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Introduction to Political Communication

In spring of 2004, I traveled to the Middle East and into Saudi Arabia for a conference on terrorism and Islam. At the time, the United States was also heavily involved and invested (politically, militarily, and financially) in Iraq, a neighboring country for the Saudis, in whose fate we had more than a passing interest. In one of our conference sessions, a Saudi professor from Ibn Saud Muhammed University addressed the conflict in Iraq and the repercussions it might have in spurring the cause of groups such as al-Qaeda. When one of the other American professors at the conference suggested in response that the American plan to bring democracy to Iraq would have a moderating influence on those in the Arab world who saw the U.S. position as imperialism, the Saudi professor paused and then replied.

“Well, I suppose that all depends on what we mean by democracy. And whose concept of democracy we are discussing. Is it what you see as democracy in the United States? Is it what is sometimes practiced in Europe? Is it what we see in other parts of the world? Will the Iraqis have an opportunity to decide this for themselves? Will your soldiers leave if the Iraqi people vote and ask you to leave?”

Although his larger point was to rebut the other professor’s claim about how political changes might moderate the influence of groups such as al-Qaeda, it was the more obvious questions that went begging for me. *What exactly do we mean when we use the word democracy? How do we conceive it when looking at it through the experience of our years in the United States?*

The word *democracy* derives from the ancient Greek words *demos*, meaning “the people,” and *kratein*, meaning “to rule.” Joining the words together to create *democracy* gives us a literal meaning of “rule by the

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people.” In practice, we usually use the word in the United States to describe participation in self-governance, whatever form that participation may take. While admittedly our political history has not always allowed everyone in this country to participate (until more recently), or even encouraged full participation by those who can vote, the allure of democracy here has revolved around the idea that *all who are qualified as citizens may vote, that all votes are treated and weighted equally, and that majority rule would ultimately determine the outcome of political questions and controversy.*

For Americans today, the word *democracy* is therefore reduced to political campaigns and the election results they produce, leaving us with a theoretically representative government able to reflect the will of the majority while mindful of and willing to protect those who disagree.

In our democracy, voter participation is encouraged, even if not incited. Though we hold ourselves out as an example of how democracy can work, we also know that not everyone who *can* vote *does* vote. Historically we have observed a precipitous decline in the number of eligible voters who participate in national elections, really since 1960, and more pronounced after 1968. For example, as indicated in Table 1.1, less than half of all eligible voters participated in the 1996 presidential election, a trend that spiraled down only to 36% for the 1998 midterm congressional elections. In an election as important as the 2000 presidential race—where the election was decided in Florida by a relatively small number of votes (compared to the size of the overall national voting pool)—voter participation was estimated at only 51% of the population by voting age,¹ using the methodology employed in Table 1.1. If we were to measure this by eligible voters,² however, discounting for convicted felons and noncitizens, the number would be only a little higher at 55.6%. Two years later, in the far-reaching shadows of the attacks of September 11, voter participation for the midterm congressional races was projected at only 39% for the voting age population. Even in 2004, with President Bush claiming an electoral mandate and the overall number of votes cast showing an increase after so much decline—the total numbers were not terribly impressive. Voter turnout was only 54.9% using a voting age population measure, and 60% using the more reliable voting-eligible population measure. Certainly, this was an increase—but not by much.

Voter apathy and low turnout may be caused by a variety of maladies and realities. These include a growing sense of cynicism about life in the United States, coupled with a distrust of all things political and/or those who work in politics. Of this last point, it may well be the case that historical scandals on the scale of Watergate for President Nixon, the Iran-Contra affair for President Reagan, the impeachment proceedings against Bill Clinton, the controversy about disclosure of a CIA operative's identity by a senior

Table 1.1 Voter Turnout in Presidential and Congressional Elections, 1960–2006

<i>Year</i>	<i>Presidential Election</i>	<i>Congressional Election</i>
1960	63%	
1962		47%
1964	62%	
1966		48%
1968	61%	
1970		47%
1972	56%	
1974		38%
1976	54%	
1978		37%
1980	53%	
1982		40%
1984	53%	
1986		36%
1988	50%	
1990		36%
1992	55%	
1994		39%
1996	49%	
1998		36%
2000	51%	
2002		39%
2004	55%	
2006		40%

Sources: For voting age population data from 1960 to 2002, see “Who Votes? The Key Question for the 2006 Midterms,” by Larry Sabato, available on Sabato’s Web site, Crystal Ball, at <http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/article.php?id=LJS2006042801>. Note that the numbers above are rounded off. For data from the 2004 election, see *United States Election Project*, by Michael P. McDonald, available at http://www.elections.gmu/Voter_Turnout_2004_Primarys.htm. For data from the 2006 election, see “Rocking the House: Competition and Turnout in the 2006 Midterm Election,” by Michael P. McDonald, 2006, *The Forum*, 4(3). This is available at <http://www.bepress.com/forum/vol4/iss3/art4/>.

member of President Bush’s inner circle, and the like have all contributed to a growing sense of public distrust in our leaders. Some find that news coverage of politics has become more adversarial since the Watergate scandal (although those who make the charge often tend to be those in power at the time), creating a negative perception about politics for readers and viewers.

