

# Media and American Democracy

GOV 355M

Fall 2025

University of Texas at Austin

## Class Meetings

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2-3:30 p.m.  
Parlin Hall (PAR) 101

## Teaching Team

Prof. Michael Auslen  
[EMAIL ADDRESS]

Office Hours: [DATE AND TIME]  
[LOCATION]

TA:[TA NAME]  
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## Course Description

We all live in a world shaped by media. News, entertainment, and social media are everywhere. Naturally, all this media has an effect on our politics and the extent to which our democratic system produces high-quality representation and political accountability. This course considers the how the media, broadly defined, affect contemporary American politics. In particular, we will focus on how these media effects strengthen or weaken political accountability and the quality of representation citizens receive in a democracy.

In doing so, our focus will be on understanding the incentives of the various actors in political accountability — citizens, the media, and politicians — and the ways in which their behaviors are affected by one another. We will ground our study in empirical evidence and social science research, and students will produce research themselves.

## Learning Objectives

In this course students will learn to:

- Understand and critique theories of the media's effect on politics.
- Interpret evidence of the media's role in shaping political behavior and institutions.
- Critically evaluate claims about the role of the media and changing media environments using evidence.
- Collect, present, and analyze data to answer research questions about the media and politics.

## Prerequisites

None. But we assume basic familiarity with the structure of American political institutions and federalism.

## Grading Policy

Your grade will be based on the following distribution of assignments:

- 66% Final Paper and Checkpoint Assignments
  - 3% First assignment: Research Question
  - 5% Second assignment: Research Plan
  - 8% Third assignment: Measurement, Codebook, and Data Access
  - 5% Fourth assignment: First Analytic Result
  - 5% Peer Feedback
  - 40% Final Research Paper
- 24% Reading Critical Response Essays (3 x 8% each)
- 10% Participation and Attendance

Grades will be assigned using the below scale. I will generally not round beyond these cutoffs.

A	93% - 100%	B-	80% - 82.9%	D+	67% - 69.9%
A-	90% - 92.9%	C+	77% - 79.9%	D	63% - 66.9%
B+	87% - 89.9%	C	73% - 76.9%	D-	60% - 62.9 %
B	83% - 86.9%	C-	70% - 72.9%	F	0% - 59.9%

**Late assignments:** Due dates for all assignments are in the syllabus. Late work will be penalized by one-third of a letter grade for each 8 hours past the deadline. So, an assignment of “A” quality would receive an “A-” if it were submitted in the first 8 hours after the deadline passed, a “B+” in the next eight hours, and so on.

*We will not accept late submissions of reading response essays. The point of these assignments is to think and draw connections before we have class. Essays submitted after class has begun on the day we are discussing a reading will not receive credit.*

**Regrades:** Any questions about your grade on an assignment should first be directed to the TA. If you would like your grade to be reconsidered, submit a request in writing to Prof. Auslen within one week of receiving the grade. I will re-grade the full assignment, and your grade may go up or down.

## Assignment Details

All assignments should be submitted on the course's Canvas page. I will not accept emailed or printed assignments. All work for this class will be checked using plagiarism detection software.

**Final Research Paper:** The main assignment for the course will be a research project for which you will (1) generate an original research question related to the media (broadly defined) and politics; (2) collect data that will allow you to provide a reasonable answer to this question; (3) analyze this data; and (4) provide empirical and theoretical analysis.

Generally, final papers should take the form of a *content analysis*, in which you systematically review published content (e.g., a random sample of news stories, tweets, video news reports, etc.). To do so, you will identify relevant variables and collect data on each of the pieces of content in your sample. You might collect data by hand, reading each item one at a time. Alternatively, you may use one of two AI tools to aid in your analysis: ProQuest TDM Studio and UT Spark. We will discuss these options and the components of your paper in class.

You are also welcome to propose alternative ideas, though these should be run by the instructor first.

The final version of the paper should be 10-12 pages, double spaced, 12-point font, excluding the title page, references, and appendices such as the codebook assignment and data. You should include figures and tables in the paper. Over the course of the semester, you will complete various checkpoint assignments that help build to the final paper, and we will discuss these more in class.

The final paper is due on **Thursday, December 11**, at 11:59 p.m. We will make further details available as the semester progresses.

**Checkpoint Assignments:** As you work toward the final research paper, you will complete a number of assignments that allow you to fine-tune the project and receive feedback from the teaching team as well as your peers.

*First Assignment: Research Question* — Outline the research question you plan to answer. What is the big question? What kinds of evidence might you want in order to answer it? You don't need to get too specific yet, but give us a sense of the bigger phenomenon you're interested in as well as the kinds of sources you might analyze. This should be about 1-2 pages, double spaced. Due **Thursday, September 18**, at 11:59 p.m.

