Voting Behavior: The Impact of Public Opinion and the Media

- Civil Rights Act of 1964
- Fairness doctrine
- Information superhighway
- Literacy laws
- Mass media
- Media bias
- Motor Voter Act of 1993
- Party identification
- Photo ops
- Political socialization

- Poll tax
- Public opinion polls
- Sampling error
- Simpson-Marzzoli Act (1987)
- Solid South
- Sound bites
- Suffrage
- Talking heads
- Voting Rights Act of 1965
- Wave election

Contemporary Connection

Research has shown that public opinion polls that do not include cell phones as well as land-line phones tend to favor Republican candidates and Republican issues. This chapter explores the linkage institutions of voting and the media. What factors influence voting behavior and party identification? How does the media influence public opinion and political discourse? These questions are answered in this chapter.

Ever since Harry Truman held up a front page of the *Chicago Tribune* that declared "Dewey Defeats Truman," politicians have stopped taking voters for granted. They also view polling and the media with skepticism and rely on their own pollsters and media advisers. If elections prove the legitimacy of a candidate's campaign, the task of the politician is to find the way to influence the citizen to vote for him or her.

This chapter also explores why people either vote or why they stay home on Election Day. By looking at the demographics of America, you will be able to understand voter trends. Even though Americans are notorious in the manner in which they exercise this essential quality of a democracy, recent elections have provided optimism that voter turnout is on the increase. When you view the constitutional basis of voting and its history, you should see how long it has taken for all suffrage to be obtained by every citizen.

In recent elections, public opinion, measured through polls, became a primary barometer of how and why the voter behaved. Political polls were conducted to gauge the feelings and attitudes of the electorate. We will evaluate how polls are conducted, how candidates rely on polls and the media, and the impact of exit polls and the media.

The role of the media, including its historical development and its impact on public opinion and the political agenda, will be the focus in the last section of the chapter. Topics such as the limits placed on the media, the bias in the media, and the future importance of the information superhighway will be discussed.

QUICK REVIEW OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL BASIS OF SUFFRAGE

- Article I Section 2 Clause (1) required each state to allow those qualified to vote for their own legislatures as well as the House of Representatives.

- Article II Section 1 Clause (2) provided for presidential electors to be chosen in each state with the manner determined by state legislatures.

- The Reserve Power clause of the Tenth Amendment gave the states the right to determine voting procedures.

- The Fifteenth Amendment gave freed slaves the right to vote.

- The Seventeenth Amendment changed the meaning of Article I Section 2 to allow eligible voters to elect senators directly.

- The Nineteenth Amendment made it illegal for the states to discriminate against men or women in establishing voting qualifications.

- The Twenty-Fourth Amendment outlawed the poll tax as a requirement for voting.

- The Twenty-Sixth Amendment prohibited the federal government and state governments from denying the right of 18 year olds to vote in both state and federal elections.

- The Voting Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, and 1965 increased the opportunities for minorities to register and allowed the attorney general to prevent state interference in the voting process.

- The Supreme Court decision in *Baker v Carr* (1962) established the one man, one vote principle.

- Supreme Court decisions in the 1990s established that gerrymandering resulting in "majority-minority" districts was unconstitutional.

VOTING PATTERNS

In order to understand why people vote, you first must look at the potential make-up of the American electorate. Demographic patterns are determined every ten years when the census is conducted. Besides establishing representation patterns, the census also provides important information related to the population's

- age
- socioeconomic make-up
- place of residence and shifting population movement
- ethnicity
- gender

Demographics, the type of election, socioeconomic status, religious background, and extent of party identification are some of the factors that influence voting patterns.

Once this demographic study is evaluated, certain things become obvious. The impact of immigrants has been a key factor in the nation's population increase. When you look at immigration patterns, historically, you will see that there have been three distinctive immigrant trends affecting population patterns. The first wave occurred before the Civil War when immigrants came from northwestern Europe and included English, Irish, and Germans. The second period, the greatest influx of immigrants, took place after the Civil War and peaked from 1890 to 1920. Italians, Jews, Asians, Poles, and Russians came to this country looking for the American Dream. Ellis Island became the center of immigrant activity and America was described as a melting pot, denoting a mix of immigrants whose cultures and ideas had an influence on the culture of this country. Immigrants assimilated into the mainstream of the country. The flow stopped with the passage of restrictive immigration quota laws in the 1920s and 1930s.