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Looking at apathy from a different perspective, it may also be that as our country has grown and spread out, communities have become replaced with suburbs and strip malls, and the connection Americans feel to one another (at the familial or the community level) has diminished, which in turn may have decreased the personal significance of voting.

Voter apathy is a sad but inescapable fact in our experiment with democracy. Truthfully, the right to vote also means the right to decline to vote. Former Speaker of the House, Representative Tip O'Neill is often credited with having said that "all politics is local"—and it was widely assumed that what he meant was that people are more likely to be invested in issues that affect them closer to home—to where they live. This didn't mean that eligible voters would be more active in local elections, however. Indeed, the above-described phenomenon of voter apathy occurs in local elections on a fairly consistent basis, too. What he really meant (and what voting statistics tend to verify) is that voter participation in American elections appears to be highest when the stakes in a given campaign turn to the personal, which is to say we vote when and if we perceive a personal connection or impact from the electoral outcome.³

In the United States, therefore, the campaign for votes at the national, district congressional, statewide, or even local level, is a campaign waged against apathy, and a struggle to make sure that those who do bother to participate in our democracy vote a certain way, for a certain cause, or a certain individual. Elections in such an environment are more accurately analogized to *contests*. But contests of what?

Elections as Contests

Some cynically describe elections in the United States as *popularity contests*. In such an environment, electability becomes a function of personal popularity. In turn, one becomes electable if one is famous and generally well liked. This much might explain the appeal of former actors and entertainers, or well-known sports icons, who cross over into the political arena and seek higher office.⁴

Others might cynically reduce campaigns to a contest based on *personal appearance*. Perhaps the lack of time voters invest in learning about a candidate's positions is made up for by the superficial examination they give to things like how handsome or beautiful the candidate may be. When was the last time a bald man was elected president? In the modern era, it is also a fact that tall candidates seem to do better in presidential races (even in the race for a nomination) than short candidates. Is this a

Table 1.2 General Labels and Specific Issues in National and Local Elections

	<i>General-Label Contrast</i>	<i>Specific-Issue Contrast</i>
<i>Local Election</i>	Progrowth versus. Antigrowth	For/against allowing Native American casinos within city limits
<i>National Election</i>	Civil liberties versus. Law and order	For/against reinstating the draft

coincidence, or does it merely reflect those cultural biases we have about personal appearance? Maybe we judge our candidates the same way we judge people in society, which is to say that we privilege certain physical traits and devalue others.

For those who follow elections (admittedly a smaller percentage of voters) or those who are sensitive to certain issues (e.g., legislation that might affect labor unions, budget cuts that might decrease spending for education, or legislation to control the size of damage awards in class-action lawsuits), elections might be reduced to a contest based on the *stated or perceived stance of a candidate on specific issues*. This might be something as broad and vague as general labels in a local or national election (see Table 1.2), or something very specific in either context. Where voters identify strongly with an issue and/or perceive that a candidate's believed position on the issue may affect them (the voters) positively or negatively, they will always be more likely to vote based on that issue.

That much was true for knowledgeable voters who follow elections and bother to investigate issues and candidate positions or single-issue voters for whom a candidate's position on a very specific issue may become a litmus test for support.

More commonly, however, elections may be seen as a *contest of imagery*. Here the campaign for a given candidate or cause seeks to identify, create, and communicate a certain image that voters can identify with and associate with the same candidate. Oftentimes, this revolves around a general image of *leadership*. This is as routine in local campaigns for city council as it is in national campaigns for the presidency. Consider for a moment what attributes you associate with leadership: The qualities of a strong leader? A moral or ethical center? Strength of personal convictions? Prior experience as a leader? Managerial skills? Political vision? Physical

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strength? Health? Vitality? Truthfulness? Intelligence? Wisdom? A sense of understanding? The ability to empathize with the average voter? These are only some of the ways leadership has been described, but more often than not, voters who identify these as desirable traits and then associate them with given candidates do so on less than complete information.

