FRAMING INEQUALITY

News Media, Public Opinion, and the Neoliberal Turn in U.S. Public Policy

MATT GUARDINO

Framing Inequality

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To my father—a great citizen, and a better man

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Framing Inequality

1

Introduction

Why are some political ideas and facts more likely than others to attract media coverage in the United States? In a nation with comparatively strong formal freedoms of expression and association, political messages are rarely in short supply. In a nation where explicit government censorship has been uncommon, any of these political messages are conceivably eligible to appear in the news. And in a nation that—by law, custom, and mythology—defines the media as an independent institution that subjects power holders to popular accountability and control, political messages might make the news by their contribution to vigorous and informed debate: Are the messages relevant to an important public issue? Are they supported by credible evidence and cogent logic? Do they accurately reflect the range of viewpoints in government and across society? Academic observers and journalists concur, however, that selecting political ideas and information for the news is rarely such a careful process.

Indeed, newsworthiness in political communication is something of a mystical property. My own experience of six years as a daily newspaper journalist confirms the role of a largely implicit "news sense" in deciding not only which events and issues to cover but also which political actors to seek out for information and opinions, and which policy views to include in stories. As a rookie reporter who had never taken a journalism class, I learned on the job—often through frustrating trial and error—just when the views of particular government officials, policy researchers, scientific experts, public interest attorneys, advocacy organizations, and others were relevant as "news," and when they were not. I made these decisions under consistent pressure to generate a large volume of stories that would pass muster with editors' news judgments and perceptions of reader tastes and sensibilities. As Timothy Cook (1989, 8) asserts, "If reporters are asked for the difference between news and non-news, they are likely to provide anecdotes or examples, not a hard-and-fast dividing line. Yet the demand for fresh news is incessant."

Questions of newsworthiness carry special importance in debates about what governments ought to do—or not do—in response to social and economic problems. Many policy issues are exceedingly complex and controversial, both technically and ideologically. Myriad ideas about ends, means, evidence, and values are expressed throughout government, and in interest groups, advocacy organizations, academic institutions, activist groups, and elsewhere, not to mention by ordinary people at the proverbial kitchen table. That makes allocating news time and space to policy messages based on their contribution to democratic debate particularly difficult, time consuming, risky, and costly.

Nevertheless, the stakes are extremely high: If media organizations do this poorly, the majority of Americans without skills or resources to spend hours studying public policy cannot be expected to express informed opinions that advance their interests and values. Nor can ordinary people, the lifeblood of democracy, make wise decisions about which political leaders to support or oppose. This book argues that, all too often in recent decades, corporate influences and commercial pressures have diminished the media's capacity to serve their crucial democratic function of organizing public debate. It also argues that the resulting distortions in the news have encouraged public support for policies that worsen economic inequality and its toxic social and political effects.

Argument and Evidence

This is a book about the media's role in selecting the political messages that have helped reshape U.S. economic and social welfare policy as income and wealth inequality have soared since the early 1980s. It contends that the primary forces determining how the news depicts these policy issues have little to do with the individual political biases of media personnel, or the straightforward consumer preferences (for Democratic- or Republican-leaning coverage, for simplicity and drama, and so on) of media audiences. Instead, I argue, political science ought to devote more attention to the concrete political effects of the media's structural position as a privately owned, corporately organized, commercially driven institution. Operating through a process that I call *media refraction*, these political-economic factors powerfully condition how news outlets interpret and convey to the public the welter of policy debate and discussion inside and outside government. In turn, the traits that mark the news media as key elements of corporate capitalism can generate real—if rarely consciously intended—consequences for the ideological direction of public opinion and, thus, the resolution of key policy debates. Working from this political-economic framework, I show how the media's institutional imperatives in recent decades have encouraged news coverage that favors neoliberal—broadly, market-oriented

and pro-corporate—policy views. I also demonstrate that such coverage can affect people's opinions about these critical issues.

Corporate and commercial influences in the news often operate aside from—and sometimes in spite of—the explicit intentions and preferences of individual journalists, editors, and producers. We tend to stereotype media personnel as either heroic guardians of the public or self-serving political operatives. But their decisions about which political voices and ideological views to include in the news are better understood as constrained by implicit professional codes and work practices. These news routines have developed historically as generally compatible, though not always fully consistent, with the U.S. corporate and commercial media architecture (Schiller 1981). I argue that the particular ways in which these journalistic norms and practices have operated since the early 1980s have facilitated the turn toward neoliberal policies. Further, while new technologies have transformed the media in far-reaching ways in recent decades, the power of institutionally rooted corporate prerogatives and commercial imperatives to shape political news coverage has eroded little. In fact, these forces may have become stronger—and more insidious for democracy—as U.S. political communication has been shaken by the rise of digital media (McChesney 2013; McChesney and Pickard 2014).

Among the most important—and least appreciated—reasons why the media environment shaped by these political-economic tendencies is so critical is its influence on the opinions about specific policies that Americans express during highly charged episodes of political debate. Thus, this is also a book about where our opinions about public policies come from. I argue that these opinions are not rooted solely in relatively stable demographic characteristics, such as how much money we make, our race, our gender, and so on. Policy attitudes do not emerge entirely from the deeply ingrained mental habits that shape how we respond to our social environments, materializing from the psychological ether to make their mark on political polls. Nor do our opinions spring exclusively from well-rooted partisan attachments that generate nearly automatic cues about the "correct" policy positions to take. Instead, this book demonstrates that public opinion on specific policy issues can be significantly shaped by the substantive and ideological contexts of media communication that surround us.