The new immigrant period began after World War II and peaked in the 1980s when immigrants came from Central and Latin America and Asia. In 1987, after the passage of the Simpson-Marzzoli Act, illegal aliens who were living in this country since 1982 were allowed to apply for legal status. Almost two million did so. The most recent immigration act was passed in 1991. This act shifted the quota of immigrants to Europe and aimed to attract immigrants who were trained workers. In 1994, angry California voters passed Proposition 187, which denied social services such as education and welfare to illegal aliens. The law was challenged in federal court and declared unconstitutional. Congress also passed the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, which denied welfare benefits to legal immigrants, and an immigration bill that would build a 700-mile fence along our southern border to keep illegal immigrants out of the country.

The 2010 Census

Key aspects of the 2010 census reflect an increase in the aging America, a population shift to the sunbelt, and a decrease in those who would be classified as earning an income close to or below the poverty level. The 2010 U.S. census results released by the Census Bureau indicated big changes in the population of the United States and population shifts from big industrial states to the sunbelt states of the south and southwest. Specifically:

- The official U.S. population count is 308,745,538. In 2000 the population was 281,421,906. That is a growth rate of 9.7 percent, the lowest growth rate since the Great Depression.

- The states of Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania will all lose congressional seats. New York and Ohio will both lose two seats. President Obama will now likely lose some electoral votes in 2012 as a result. He won every one of those states except Missouri and Louisiana in 2008. In addition, the districts in those states will have to be redrawn.

- The states gaining seats are Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, and Washington. Texas will gain four seats. Florida will gain two seats.

Immigrant patterns and these factors have public policy consequences and are therefore important to the political process.

Political Socialization

Political socialization is the factor that determines voting behavior. There is growing interest in how people actually develop their political orientation, thus making it more likely they will vote. Studies have determined that these attitudes are determined by the family, the media, and public schools. Party identification, the voter's evaluation of the candidates, and policy voting, the actual decision to vote for a particular candidate based on these factors, all come into play in evaluating the overall voting process.

What are the factors, then, that make people decide to cast their vote for a particular candidate? They can be classified in two major categories, sociological and psychological. Sociological factors include:

- income and occupation
- education
- sex and age
- religious and ethnic background
- region of the country where you live
- family make-up

Psychological factors include

- party affiliation and identification
- perception of candidate's policies and/or image
- the feeling that your vote will make a statement

Based on these factors we can make the following statements about who votes, what party those who vote lean toward, and who doesn't vote:

- Voters who are in the lower income brackets and laborers tend to vote Democratic. Those upper-middle to upper-income level voters, many of whom are business and professional white-collar workers, tend to vote Republican. Yet when you compare voting rates of both groups, you will see that citizens with higher incomes and greater education vote in greater numbers than those with lower incomes and less education. This is the number one factor in what determines voter turnout. This pattern held true in the 1976–2008 presidential elections.

- Voting patterns do not usually correlate strongly with gender. Analysts suggest there is a gender gap in national politics, a significant deviation between the way

men and women vote. In addition, there is no guarantee that even if a woman ran for national office, she would get the women's vote. With Geraldine Ferraro on the 1984 Democratic ticket, more women voted for the Reagan-Bush ticket, proving that women did not vote just because there was a woman running for vice president. However, since 1988 a trend has developed where women vote for Democratic candidates in greater percentages than men vote. This was particularly true in the 1994 midterm election when polls showed that "angry white" voters heavily supported Republican candidates, whereas women still supported Democratic candidates. Yet in 1996, because for the first time the male vote was split almost 50–50 between Clinton and Dole, women voted for Clinton by more than 10 percent. As stated in the previous chapter, the soccer mom became a new term illustrating why certain women voters favored Clinton so heavily. This trend repeated itself in 2000. In 2004, both campaigns went after the so-called "NASCAR dad." President George W. Bush even opened up a NASCAR event with the traditional "Gentlemen, start your engines." John Kerry went goose hunting hoping to siphon the gun owners' vote. But the most significant change that occurred in 2004 was a new gender gap described in Chapter 12, the gap between single and married women. In the election of 2008, Barack Obama continued to attract women to the Democratic ticket, resulting in both a greater percentage of women turning out and voting for him.

