THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION AND THE MEDIA

THE OXFORD HANDBOOKS OF AMERICAN POLITICS

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THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION AND THE MEDIA

Edited by

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and

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Preface

Public opinion and the media form the foundation of the representative democracy in the United State. They are the subject of enormous scrutiny by scholars, pundits, and ordinary citizens. This volume takes on the "big questions" about public opinion and the media in popular debates and in social scientific research. The volume brings together the thinking of leading academic experts, delivering a cutting assessment of what we know about public opinion, the media, and their interconnections. This volume is particularly attentive to the changes in the mass media and communications technology and the sharp expansion in the number of cable television channels, websites and blogs, and the new social media, which are changing how news about political life is collected and conveyed. The changing dynamics of the media and public opinion has created a process of what we call *informational interdependence*. The extensive interconnections exert a wide range of influences on public opinion as the processes by which information reaches the public has been transformed.

In addition to encompassing critical developments in public opinion and the media, this volume brings together a remarkable diversity of research from psychology, genetics, political science, sociology, and the study of gender, race, and ethnicity. Many of the chapters integrate analyses of broader developments in public opinion and political behaviour with attention to critical variations based on economic status, education and sophistication, religion, and generational change, drawing on research that uses survey data and experimental designs. Moreover, the book covers the variations in public opinion and media coverage across domestic and foreign policy issues.

As academics well know—and as we tell our students—every project takes longer than you think. This book was no exception. We thank Dominic Byatt, Jennifer Lunsford, Sarah Parker, and Elizabeth Suffling at Oxford University Press, and copy-editor Laurien Berkeley, for their patience and superb assistance in moving this volume to publication. We are especially grateful to our good colleague George Edwards for proposing to Oxford that we undertake this volume. We share credit for what we have put together with him, but take full responsibility for any shortcomings. Stephen Thompson and Michael Scott provided able assistance as we scrambled to finish the volume, as did the proofreader, xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx, and indexer, xxxxxxxxxxxxx.

We thank most of all the outstanding scholars who agreed readily and with good cheer to write chapters for us. We stole their valuable time so that we and this volume's readers would benefit from their highly engaged research and collective expertise.

Columbia University's Department of Political Science, its Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy, and the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and Department of Political Science have provided us with strong

academic homes and support. We began work on this volume while Shapiro was finishing the 2006/7 year as a Visiting Scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation, which supported work that is reflected in this volume's final chapter regarding political leadership, "pathologies," and partisan conflict.

And as always, each of us is indebted to our soul mates, Nancy Rubenstein and Julie Schumacher, who were patient as we worked on this volume—and let us know that.

R.Y.S.
L.R.J.

New York and St Paul
August 2010

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PART IV

ISSUES AND POLITICS

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CHAPTER 36

PUBLIC OPINION, THE MEDIA, AND ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

JASON BARABAS

There have been profound economic changes around the world in recent years. To what extent are citizens aware of important developments that influence their economic well-being and does that awareness have political ramifications? Scholars devote considerable attention to studying the relationship between variations in leading economic indicators (e.g., inflation, unemployment, gross domestic product) and political outcomes such as electoral support or executive branch approval. By one count there have been almost 400 studies documenting linkages between the economy and voting (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). However, there are lingering disputes about the level at which this occurs—i.e., personal ("egocentric," "pocketbook," or "egotropic") versus national ("sociotropic")—as well as the degree to which citizens look forward or backward (for example, Clarke and Stewart 1994; Duch, Palmer, and Anderson 2000; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Evans and Andersen 2006).

The heterogeneous effects of the economy on political behavior could signal that individuals are basing their impressions upon different pieces of information or that they process the same information differently. In other words, perceived economic experience may matter as much if not more than objective changes, especially when economic perceptions deviate from reality (for example, Conover, Feldman, and Knight 1986; Duch, Palmer, and Anderson 2000; Hetherington 1996; Goidel and Langley 1995). Findings like these underscore the role of the news media. Whether by radio, newspapers, television, or the Internet, information about economic affairs often originates in the mass media even though the news is sometimes disseminated through interpersonal contacts (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Mutz 1992).