In the end, whether our democracy is predicated on elections that are contests of popularity, appearance, issues and stance, or imagery, the questions remains the same: Where do voters get their information about voting? How do we make our decisions about a candidate? The answer to this may surprise you, and it most simply may be illustrated if we rethink what an election is in the context of *communication*.

Election as a Process of Communication

As implied by the previous discussion, the way in which we send, receive, and share the information that shapes our political discourse and decision making is encompassed in the term *political communication*. But to what exactly does this term refer? It should come as no surprise that the definition of political communication is as wide and controversial as the subject matter making up the political discourse in our country. For example, some would argue that *political communication* refers to the tools employed by different groups and individuals to express their differences and celebrate their unity.⁵ This view holds that political communication is key to participation in a democracy.

Others view political communication as a way of describing the interaction of different groups that influence political decision making in this country. Here it is seen as a three-way discussion between political elites, the media, and the public.⁶ By this view, the study of political communication would therefore focus on the interactions between elites (like politicians and their powerful supporters or detractors), the media (print and broadcast), and the average voting public.

Others prefer to see this discussion or dialogue mostly in terms of the effect it has on public policy.⁷ The emphasis is on how this discussion leads to and shapes the direction of public laws and government initiatives. For example, this view of political communication in the year 2004 might center on the role of the mayors of certain cities in the United States (like the mayors of San Francisco or Boston) and their publicly expressed desire to legalize gay and lesbian marriages, how their message and actions were covered by mass media and disseminated by the larger public and its discourse, and how this discourse in turn spawned challenges in the legal

system and promoted a drive to create a federal constitutional amendment defining marriage as between two people of the opposite sex.⁸

Many see political communication as a misnomer—suggesting that no information is being shared; rather, it is argued that distortion, propaganda, exaggeration, and half-truths make up the nature of American political communication, in an attempt to unethically manipulate and influence voters in elections.⁹ Such a perspective is inherently distrusting of the motives behind any kind of political communication, seeing it as an exercise in sophistry (persuasion and argument for its own sake), with the intent of winning over the audience and nothing more. For example, during the second term of the Clinton presidency, Mrs. Clinton went on television to defend her husband against the coming impeachment proceedings, accusing her husband's detractors of being part of a "vast right-wing conspiracy,"¹⁰ whose main objective was to remove her husband from office. Was there such a conspiracy? Did Mrs. Clinton have evidence of such, in the legal sense of the word *conspiracy*? Certainly there were individuals who hated the Clintons (both of them) and wanted them out of office, and it is now clear in retrospect that the Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr (who investigated both individuals for alleged abuses such as the White Water investment scandal, the so-called Travelgate scandal, or the president's statements about an illicit affair with Monica Lewinsky) may indeed have overreached in his zeal to prosecute the president, when all he could show was that President Clinton had not been honest about his affair. But did all of this add up to a vast right-wing conspiracy? Or was this the effort of an exasperated first lady to spin and propagandize—to influence the public discourse about her husband and the chances for his political survival?

The same may be said of the Bush (George W.) Administration's attempt to publicly justify the American invasion of Iraq shortly before the start of military operations there. Through a steady series of press conferences, speeches by both the president and his aides, and a powerful presentation by Secretary of State Colin Powell to the United Nations, the White House sought to persuade the American public and much of the global community that war with Saddam Hussein was justified and inevitable because he possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs); he had a direct connection to the terrorist group responsible for the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (al-Qaeda); his continued presence as a ruler in Iraq increased the likelihood that al-Qaeda terrorists would acquire WMDs and use them to target the United States; and Hussein was a brutal dictator who regularly abused his own people. This effort at political communication was initially successful. Few if any members of Congress challenged the president on his claims, and public support for the invasion was (at least at the start) very

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strong. But over the course of time it became obvious that there were no WMDs to be recovered, that their existence was in question, and that the link between Hussein and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network was not accurate. A bipartisan commission investigating 9/11 said as much in their final report.¹¹ Although the report did not directly accuse the White House of distorting intelligence or manufacturing reasons to manipulate the public to support war against Iraq, it plainly suggested that the justifications offered by the Bush Administration were inflated, and perhaps deceptive.

Of course, these kinds of examples and this kind of definition (which focuses on the policy outcome) tend to see political communication in its larger context, involving politicians, media, political elites, and the public, and all the ways their interactions can be *discursive* (promoting public discourse). In truth, however, much of political communications involves campaigning for elections, especially since the first job of any incumbent is to be reelected to office. In that way, almost everything they do, every law they support, and every speech they give is geared toward maintaining and building public support for their ongoing candidacies.