In a political culture with strong populist overtones, the patterns of opinion that form around news coverage constitute a potent resource for leaders who seek to legitimize the policies that these officials—and the narrow interests which fund and support them—favor (Druckman and Jacobs 2015; Jacobs 2011; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, 2002). But media coverage is politically important not only because of its relatively direct effects on concrete poll results. Prevailing news content can also play a role in constructing a politically fraught picture of "public opinion" as seen in the news itself. This picture of

public opinion may indirectly shape policymaking. For example, members of Congress often look to news coverage as an implicit guide to what "the people" believe and want (Cook 1989; Jacobs et al. 1998). If patterns of ideas and information in the news systematically favor particular ideological tendencies, then such media coverage may affect what political leaders do, even when it does not directly shape their constituents' policy preferences (Cook, Barabas, and Page 2002). Thus, superficial and narrow coverage of policy issues can help certain elite interests by "packaging a particular image of public opinion to send to other officials who look to the news media as constructing public opinion" (Cook 2006, 168).

For these reasons, understanding how and why economic and social welfare policy has shifted to the "free-market" right in recent decades, despite significant countervailing political trends (including in public opinion itself)—and despite much evidence that these policies worsen inequality and degrade the lives of poor, working-class, and middle-income people—requires that we understand how and why the commercial news media operate as they do. And understanding how the media generate public policy coverage in these contexts requires understanding how neoliberal policies themselves have catalyzed and reinforced corporate news practices and commercial routines at the center of the U.S. media system. In other words, the political climate that has facilitated the neoliberal turn has not only been shaped by news coverage produced by the corporate media complex. That political climate and its power inequalities have shaped the media complex itself, in turn supporting news media's promotion of the broader political shift to the right.

My empirical evidence for this argument is derived from two primary policy case studies of news coverage, political debate, and public opinion; two secondary case studies; and an online survey experiment. Drawing on extensive content analyses of popular mainstream news coverage, I show that the media consistently favored neoliberal policy perspectives during the 1981 debate over the inaugural Reagan economic plan and the 1995–1996 debate over welfare reform. My analyses of governmental and nongovernmental discourse circulated outside of media venues during both debates suggest that news coverage magnified these right-leaning policy perspectives and marginalized dissenting messages. While coverage was far from monolithic, I demonstrate that news outlets downplayed critical ideas even when elected members of Congress voiced them. I explain these disconnects between public debate and media content by connecting them to structural factors in the media system that have been reinforced during the neoliberal era in ways that tend to limit depth and diversity in economic and social welfare policy news. Comparisons of news content

and polling results in the two key cases suggest that such coverage shaped public opinion to facilitate the neoliberal policy turn.

I corroborate the patterns of these earlier historical episodes by examining media coverage during the 2010 debate over extending the George W. Bush tax cuts. I then report the results of an experiment that builds from the media analyses to show that the ideological contours of news discourse can affect public opinion, particularly among those large slices of the American public without strong partisan commitments. Here, I demonstrate that news coverage very similar to that which has characterized crucial policy debates in recent decades can make even low- and middle-income people, and people with generally egalitarian social values, more likely to endorse neoliberal policies. Taking another step forward in time, my analysis of the 2017 debate over repealing the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (the ACA or "Obamacare") suggests that corporate media continued to narrow the range of economic and social welfare policy discourse even amid proliferating online news options and the political maturation of social media.

My integrated approach links political-economic dynamics in media and government institutions to concrete patterns of news coverage (Lawrence 2006, 228–229), and proceeds to connect this coverage to politically meaningful configurations of public opinion. Few subjects raise more important implications for democracy. Mass public opinion is a crucial facet of the political environments that constrain and enable elite policy decisions. But public opinion does not form in a vacuum, and it does not merely reflect bottom-up processes that precede or stand apart from the power inequalities that permeate political-economic institutions like the media. For most Americans, it is news coverage that provides the political information and discourse which allows them to connect—or misconnect—specific policy issues to their material interests, broader values, and social worldviews. This makes the news media paramount in creating conditions for informed and active publics able to tell government what they want—and what they don't want (Feree et al. 2002; Porto 2007)—and in ensuring elite accountability for policy decisions (Arnold 2004). The media's role is especially crucial for those with relatively less political and economic power.[1] Through the information and discourse that they convey—or fail to convey—the media can reduce or amplify the inequalities in political voice that are associated with having lower incomes and less education. Such political disparities may play a major part in generating the neoliberal policies that have exacerbated economic inequality (Gilens 2012). Looking closely at the media can help us better understand the reasons for these power inequalities. It can also help us identify possibilities for broadening the opportunities for all Americans to have their voices taken seriously during crucial public policy debates.

Plan of the Book

In Chapter 2, I set the conceptual and historical foundation of my argument and pose a question: Why have so many Americans since 1980 told pollsters that they support specific neoliberal economic and social welfare policies, even as similarly large majorities and pluralities express left-of-center opinions when asked general questions about these issues? Mainstream news coverage of high-profile policy debates provides a key part of the answer. I explain how the corporate consolidation and commercialization of the media that define the neoliberal era have reinforced longstanding institutional tendencies to limit the substantive depth and ideological range of popular news coverage. These structural and institutional forces can diminish opportunities for Americans to receive policy messages not only from interest group and social movement voices but from their own elected representatives. In short, the widespread support for many specific neoliberal policies seen in poll results, which political leaders have interpreted as a broad popular mandate, is in no small measure a result of news media influence. Analyzing these communication processes can help us better understand the ongoing politics of economic inequality. It can also shed new light on political-economic power in the United States, and on the ways in which news coverage may undermine democratic values.