This chapter is primarily concerned with economic welfare as it relates to public opinion and the mass media. The term "economic welfare" refers to the financial well-being of the citizens within in a nation. According to the United States Census Bureau, personal or household income are widely regarded as the best measures of the degree to which people are well-off. But other factors also contribute to economic well-being, such as how people are faring at the household level, possession of consumer durables, housing conditions, and whether basic needs are being met. Moreover, it is the case that governmental programs or policies, such as Social Security, directly alter annual income for recipients and their families. In that sense, the scope of economic welfare is potentially quite large.

Here I focus on the scholarly evidence linking economic welfare experience or trends to public opinion via the mass media. Of particular concern is the extent to which the mass media inform citizens about economic matters and how that knowledge alters political preferences or decisions. To be sure, social policies influence economic outcomes. For example, laws that restrict abortion can alter economic status (Haas-Wilson 1993). Similarly, some policy arenas, like health care, almost certainly generate economic consequences, but tracing the complex pathways could easily take up a separate volume. Thus, the primary focus of this chapter is on policies, programs, or macroeconomic changes that directly affect economic outcomes, especially in America. After a review of the literature as well as its limitations, I consider some possible avenues of future research and the implications for democracy.

Existing RESEARCH

Social science journals contain numerous studies examining economic welfare, public opinion, *or* the mass media. Works integrating all three are far less common. Part of the reason stems from the difficulty of discerning media effects. For years scholars have debated the influence of the mass media, offering judgments ranging from no effects to substantial effects (for example, Klapper 1960; Bartels 1993; Zaller 1996). Although few dispute that the mass media signal which issues are important (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987), media effects can be much more subtle when it comes to informing the public and how that knowledge shapes political preferences. In this section I review the some of the scholarship relating to economic welfare, opinions, and the mass media, moving from the broadest areas of income inequality and political economy to specific changes in macroeconomic and fiscal policy.

Income Inequality

Some of the most dramatic changes in economic welfare concern the rising income gap in the United States. Since the 1970s, wealthy families have earned disproportionately large and ever increasing shares of the annual national income as compared to middle-income or poorer Americans (Danziger 1994). The US experienced inequality trends like these before, most notably during the 1920s. But following the Second World War, income growth was much more equitable. Thus, in many respects, the trends in income inequality serve as a good starting point because they bear directly upon economic welfare.

Discussion of the inequality trends appears in several works, including two prominent books. In the first, titled *Unequal Democracy* (2008), Larry Bartels notes that from the 1970s to 2000s income growth was concentrated among those who are in the top 5 percent of the income distribution. A key question, though, is whether Americans are aware of these trends. In a second book, titled *Class War? What Americans Really Think about Economic Inequality*, Professors Benjamin Page and Lawrence Jacobs report on the results of a nationwide inequality survey. They write, "Large majorities of Americans from both political parties and from across the income spectrum are alarmed about the high and increasing levels of inequality and want less inequality of incomes and wealth" (Page and Jacobs 2009, 20). In a poll Page and Jacobs commissioned in 2007, an astounding 81 percent of Americans knew that the income inequality gap had increased over the past twenty-five years (2009, 39).

From these patterns one might assume that the issue of income inequality appears often in the press and filters into public consciousness. As Page and Jacobs state, "Economic inequality has moved from chats in faculty lounges and academic conferences to headline news" (2009, 13). Although Page and Jacobs did not set out to conduct a systematic media content analysis, they do highlight a few key examples. For example, they mention a speech that President George W. Bush gave on January 31, 2007, at Federal Hall near Wall Street, in which he acknowledged that "income inequality is real [and has] been rising for more than twenty-five years." They also unearth newspaper accounts of the income trends that feature quotations from ordinary citizens who expressed great unease about inequality.

However, even though Bartels (2008) agrees with Page and Jacobs that the American public displayed high levels of awareness of the income gap at the start of the twenty-first century, he points out how little awareness has changed over the years. In particular, Bartels reviewed more than fifty national surveys since the 1960s that featured questions as to whether the rich are getting richer vis-à-vis the poor. Americans, it seems, often report that the income gap is on the rise even when it is not. In fact, perceptions of economic inequality were no more common at the end of President George W. Bush's first term than during Gerald Ford's administration in the 1970s. Thus, public beliefs about the gap between rich and poor seem consistently skewed toward pessimism.