Therefore for the purposes of studying political communication, in this book I focus on American political elections, at the local, state, and national level. In their most basic form, all elections are about communication. And so I may be clear about how I am using the term in this book, let me stress that all of the above definitions have some validity in fact. It is accurate to say that political communication is essential to participatory democracy, just as it is accurate to suggest that most (but not all) of this communication occurs between groups such as elites, the media, and the public. It is also true that the product of this communication can be support for public policy, or the reverse, and that many who engage this process may do so with an *ends justify the means* rationale, within which manipulation and deception in the communication may be rationalized as necessary for whatever greater goals are desired. To be sure, after a lifetime of studying this process, I am equal parts cynic and enthusiast. For that reason, in this book I define political communication as the *discursive process by which political information is shared and promotes awareness, ignorance, manipulation, consent, dissent, action, or passivity*. More specifically, I see political communication as being about elections and the most important rhetorical artifacts of elections in a modern age: the use of *political speeches*, the role of *political debates*, and the participation of all forms of *mass media*, including print, broadcast, and Internet, both for paid and free media. This process is designed to work within the limitations of an increasingly less engaged and more apathetic public, targeting and attracting those of us who still bother to vote. This can be seen diagrammatically in Figure 1.1.

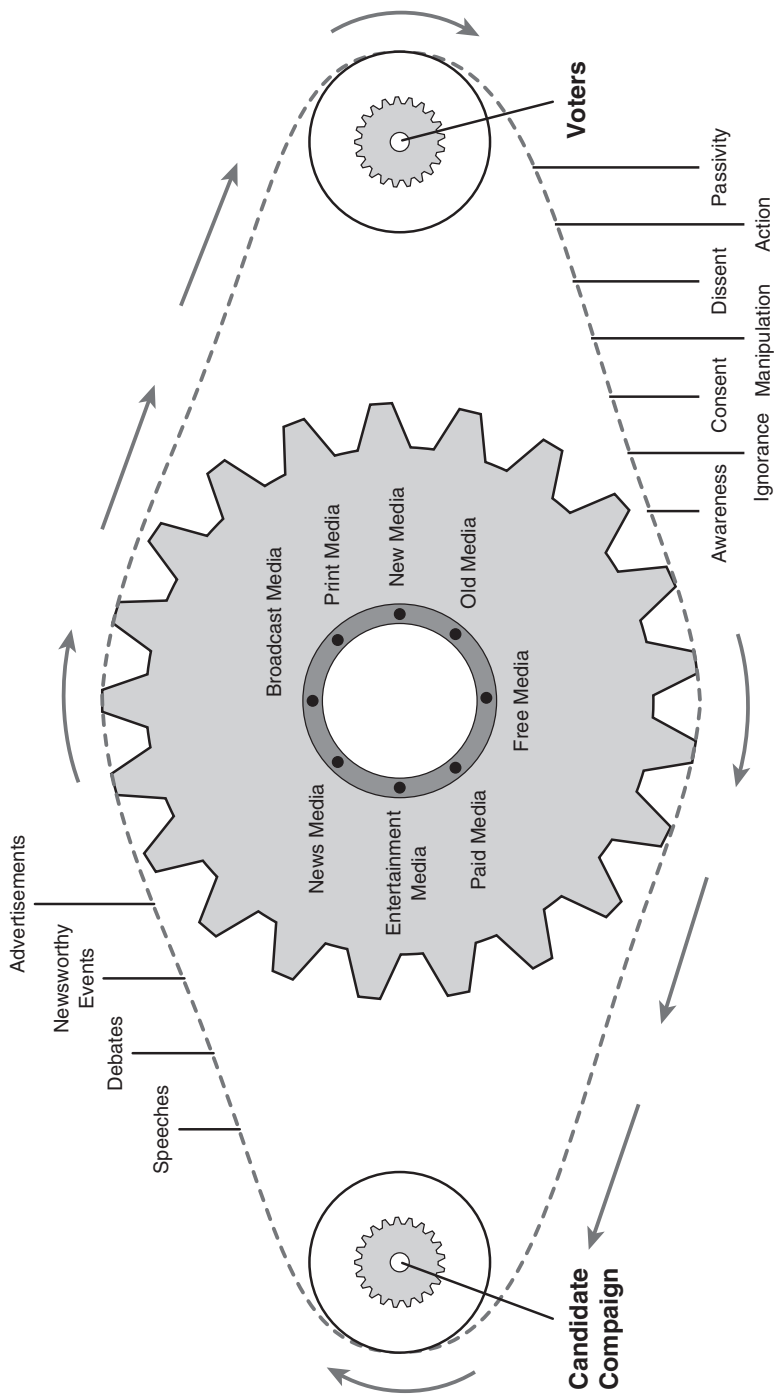


Figure 1.1 Political Communications as a Discursive Process

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Communication derives from the Latin word *communiatus*, which refers to the sharing and exchanging of information. Modern theories of human communication typically see it as bidirectional, meaning that while there are senders of messages and receivers of messages, a sender/communicator can also be the receiver/audience, and vice versa, when both sides are free to interact and respond to one another. In Figure 1.1, this sentiment is reflected in the bidirectional flow of the message exchange between political candidates and their intended audience(s). Candidates and their campaigns attempt to affect the real electorate (those eligible voters who bother to vote) and in turn can be affected by how that electorate responds and reacts to the same messages. The message of this communication loop between candidate/campaign and electorate is considered discursive to the extent it promotes discourse—i.e., affecting how people talk about things between themselves—and the message and discourse are themselves expressed through the additional interaction of mass media, and shaped by the forms the message takes in *political oratory* or *political debates*. As implied by Figure 1.1, the end product of this interaction is some form of *electoral outcome*, with a vote for one candidate or another, or the same for an initiative or ballot measure.

Political Communication as Process

In this chapter, we have considered political communications in general and how this topic may be explored in the United States by referencing political election campaigns. To that end, I have defined political communications a discursive process, primarily aimed at elections. The critical artifacts of this process include political speeches, the interaction between candidates/campaigns and mass media, and the role of political debates. The process itself, in turn, works at targeting an increasingly apathetic audience of voters—all with the hope of targeting and attracting those who still bother to vote.