Chapter 3 presents the first case study of news content, political discourse, and public opinion. Using a variety of indicators, I show that then-dominant broadcast network television and Associated Press newspaper coverage of the 1981 Reagan economic plan both downplayed the substance of the policy debate and significantly favored right-leaning perspectives. Analyses of the Congressional Record demonstrate that many Democratic legislators joined nongovernmental voices in criticizing the neoliberal Economic Recovery Tax Act. However, media refraction rooted in corporate and commercial imperatives blunted these oppositional messages. In the early 1980s, the political-economic tendencies that encourage superficial and narrow news coverage were not as potent as they would become as the neoliberal era unfolded. Still, survey data suggest that this coverage encouraged public opinion to support the Reagan plan, setting the stage for several decades of neoliberal tax policy.

In Chapter 4, I turn to the historic debate over neoliberal welfare reform in 1995 and 1996, focusing on the content of broadcast network news, CNN, and *USA Today*. Again, welfare coverage in these popular outlets significantly favored right-leaning ideas. News organizations marginalized or ignored ample messages from Congress and beyond that challenged neoliberal approaches, especially arguments which questioned the number and quality of jobs that would be available to former welfare recipients. Media outlets operating in an increasingly

consolidated and commercialized climate also produced substantially less hard news than during the debate over the Reagan economic plan. Poll results suggest that public opinion on welfare reform appeared to respond to this news environment. The increasingly bipartisan character of welfare discourse in the media shows how neoliberal politics had advanced since Reagan's first term. By the mid-1990s, pro-corporate, market-oriented views had been adopted by powerful elements in the national Democratic Party and magnified in a neoliberalized news system that filtered the political discourse which reached the public.

Chapter 5 extends the media analysis into the 21st century and presents an in-depth study of how ideologically narrow news can shape public opinion. Content analysis of *USA Today* stories during the late 2010 debate over extending the Bush administration's upper-income tax cuts confirms the basic patterns of news coverage identified in earlier cases amid the shifting partisan and communication environment of the Obama presidency. The centerpiece of this chapter is an online experiment in which a diverse sample of more than 1,000 Americans confronted randomly determined selections of ideological messages in realistic newspaper and TV news depictions of the debate over corporate tax policy. I demonstrate that media coverage can cause even many people who are generally skeptical of neoliberal approaches to support a specific neoliberal policy. People without strong partisan predispositions are most susceptible to the effects of narrow news coverage. Those with greater command of factual political and policy information are more resistant. This chapter demonstrates that ideological diversity in policy news matters for public opinion.

In Chapter 6, I place my findings on corporate news coverage and public opinion during economic and social welfare policy debates in the context of sweeping changes in media technology. The migration of mainstream news organizations online, the explosion of new digital-only sources of policy information and commentary, the political emergence of social media, and the rise of "fake news" have bewildered many Americans—political scientists and communication scholars included. Still, there is little sign that the power of corporate media to influence public opinion during policy debates is evaporating. Indeed, key tendencies of the current moment may exacerbate the very forces responsible for media refraction and its political effects. My empirical analysis of mainstream news during the debate to repeal Obamacare shows that the patterns which characterized earlier neoliberal-era policy episodes have largely persisted. I also speculate about how the media and public opinion dynamics described in this book might be redirected along a more democratic path. Because political-economic factors have shaped the quantity, quality, and diversity of public policy news, new political-economic policies may be required to significantly shift these dynamics.

The final chapter reviews my evidence and argument about the U.S. news media's role in the neoliberal policy turn since 1980, discusses their significance for the contemporary political moment, and sketches their broader implications for American democracy. Given the important changes in political dynamics, information technology, and media economics since the earlier case studies presented in this book, it is easy to overlook larger patterns that have endured and intensified. Disparities in wealth and income have reached new levels in the long wake of the Great Recession, corporate and commercial media are in many ways as powerful as ever, and neoliberal policy frameworks continue to play a strong role in government responses to the mounting economic and social challenges of the 21st century. Understanding how political-economic tendencies in media communication helped lead to today's political circumstances can only illuminate a current moment defined by power inequalities that mainstream news has often reflected and supported. Those inequalities demand critical analysis. I hope this book contributes to that crucial task.

2

Toward a Critical Understanding of News Media, Public Opinion, and the Politics of Economic Inequality

In September 2013, President Barack Obama made headlines when he acknowledged the persistent menace of rising economic inequality and eroding social mobility. "The gains that we've made in productivity and people working harder have all accrued to people at the very top," the president told George Stephanopoulos, as the former Clinton White House staffer-turned-media-personality noted that 95 percent of new income since the 2008 financial crash had gone to the top 1 percent of Americans (*ABC This Week* 2013). Later that year in a speech at the moderate-liberal think tank Center for American Progress, Obama called economic inequality the "defining challenge of our time" (Newell 2013).