These findings raise the question of how well the media inform people about income inequality differences. Regrettably, there have been no comprehensive studies of this question. Suggestive evidence, however, appears elsewhere in Bartels's book. Specifically, Bartels examined respondents within reputable national surveys and found that information strongly conditions whether people acknowledge increasing income differences. Well-informed liberals recognized and regretted the changes in inequality. Informed conservatives displayed the opposite pattern (Bartels 2008, 159). Thus, political information magnifies partisan differences in perceptions of income inequality. Yet these findings, while certainly provocative, do not directly implicate the mass media and they leave several questions. Do partisan subgroups use different media? Do various media sources treat the topic differently? And finally, does the public receive and comprehend information about economic inequality? Regrettably, we do not know much about the system that created such opposing views of inequality, although it would be logical to suspect that the mass media play an important role (see Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008 for more).

Political Economy

Many studies fall under the rubric of political economy, but arguably the ones with the most relevance to economic welfare concern the partisan differences in economic outcomes. That is, if political control of the government produces differences in economic performance, then that process is worth considering from the perspective of the mass media and public opinion. Here, again, there are some provocative scholarly findings but little when it comes to studies of mass media coverage or public awareness.

For example, Bartels states unequivocally that "Economic inequality is, in substantial part, a political phenomenon." He adopts this view because, "On average, the real incomes of middle-class families have grown twice as fast under Democrats as they have under Republicans, while the real incomes of working poor families have grown six times as fast under Democrats as they have under Republicans" (2008, 3). In other words, the changes in income inequality—in the direction of increasing concentration—have been concentrated under Republican administrations. Bartels discovers that under Republican administrations, real income growth for the lower- and middle-income classes has consistently lagged behind the income growth rate for the rich, and well behind the income growth rate for the lower and middle classes under Democratic administrations (Bartels 2008, 30; also see Smith 2007, 185, and Hibbs 1987).

Despite scholarly findings like these over the last few decades, it is unclear whether these extraordinary data patterns make it into the media and, in turn, register in the consciousness of Americans. It could be that the trends are simply too one-sided for mainstream journalists who are trying to present "both" sides of the story. Assuming news audiences did not get lost in the statistical techniques used to generate these facts, Republicans probably would not appreciate stories documenting the subpar economic experience during periods of Republican control. Allegations of "liberal bias" would likely ensue. Nevertheless, these findings, to the extent that citizens encounter them with an open mind, might have a persuasive effect.

Macroeconomic Changes

Given the strong relationship between inequality and which party holds political power, it seems logical to explore the degree to which media coverage of economic experience affects voting behavior or related forms of public support. After all, if unemployment goes up, then it is typically the case that general economic welfare declines. The same may be said of other macroeconomic indicators, such as changes in the overall indicator of economic activity—the gross domestic product—or measures of inflation and consumer sentiment. Aggregate economic indicators like these have been used in studies relating economic changes to voting, presidential approval, or other political variables (for example, Monroe 1984; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001). Yet studies explicitly incorporating the media are much less common.

For example, the title of one prominent media effects article by Larry Bartels, "Messages Received: The Political Impact of Media Exposure" (1993), conveys his main point succinctly. Individuals who report using the media have different opinions on a range of attitudinal measures compared to people who do not use the media or at least those who use it less. The irony, though, is that there is no explicit consideration of the messages that were reportedly received. Instead, Bartels uses a sophisticated modeling approach, one designed to correct for error-prone media measures, to infer the presumed distinctiveness of the media messages over a six-month period of the 1980 presidential campaign (i.e., between February and September). Given that the study uses panelists, in theory all changes can be attributed to what transpired between surveys (i.e., the media and other campaign-relevant information). This provides some of the most compelling evidence that exposure to the mass media influences opinions, especially for candidate perceptions (e.g., where Reagan or Carter stood on issues as well as how well they would handle economic affairs). However, the effects are much smaller or insignificant in the domain of economic and ideology-based policy attitudes.

All of that might lead some to wonder whether the media have an effect on politics in the realm of macroeconomic changes, but evidence of the mass media's role typically takes one of two paths. First, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) demonstrated in laboratory experiments as well as in analyses of survey opinion data that media content influences which problems are rated as most important. Beyond setting the agenda, Iyengar and Kinder found that media coverage also "primes" individuals when it sets the basis for political evaluation. For example, when people see stories on inflation or unemployment, they are more likely to evaluate political leaders on those issues.

