

SECOND EDITION

THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

MEDIA AND POLITICS IN A DIGITAL AGE

RICHARD M. PERLOFF



THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

What impact do news and political advertising have on us? How do candidates use media to persuade us as voters? Are we informed adequately about political issues? Do 21st-century political communications measure up to democratic ideals? *The Dynamics of Political Communication: Media and Politics in a Digital Age, Second Edition* explores these issues and guides us through current political communication theories and beliefs by detailing the fluid landscape of political communication and offering us an engaging introduction to the field and a thorough tour of the discipline. Author Richard Perloff examines essential concepts in this arena, such as agenda-setting, agenda-building, framing, political socialization, and issues of bias that are part of campaign news. Designed to provide an understanding and appreciation of the principles involved in political communication along with methods of research and hypothesis testing, each chapter includes materials that challenge us by encouraging reflection on controversial matters.

Inside this second edition you'll find:

- Expanded discussion of conceptual problems, communication complexities, and key issues in the field.
- New examples, concepts, and studies reflecting current political communication scholarship.
- The integration of technology throughout the text, reflecting its pervasive role in the political spectrum.

Accompanied by an updated companion website with resources for students and instructors, *The Dynamics of Political Communication* prepares you to survey the political landscape with a more critical eye, and encourages a greater understanding of the challenges and occurrences presented in this constantly evolving field.

Richard M. Perloff, Professor of Communication, Political Science, and Psychology at Cleveland State University, has a very successful persuasion textbook with Routledge, now in its sixth edition (2017), as well as an earlier scholarly text on political communication (1998). He is well-known for his scholarship on the third-person effect and theoretical integrations of media influences. A Fellow of the Midwest Association of Public Opinion Research, Perloff has been on the faculty at Cleveland State University since 1979 and served as director of the School of Communication from 2004–2011. Taking scholarship to the public arena, he has had many letters to the editor in *The New York Times* and op-ed columns for *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*. He is an inveterate follower of political communication, reading the news each day in a coffee shop following a morning swim.



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THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Media and Politics in a Digital Age

Second Edition

Richard M. Perloff

Second edition published 2018
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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First edition published by Routledge 2013

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Perloff, Richard M., author.

Title: The dynamics of political communication : media and politics in a digital age / Richard M. Perloff.

Description: Second edition. | New York : Routledge, 2017.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017024427 | ISBN 9781138651647 (hardback) | ISBN 9781138651654 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Communication in politics—United States. | Mass media—Political aspects. | Digital media—Political aspects. | Political campaigns—United States. | United States—Politics and government.

Classification: LCC JA85.2.U6 P467 2017 | DDC 320.01/4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017024427>

ISBN: 978-1-138-65164-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-65165-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-62442-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman

by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Visit the companion website: www.routledge.com/cw/9781138651654

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Acknowledgments

I want to first thank Routledge's conscientious staff who have provided me with support and reinforcing comments as I worked on this second edition. Thanks to Nicole Solano, Routledge's communication publisher, for the warm, gracious support. She has made me feel appreciated, in the tradition of long-time publisher Linda Bathgate. Thanks also to Kristina Ryan, editorial assistant at Routledge, for being on top of details and her reinforcing messages. Thanks are also due to Autumn Spalding for her painstaking and ever-so-patient work on copyediting.

I also appreciate the willingness of my colleagues in the field to indulge me as I sent them sections of this book. Thank you for the excellent scholarship you contribute to the field. I appreciate the comments of Kevin Coe, Michael X. Delli Carpini, James N. Druckman, Frank Esser, Lauren Feldman, David Greenberg, Douglas B. Hindman, Bruce Hardy, Kathleen Jamieson, Kate Kenski, Hoon Lee, Mitchell S. McKinney, Douglas M. McLeod, Matthew C. Nisbet, Pippa Norris, Raymond J. Pingree, Dvahan V. Shah, Jesper Strömbäck, Jennifer Stromer-Galley, Talia Stroud, Emily K. Vraga, and Dannagal Young. Thanks in particular to Bruce I. Newman, William L. Benoit, and Weiwu Zhang for their reinforcing, helpful comments.

