Media and American Democracy

GOV 355M
University of Texas at Austin

Class Meetings

Mondays and Wednesdays, 10-11:30 a.m.
Parlin Hall (PAR) 101

Instructor

Michael Auslen   Office Hours: [DATE / TIME]
[EMAIL ADDRESS]   [LOCATION]

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 and present evidence useful in answering research questions about the media and politics

Prerequisites

None. But I assume basic familiarity with the structure of American government and federalism.

Grading Policy

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

66%   Final Paper and Checkpoint Assignments
   8% First assignment: Identifying a Research Question and Data
   8% Second assignment: Research Plan and Data Access
   5% Third 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%
A- 90% - 92.9%
B+ 87% - 89.9%
B 83% - 86.9%
B- 80% - 82.9%
C+ 77% - 79.9%
C 73% - 76.9%
C- 70% - 72.9%
D+ 67% - 69.9%
D 63% - 66.9%
D- 60% - 62.9 %
F 0% - 59.9%

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.

There are generally two options for this paper, which we will discuss in class. You are also welcome to propose alternative ideas, though these should be run by the instructor first.

- *Content analysis:* You'll systematically review published content (e.g., a random sample of news stories, tweets, video news reports, etc.), collecting a number of variables as you go.
- *Survey data analysis:* Using existing surveys, you can answer questions related to the media and public opinion. I generally recommend this approach only for students who have some experience with statistical software (e.g., R, STATA, SPSS) or using Excel for really large datasets. We don't have resources to teach you these languages in this class.

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, May 1,** at 11:59 p.m. Your submission must include the data you collect, as well as any codebook used to analyze that data. For content analysis projects, you should include the text of the news stories, social media posts, etc., or links to video content. If you used any R, Stata, etc., code, include that.

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 me and your peers.

First Assignment: Identifying a Research Question and Data — Outline the research question you plan to answer. What is the big question? How might you answer it? What do you expect to find and why? Identify what sources you'd like to use for data. E.g., for a content analysis comparing stories in two local newspapers, which papers will you use? Why? How will you collect the data for the sample? For a survey analysis, what survey will you use? Do you have access to it? Which variables might be helpful? Lengths will vary, but this should be at least 1-2 pages and may be longer if you'd like more feedback. Due **Thursday, Feb. 20**, at 11:59 p.m.

Peer Feedback on First Assignment — You'll read another student's Assignment 2 and provide them with 1 page of helpful feedback for their projects. Due **Thursday, March 6**, at 11:59 p.m.

Second Assignment: Research Plan and Data Access — If there are any changes you'd like to make to the research question following peer feedback, do so. Then, outline your plan for conducting the project. By now you should have collected the data. How did you do so? Also include a codebook, as discussed in class. Due **Thursday, March 27**, at 11:59 p.m.

Third Assignment: First Analytical Result — In class on April 21, 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 **Sunday, April 20**, 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 **11:59 p.m. the night *before* 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. 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 but to grapple with it intellectually. Each should be about 3 pages, double spaced. I will grade them generally on a "check-plus"/"check"/"check-minus" scale.

At least one reading response must be completed in the first portion of the class, no later than **Tuesday, Feb. 25** (for the readings due on Wednesday, Feb. 26). The other two must be completed no later than **Tuesday, April 15** (for readings due April 16), but you are welcome to do all three as early as you would like!

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 April 21, when you and your colleagues are presenting your research projects to each other. You will receive a 0 on attendance and participation for the class 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) in this class is strictly prohibited. This includes using AI to generate ideas, outline an approach, answer questions, generate or code data, or create original language in written assignments. All work in this course must be your own. If you have any questions about what is allowable under this policy, please contact the instructor.

Additional Policies

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.

I 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 midnight the night before will not receive credit.*

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

Mon. Jan. 13 — Introduction: What is/are "the media"?

Carefully review the course syllabus.

Wed. Jan. 15 — What Do the Media Do?