Second, the strong evidence of a link between economic experience and politics (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007) leads to the question of how citizens learn of the changes. Many studies hint that the media influences economic opinions. In one of the earliest works, Shapiro and Conforto (1980) found that changes in consumer prices and the percentage of the workforce unemployed affect the public's perception and evaluation of economic conditions, and that this popular assessment in turn affects disapproval of presidential performance. However, they make a common assumption that is shared by many others: that information about the economy is obtained from the news (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992, 605; Shapiro and Conforto 1980, 52). In other words, the media connection was implicit—which is not unreasonable, especially in an era when media content databases were not widely available.

Later works added the media explicitly. For example, Mutz (1992) finds that individual perceptions of unemployment are related to the amount of newspaper coverage devoted to the unemployment issue. To the extent that media coverage influences individuals, it typically means that the mass personal economic experiences play less of a role. Thus, in contrast to the literatures on inequality and political economy, the mass media now factor regularly into studies of the macroeconomy and politics (for example, Shah et al. 1999). Probably more so than in any other area of economic welfare, there appears to be a firm connection between the media and politics in the sphere of macroeconomics.

However, reality is largely filtered through the media. Sometimes the filtering process mirrors reality, and sometimes it does not. One of the more stark cases of the latter occurred in the 1992 presidential election. Hetherington (1996) showed that overly negative coverage of the economy helped contribute to the defeat of President George H. W. Bush in 1992 (also see Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998 or Holbrook and Garand 1996). Similarly, Goidel and Langley (1995) studied the same 1992 election and showed that news coverage affects economic perceptions even after controlling for actual economic conditions. They also discovered that journalists tend to cover negative economic conditions more closely than positive economic conditions, particularly in non-election years. Moreover, citizens respond asymmetrically to economic information in the news by overweighting bad economic information (Soroka 2006). All of this further elevates the role of the mass media in structuring beliefs and attitudes about how the nation is faring economically.

Economic Policy

Economic welfare, in the form of inequality or macroeconomic changes, is related to public policy decisions. In other words, government actions affect the financial well-being of citizens (Page and Simmons 2000). As such, it is helpful to work on the issue from the other direction. Instead of considering forms of economic awareness, one could look at levels of knowledge or opinions pertaining to the governmental programs or policies that are among the most responsible for the economic welfare of the public.

Many observers argue that one of the most important economic welfare programs in the United States is Social Security. In the years following the creation and implementation of Social Security, the 1950 elderly poverty rate was above 30 percent. In the following decades, seniors experienced dramatic gains in their economic standing. By 1965 the poverty rate for Americans over age 65 was cut nearly in half to 17 percent (Gilens 1999). These trends continued to the point where seniors are much less likely to be poor than adults under age 65; decades ago, older citizens were twice as likely to be economically impoverished.

While these poverty reduction statistics are a success from a policy point of view, journalists and politicians regularly raise the specter of Social Security bankruptcy. An example appeared in the writings of a columnist for *U.S. News & World Report*, Emily

Brandon, who started an article on Social Security with the following: "Retirees often sign up for Social Security payments as soon as possible, at age 62. And who can blame them? In just seven years, program costs will exceed tax revenues, according to the most recent Social Security Board of Trustees report. And the trust fund is expected to be exhausted in 2037" (Brandon 2009). Statements like these are ubiquitous in the Social Security debate (Jerit 2006), but they are also misleading, especially when taken out of context.

The key issue concerns what happens when the "bankruptcy" year arrives. According to the estimates of the trustees who run it, the Social Security program will have the ability to pay roughly three quarters of benefits even after the financial doomsday arrives. Most people, however, believe "bankrupt" means the program will be in financial ruins, which is inaccurate. As it turns out, these perceptions are shaped by media coverage, particularly the type of words used. Experiments confirm that some synonyms that journalists use to describe the financial condition, including "bankrupt," "exhausted," or "run out of money," as well as dozens of other terms used widely, cause people to overestimate the severity of the problem (Jerit and Barabas 2006). All of this means that media coverage plays an important role in shaping perceptions, in this case misperceptions, of a major program central to economic welfare.