Thanks again to Sharon Muskin for her professionalism and beyond-the-call-of-duty conscientiousness in her work on the aesthetics and production of this book, even in the final stages when she was abroad, two continents from home. This book could not have been completed without her painstaking dedication.

Thanks also to Rashelle Baker of the School of Communication for her balanced perspective and engaging sense of humor, always welcome. In addition, I want to thank the students of my political communication classes at Cleveland State—the students too many to mention, but all memorable—for your inspiration, fondness for the material, and compassion for the problems that afflict America.

viii Acknowledgments

On a more personal level, I appreciate the inspiration and broad perspectives taught me by my late father, Robert Perloff, who loved politics and would have loved talking about Donald Trump's style and foibles. We miss the chortles that would have accompanied my dad's following the 2016 campaign. Thanks to my mother, Evelyn Perloff, for serving as a role model for what I do, with her working, working, working motif and loving support. Thanks are also due to my in-laws, Selma and Gerald Krevans, for their incisive comments about politics and their New York flair that gives them a particularly canny and witty approach to the political world.

And thank you Michael, for combining wit and wisdom in our many conversations about the political inequities you are on track to redress, Cathy for your indomitable spirit in your prodigious political journalism, and Julie for continued, kind support during the long hours over weeks, months, and a couple of years when this book was written, rewritten, and, in the interlude between contentious elections, finally completed.

Richard M. Perloff
Cleveland

Preface

Americans have many views about politics, some thoughtful, others goony, still others reflecting the divisions that characterize an increasingly fragmented country. They have plenty to say about politics and the media, much of it unfavorable. Opinions are the oxygen of democracy, so that's fine. The problem is getting past our opinions and grasping the larger context in which political communication occurs. During a time when citizens are increasingly distrustful of democratic institutions, dissatisfied with their leaders, and communicating about politics in increasingly visceral ways on social media, it is important that people have a broader appreciation of the democratic foundations of our society and, in particular, a more thoughtful, penetrating understanding of the media and politics, which influence so many aspects of contemporary life.

This book, guided by theory and research, addresses these and a wealth of other issues, providing an introduction to the cross-disciplinary field of political communication. Politics and political communication are nothing if not controversial, as even a momentary recollection of the searing 2016 presidential campaign illustrates. This book navigates the shoals of controversy, invoking theory, research, and normative concepts to illuminate our vibrant, but flawed, political communication system.

The text is designed to introduce students to the main concepts in the field, the focus and distinctive contributions of political communication, crisscrossing issues of political communication processes and effects, and normative perspectives that offer guidance. One must draw limits in discussing political communication. This book is about politics and media in America, with a focus on the presidential election. However, it calls on research from scholars across the world, as well as philosophical concepts that cut across borders.

In writing the book, I tried to keep it current, interesting to read, and lively; at the same time, the emphasis is singularly academic, with a focus on appreciating intricacies of

political media processes and effects, core theories, research findings, methodological caveats, and the complex, sometimes distressing conundrums of political media in an increasingly fractious media age. A theme is Pascal's observation that people do not show their "greatness by being at one extremity, but rather by touching both at once." Thus, I take pains to present a panoply of political, theoretical, and philosophical perspectives, while staying grounded in democratic norms of justice, accountability, and civic, deliberative public discourse. I want to debunk common myths, lay out the complex foundations of political communication, illuminate what we know, and call on the nation's historical past to clarify how political media of today depart from, and draw on, the media of decades and centuries past.