- The youth vote is undergoing a major change. Ever since the Twenty-Sixth Amendment was passed, political parties have wanted to capture the young voter. Even though they seem to vote more Democratic than Republican (with the exception of youth supporting Reagan and Bush), the fact remains that they have voted in much lower numbers than other groups. From 1976 to 1988, for instance, the turnout among the youngest voters, those 18–20 years old, was less than 40 percent of the eligible voters. In the 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008 elections, MTV ran a "Choose or Lose" campaign, resulting in increased registration and turnout of young voters.

THE YOUTH VOTE HAS BEEN GREATLY INFLUENCED BY MTV'S ROCK THE VOTE CAMPAIGN

- Religious and ethnic background highly influences voter choice and voter turnout. Dating back to the early days of immigration, Catholics and Jews tend to vote Democratic (Republicans traditionally supported anti-immigration legislation), whereas northern Protestants tend to vote Republican. Strongly affiliated

religious groups also tend to vote more often in general elections, compared to those people who don't identify themselves as being closely connected to a religion. Minority groups, although voting heavily for Democratic candidates, do not turn out as much as white voters. Jesse Jackson and his Rainbow Coalition, minority groups of "color" rallying around causes espoused by Jackson, have been attempting to increase minority registration and voter turnout. Minority groups are a fertile field for political parties to pursue. After the 2000 election, a religious gap became evident. Those people who were regular churchgoers tended to vote Republican, while those who did not attend religious services regularly tended to vote Democratic. This trend continued in 2004 and polls reflected an increase of three million evangelical voters, the majority of whom voted for George W. Bush.

- Historically, geography has dictated a voter preference. The South voted solidly Democratic after the Civil War. However, the solid South has become much more conservative. They vote Republican more on the national level and continue to vote Democratic in local elections, but it is sometimes hard to tell the difference because of ideology. Comparing voter turnout, proportionally, Northerners vote in greater numbers than Southerners. This difference is explained by a large number of minority voters who are still not registered. New England and sunbelt voters tend to vote Republican, whereas the big industrial states, especially in the big cities, lean to the Democrats but are considered toss-ups in close presidential elections.

- Even though party identification plays a key role in determining voter choice and voter turnout, more and more people are registering Independent. There is a greater overall Democratic registration, but voters tend to respond more to the individual candidate and issues, along with the sociological factors, than just party identification alone.

PARTY IDENTIFICATION

Voting patterns vary from election to election and reached a peak in the 1960s presidential elections.

If we assume party identification is a key factor in determining voter turnout and voter preference, then we would assume the Democrats would have the edge. This was definitely true in Congress, where Democrats dominated both houses from World War II until 1994, when the Republicans gained control of the House as well as the Senate. When you look at presidential elections, personality and issues rather than party have been a conclusive factor in determining the outcome of the election. In many elections, ticket-splitting occurred more than straight party line voting. This was especially evident in 1996, when the voters kept in office the Democratic president and a Republican Congress.

In order to vote, you must be registered. Historically, this was an important factor explaining why voter turnout was low. In 1992 Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition increased minority voter registration. To make voter registration easier for all groups, the Motor Voter Act of 1993 was signed into law by President Clinton. This law enabled people to register to vote at motor vehicle departments. In fact, it has not been since the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that so many new voters registered. More than 600,000 voters became eligible to vote. Another interesting point is that even though Republicans were concerned that there would be a Democratic imbalance in the new registrants, it was in fact the Republicans who made significant gains. However, in post-1996 election analysis, most of these new voters did not vote. California, along with four other states, challenged the constitutionality of the law arguing that it was an unfunded mandate. The federal courts have dismissed that contention.
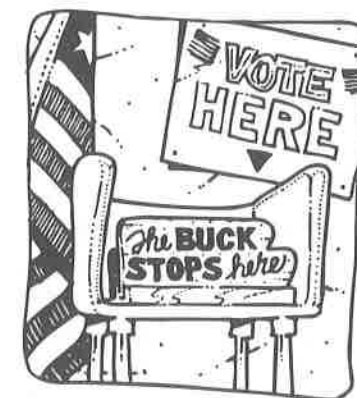
Voter Declines