*Second Assignment: Research Plan* — Revise your research question in light of the feedback you have received. What is the big question? How might you answer it? What content will you analyze? Why are these sources appropriate for answering your question? Are there any limitations? What do you expect to find and why? Lengths will vary, but this should be at least 2-3 pages and may be longer if you'd like more feedback. Due **Thursday, October 9**, at 11:59 p.m.

*Third Assignment: Measurement, Codebook, and Data Access* — If there are any updates to your project since the second assignment, briefly outline them. By now you should have your sample of content in hand or know where to access it. How did you do so? What sorts of concepts are you measuring? How will you operationalize these concepts? Hand-code a subsample of your data (at least 20 observations, though possibly more for shorter media such as tweets) for at least two of your main variables. How do your handcoded results compare to those obtained from AI? If they don't look similar, how might you improve the AI responses to better match human coders? Due **Thursday, October 30**, at 11:59 p.m.

*Fourth Assignment: First Analytical Result* — In class on Nov. 20, you will briefly present your project to a small group of your peers. Before doing so, you should have at least one result. It might be a figure or table, it might be a single statistic that summarizes what your paper will focus on. This first result should be submitted before class, by **Wednesday, November 19**, at 11:59 p.m.

**Reading Critical Response Essays:** Three times over the course of the semester, you will submit a reading response essay based on the readings for the upcoming class. These are due at **1:59 p.m. before class starts the day of the class meeting** for which the readings are assigned. But you are welcome to submit them well in advance of that.

These essays are an opportunity to engage with what we're reading and talking about in class. There is no one "correct" way to approach this. You might consider how a paper differs from something else we've read. You might assess the evidence an author brings to bear on a question. You might bring in outside evidence of your own from the real world or from other things you have read. The goal here is not to summarize what you've read or to say whether you agree with the argument made but to grapple with it intellectually. Each should be about 3 pages, double spaced.

In the beginning of the semester survey (<https://bit.ly/gov355fall25>), you will commit to the three days when you will write a reading response. Your responses should be submitted for those days, no later than the start of class. You may change your days only in extenuating circumstances.

**Participation and Attendance:** Attendance and active participation are essential components to understanding the material in this class, and good habits generally for college and life. While the class will include some lecture, I encourage students to ask questions and to engage with the ideas we are talking about. I will take attendance at each class. You may miss two class meetings no questions asked. After that, your attendance and participation grade will decrease after further absences. If you have a university-approved absence for religious observances (see below) or a personal or medical emergency, please let me know as soon as feasible.

**You may not miss class or leave early on November 20, when you and your colleagues are presenting your research projects to each other.** You will receive a 0 on attendance and participation for the entire semester if you miss this class meeting.

## Academic Integrity

Plagiarism, cheating, and other academic misconduct are serious violations of your contract as a student. Plagiarism is using someone else's language without quotations and attribution or using someone else's idea (even in different language) without attribution. I expect that you will know and follow the University's policies on cheating and plagiarism. **I follow a zero-tolerance policy for all forms of academic dishonesty.**

If you are unsure about the standards of academic integrity, it is your responsibility to ask the professor. Any suspected cases of academic misconduct will be handled according to University regulations.

**Generative artificial intelligence:** The key aims of this course are to think critically, generate and evaluate evidence relevant to research questions and craft arguments. As such, the use of generative artificial intelligence tools (such as ChatGPT) for any writing, outlining, or idea generation in this class is *strictly prohibited*. All written and creative work in this course must be your own and reflect your own ideas.

You may use AI—and are encouraged to do so in a responsible way—to aid in the coding of your data for the research project. However, you should not use Chat GPT or any other free and open-source tools to do so, as these may store your inputs as training data in violation of the intellectual property rights of the owners of the content being analyzed. Instead, be sure to use the provided AI tools (ProQuest TDM Studio and UT Spark), which do not train their models on newly inputted data.

## Additional Policies

**Office policy:** Per my right, I prohibit carrying of handguns in my personal office. Note that this information will also be conveyed to all students verbally during the first week of class. This written notice is intended to reinforce the verbal notification and is not a “legally effective” means of notification in its own right.

**Absences for religious holidays:** Per UT Austin policy, you must notify me of your pending absence for a religious holy day as far in advance as possible of the date of observance. If you must miss a class, an examination, a work assignment, or a project in order to observe a religious holy day, you will be given an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence. For questions regarding religious accommodations, please contact the Office of the Dean of Students.

**Special accommodations:** The university is committed to creating an accessible and inclusive learning environment consistent with university policy and federal and state law. Please let me know if you experience any barriers to learning so I can work with you to ensure you have equal opportunity to participate fully in this course. If you are a student with a disability, or think you may have a disability, and need accommodations please contact Disability and Access (D&A). Please refer to D&A's website for contact and more information: <http://disability.utexas.edu>. If

you are already registered with D&A , please deliver your Accommodation Letter to me as early as possible in the semester so we can discuss your approved accommodations and needs in this course.