There are other programs that influence economic welfare, most notably a collection of means-tested benefits for able-bodied adults commonly thought of as "welfare." Programs thought to fall under the banner include Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, which replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children as well as food stamps and Medicaid. Welfare is not especially politically popular and it is racially charged (Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1995). In a review of more than forty years of news coverage, Gilens (1999) argues that the mass media contribute to public opposition by depicting the poor as atypically black and undeserving, especially since the late 1960s (also see Clawson and Trice 2000; Kellstedt 2003). The notion that media coverage drives support for welfare also enjoys support in a study by Schneider and Jacoby (2005), although welfare attitudes did not seem to moderate much after the much publicized welfare reform efforts of the Clinton administration (Soss and Schram 2007). While the links between media and attitudes are somewhat indirect, these studies generally support the idea that the media shape public opinion, at least in regard to welfare.

Social Security and related welfare programs are examples of government spending programs, but fiscal revenue policies, such as taxes, also influence economic welfare. Many assume Americans hate taxes, but they display a surprising degree of support for using tax money to pay for specific policies such as job training, health care for children, food stamps, or retirement security (for example, Cook and Barrett 1992; Page and Jacobs 2009). Furthermore, there is heterogeneity with respect to types of taxation. Attitudes toward taxes—income, sales, and property—are related to actual tax rates in the states (Bowler and Donovan 1995; see Hibbs and Madsen 1981 for cross-national patterns), although scholars have not said whether these patterns reflect media coverage of tax policies in each locale (but see Campbell 2009 for data on variations in campaign ads mentioning taxes).

However, elite rhetoric, particularly on the political right, shifted in the US toward an increasing focus on economic policy and tax cuts (Smith 2007; also see Campbell 2009). Some of the most dramatic changes in tax law were detailed by Bartels (2008), who studied the Bush tax cuts of 2001 and 2003 as well as the repeal of the estate tax (also see Rudolph 2009). The cost to the federal treasury of the tax cuts was estimated at $4.6 trillion. The benefits were also concentrated on the upper-income tier (Bartels 2008, 163). Amazingly, though, in the years following the tax cut enactment, 40 percent of public had not thought about the tax cuts. Bartels (2005, 23) attributes tax cut support to "unenlightened self-interest," and he states, "Most of the people who recognized and regretted the fact that economic inequality has been increasing nevertheless supported President Bush's tax cuts" (Bartels 2008, 163).

In his analyses, Bartels focuses on the role of political information, indirectly implicating the mass media. He found that better-informed people were more likely to express an opinion and they attached more importance to the 2001 tax cut. Better-informed people were also more likely to recognize the party positions on the issue. Overall, support for tax cuts drops as levels of information rise for all respondents. However, Republicans at any information level support tax cuts while Democratic support drops off as they know more (Bartels 2008, 183; Lupia, Levin, Menning, and Sin 2007). Bartels continues, "As in the case of the Bush tax cuts more generally, this pattern of support leads one to wonder what considerations have led so many people to embrace policies that are so clearly contrary to their material interests" (2008, 202). Lower-income people mistakenly believe that the estate tax will apply to them. In reality, it is concentrated on people in the upper-income tiers, but we do not know whether this fact was publicized widely in the media.

However, in the case of the estate tax, there is reason to suspect that information from the mass media may not matter. Bartels found that better-informed people were slightly more likely to favor the estate tax repeal (2008, 208–13; but see Rudolph 2009). Thus, making citizens more informed does not alter opinions in this instance. Yet the information measures that Bartels relies upon—a range of facts unrelated to the policy in question as well as subjective interviewer ratings—leave open the possibility that a different combination of the facts, presented in a compelling format, might alter preferences.

Future RESEARCH

At this point it might be helpful to transition from the existing literature on economic welfare, opinions, and the media to relatively uncharted territory. A common theme so far has been the need to add explicit measures of media content in an effort to study media effects. This topic is covered in depth elsewhere in this volume (see Chapter 9, by

Jerit and Barabas). However, there are several other paths that seem ripe for researchers to pursue. In each, scholars should rethink how the topic has been studied and whether the assumptions, methods, or approaches of the past have limited what is known or what is possible to know.

Biased Information Processing

In studying public opinion about economic affairs, it is important to establish a firm factual basis for financial conditions. The problem, though, is that political preferences may shape perceptions of reality rather than the opposite. This is an issue that has recently vexed scholars working in the field of economics and politics.