Even though it is easier for people to vote and a greater number of people have registered, there has been a consistent downward trend from 1968–2008. The number of people of voting age has more than doubled since 1932. Yet after reaching a high in 1960, the percentage of eligible voters who voted actually declined (except for a small increase in 1984 and 1992). Because of the increase in young voters and successful efforts to enroll minorities and get them to vote, there was a significant increase in the 1992 election when close to 55 percent of the registered voters turned out. In 1996, because of negative voter reaction to the campaign issues raised by President Clinton and Senator Dole, the voter turnout was again below 50 percent. In 2000 the percentage rose to a little above 50 percent. In 2004, there was a record voter turnout that translated into a 60 percent turnout. The 2008 presidential election saw an increase in voter registration and voter turnout. A little more than 62 percent of eligible voters turned out. Since 1932 the highest presidential turnouts (60 percent or more) were in the three elections that took place in the 1960s. National and international events, as well as new legislation that increased voting opportunities for minorities, were probably responsible for the higher numbers. After Watergate the percentage of voters dropped dramatically. It is interesting to note that in off-year congressional elections, voter turnout is significantly lower. From 1974 to 2006 turnout in midterm congressional elections averaged around 40 percent.

There is a real inconsistency between voter participation and the amount and type of election coverage provided in the campaigns. Everything from presidential debates to town meetings and an increased use of the mass media should result in an increased voter turnout. But because of a decline in party identification and a distrust of politicians, it seems that many eligible voters would rather sit out elections.

THE RIGHT TO VOTE

The country has seen a tremendous change in the legal right to vote. When the Constitution was ratified, franchise was given to white male property owners only. Today there is a potential for close to 200 million people who are at least 18 years old to vote. It has been a long struggle to obtain suffrage for individuals who were held back by such considerations as property ownership, race, religious background, literacy, ability to pay poll taxes, and sex. In addition, many state restrictions lessened the impact of federal law and constitutional amendments.

The history of suffrage reflects increased opportunities to vote.

THE HISTORY OF SUFFRAGE HAS BEEN CHARACTERIZED BY MINORITY GROUPS FIGHTING FOR THEIR RIGHT TO VOTE

By the 1800s all religious qualifications were eliminated from voting requirements. Property considerations also were legislated out of existence by most states in the middle of the nineteenth century. The aftermath of the Civil War provided a major attempt to franchise the freed race. However, the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment was countered by the passage of literacy laws and poll taxes by most Southern states. The progressive era of the early twentieth century saw the passage of two key amendments, the direct election of senators and the granting of voting rights to women. After the *Brown* decision in 1954, Congress began formulating voting rights legislation such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and these changes were backed by the passage of the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, eliminating the poll tax (or any other voting tax). The final groups to receive the vote were Washington, D.C., voters, as a result of the Twenty-Third Amendment in 1961 and the 18-year-old as a result of the passage of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment in 1971.

Even though these trends resulted in an increase in the potential pool of voters, it was still left up to the individual states to regulate specific voting requirements. Such issues as residency, registration procedures, age, and voting times affect the ability of people to vote. However, federal law and Supreme Court decisions have created more and more consistency in these areas. This was especially apparent in the 2000 election when the Supreme Court intervened in the Florida recount and decided to stop the recount in *Bush v Gore*. For instance, the Supreme Court has ruled that a 30-day period is ample time for residency. The Motor Voter Act does provide for the centralization of voter registration along with local registration regulations. Some states have permitted 17-year-olds to vote in some primary elections. Literacy tests have been outlawed in every state as a result of the Voting Rights Act Amendments of 1970 and Supreme Court decisions.

Important Legislation

The two significant pieces of modern legislation increasing voting opportunities were the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Civil Rights Act prohibited the use of any registration requirement that resulted in discrimination and paved the way for the involvement of the federal government to enforce the law. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 finally made the Fifteenth Amendment a reality. It was reinforced by other amendments in 1970, 1975, and 1982. As a result of this act, the poll tax and literacy requirements were addressed. The act gave the attorney general the power to determine which states were in violation of the law and led to the passage of the constitutional amendments after the Supreme Court ruled on the legality of the law. The act also prohibited states from passing their own restrictive voting laws without "preclearance" from the Department of Justice.