The second edition of *The Dynamics of Political Communication* builds on the first, but is, in many ways, a different book, with new concepts, more research, and an intellectual sophistication befitting our scholarly field. The second edition is characterized by these additions and changes:

- Chapter 1, updated with a lively introductory retrospective on the 2016 presidential election, includes an expanded discussion of definitions of political communication, with more discussion of mediatization, enhanced discussion of social media, and an overview of comparative political communication.
- Chapter 2 provides a more comprehensive examination of democracy, deliberative democracy, and corrosive effects of polarization.
- Chapter 3 continues the introduction to the field of political communication, with updates, especially a new section on the zeitgeist of contemporary political communication scholarship.
- Chapters 4 and 5, focusing on political knowledge and socialization, contain an up-to-date review of the strengths and shortcomings of online news effects on citizenship, along with new sections on hyperreality and cultivation.
- Chapter 6 covers both agenda-setting and agenda-building, with a fresh example inaugurating the chapter and new research on online media agenda-building effects prominently discussed.
- Chapter 7 offers greater discussion of conceptual foundations of framing theory. It replaces the hegemonic and indexing sections with a discussion, more appropriate to political communication, of the political psychology of the recent election: Donald Trump's populist framing, why it was effective, and the different underpinnings (economic, cultural, prejudice-based) of his electoral support. The chapter also discusses Hillary Clinton's framing, thus putting the 2016 election in a larger context that transcends a particular election.
- Chapter 8 is devoted to presidential election campaigns past and present. It contains new sections on the history of presidential persuasion, spin, and political marketing. The chapter provides embellished discussion of social media's role in the

presidential campaign, eschewing a “rah-rah” approach and evaluating its functions and dysfunctions.

- Chapter 9, with its focus on political news bias, provides a thorough overview of the contemporary news environment, complete with a discussion of ideological websites, Facebook, fake news, White House denunciation of the press, and flagrant examples of political gender bias, along with journalistic complexities. A new chapter, Chapter 10, is devoted exclusively to press coverage of the presidential election, permitting more discussion of classic storylines, polling (including 2016 polling controversies), and the time-honored lack of coverage of policy issues. Chapter 11, now focusing on the broader nomination campaign in a more cohesive fashion, examines the outsized effects polls had in cable network debates that exerted an unprecedented winnowing effect on the presidential nominations.
- A final section, focused on political persuasion, begins with Chapter 12, which includes a description of macro political science voting models and a much-expanded discussion of selective perception and selective exposure. Beginning with a telling anecdote about psychological selectivity, the section provides an in-depth research-based examination of selective exposure to congenial information in a digital age, looking at supportive research, exceptions to the selectivity rule, and normative implications. A new section follows, examining an important aspect of political persuasion: the content and effects of presidential language. The section profiles Ronald Reagan’s rhetoric, discusses presidential language effects on policymaking, and examines presidential language in an age of 140 online characters, for good and for ill.
- Chapter 13 on political advertising, updated with new research and 2016 applications, now includes a discussion of Citizens United and campaign finance, looking at the controversial Supreme Court decision from both liberal and conservative perspectives. Chapter 14 on presidential debates includes content analytic research, consideration of primary election debates, new critical perspectives on classic debates—Kennedy-Nixon and Ford-Carter, and normative implications.
- There is full discussion of the 2016 election—populism, why Trump won, his incendiary frames, Clinton’s popular vote victory, the email controversy, and voter anger—but examined through the frameworks of political communication scholarship. Agenda-setting, framing, news storylines, and political advertising are harnessed, conceptually and with a focus on new research, to explain the election, while also placing it in a larger context.

The book is reorganized, with less focus on determinants of non-political news (formerly in Chapter 10) and transfer of material on polling and campaign finance from an omnibus chapter (formerly Chapter 12) to appropriate chapters on these topics in the book. The organization, I think, is more cohesive, with a strong focus on distressing problems, conflicting, paradoxical aspects of political communication, and the need to

appreciate contradictions and different ways of viewing political media in America. The chapter conclusions provide integrative summaries focused on these issues.