The problem was summarized by Lewis-Beck, Nadeau, and Elias (2008) with the following hypothetical example. Before an election, Republican identifiers will tend to favor the candidate from their party. If a Republican occupies the presidency, they will tend to see the economy as better than it is, presumably because they credit the Republican management style. As a result, there should be a robust correlation between economic perception and vote choice. The relationship, while certainly strong, is not necessarily causal. A variety of studies have proposed this basic criticism (Anderson, Mendes, Tverdova, and Kim 2004; Evans and Andersen 2006; Wlezien, Franklin, and Twiggs 1997).

The logic behind the causality critique is that instead of moving from facts to opinions, it could be that people do the opposite. That is, political preferences tend to shape how people look at the world. Within political psychology, the phenomenon is called "motivated reasoning" (for example, Kunda 1990; Redlawsk 2002; Rudolph 2006; Taber and Lodge 2006), and it occurs when affective judgments lead individuals to reject information inconsistent with their prior preferences. Such findings contradict the claims of scholars who steadfastly maintain that economic perceptions are unbiased and highly accurate (for example, Anderson and O'Connor 2000; Haller and Norpoth 1997; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001). However, others disagree since individuals display little factual knowledge about real economic conditions (Holbrook and Garand 1996; Conover, Feldman, and Knight 1986, 1987). Such discrepancies remind us of how public opinion in the aggregate can seem reasonable or rational even with individual-level errors (Page and Shapiro 1992). Nevertheless, since the existing linkages are largely associational, it is hard to determine the causal ordering between opinions and economic experience. It may be that the relationship flows from experience to opinions, but often scholars lack conclusive evidence.

To get around this problem, one potential solution is to use panel data. The idea is that if one can pin down partisan impressions before the moment of evaluation, or at least hold them constant, then it should be possible to clarify the causal orderings. Unfortunately, though, teams of scholars have tried panel data and their studies point to different conclusions. One group, headed by Lewis-Beck, Nadeau, and Elias (2008), suggests that endogeneity is not a problem; that is, once the reciprocal influence of party identification is purged with panel data, economic perceptions are even stronger predictors of voting

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behavior. The other camp, led by Larry Bartels (2002), shows that Democrats and Republicans arrive at starkly different conclusions about the same objective macroeconomic trends such as whether unemployment or inflation improved during the Reagan administration. Partisanship, it seems, strongly colors incumbent evaluations. Thus, there is some ambiguity in the literature on this point even in the panel studies.

To adjudicate these differences, it might be possible to combine panel surveys with media content data. Another possibility would be to construct "within-survey/within-subjects" estimates of media effects by comparing the responses of individuals on several questions covering the same topic in the same survey, some of which receive media coverage and others of which do not (Barabas and Jerit 2009). In either case, however, it will be helpful to include meta-attitudinal measures of opinion strength and uncertainty. For example, under a Bayesian updating framework (for example, Gerber and Green 1999; Barabas 2004), we would not expect factual beliefs or opinions to change much in the face of media messages if the new information lacks precision or if the prior beliefs are held with conviction. Thus, it may seem as if members of the public are not responding to messages in the mass media even when they are actually quite sensitive to it. Importantly, though, it is wise to measure the uncertainty of the media messages as well as individual-level uncertainty. That means, once again, that theoretical clarification depends in large part on isolating the media messages in the information environment.

Which Economic Activities, Facts, or Policies?

Thus far the discussion has centered on prominent economic outcomes as well as the policies that lead to them, but what about understudied aspects of economic welfare? In particular, the stock market is a major source of economic activity that shapes economic welfare. However, studies of financial markets are, relative to the voluminous literature on economics and politics, fairly uncommon. As one might guess, then, studies integrating media coverage are even rarer. Some articles rely on market disruptions that were highly publicized, such as the effects of the 1998 Russian currency crisis and how stock market volatility altered public support for Social Security privatization (Barabas 2006), but again there is no explicit media component.

At any rate, most studies using macroeconomic variables tend to show that people react to changes in national economics rather than their own pocketbook. However, it could be that people politicize more personal forms of economic activity, such as stock market participation. The logic here is that much more so today than in the past, citizens are expected to be financially savvy. Written into public policy are programs like Flexible Spending Accounts (FSAs), which require individuals to accurately forecast how much health care spending they will incur over the next year. Similarly, Health Savings Accounts (HSAs) and Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs) demand individual decisions about where to allocate investments (Barabas 2009). Of course, many citizens delegate this task to investment professionals. However, scholars need to probe the degree to which the mass media convey basic financial information that will help citizens navigate the economic world.