There are some cases where restrictions can exist on a person's right to vote. People in mental institutions, the homeless, convicted felons, and dishonorably discharged soldiers have been denied the right to vote in some states.

PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion is molded through a combination of factors at a very early age.

Public opinion can be defined as the attitudes, perceptions, and viewpoints individuals hold about politics and government. Some political scientists view this process as one of political socialization. It is interesting to see the parallels between the factors that influence voting patterns and the factors that mold public opinion and political socialization. They include:

- the family
- the schools
- the church
- molders of public opinion
- the mass media

People internalize viewpoints at a very early age and act on them as they grow older. "Family values" has become an overused phrase but, in fact, is the primary source of the formulation of political opinions. When Vice President Dan Quayle made family values an election issue in 1992, he touched a chord that set off a debate. The reality is that children internalize what they hear and see within their family unit. If a child lives with a single parent, that child will certainly have strong attitudes about child support. If parents tend to speak about party identification, most children will tend to register and vote for the same party as their parents. Schools and the church play a secondary role in the formation of political views. There is no doubt that the Catholic Church's position on abortion has had a tremendous impact on Catholics taking a stand for the "right to life." However, the family unit reinforces the viewpoint.

Schools and teachers inculcate the meaning of citizenship at very early ages. Children recite the Pledge of Allegiance and sing the national anthem. Depending upon how open the educational system is, students will also learn how to question the role of government.

People who are in the public spotlight—whether they are politicians, union officials, successful businessmen and women, spiritual leaders, or your personal doctors, lawyers, or accountants—play an impressive role in molding public opinion. When Lee Iacocca or Donald Trump talk about government, people respond to their perspective. People holding important offices also command respect and use different techniques to influence the public. The mass media (covered in the last part of this chapter) is playing an increasingly important role in the formation of people's political attitudes. TV talk shows, interactive technology, and the print media comment on every aspect of our lives. Surveys have shown that the average household watches television more than seven hours a day.

The translation of public opinion into public policy takes place when policymakers truly understand opinion trends. This is one of the most difficult aspects of policymakers. They rely on such things as polls, letters, and personal input from constituents. The next section will discuss polling techniques.

Opinion Polls

In recent years, poll-taking has increased in scope and importance. Pollsters want to determine what the American public is thinking. The results are widely reported in the media, and in a number of cases polls themselves are newsworthy. The qualities that are measured in polls include:

- How intense people are in their beliefs and attitudes
- The real wants and needs of individuals that can be translated into policy
- Whether public opinion on any given issue is constant or changing
- The extent to which the public is polarized or has a consensus on any given issue. Issues such as the Vietnam War and healthcare are two examples of the public displaying either polarization or consensus

Public opinion polls take the pulse of America regarding many different issues. They also are predictors of the outcome of elections.

Using scientific methodology and computer technology, professional pollsters such as Gallup, CNN, and daily newspapers have mastered the art of measuring public opinion. When looking at political polls, you should consider:

- Who conducts the poll—there is a real difference between a candidate who reports polling results and a neutral organization that conducts a poll
- The sample size—make sure that a random sample was obtained
- If a clear distinction regarding the population sample (e.g., in a presidential preference poll, whether those polled were likely voters)
- When the poll was conducted
- The poll methodology
- The sampling error, which gives the poll statistical validity—±3 percent is usually an acceptable standard
- How clearly the questions were worded

During recent presidential campaigns, CNN and other media outlets took daily tracking polls of both likely voters and those voters who were eligible. The results differed significantly. In 1996, the increased popularity of the Internet contributed to the proliferation of daily tracking polls. On any given day, one could find as many as a dozen polls broken down nationally and by state, by registered voter, by likely voters, by electoral vote, by popular vote, and by over a three-day period as well as over a one-day period. The result was conflicting data. By 2008, polling techniques became so sophisticated that some websites were able to accurately predict both the popular vote and electoral vote margins that Barack Obama received.

