a reduction in the voting population. As early as the 1960’s, public perception of a bias media was first noticed; “however, current data suggest the American public views the media as increasingly less trustworthy…(Rouner)”. Partisanship of news groups also discourages people from participating in the political process because news groups may be supportive of one party and their beliefs giving only one side of an issue. More of the American population may be better influenced to vote if news groups would take a neutral position supporting only the facts and produce a non-bias broadcast. In addition to partisanship, the idea of media being bought by candidates or parties to influence the public can also diminish voter turnout. For example, a wealthy candidate can purchase large amounts of airtime trying to earn more of the public’s votes or simply a news affiliate that favors a candidate or party would donate more airtime to that candidate or party.

Guaranteed by the first amendment, the media will always be there to inform the public and to decide what issues are important. Americans rely more and more on this media to judge how our leaders campaign, govern, shape public policy, and communicate their ideas. Yet, the public expects a degree of professionalism from running candidates that should not include negative tactics incorporating the media. News coverage of political campaigns can reduces voter turnout because of these negative campaign tactics used by candidates and their parties. Exit polls that predict the outcome of an election and can cause the voters not to vote because they feel that they already know which candidate is going to win and they feel that voting is unnecessary. The public’s perception that the media can be bought to influence people to vote for a certain issue or candidate causes the voters to be swayed or influenced by the politician that has the money and the media coverage. The media influences the public and the government in positive and negative ways, but if the media was truly neutral they would not cause the negative views on voting.

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