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

*** DEADLINE: Fri. Jan. 16, 11:59 p.m. ***
Fill out Course Survey: https://bit.ly/gov355spring25

Week 2 — Theoretical Foundations

Mon. Jan. 20 — NO CLASS (Martin Luther King, Jr., Day)

Wed. Jan. 22 — Introduction to Political Accountability

Fearon, James D. 1999. "Electoral Accountability and the Control of Politicians: Selecting Good Types versus Sanctioning Poor Performance." In *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, eds. Adam Przeworski, Susan C. Stokes, and Bernard Manin. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Week 3 — Foundations of Public Opinion

Mon. Jan. 27 — 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.

Wed. Jan. 29 — Framing and Priming

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

Week 4 — Public Opinion and the News I

Mon. Feb. 3 — Media Trust

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

Wed. Feb. 5 — Media and Elections/Campaigns

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

Week 5 — Public Opinion and the News II

Mon. Feb. 9 — How Public Opinion Shapes the Media

Wlezien, Christopher, and Stuart Soroka. 2024. "Media Reflect! Policy, the Public, and the News." *American Political Science Review* 118(3):1563-9.

Wed. Feb. 12 — Research I: Research Questions and Challenges for Studying Media

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

Week 6 — Media and Political Accountability

Mon. Feb. 17 — 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.

Wed. Feb. 19 — Limitations to the Theoretical Ideal

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

*** DEADLINE: Thu. Feb. 20, 11:59 p.m. ***
Identifying a Research Question and Data

Week 7 — Journalists in Political Ecosystems

Mon. Feb. 24 — 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.

*** DEADLINE: Tue. Feb. 25, 11:59 p.m. ***
Last Day to Submit Reading Response 1

Wed. Feb. 26 — Agenda Setting

McCombs, Maxwell. 2005. "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press." In *The Press*, eds. Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Hall Jameson. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 156-68.

Week 8 — Media Choice

Mon. March 3 — 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.

Wed. March 5 — 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. March 6, 11:59 p.m. ***
Peer Feedback on First Assignment

Week 9 — Changing Media Markets

Mon. March 10 — Research II: Data and Codebooks

Busch, Carol, Paul S. De Maret, Teresa Flynn, Rachel Kellum, Sheri Le, Brad Meyers, Matt
    Saunders, Robert White, and Mike Palmquist. 2005. "Content Analysis." *WAC Clearing*
    House Writing Guide. Colorado State University. Available at
    https://wac.colostate.edu/repository/writing/guides/guide/index.cfm?guideid=61.

Wed. March 12 — Media Ownership and Consolidation

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

Spring Break — March 17-19

Week 10 — Media Bias?

Mon. March 24 — 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.

Wed. March 26 — 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. March 27, 11:59 p.m. ***
Second Assignment: Research Plan and Data Access

Week 11 — Does Medium Matter? Social Media and the News

Mon. March 31 — Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles

Sunstein, Cass R. 2018. *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton,
    NJ: Princeton University Press. Ch. 1.

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

Wed. April 2 — 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.

Week 12 — Partisan News and Misinformation

Mon. April 7 — Partisan News and Polarization

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*.

Wed. April 9 —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.

Week 13 — Local News in the 21st Century

Mon. April 14 — The Nationalization of Politics and Media

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

*** DEADLINE: Tue. April 15, 11:59 p.m. ***
Last Day to Submit Reading Responses 2-3

Wed. April 16 — Decline of Local News

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.

Week 14 — Finishing Your Research Projects

*** DEADLINE: Sun. April 20, 11:59 p.m. ***
Third Assignment: First Analytic Result

Mon. April 21 — Research III: Small-Group Presentations

Wed. April 23 — Catchup Day

Week 15 — Wrapping Up

Mon. April 28 — Wrap-Up

*** DEADLINE: Thu. May 1, 11:59 p.m. ***
Final Research Paper