President Obama's second-term rhetorical focus on class disparities generated considerable public attention. But increasing income and wealth inequality, stagnating wages, and intractable poverty long predate his presidency. These trends are deeply embedded structural problems that have taken decades to reach their current levels. Moreover, the diminishing fortunes of lower- and middle-income people are not the inevitable outcome of changes in technology or disembodied market forces. Rather, they have been driven by a series of political choices since the late 1970s that have decisively shifted U.S. domestic policy in a neoliberal direction (Harvey 2005; Schram 2015; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

Obama's retrospective lament to Stephanopoulos and Center for American Progress remarks attracted significant short-term media buzz. However, we know very little about how news coverage itself has affected the political environments that have intensified economic inequality over time. A growing volume of scholarship has explored the political forces that propel—and, in turn, have been reinforced by—the turn toward policies that favor the wealthy

and large corporations (Gilens 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2010). But the media have been, at best, peripheral political actors in these analyses.

The inadequate attention paid to mass media's role in the politics of public policy and economic inequality is puzzling. Decades of research demonstrate that the media can affect our policy perceptions and preferences, molding the popular political climates that facilitate government action (or inaction) on key issues. But what part have the news media played in the historic economic and social welfare policy debates that have had such crucial consequences for the lives of low- and middle-income people, and that continue to exert a gravitational pull on political debate in the twenty-first century? This book steps back from the partisan battles of the moment to closely examine the patterns of news coverage that set the political foundations for contemporary policy controversies over taxes, the federal budget, the minimum wage, financial regulation, and other critical issues. Which political voices and policy interpretations have received a wide public platform—and which have not—in popular news coverage of neoliberal-era policy debates? Why have the media produced this kind of news coverage? And how might media coverage shape ordinary people's opinions about specific policy issues that carry profound implications for individual citizens, their families, and the nation at large?

To address such questions, this book takes a wider view of the role of the media in the politics of economic inequality than has been typical in political science research. It describes news coverage of economic and social welfare policy issues, explains that coverage by situating it within the historically shaped political-economic structure of the media industry, and explores the potential effects of such coverage on public opinion. I argue that the neoliberal turn in domestic policy has been reinforced and supported by a corresponding neoliberal turn in media institutions and practices. Such changes in the media—themselves enabled by public policy choices since the 1970s—have bolstered news production routines that are rooted in the corporate structure and commercial character of the U.S. communication system. At pivotal historical moments in recent decades, these political-economic dynamics have encouraged superficial and narrow media coverage of economic and social welfare policy issues.

In taking this approach, the book aims to improve our understanding of the causes, consequences, and future of the decades-long turn toward neoliberal policy. In so doing, it identifies some underappreciated constraints on the U.S. news media's democratic potential to enable ideologically open and informationally rich public debates. My findings suggest that such open and rich debates—which can help people with less political power to assert their interests and values when elites make decisions on their behalf in Washington, DC—have not been the norm during the neoliberal era. Moreover, there is reason to be skeptical that popular news media are discharging their democratic

responsibilities during public policy debates more impressively today as neoliberalism maintains a firm bipartisan grip on the elite political imagination.

The next section explains how taking news coverage more seriously can help political science to better understand the neoliberal turn in U.S. policy and the broader politics of economic inequality. This is followed by a conceptual framework illuminating how media coverage can shape public opinion. Then the chapter examines the U.S. commercial media system in the historical context of neoliberalism, explaining how richly textured and systematic analyses that define media in political-economic and institutional terms can strengthen our grasp of mass political dynamics. The chapter ends by describing how this book contributes to an ongoing renewal of empirical research on political-economic power and American democracy.

Neoliberalism and the Politics of Economic Inequality: Media as Missing Link

Historians, sociologists, and a growing number of political scientists have explored critical aspects of the neoliberal turn in American politics. However, aside from important studies of partisan talk radio and cable television (Berry and Sobieraj 2014; Jamieson and Cappella 2008), the role of mass-market media in these developments has been largely neglected. In particular, few studies have systematically analyzed the economic and social welfare policy coverage that popular news outlets have circulated to the broad swath of Americans that has comprised most national poll respondents since the early 1980s. In this section, I explain how my perspective on media and public opinion adds a key element to the story of the neoliberal policy turn and the politics of rising economic inequality.

Neoliberal-New Right Ideological Production

Many studies of the market-conservative turn in U.S. politics since the 1970s—and the rise of neoliberal economic and social welfare policy specifically—have highlighted the role of institutions focused on producing and disseminating political ideas (Diamond 1995; Phillips-Fein 2009). These institutions include think tanks and policy research organizations; elements of the secondary and higher education systems (Moreton 2008); and specialized communications channels, including narrowly targeted activist media, intellectual opinion journals, and formal party organizations (M. A. Smith 2007). Conservatives' growing attention to ideological production and circulation was facilitated by the remarkable

(if incomplete) unification, organization, and mobilization of business interests facing increased international competition, economic turmoil, labor militancy, and political threats from a social welfare and regulatory state that had reached its apex in the early 1970s (Harvey 2005, 43–44; Phillips-Fein 2009). In addition to growing campaign finance, lobbying, and other direct political activities, corporate interests have been instrumental in founding, funding, and promoting a variety of opinion-shaping institutions created or significantly revitalized during the 1970s, including think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute (O'Connor 2008).

While many of these ideological organizations have had fairly direct and immediate impacts in elite policymaking circles, they have also moved aggressively to shape wider political discourse through strategies aimed at influencing broad currents of American public opinion. But there has been little research on the extent to which the ideas incubated in conservative policy formulation and advocacy venues over recent decades have reached the mainstream news media, which is where most ordinary people encounter policy-relevant information and discourse. In directing itself toward mass-market media, then, the analyses in this book concentrate on a key mechanism of potential ideological opinion influence that scholars have largely neglected.

