

POLS115
Fall 2007
Essay #3

In "Mediating the Vote: The Changing Media Landscape in U.S. Presidential Campaigns, Michael Pfau, Brian Houston and Shane Semmler note that:

Politics is about the nature of communication forms that people use to receive political information. However, we are well into a watershed period in which people's use of truly "mass" media to receive information about political candidates and campaigns is giving way to a much more specialized media." (p. 5)

And in examining that landscape they conclude that: "Overall, the pattern of results indicates that many traditional communication forms – and some of the "new" or alternative forms – exerted a positive influence on normative outcomes." (p. 123) But they also found that the type of communication medium used mattered, with some forms being more positive than others.

You should evaluate their argument looking at particular at two traditional forms of mass media, television and newspapers. Use of these "truly mass media" may be on the decline, but they still are the two most commonly used media sources. (The rapidly growing use of the web will be our focus in a few weeks.)

Over the next couple of weeks, watch at least two television news broadcasts. It doesn't matter which networks (but if you do choose a 24 hour cable news network, be sure you are watching a newscast, not a talk show or other more specialized information program). Do not look at the websites of these networks to see what they put in their programs. Watch the actual news program on a television. Please take brief notes on what you saw and attach those notes to your paper. (Do not worry if the notes are sloppy or hard to read. Do not "clean them up." Your grade will not be affected by the notes. Rather, I need to see the notes to see what the evidence is on which you are making your claims. I cannot watch every newscast on every network between now and the due date of the assignment.)

In addition, you should read the Des Moines Register on at least two days. (You do not need to save or hand in any articles you cite. But be sure to properly cite any article you use as evidence.)

For the essay, evaluate their argument. What are its strengths and weaknesses? Is coverage of the caucuses as effective as they claim? Or is it worse, or better? And what are the implications of this for American democracy? Be sure to use the news you watched and read as evidence to support your argument.

You will be evaluated by the following rubric:

1. Understanding of the argument made by Pfau, Houston and Semmler about our media landscape. ____ (20 points)
2. Evaluation of the argument made by Pfau, Houston and Semmler and use of evidence to support that evaluation. ____ (20 points)
3. Implications of the patterns of media coverage discussed for American democracy. ____ (20 points).
4. Coherence of essay including, but not limited to, the relationship between the patterns of coverage described and the evidence presented as to what was seen and/or viewed. ____ (20 points)
5. Quality of writing (spelling, grammar, clarity, punctuation, proper citation of sources, etc.): ____ (20 points).