Public opinion polls have become so sophisticated that the use of exit polls in carefully selected precincts can accurately predict the outcome of an election minutes after the polls close. In addition, these polls can give valuable information regarding why people voted the way they did. A serious question has been raised regarding the prediction of elections using exit polls in presidential elections. If the East Coast results are reported right after the polls close, will it influence West Coast voters to stay home? There have even been attempts to legislate restrictions on the use of exit polls.

There have also been historical polling mistakes. The most famous polling error took place in the 1936 election when a magazine mailed out straw ballots to more than 10 million people. It got back more than 2 million of them and predicted that Governor Alfred Landon would defeat incumbent Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt won the election by one of the greatest landslides, carrying every state with the exception of Maine and Vermont. Obviously, the poll lacked a valid sample, getting its population from automobile registration lists and telephone numbers. That kind of sample during a depression would obviously favor the Republicans. Another polling disaster occurred in the 1948 election between Truman and Dewey. Pollsters had been accurately calling the election extremely close. In September the Gallup organization ended their polling and predicted a Dewey victory. Pollsters quickly learned they would have to continue polling to the final day of the campaign to gauge subtle shifts in public opinion accurately. Overall, most polls have accurately predicted voter trends and have been responsible in the manner in which they have been taken and reported.

In the 2000 presidential election polling organizations came under fire. The Voter News Service, a conglomerate of the major media organizations pooling their

resources to provide exit poll information, gave inaccurate statistics to the networks regarding the results of the Florida vote. This caused the networks to first call the election for Vice President Gore. Then, when additional information was evaluated, the networks pulled back their initial projection and the state remained in the "too close to call" column until the networks again, based on faulty information, gave the state to George W. Bush in the early hours of the next morning. Based on this, Gore called Bush and conceded the election until it became clear that the real results were so close that a recount of Florida's votes was required. Voter News Service took responsibility for the poor methodology used and, along with the networks, implemented new procedures for the 2004 election.

THE OLD MEDIA VERSUS THE NEW MEDIA

> The impact of the information superhighway on the political and public agenda has far-reaching consequences.

As the media continues to try to quench Americans' thirst for information, different kinds of media conglomerates form, and new kinds of technologies are made available. This has led to the growth of the information superhighway. This "thruway" of information has many different exits. Media conglomerates and the Internet are two of the major characteristics of the information superhighway. The media concentration that exists gives the public access to the highway. The structure can be viewed as a three-tiered structure—an inner, middle, and outer tier. The inner tier consists of the three major networks, cable news channels, the national news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*), and the four national newspapers (*The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Los Angeles Times*), as well as the national wire service the Associated Press. The middle tier embraces other national newspapers including *USA Today*, *Chicago Tribune*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and other news services as well as magazines with a strong political slant (*New Republic* and *National Review*). The outer tier consists of local newspapers and local television and radio stations. Crossing these tiers is a concentration of power among major media conglomerates such as Gannett and Time Warner, Disney, and General Electric. The impact of so-called right-wing radio and television commentators, such as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, and the use of Fox News cannot be underestimated and contribute to what has been characterized as a hyperdemocracy, the influence of the masses through the media on government.

The formation of new media pathways to the information superhighway has proliferated in the 1990s. Such relatively new media as computers, satellites, cable television, direct broadcast satellite services, laser discs, CD-ROM, and other interactive technologies such as e-mail, videoconferencing, and teleconferencing online services, and the tremendous growth of the Internet have created a congested information highway. The net result is a greater impact on the political agenda. In the 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2010 elections every major political candidate had a "website" on the Internet. Candidates also use the Internet for fundraising. In the 2000 election Senator John McCain raised over $1 million using his website. In 2003, presidential candidate Howard Dean set an Internet fund-raising record. Sites such as *moveon.org* and *meetup.org* have changed the political landscape. Political "blogs" (web logs) and video sites such as *youtube.com* have had a major impact on voting behavior. As the public has more and more access to information, the media has the potential to influence the way the public thinks. For instance, having the capability to react immediately to an issue raised by using voice mail enables instant polling to take place. Barack Obama notified his supporters of his choice of Senator Joseph Biden as his