I focus empirically on neoliberal economic and social welfare policy as a key strand in the broader rise of conservative politics in the United States that is often associated with the "New Right." I follow Harvey's (2005, 2) definition of *neoliberalism* as "a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade." In the U.S. domestic sphere, neoliberal policies have focused on supporting and promoting private markets by redirecting government action in business regulation, labor-management relations, taxation, and social welfare provision, including moves to expose public functions to market discipline. Neoliberalism, however, does not entail increased separation of the state from the market, or withdrawal of "big government" from the private sphere. Rather, it constitutes a reorientation of state activity to promote capitalist markets and corporate power. In this sense, neoliberalism has often embraced the broadening of explicit government authority and the intensification of coercive social control (Bruff 2014; Harvey 2005). For instance, as discussed in Chapter 4, welfare reform has deployed state power to constrain and direct the behaviors of poor people in the interest of market imperatives (Mink 2001; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

The New Right grew out of the post–World War II "fusionist" conservative movement, which combined anti-communism, libertarian economics, and traditional moralism (Diamond 1995). Compared to its ideological forebears in

American politics, the New Right featured innovative strategies that cemented its ties to the Republican Party and conventional electoral processes, more sophisticated organizational forms and strategies focused on winning popular support, and greater levels of concentrated funding from corporations and wealthy families. As Diamond (1995, 127–128) observes, "What was 'new' about the New Right was that, by the 1970s, conservative movement leaders enjoyed a greatly enlarged resource base. New corporate money flowed into new and varied organizations, focused on an expanded set of policy issues and directed at a new and growing constituency."

Thus, neoliberalism is the economic governance and social welfare policy dimension of the broader, corporate-supported New Right ideology and political program. In other words, while its political scope reaches into other areas, the New Right has served as a crucial vehicle for neoliberal ideas, institutional orientations, and policy agendas. Still, while neoliberal public policy has been a central element of the New Right, neoliberalism transcends conservative politics as conventionally understood. Neoliberal viewpoints and policy instruments gained their first and most strident mainstream political adherents in the New Right-led Republican Party, but over time they have moved well beyond the GOP. As described in Chapter 4, by the mid-1980s, a new breed of conservative Democrats was rising to power, championing neoliberal ideas and policies that made the party more welcoming to affluent, wealthy, and corporate constituencies. Eventually led by President Bill Clinton, these "New Democrats" (Hacker and Pierson 2010, 180–183) gained media attention as pragmatic ("moderate") leaders who adapted the party to what was seen as an increasingly conservative public mood on many issues.

This bipartisan penetration of neoliberal ideas and policies into the power centers of the national government in part illustrates the ongoing success of the New Right nongovernmental sector in setting ideological frameworks for policy debate and helping sympathetic officials gain elected office. New Right organizing, mobilization, and opinion-shaping activities boosted the political strength of increasingly conservative Republican elites in the late 1970s. Especially following the "Reagan Revolution" wave of the 1980s, New Democrats followed by steadily positioning their party further right on many key economic and social welfare policy issues, attempting to appeal to upper-middle-class voters and wealthy and corporate funders that were becoming more important amid the emergence of expensive advertising- and media-focused campaign strategies (Hacker and Pierson 2010). In that sense, while my empirical analyses in this book show that nongovernmental voices have rarely appeared explicitly in mass-market news coverage of key policy issues, that coverage bears the marks of their influence: most of the officials who dominate media coverage in the neoliberal era owe their policy agendas and electoral positions to New Right interest

groups and political organizations, even if that impact has been more direct in the case of Republicans.

Media and Public Opinion in the Conservative Turn

Parallel to this historical work on neoliberalism and the rise of the New Right, research on American political behavior and institutions has devoted increasing attention to the rising economic inequality and persistent poverty that have accompanied the conservative resurgence. This work does not usually define market-oriented and pro-corporate economic and social welfare policies as part of the broader neoliberal turn. Still, many studies in this line of research have carefully examined the tensions and ambiguities that characterize public opinion's role in legitimating these policies. In particular, scholars have sought to explain how U.S. governing elites in recent decades could consistently enact specific programs that sharply contradict their constituents' generally left-leaning preferences on broad policy directions (Cook and Barrett 1992; Page and Jacobs 2009; Page and Shapiro 1992, 117–165). In a representative democracy, specific public policies are expected (at least most of the time) to be compatible with public opinion. Why has that not usually seemed to be the case for economic and social welfare policy during the neoliberal era?

Leading research on this apparent disconnect between opinion and policy has examined partisan gerrymandering of House of Representatives districts (Hacker and Pierson 2005b, 124–125, 160–161), the decline of unions as a potent advocate of working- and middle-class political interests facing the aggressive countermobilization by business groups since the 1970s (Hacker and Pierson 2010, 116–136; Volscho and Kelly 2012), and the growing upper-income tilt of liberal advocacy organizations as they have transformed from mass membership associations into professionally managed research and lobbying groups (Skocpol 2003). Scholarship has investigated partisan control of government and the confluence of short-term economic growth and Republican electoral wins (Bartels 2008), corporate campaign spending and its effects on Democratic Party agendas (Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Keller and Kelly 2015), the upper-class and business-oriented backgrounds of members of Congress (Carnes 2013), and elite-level GOP political strategies and policy design tactics (Hacker and Pierson 2005b). Other studies have shown how recently intensified institutional and administrative restrictions on voting have exacerbated class and racial biases in the electorate (Piven and Cloward 2000; Uggen and Manza 2002), biases which have perhaps contributed to declining policy responsiveness to broad public opinion and unequal responsiveness along socioeconomic lines (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013; Winters and Page 2009). Some scholars

have argued that the specific designs of market-oriented policies have obscured these policies' impacts on people's material conditions, and their inconsistency with popular ideological stances and values, making it more difficult for people to hold elected officials accountable (Howard 1997; Mettler 2011).