Of course, such a view leaves out discussion of the real players and forces behind the process that help foster this political discourse and electoral outcome. The next chapter identifies these people and considers how we might describe their influence and role in this process called political communication.

Notes

1. See “How Exceptional Was Turnout in 2004,” by Scott L. Althaus, 2005, *Political Communication Reports*, ICA and APSA, 15(1), p. 1. Voting age

population (also referred to as VAP) is used as one measure of voter turnout—it includes the voting age population, which also incorporates noncitizens and felons eligible to vote, while excluding expatriate citizens who could legally vote from overseas. VAP estimates usually provide low-level estimates for turnout because they underestimate actual turnout.

2. See “The Myth of the Vanishing Voter,” by Michael P. McDonald and Samuel L. Popkin, 2001, *American Political Science Review*, 95(4), pp. 963–974. Vote eligible population (or VEP) is a measure of the voting age population *minus* disenfranchised felons, *minus* noncitizens, *plus* eligible overseas citizens. Applying this measure to the 2000 returns yielded a result of 55.6% in different examinations.

3. This is especially true when voters fear the outcome of an election may materially impact their well-being (e.g., raised taxes or loss of specific social programs), alter their sense of the status quo (e.g., a newly elected official may enact a law that criminalizes what had been acceptable behavior), or subject them to danger (e.g., a newly elected president might act to reenact the draft).

4. Consider the appeal of former U.S. Senator George Murphy of California, a movie actor turned politician; Arnold Schwarzenegger, a bodybuilder and box office movie star turned state governor; Jesse Ventura, former “professional” wrestler turned governor of Minnesota; or Ronald Reagan, who enjoyed a long career in Hollywood before becoming governor of California and eventually president of the United States.

5. See, for example, *Uncivil Wars: Political Campaigns in the Media Age*, by Thomas A. Hollihan, 2001, New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s.

6. See, for example, *Campaign Talk: Why Campaigns Are Good for Us*, by R. P. Hart, 2000, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

7. See *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and the Public in America*, by R. M. Perloff, 1998, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

8. The House and Senate Republicans enjoyed political success in 2004 by forcing Democrats to take a position on same-sex marriage in an election year—the Republican-led attempt to force a constitutional amendment restricting marriage to heterosexual couples never had a chance of passing, but it put Democrats on record, and later helped spawn numerous state amendment ballot efforts that ultimately damaged the Kerry campaign. For more, see *Red Over Blue: The 2004 Elections and American Politics* (p. 149), by James W. Ceaser and Andrew E. Busch, 2005, New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

9. See, for example, *Political Language and Rhetoric*, by P. E. Corcoran, 1979, Austin: University of Texas Press.

10. Mrs. Clinton, then the first lady, made her claim in an interview with Matt Lauer on the *Today Show* in January of 1998, responding publicly to allegations that her husband had been involved in an affair with a White House intern named Monica Lewinsky. For more, see “First Lady Launches Counterattack,” by D. Maraniss, 1998, January 28, *The Washington Post*, p. A01.

11. See “Senators Assail CIA Judgments on Iraq’s Arms as Deeply Flawed,” by Douglas Jehl, 2004, July 10, *New York Times*, p. A1.