## **Course Materials**

There are no required books to purchase for this class. We will instead read articles and book chapters that can be downloaded free from the UT Library and/or the course website on Canvas. All readings are available on Canvas.

## **Course Outline**

Some readings may be subject to change, which will be communicated via Canvas.

### **Week 1 — Introduction**

***Tue. Aug. 26 — Introduction: What is/are “the media”?***

Carefully review the course syllabus.

***Thu. Aug. 28 — What Do the Media Do?***

Boydston, Amber. 2013. *Making the News: Politics, the Media, and Agenda Setting*. Chicago, Chicago University Press. Ch. 2.

**\*\*\* DEADLINE: Fri. Aug. 29, 11:59 p.m. \*\*\***  
**Fill out Course Survey: <https://bit.ly/gov355fall25>**

### **Week 2 — Theoretical Foundations**

***Tue. Sept. 2 — Introduction to Political Accountability***

Ashworth, Scott. 2012. “Electoral Accountability: Recent Theoretical and Empirical Work.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 15:183-201.

***Thu. Sept. 4 — Political Knowledge and Engagement***

Krupnikov, Yanna, and John Barry Ryan. 2022. *The Other Divide: Polarization and Disengagement in American Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Ch. 3-4.

### **Week 3 — Studying the Media**

***Tue. Sept. 9 — Challenges for Studying the News Media***

Prior, Markus. 2009. "The Immensely Inflated News Audience: Assessing Bias in Self-Reported News Exposure." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73(1):130-43.

***Thu. Sept. 11 — Research I: Research Questions***

Be sure to complete the research questions module on Canvas.

**Week 4 — Public Opinion and the News I**

***Tue. Sept. 16 — Framing, Priming, and Agenda Setting***

Chong, Dennis, and James N. Druckman. 2007. "Framing Theory." *Annual Review of Political Science* 10:103-126.

***Thu. Sept. 18 — Media Trust***

Ladd, Jonathan M. 2012. *Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Ch. 1 and 6.

**\*\*\* DEADLINE: Thu. Sept. 18, 11:59 p.m. \*\*\*  
First Research Assignment: Research Question**

**Week 5 — Public Opinion and the News II**

***Tue. Sept. 23 — How Public Opinion Shapes the Media***

Wlezien, Christopher. 2024. "News and Public Opinion: Which Comes First?" *Journal of Politics* 86(1):1-17.

***Thu. Sept. 25 — Research II: Measurement and How to Complete Your Research Projects***

*Recommended:*

Adcock, Robert, and David Collier. 2001. "Measurement Validity: A Shared Standard for Qualitative and Quantitative Research." *American Political Science Review* 95(3):529-46.

**\*\*\* DEADLINE: Thu. Sept. 25, 11:59 p.m. \*\*\*  
Peer Feedback on First Research Assignment**

## **Week 6 — Media and Political Accountability**

### ***Tue. Sept. 30 — The Theoretical Ideal of Media and Accountability***

Snyder, James M., Jr., and David Strömberg. 2010. "Press Coverage and Political Accountability." *Journal of Political Economy* 118(2):355-408.

#### *Recommended:*

Auslen, Michael. 2025. "Statehouse Democracy without the Electoral Connection: Local News and Representation in State Legislatures." Working paper.

#### *Helpful for interpreting the readings:*

Llaudet, Elena, and Kosuke Imai. 2022. *Data Analysis for Social Science: A Friendly and Practical Introduction*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Especially Ch. 4.

### ***Thu. Oct. 2— Watchdogs and Burglar Alarms***

Bennett, W. Lance, and William Serrin. 2005. "The Watchdog Role." In *The Press*, eds. Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Hall Jameson. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 169-88.

## **Week 7 — Media in Elections**

**Oct. 6 is the deadline to register to vote. More info. is at:**

**<https://straussinstitute.moody.utexas.edu/collegiate/tx-votes>.**

### ***Tue. Oct. 7 — Minimal Effects and Limitations of the Theoretical Ideal***

Mutz, Diana C. 2012. "The Great Divide: Campaign Media in the American Mind." *Daedalus* 141(4):83-97.

### ***Thu. Oct. 9 — Effects of Political Campaigns***

Gerber, Alan S., James G. Gimpel, Donald P. Green, and Daron R. Shaw. 2011. "How Large and Long-lasting Are the Persuasive Effects of Televised Campaign Ads? Results from a Randomized Field Experiment." *American Political Science Review* 105(1):135-150.

