

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
AND  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
Posc 150**

**PUBLIC OPINION**

I. CONTENTS:

- A. How the media affect the public's understanding of current events.
- B. Recent History
- C. Public opinion.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF NEWS PRESENTATION:

- A. Reprint from January 21, 2003.
- B. \*General proposition: the media are not politically biased nearly as much as they are biased against citizenship.
  - 1. This bias creates mass cynicism and apathy, which in turn favors some interest and groups.
- C. How the media package the news and present it to the public.
  - 1. ○**Government point of view:** official interpretations of events and issues are the primary source and topic of most news stories. One seldom finds independent accounts or analysis.
  - 2. ○**Personalization:** news stories are most frequently reported in personal terms. How individuals are affected by an event. Who won, who lost, who was hurt or helped, etc. Compare the number of statements about or by individuals with the number about policy content.
    - i. Check this on your own by looking at a news paper account of some congressional activity.
      - 1) Does it talk about the merits of the issue or who wins and who loses.
  - 3. ○**Drama:** Wherever possible the story's dramatic and emotional elements are emphasized. As the narrator talks what visual images are portrayed. What feelings does the story arouse? Are you angered, saddened, gladdened, etc. or are you "informed." Is coverage dispassionate or does it arouse your feelings?
    - i. Listen to theme music on news casts.
    - ii. What kinds of pictures dominate a typical night on the networks news broadcasts.
  - 4. ○**Hostility to institutions and government:**
    - i. The media frequently dwell on corruption, waste, ineptitude, silliness, and the like when describing government and public officials.
      - 1) Stories of scandals, corruption, waste, ineptitude
  - 5. ○**Fragmentation:** stories are usually short, superficial, devoid of contextual explanation. They don't show how events are interconnected

---



---

and skim on background information.

6. ○ **Politics over substance**: the "political" aspects of news (who did what to whom) frequently overshadow the "why" parts of the matter.
  - i. ○ **Horse racing and campaigns**: Look at the coverage of election campaigns. What is stressed, who's ahead, who's behind or stands on issues? Who has raised the most money or what the candidates proposal really entail? Who endorsed whom or what the advantages and disadvantages of various platforms are?
    - 1) Usually, it's the first.

### III. HOW THE MEDIA AFFECT THE PUBLIC:

#### A. The consequences:

1. ○ **Remoteness**: there is usually little effort to show the individual how a controversy relates to his or her personal life or interests.
2. ○ **Mystification**: reports usually do not explain issues or policies or controversies to the reader or viewer. Because emphasis is on personalities and drama, the substance is often left out.
3. ○ **Disinterest and apathy**.
  - i. People are confused and frustrated so they become cynical and less inclined to care seriously enough to take politics as seriously as other activities.

### IV. A BRIEF HISTORY LESSON:

#### A. \*Thirty year history of Democrat and Republican attempts to understand the public.

1. The fate of the Democratic candidates in the 1970s, 1980s.
  - i. Hubert Humphrey (1968), George McGovern (1972) seen as too *liberal*
  - ii. Jimmy Carter (1976), a non-ideological "outsider," the exception that proved the rule.
  - iii. Walter Mondale (1984) and Michael Dukakis (1988) also considered too liberal.
2. Reaction to Ronald Reagan
  - i. ○ Reagan's victories interpreted as
    - 1) evidence that the country was becoming or had become "conservative."
    - 2) Democrats were actually too "liberal" or "soft" on social issues.
  - ii. The need to raise money.
3. ○ Democratic Leadership Council (DLC)
  - i. Bill Clinton, chair
  - ii. Joseph Lieberman, recent chair.
  - iii. \*Moved Democrats to the "Center."
  - iv. See, for example, "New Democrats Online" at

<http://www.ndol.org/>

4. 1992: Clinton wins the presidency.
  - i. Tax increase and health care fiasco put Democrats on the defensive.
5. ○Newt Gingrich and the “Contract With America.”
  - i. 1994 Republicans take control of both branches of Congress.
  - ii. Contract promises peaceful “revolution.”
    - 1) See Readings below.
6. Democratic rebound
  - i. Elections of 1996 and 1998 convinced Republican to tone down the rhetoric.
  - ii. Impeachment
7. “Compassionate conservatism” and George W. Bush.

V. PUBLIC OPINION:

- A. So what is the state of public opinion.
- B. Difference between “door-step” opinions and considered views.
  1. Many have a small factual basis from which to work.
- C. Pragmatism over ideology.
  1. Americans are not generally ideological in the usual sense of the word.
  2. They oppose “big” government in the abstract but favor many, many big-ticket and expensive specific programs.
    - i. They also support regulations aimed at preventing commonly perceived threats.
- D. Pragmatically “internationalist.”
  1. They are reluctant to get involved militarily abroad and dislike foreign aid.
  2. Support for war with Iraq is instructive.

<i>What to do if inspectors find ...</i>	<i>Military Force</i>		
	<i>Favor</i>	<i>Oppose</i>	<i>DK</i>
<i>Iraq is hiding weapons</i>	76	17	7=100
<i>Iraq is hiding ability to easily make weapons</i>	46	47	7=100
<i>No weapons, but Iraq can't prove otherwise</i>	29	63	8=100
<i>No weapons, but inspectors can't assure Iraq has none</i>	28	62	10=100

Figure 1: Support For War

3. People seem to want a coalition and are sensitive to costs.

	August 2002	Sept 2002	Oct 2002	Now
<i>Favor or oppose military action in Iraq</i>	%	%	%	%
Favor	64	64	55	68
Even if allies won't join	30	33	27	26
Only if allies agree	30	25	23	37
Don't know	4	6	5	5
Oppose	21	23	34	25
Don't know	15	13	11	7
	100	100	100	100
<i>Favor or oppose even if U.S. suffered thousands of casualties</i>				
Favor	42	48	--	43
Even if allies won't join	21	24	--	21
Only if allies agree	18	19	--	20
Don't know	3	5	--	2
Oppose	41	36	--	48
Don't know	17	16	--	9
	100	100		100

Figure 2: Support Depends On...

4. Many wonder if Bush has made the case.

<i>Has Bush explained clearly?</i>	-----2002-----				Jan 2003
	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sept</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Dec</u>	
Yes	37	52	48	48	42
No	52	37	45	45	53
Don't know	11	11	7	7	5
	100	100	100	100	100

Figure 3: Doubt About the "Case"

5. Figures are from the Pew Research Center. (See below.)



VI. NEXT TIME:

A. Elections

B. Reading:

1. Required: "Contract With America" in the Cyber Reserve Room.
2. Suggested: Pew Research Center, "Public More Internationalist than in 1990s" (<http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=166>)