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Governing through the Media

Abstract: Once candidates get into office, they must continue to use the new tools of political communication to build community among constituents. The chapter will trace presidential approval ratings over time, with particular attention to the changes since shifting online. The chapter will discuss whether voters are more informed and active or less engaged and superficially connected through Web 2.0 and direct communication tools.

Keywords: crowdsourcing; hashtag; outreach; Red Balloon initiative; social capital

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The end of the campaign season does not mean the end of the media’s connection to politics. Once candidates are elected, they must go about the work of making public policy. The media are a vital component of this phase of the political system, too. Campaigning has changed, and certainly so has governing. Campaigning in the new media environment is different, but just as tough, because every new project is a unique event. There are fewer opportunity points for campaigns: there is only one point to determine whether the campaign’s strategy has been successful or not: Election Day. While governing, every new piece of proposed legislation is a new opportunity to learn from the previous event, but each piece of legislation is unique and requires a different strategy. There are more frequent opportunities, but in shorter timeframes and with different approaches. Media strategies must shift from campaign mode to governing mode, as different tactical methods apply to the two different areas. The media’s role in policymaking is changing under the disruption of online communication.

The nature of that role is in question, though. How much influence should the media have in the creation of public policy? And how does that compare to the amount of influence they do have? Does the quality of policy information communicated to the public compare with the quality of campaign information communicated?

How do you interact with policymaking news? Do you take in news content, or do you create it yourself? Do you communicate directly with elected officials? Do you have political conversations about policy as it is in process online? The new world of online political communication has affected policymakers with the same kind of disruption.

Theodore Roosevelt first called the presidency a “bully pulpit” to describe the president’s ability to move public opinion via his speeches communicated to the public through the media. For the past 60 years, television has been the bully pulpit of choice for presidents to use to help manipulate public opinion, but the online shift has changed those practices as well. Richard Neustadt famously posited that the president’s power mostly relies on his ability to persuade. Persuasive and convincing presidents can use the public’s interest to push Congress to do things they would not otherwise do. The threat of backlash at the polls is one of the last resorts a president trying to get policy through Congress can rely on when Congress cannot be persuaded through more direct presidential efforts.