There are four parts of the book. The first part consists of a broad introductory chapter, with explication of basic definitions, and a philosophically focused second chapter. The second part encompasses Chapters 3–7, and moves from the field of political communication through citizenship and core theories. The third part, Chapters 8 through 11, focuses on communication in the presidential election, taking readers on a historical tour, examining political news bias, polls, storylines, and the nomination process. The fourth part, Chapters 12–14, examines political persuasion, with an examination of persuasion effects, political advertising, and presidential debates. A postscript takes stock of the 2016 election, evaluating it through normative lenses. The postscript describes challenges of democracy in a no-holds-barred online media age and closes on a cautiously optimistic, but sobering, note.

The overall result is a better structured, more scholarly text that, I hope, continues to offer multiple perspectives on political communication in ways readers can appreciate, enjoy, contest, and contemplate.

PART ONE

Foundations



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CHAPTER

1

Introduction to Political Communication

PROLOGUE

Before the Justice Department appointed a special counsel to investigate connections between President Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and Russian officials, before Trump tried to persuade the FBI director to shut down an investigation of a former national security adviser, and before he fired the FBI director on suspicious grounds, there was unabashed jubilation among his supporters about his ascendance to the presidency. As Trump swiftly sought to dismantle Barack Obama's long-standing policies on the environment, health care, and immigration with his typical bravado and braggadocio, his base felt vindicated, thrilled that change they thought would be muzzled by the Establishment class would finally occur. Yet his unconventional, untrammelled leadership style and statements seemed to repudiate long-standing American values, terrifying his opponents and confirming the worst of their fears about the mercurial president. As the White House was besieged with rumors, accusations, and distractions from its promised policy agenda during the spring of 2017, leading Republicans expressed concerns about Trump's volatile leadership style, typified by his emotive, rapid-fire tweets.

Trump's strategic use of social media during the 2016 campaign rewrote political communication history, with the most unfathomable aspect his stunning Electoral College victory early in the morning of November 9, 2016. No one saw it coming, except maybe his wife, Melania, who confided long before the election, with utter confidence in her prophetic ability, "If you run, you'll win." The pundits, pollsters, even a leader on Donald Trump's staff, who on the night of the election, told a CNN reporter that it would take a miracle for Trump to win, were dubious until the end. A wildly successful, flamboyant billionaire businessman, big-city real estate magnate and reality television star, who during the campaign could speak harshly of other Americans (yet always had the back

of White working class voters), lost the popular vote, but won a convincing Electoral College electoral victory on November 8, 2016, becoming the nation's 45th president.

It was an election of firsts: the first woman nominated for the presidency by one of the two major political parties; the first person in American political history to capture the presidency without having served in public office or as a general in the U.S. military; and the first time, in an acerbically negative campaign, that so many adrenalized Twitter posts reached so many citizens.

Politics is full of unexpected events, and 2016 was a freight train carrying combustible containers of ideological fury and frustration, long simmering, that turned politically consequential during the nomination and general election campaigns. It was also a bizarre campaign, characterized by Trump's insults, charges of sexual assault, an FBI investigation of Hillary Clinton, her bitter denunciations of the Republican standard-bearer, a parade of mini-scandals, evidence of Russian meddling in the election, dizzying falsehoods and untruths surrounding the diffusion of fake news—a political funhouse of mirrors “characterized by an erosion of surety, bizarre and inscrutable subplots worthy of an airport bookstore spy thriller” (Fausset, 2017, p. A10). Trump's campaign circumvented the political elites who dominated the nomination and brought to the fore issues like free trade that had been neglected for years. The campaign also stirred the political cauldron of young people, enchanted by Bernie Sanders, the 74-year-old grandfatherly (gruff, but fiery) populist, who challenged Hillary Clinton from the political left, and inspired thousands of supporters across the nation (see Figure 1.1). His adherents demonstrated their enthusiasm for Sanders at large rallies and in social media donations that averaged \$27, as Sanders repeatedly emphasized in an effort to highlight the grassroots nature of his liberal support.