Connecting Economic Facts, Beliefs, and Policy

Can citizens make linkages between their values and beliefs on the one hand and their policy opinions or voting decisions on the other? In other words, can citizens make enlightened decisions in a modern democracy? The extent to which they do will likely affect the quality of political representation and their economic welfare. For example, some of the macro-level statistics on economic inequality presented earlier are a product of differential patterns of earnings in the economy. To what degree is the public aware of this? Page and Jacobs (2009) conclude from a national survey that Americans are relatively accurate about the annual incomes of factory workers, sales clerks, and small shop owners, but they regularly underestimate the annual incomes of doctors, surgeons, and corporate executives.

The question from a mass media perspective is whether individuals are encouraged to connect the dots. That is, to what extent are Americans told that income inequality is growing, that there are huge differences in pay rates, and that public policies like tax cuts exacerbate those trends? To the extent that any of these are covered at all, a story about CEO compensation might appear in the business section while inequality trends could be buried in the national section and a piece on tax cut proposals might appear on the front page. Moreover, each of these stories could be scattered across publications or media. In short, citizens probably get isolated doses of economic information, but whether they can link the various pieces together to inform political opinions remains uncertain. Political advertisements sometimes fill this void, connecting facts, or at least innuendos, to persuade voters about candidates. Campaign ads may be emotionally or visually compelling, but one might question whether this is the best way for individuals to receive political information. If ads reinforce existing opinions or fail to provide diverse perspectives, they are unlikely to stimulate high-quality policy debate.

Conclusion

Deliberation in modern democracies takes place from time to time in issue forums or town hall meetings (Barabas 2004; Mansbridge 1980; Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini 2009). However, we delegate a lot of serious policy discussion to the mass media (Page 1996). While it is too early to generalize about how much news is devoted to economic welfare, it is probably fair to say that it is not as much as, say, coverage of entertainment or sports. One might argue that to help citizens make informed political choices, the nation needs more coverage of economic trends and the policies are responsible for these changes. Moreover, scholars also need to continue their efforts to document the degree to which the mass media alter opinions in the arena of economic welfare.

Over a decade ago there was a call for a more citizen-oriented form of journalism, also known as "civic journalism" or "public journalism" (Glasser 1999; Merritt 1997; Rosen 1999). Perhaps the time is right for "public policy journalism." Public policies are more complex and far-reaching than ever before. There needs to be more consciousness raising on the part of journalists, not only by including the public in the debate, but also through press coverage that places a premium on factual presentation as well linking public concerns, beliefs, or preferences to policy outcomes. Government policy dramatically alters economic fortunes. Do the media help citizens make connections between their values, beliefs, facts, and preferences? In particular, there is a need to look for times when the media highlights a pressing problem and the best solution. Of course, "best" is in the eye of the beholder and proposals for more policy-oriented media coverage are likely to bump up against two countervailing journalistic trends.

The first set of impediments to having journalists take a more active role in policy-oriented news coverage is that of norms of media objectivity. The term "objectivity," outside of the media, is usually thought to mean focusing on the facts without impressions, personal emotions, or prejudicing normative statements about what should take place. Within the media profession, objectivity typically means presenting both or multiple sides (Graber 2010; Bennett 1996). But is it possible to always have two sides of the story, even when the preponderance of the factual evidence points overwhelmingly to one side? For example, a media story reporting on the vast differentials in economic growth under Democrats or Republicans will likely lead to charges of media bias, presumably by the Republicans given the empirical evidence reviewed earlier. In that sense, media objectivity norms are probably well suited for preferences or policy solutions rather than factual descriptions of the status quo. Of course, strong partisans will undoubtedly argue about what constitutes reality, but in the end it would be helpful from the standpoint of democracy to have a common set of basic economic welfare facts.

A second impediment concerns audience dynamics and ownership. News is driven by audience tastes, and it is increasingly the case that citizens can change the channel to more entertaining formats (Prior 2007). Since many news providers are for-profit corporations, there are incentives to eschew public policy minutiae in favor of tantalizing coverage (Bagdikian 1997; Bennett 1996; Graber 2010). It is also the case that audiences seek out news channels that tend to confirm their preexisting beliefs (for example, Morris 2005; Stroud 2008). Thus, it may be hard to bring about the kind of news coverage that promotes public deliberation on topics like economic welfare.

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