These studies have pinpointed several key factors behind a profound policy shift that no doubt has had multiple causes. However, while some research on the politics of economic inequality touches on the media, none of it focuses squarely on the concrete ideas and information that ordinary Americans have encountered through news coverage as economic and social welfare policy has moved rightward. Moreover, this important line of research has not engaged the media as a political-economic institution that increasingly exhibits many of the same neoliberal tendencies that have enveloped other parts of society over recent decades.

More attention to the media can shed particular light on a key puzzle in U.S. public opinion that emerges from several decades of empirical study. On the one hand, polling majorities consistently express opposition to "big government," oppose state interference in the economy, claim that the government "wastes a lot" of tax money, and generally favor private enterprise over state action in addressing social and economic problems (Feldman and Zaller 1992; Ferguson and Rogers 1986; McClosky and Zaller 1984; Page and Jacobs 2009).[1] In recent decades Americans also are much more likely to label themselves "conservative" than "liberal" (Saad 2016). At the same time, when survey items are worded as questions of general policy, majorities or substantial pluralities have long expressed support for a number of key social welfare and business regulatory programs, including Social Security, Medicare, subsidized job-training, public education, environmental protection, and a higher minimum wage. In addition, substantially more people say they want to increase taxes on corporations and the wealthy than to decrease them, and general support for progressive taxation is strong, nearing 50 percent even among Republicans and high-income people (Cook and Barrett 1992; Page and Jacobs 2009; Page and Shapiro 1992, 117–165).[2] Majorities go so far as to support more government spending to help the poor, when the word "welfare" is not used in the question (Gilens 1999; Pew Research Center 2018).

Another curious pattern in U.S. public opinion further complicates this picture. During major debates about *specific* economic and social welfare policy initiatives, polling majorities since the early 1980s have usually favored the more conservative position, particularly at the peak of policy debate. Table 2.1 summarizes public opinion in three illustrative cases. The third and fourth columns show mean levels of support and opposition in each debate, based on survey items referring to particular policy proposals or specific provisions

Table 2.1 **Public Opinion in Key Economic and Social Welfare Policy Debates, 1981–2001**

Policy Debate	*Time Period*	*Mean Support*	*Mean Opposition*	*Question N*
Reagan Economic Plan	January–August 1981	59	29	47
Welfare Reform Plan	January 1995–August 1996	60.2	32.1	109
G.W. Bush Tax Plan	January–June 2001	53.8	37.3	85

Note: These data are from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research IPOLL Database (https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/CFIDE/cf/action/home/index.cfm). Cell entries in the third and fourth columns represent percentages of survey respondents.

of those proposals. These data are drawn from all relevant questions in polls conducted on random national samples by major survey organizations during the time periods indicated.

Ordinary Americans' opinions in these concrete political contexts seem to contradict their broadly left-leaning attitudes regarding general policy orientations. For example, significant majorities favored Reagan's neoliberal "supply-side" tax and budget plans (Cattani 1981; Clymer 1981a, 1981b), supported neoliberal welfare reform (Pereira and Van Ryzin 1998; Weaver 2002; Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1995), opposed the Clinton health care plan (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), endorsed the 2001 and 2003 Bush tax cuts (Bartels 2005; Bell and Entman 2011; Guardino 2007; Hacker and Pierson 2005a), and opposed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (Jacobs and Mettler 2011; Jacobs and Skocpol 2015).[3] Evidence from nationally representative surveys is clear: during concrete episodes of institutional political debate, a picture of strong popular support for neoliberal economic and social welfare policy emerges. In this book, I argue that superficial, substantively thin, and ideologically distorted mainstream news coverage has contributed to these public opinion patterns during key policy debates. These media dynamics have played an underappreciated role in generating and sustaining political support for the broader neoliberal turn in American politics.

Researchers have devoted little sustained attention to news coverage of U.S. economic and social welfare policy issues in recent decades. A handful of insightful but smaller-scale studies of media coverage in these political contexts has been produced (Bell and Entman 2011; Limbert and Bullock 2009). And a few scholars have analyzed news coverage of some aspects of the key policy issues that have punctuated the neoliberal turn in American politics. However,

these analyses have either been minor parts of extensive, longitudinal studies featuring many issues not related to the market-conservative turn in economic and social welfare policy (Wagner and Gruszczynski 2016), narrower treatments concerned with particular dimensions of media coverage (Jerit 2008; Lawrence 2000a), or broader analyses that focus on the volume of attention to particular topics related to economic inequality (McCall 2013, 53–95), rather than to the specific content, sources, or ideological texture of that coverage. So far, we have lacked systematic descriptions of the political voices, ideological messages and factual information conveyed through major news media during pivotal policy debates that concern rising inequality. And no large-scale study has connected these key elements of news coverage with the broader neoliberal policy turn that has swept American politics since the early 1980s.