**\*\*\* DEADLINE: Thu. Oct. 9, 11:59 p.m. \*\*\***  
**Second Research Assignment: Research Plan**

## **Week 8 — Media Choice**

### ***Tue. Oct. 14 — Media Choice and Selective Exposure***

Prior, Markus. 2005. “News vs. Entertainment: How Increasing Media Choice Widens Gaps in Political Knowledge and Turnout.” *American Journal of Political Science* 49(3): 577-92.

Robertson, Ronald E., Jon Green, Damian J. Ruck, Katherine Ognyanova, Christo Wilson, and David Lazer. 2023. “Users choose to engage with more partisan news than they are exposed to on Google Search.” *Nature* 618:342-8.

### ***Thu. Oct. 16 — Entertainment Media***

Kim, Eunji. 2023. “Entertaining Beliefs in Economic Mobility.” *American Journal of Political Science* 67(1):39-54.

Baum, Matthew A., and Angela S. Jamison. 2006. “The *Oprah* Effect: How Soft News Helps Inattentive Citizens Vote Consistently.” *The Journal of Politics* 68(4):946-59.

**\*\*\* DEADLINE: Thu. Oct. 16, 11:59 p.m. \*\*\*  
Peer Feedback on Second Research Assignment**

## **Week 9 — Local News**

### ***Tue. Oct. 21 — Local News Decline and its Effects***

Hayes, Danny, and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2021. *News Hole: The Demise of Local Journalism and Political Engagement*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Ch. 3, 5.

Auslen, Michael. “Public Goods and the Press: Policy Implications of Disparities in Local Political News.” Working paper.

### ***Thu. Oct. 23 — Nationalization of Politics and the Demand Side of News Decline***

Hopkins, Daniel J. 2018. *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Ch. 3, 9.

## **Week 10 — Media Bias?**

### ***Tue. Oct. 28 — Media Production: What does the News Cover?***

Hamilton, James T. 2003. *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. pp. 7-13 and ch. 3.

Puglisi, Riccardo, and James M. Snyder, Jr. 2011. "Newspaper Coverage of Political Scandals." *Journal of Politics* 73(3):931-50.

***Thu. Oct. 30 — Media Slant: How does the News Get Covered?***

Groeling, Tim. 2013. "Media Bias by the Numbers: Challenges and Opportunities in the Study of Partisan News." *Annual Review of Political Science* 16:129-151.

**\*\*\* DEADLINE: Thu. Oct. 30, 11:59 p.m. \*\*\***

**Third Research Assignment: Measurement, Codebook, and Data Access**

**Week 11 — Partisan News**

***Tue. Nov. 4 — Mass Effects of Partisan News***

**November 4 is Election Day. Don't forget to vote in local elections.**

Broockman, David E., and Joshua L. Kalla. 2025. "Consuming Cross-Cutting Media Causes Learning and Moderates Attitudes: A Field Experiment with Fox News Viewers." *The Journal of Politics*.

Martin, Gregory J., and Joshua McCrain. 2019. "Local News and National Politics." *American Political Science Review* 113(2):372-84.

***Thu. Nov. 6 — Partisan News and Political Elites***

Arceneaux, Kevin, Johanna Dunaway, Martin Johnson, and Ryan J. Vander Wielen. *The House that Fox News Built? Representation, Political Accountability and the Rise of Partisan News*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Ch. 3-4.

**Week 12 — Social Media I**

***Tue. Nov. 11 — Misinformation and Disinformation***

Berinsky, Adam J. 2023. *Political Rumors: Why We Accept Misinformation and How to Fight it*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Ch. 3-4.

***Thu. Nov. 13 — Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles***

Nyhan, Brendan, et al. 2023. "Like-minded sources on Facebook are prevalent but not polarizing." *Nature* 620:137-44.

### **Week 13 — Social Media II**

#### ***Tue. Nov. 18 — Algorithmic Effects***

Guess, Andrew M., et al. 2023. "How do social media feed algorithms affect attitudes and behavior in an election campaign?" *Science* 381(6656):391-404.

Shmargad, Yotam, and Samira Klar. 2020. "Sorting the News: How Ranking by Popularity Polarizes our Politics." *Political Communication* 37(3):423-46.

**\*\*\* DEADLINE: Wed. Nov. 19, 11:59 p.m. \*\*\***  
**Fourth Research Assignment: First Analytic Result**

#### ***Thu. Nov. 20 — Research III: Presenting Initial Results***

### **Thanksgiving Break — Nov. 25-Nov. 29**

### **Week 14 — Wrapping Up**

#### ***Tue. Dec. 2— Catchup Day and Research Workshop***

#### ***Thu. Dec. 4— Wrap-Up***

**\*\*\* DEADLINE: Thu. Dec. 11, 11:59 p.m. \*\*\***  
**Final Research Paper**