Although Clinton's workaday campaign paled in excitement when compared to Sanders's crusade, it was significant in producing the Democratic Party's first nomination of a female presidential candidate, who announced her candidacy in April 2015 with a 2-minute video that described the heartfelt stories of diverse Americans and ended with her declaration that “everyday Americans need a champion. And I want to be that champion.” A campaign that began with the resolve to extend her success in 2008 continued through an early campaign visit in 2015 to a Chipotle restaurant in suburban Toledo, where (perhaps because of the dark sunglasses) she went unrecognized, incognito as she ordered a chicken burrito bowl, carrying her own tray. It ricocheted this way and that as she navigated through the shoals of her arguably self-generated and press-magnified tsunami of credibility-eroding news stories about her controversial private email server, soared during a compelling convention acceptance speech, barreled across the country in the fall, with her combative criticism of Donald Trump, tumbled in the wake of a questionable decision of the FBI director to reopen his investigation of her emails, and



Figure 1.1 The 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign captivated many young people, offering a political outlet to express discontent with politics as usual. While Sanders was not an avid user of technology, his supporters were, and they harnessed social media to mobilize voters, building an unlikely groundswell of support, raising issues that transformed the presidential campaign.

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culminated on Election Day with the thrill so many women experienced when voting for a woman who could be president, crying with glee, like Amanda Rafferty who on the day of the election told her 9-year-old daughter, Maeve, that “there’s nothing in this world you can’t do” (Lyall, 2016, p. 3).

About a year and a half earlier, on June 16, 2015, another candidate inspired hopes of a different sort, with Trump’s announcement at—where else?—Trump Tower that he was running for president, emphasizing what would become signature lines: “Our country is in serious trouble. We don’t have victories anymore.” You couldn’t ignore him, and the media made sure we didn’t, with more press coverage of Trump than any other candidate during the nomination period, raising questions about news judgment in a ratings-starved social media age (Patterson, 2016). There he was, with the bodacious hair, all-knowing grin, the cocky smile, “the king of zing” (Bruni, 2015, p. 3), “the presidential candidate that reality TV made” (Grossman, 2015). The star of *The*

Apprentice television show was attracting crowds like no other candidate more than a year before the election. He wasn't the first candidate to capitalize on the once-strange, now quotidian, marriage between media and politics. The media-politics symbiosis had been building since Richard Nixon appeared on the television comedy *Laugh-In*. It grew when Ronald Reagan, famous for his movies (including the alliterative *Bedtime for Bonzo*), became the great communicator president; expanded when Bill Clinton belted out a melody on his saxophone on a late-night variety show in 1992, and broadened when Barack Obama ignited social media with an iconic Will.i.am music video and its own social media network, MyBarackObama.com. Now came Trump, the tweeting presidential contender.

He began the campaign with bravado, his message of economic populism attracting tens of thousands to rallies, filling ballrooms, with people shouting "USA! USA! USA! USA!" emphasizing how much they liked his honesty and refusal to utter the politically correct, Washingtonian statement. But over the course of an unconventional campaign dominated by tweets, voluminous news coverage, and fiery primary and general election debates, Trump offended many women and minorities, even threatened to imprison his political rival, an unprecedented promise even in the dirty domain of American politics. But he confounded and surprised experts by winning support from scores of marginalized, dissatisfied voters in battleground states, inspiring with promises of bygone American greatness millions who had been wronged by the system, voters who recognized his flaws, but seemed to believe that he alone, the blue-collar billionaire, might—just might—have the moxie to offer salve to their economic hardship, cultural anxiety, and (in the view of critics) racial animus. He said what he thought, tweeting so controversially his aides pried away his Twitter privileges like a child at the end of the campaign, sniffing strangely during a presidential debate and prowling the stage during the second debate so insistently that it became fodder for a *Saturday Night Live* satire.