In specialized studies of political communication and public opinion, most research on news voices and ideological messages during policy debates has concerned foreign affairs and national security issues, especially potential and ongoing military action (e.g., Althaus 2003; Althaus et al. 1996; Entman 2004; Hayes and Guardino 2013; Zaller and Chiu 1996). This focus is understandable. Given their life-and-death stakes and democratic implications, these debates carry major substantive importance. Scholars have also reasonably supposed that a narrow range of voices and messages in the news is more likely in these contexts, which often feature patriotic calls for unity and deference to governing elites, state secrecy, and more aggressive government management of press activities. Still, the presumption that media coverage of domestic policy debates is more ideologically open than coverage of foreign policy debates is not well-examined empirically.

In general, aside from these specialized political communication studies largely conducted in foreign policy contexts, political science has paid insufficient attention to the media's role in potentially shaping a range of political outcomes (Althaus et al. 2011), including historic changes in public policy like those analyzed in this book. Despite some important advances, then, Kinder's (2006, 214) observation of more than a decade ago continues to ring true, "We have much yet to learn about how information is created and disseminated. We need theorizing and systematic empirical work that makes connections between the 'information system,' on the one hand, and the decisions, judgments, and advice of citizens, on the other." This limitation is compounded by the field's general inattention to news media as an institution in themselves with political-economic imperatives that may encourage them to cover policy issues in particular ways that have political ramifications for public opinion.

Realizing the greatest benefits from studying media effects during these critical policy debates requires extensive and intensive content analyses examining the full texts of dozens or hundreds of news stories in various popular media

produced during focused political episodes. Such analyses must be designed to tap the key dimensions that experimental studies have found most likely to actually shape ordinary Americans' opinions on specific policy issues. Later in this chapter, I discuss these news content dimensions as I elaborate a model of public opinion suited to examining the interplay of media communication and policy attitudes. But first, why analyze the 1981 Reagan economic plan and 1995–1996 welfare reform debates as primary policy case studies in the politics of economic inequality?

Political Importance and Analytic Value of the Case Studies

The news analyses in this book focus most closely and extensively on two policy cases that comprise major historical moments in the right turn under neoliberalism. Both cases also carry useful analytic features for understanding political discourse, media coverage, and public opinion during this period. One case inaugurated the neoliberal policy turn at the national level and came at a time when U.S. media institutions had yet to be engulfed by the neoliberal wave. The second case occurred at a juncture when neoliberalism had matured as an ideological outlook and a set of policies and institutions, in both government and the media sector. One policy issue primarily concerns the revenue side of the fiscal equation, while the other concerns government spending. Each issue has powerful and multidimensional connections to the broader U.S. (and global) economy, to ordinary Americans' living standards, and—most importantly—to rising wealth and income inequality. While the debates over both the Reagan economic plan and 1990s welfare reform occurred under conditions of divided government (where the White House is held by one major party and at least one chamber of Congress is controlled by the other party), the first was under a Republican president and the second under a Democratic president. These features allow me to investigate the role of the media in neoliberal policy debates with nuance and precision. They enable comparisons of relationships among elite (and nongovernmental) discourse, media coverage, and public opinion based on the partisan makeup of government and the historical point in the overall trajectory of neoliberalism, while covering two crucial substantive dimensions of neoliberal domestic policy. In particular, this study design allows me to assess the common-sense, though rarely tested, assumption that divided government produces more ideologically conflictual media coverage of domestic policies.

Beyond their importance for patterns of socioeconomic inequality and poverty, the 1981 Reagan economic plan and the 1996 welfare law have had lasting political significance, setting the basic agendas, parameters, and pathways for tax and welfare policy since their enactment. Both policies were vigorously

championed by corporate interest groups such as the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Neoliberal-New Right ideological organizations were also instrumental, with the Heritage Foundation serving as an especially prominent source of the ideas amplified by the mass-market news media in each case. The Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 was the first major neoliberal domestic policy Congress explicitly endorsed. The New Right's vigorous advocacy of the plan's supply-side logic helped solidify these tax policy ideas as Republican Party and conservative movement orthodoxy, embraced vigorously even by such putatively anti-establishment leaders as 2016 GOP primary candidate Ted Cruz and President Donald Trump (O'Brien 2016). The Reagan plan (combined with the administration's massive military spending increases over the 1980s) also contributed significantly to a large and growing federal debt and consistent budget deficits. These effects have long constrained Democrats' increasingly lukewarm promotion of new social welfare programs (Hacker and Pierson 2005a; Shefter and Ginsberg 1985). Fiscal fallout from the 1981 economic plan was not only instrumental in persuading many left-liberal members of Congress to curb their ambitions for new programs to improve economic security and broaden prosperity, but it was also instrumental in persuading neoliberal elites in the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) to prioritize deficit reduction as a policy item that could appeal to middle-class and wealthier Americans who had some egalitarian sympathies (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Meeropol 1998; Wilentz 2008). The 1981 policy also became the blueprint for the George W. Bush administration's 2001 and 2003 tax plans, which had similar structural and political implications for Democratic fiscal policy strategies. More recently, these plans served as significant inspiration for the massive upwardly redistributive tax cut delivered by President Trump and congressional Republicans in late 2017. Despite limited, periodic returns to somewhat higher tax rates on the wealthy during the early 1990s and Obama's second term, the Reagan plan set the "new normal" for federal income tax rates: in 2018, the top marginal rate was 37 percent; the year before the Reagan policy took effect, it was 70 percent.