"What do you expect?" a political editor asked, with seemingly bemused resignation. "It's politics: Weird things happen all the time" (Somaiya, 2015, p. A14)—although perhaps not this weird. The campaign circus was a constant for 18 months: publicity stunts (Republican Rand Paul made a film of himself cutting up the tax code, and put the scene on his campaign website); Americana political culture (Clinton's gaining the endorsement of 500 sex workers, most from Nevada brothels who proudly proclaimed they were "Hookers 4 Hillary"); pundits prognosticating (frequently incorrectly), along with the inevitable endorsements from celebrities (Kim Kardashian and Kanye West for Clinton, Spike Lee and Miley Cyrus for Sanders, and Dennis Rodman and Mike Tyson for Trump). When the host of the *Today* news program, Matt Lauer, interviewed Trump for a special campaign program on foreign policy, it showcased the "forced marriage of entertainment and news. The host of NBC's morning show interviewed the former star of its reality show 'The Apprentice,' and the whole thing played out as

farce” (Poniewozik, 2016). If ever there was a candidate who appreciated the seamy, entertainment-driven nature of contemporary political media, it was Trump. Eschewing the old-style (circa 2012) approach of showcasing issue positions via strategically crafted sound bites, Trump came at the media with a new approach: “Give them a big, messy show with a regular stream of action, and they will come with their cameras and won’t turn them off” (Rutenberg, 2016a).

Welcome to 21st-century American politics, an arena in which communication—conversations, advertisements, Fox, Facebook, Snapchat, and all the white-hot, acrimonious political posts—occupies center stage. Candidates still give speeches, of course—plenty of them—but they are pre-planned to get covered in television and, afterwards, candidates pose for the inevitable selfies, where taller candidates can stretch out their long arms like they are selfie sticks. You may catch a candidate at a rally, and it’s always exciting, but the mainstay of the campaign is media, the modality by which candidates, journalists, and citizens experience the candidate. Politics is ceaselessly mediated, or Facebooked or Twittered, or whatever social media term you want to place in the past tense. Can you think of a political figure—candidate, elected official, or president—whom you have seen or spoken with in person? For some, the answer is yes—a rally for a favorite candidate they stood in line for hours to see. But for most others, the answer is no.

Isn’t what you know, believe, and feel about politicians based on what you have gleaned from the multitude of media? This is one point on which conservatives, liberals, radicals, and even rabid conspiracy theorists agree. The media, broadly defined, are the place in which politics happens, “the center of gravity for the conduct of politics” (Jones, 2010, p. 23). As communication scholars remind us, “politics is carried out today in a multimedia environment that operates 24/7 and includes online and traditional media supplemented by entertainment shows as well as more typical venues such as news and political talk programs” (Kosicki, McLeod, & McLeod, 2011, p. 550).

Nowadays we cannot talk about politics without invoking media, and we cannot understand contemporary media without appreciating the role they play in the political system. A candidate can’t mount a credible campaign for office without crafting an image, and an image is conveyed, disseminated, and constructed through the multiplicity of media. Images, alas, can be deceptive and superficial, designed to brand candidates as smart, likable, and with just enough anti-Washington bluster to win over voters who profess to be sick and tired of—the cliché is apt and time-honored—“politics as usual.” Presidential candidates are ubiquitous in social media and appear as frequently as they can on news, talk shows, and *Saturday Night Live*. It’s all politics, or media-politics, or mediated political realities, terms that seem so interwoven one can’t effectively disentangle them.

Political communication, the focus of this book, is a realm commonly viewed as negative, vitriolic, and dominated by powerful interests. And there is much truth to this. But political communication is at the same time a centerpiece of democracy, a critical arena for the diffusion of democratic discourse. This text will help you appreciate what may seem like a distant realm: how media construct our high-adrenaline, ego-driven, and ideologically polarized world of contemporary politics. We are accustomed to viewing politics through our own beliefs and attitudes. This book takes a step back and applies the vistas supplied by social science theories, research, and political philosophy. Our aim is to understand the processes of political communication, mediated communication effects on citizens and elections, and broader philosophical issues, such as whether political persuasion dupes more than it delivers helpful information, and if citizens are adequately informed. We want to criticize political communication when it fails to achieve democratic ideals and celebrate it when it spurs citizens to work collectively to change the status quo.

But let's get something straight at the get-go. When you talk about politics, many people's eyes glaze over. They think about gridlock in Washington and how Congress can't accomplish anything. Or maybe they think about Stephen Colbert, Seth MacFarlane's *Family Guy*, or an uproarious YouTube political video, and crack a smile. But—you know what?—they're wrong. Politics and political communication affect us, whether we like it or not.

If you are digging deeper in your pockets or your purse to pay for college, politics affected you. Your university decided to raise your tuition because they're not getting as much money from the state on account of funding cutbacks that you don't understand but maybe now think you should read up on a little.

If you are nearly done with college and breathe a sigh of relief because you will still be covered on your parents' health insurance until you are 26, politics affected you. Obama's health care legislation enacted that provision, and the health care law was bitterly contested, nothing if not political.

Or perhaps concerned about the senseless death of unarmed African Americans at the hands of police officers, you have tweeted #BlackLivesMatter. Or, on the other end of the political spectrum, you may be angry about allegations that Planned Parenthood made illegal profits from sales of body parts from aborted fetuses to researchers, and contacted your legislator to demand action. Perhaps you posted comments on topics like these, or others running the gamut from immigration to gun control to the Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage.

Maybe, just maybe, you are someone who has strong political interests or attitudes on issues like these, channeling your passions to volunteer in election campaigns, or

helping create the social media arm of a mayor’s community outreach efforts. Or perhaps you are on the other end of the spectrum—cynical, convinced that our politics is full of vitriol and news is hopelessly biased. You find politics as it is practiced in America conniving, cunning, and at times corrupt. In either case, far from being indifferent, you have attitudes toward politics, ideas about current political issues, feelings about candidates running for office, and perhaps a commitment to exercise your right to vote in local and national elections. Politics may not be as foreign as you may have assumed.

With these issues as backdrop, this chapter introduces political communication, beginning with definitions of basic terms—politics and political communication—and moving to a description of the key features of contemporary political communication.

POLITICS

What thoughts cross your mind when someone mentions “politics”? Gridlock? Wheeling and dealing? Talk shows on Fox or MSNBC where the guests talk soberly about “the problems in Washington” and everybody disagrees with everyone else? Endless acrimony from dogmatic Democrats and Republicans? And, doesn’t this one-word metaphor for political gamesmanship also come to mind: spin?

Does that cover it?

Notice I didn’t say anything positive. That’s because for most people, the word “politics” evokes sighs, recriminations, and even disgust. It has been this way for years in America. Distrusting politicians—“them bums”—goes back to the late 19th century, if not before, when Mark Twain called politicians “dust-licking pimps,” and cartoonists like Thomas Nast depicted politicians as “vultures and rats” (Grinspan, 2014, p. A19). Although democracy involves a popularly elected government accountable to the public, Americans have historically derided elected officials and even the concept of government (Schutz, 1977). Long before television shows like *Veep* viewed politicians with contempt, *Scandal* lasciviously focused on the political libido, and *House of Cards* dramatically conveyed the lengths to which politicians will go to maintain power, humorists and writers looked disdainfully at America’s politicians and the messages they deliver.

And so it is today. “It’s just words,” voters tell pollsters, when asked to describe their views of politics. One voter lamented that politics involves “such a control of government by the wealthy that whatever happens, it’s not working for all the people; it’s working for a few of the people” (Greenberg, 2011, p. 6). We say “it’s just politics” when we want to deride the actions of elected representatives. But political scientist Samuel Popkin offers a different view, noting that the phrase “it’s just politics” is “the