Similarly, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) had profound socioeconomic and political ramifications. This policy drastically reduced the number of Americans receiving social benefits as cash assistance—including discouraging many legally eligible people from applying for aid—and contributed to the consistently high poverty levels since the end of the 1990s economic expansion, and, more recently, the Great Recession (Covert 2014). Politically, reductions in public assistance rolls encouraged neoliberal Democratic Party elites to claim a legacy of success on welfare, even as the administrative leeway and ideological space opened by PRWORA induced conservative leaders at the state and federal levels

to push for even greater cuts and restrictions. This has occurred in a political climate pervaded by racialized stereotypes of welfare recipients, stereotypes that Democratic policymakers had claimed would fade because of neoliberal reforms that pushed recipients into the labor market (Schram and Soss 2001; Soss and Schram 2007). In the concluding chapter, I elaborate how corporate media coverage may have facilitated the longer-term political consequences of neoliberal policies.

These two case studies set the stage for my experimental analysis of public opinion. I preface that experiment by reporting the results of a smaller-scale study of news coverage during the 2010 debate over extending the Bush tax cuts, which came during a period of unified Democratic control of the White House and Congress. This evidence confirms in a more contemporary media environment and a more recent—and, presumably, more left-leaning—political context my findings of superficial and ideologically narrow news coverage. Chapter 6 further corroborates these historical patterns with an empirical analysis of media coverage during the 2017 debate over repealing Obamacare. As in the 1980s and 1990s, business interests and neoliberal-New Right political groups aggressively championed the policy proposals in both of these 21st-century debates. Each of these more recent episodes also carries important material and ideological implications for economic inequality.

These varied case studies generate extensive evidence of shallow and ideologically distorted news coverage during economic and social welfare policy debates. But how, precisely, can such coverage shape public opinion?

Ideological Diversity in the News and Public Opinion on Domestic Policy Issues

Recent decades have seen a proliferation of compelling research, built in part from insights in social and cognitive psychology, concerning the media's impact on our social understandings, policy preferences, and political choices. Exposure to the news can shape people's factual knowledge of politics and public policy (Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006); affect their perceptions of the importance of social issues, policy debates, and political events (Iyengar and Kinder 1989; McCombs and Reynolds 2002); prime the standards they use to evaluate political figures, government institutions, and policy choices (Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, and Carpentier 2002); and shape the interpretive frames they apply to policy issues, political institutions, and political actors (Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2007b; Iyengar 1991; Nelson 2011). Media coverage could conceivably affect opinions on issues related to

economic inequality through any or all of these pathways. This section describes my particular framework for analyzing how mainstream news can shape public opinion on the key domestic economic and social welfare issues that have defined neoliberalism in American politics.

Ideological Issue Framing and Public Policy Opinion during the Neoliberal Turn

I apply a variety of concepts and measures to assess the ideological inflection and political content of news coverage, and touch on different mechanisms of public opinion effects as I present my media analyses. However, in all four policy case studies and the experiment in Chapter 5 I focus most closely on *issue framing* (Nelson 2011). In doing so, I apply Zaller's (1992) path-breaking model of opinion formation in a new conceptual and empirical context. This model holds that political preferences expressed through surveys are marked neither by random and arbitrary responses rooted in sheer ignorance and weak motivation (Converse 1964; Converse and Markus 1979), nor by "true attitudes" rooted in rational judgment and civic competence that can be objectively determined after eliminating measurement error (Achen 1975). Instead, mass political attitudes are characterized by a large degree of ambivalence (Feldman and Zaller 1992). Most people have many apparently conflicting—yet sincerely and genuinely held—"considerations" (or raw mental constructs) relevant to political and public policy issues (Zaller and Feldman 1992).

For instance, a given U.S. poll respondent may simultaneously hold basic considerations favoring the "deserving" over the "undeserving" poor, opposing the unfairness of high pay for corporate CEOs, lamenting the lack of good-paying jobs, praising the moral and economic benefits of the profit motive, decrying the political corruption enabled by corporate campaign contributions, and opposing the wastefulness of federal government bureaucracy. Confronted with a survey question to which multiple considerations may be relevant, this person draws on those constructs that are most salient and accessible (i.e., available in working memory). Accessibility and salience in turn are strongly influenced by frequent and recent reception of particular messages that activate considerations (Chong and Druckman 2007a). Survey responses on which collective poll results are based, therefore, are immediately derived from the contingent mix of accessible and salient considerations in particular communicative contexts, even if they are grounded in a reservoir of sociopolitical thoughts and images with various (and often contradictory) ideological overtones.

Considerations are made accessible and salient through "emphasis framing" (Druckman 2001). An emphasis frame is a conceptual and discursive device

that highlights certain ideologically inflected aspects of an issue and downplays others, thus promoting particular definitions of social problems, and particular actions (or lack of action) to address them (Entman 1993, 2007). For example, a frame might depict reducing the corporate tax rate to 15 percent as the antidote to sluggish economic growth, thus evoking right-leaning considerations glorifying traditional notions of American entrepreneurship. Considerations triggered through culturally resonant issue frames attached to credible voices (Chong and Druckman 2007b), and widely and consistently disseminated in public discourse, can become habitually accessible and salient. For large numbers of people, such considerations are almost always in the "top of the head" reservoir of constructs available for answering survey questions. Framing through the media, then, is a crucial way in which certain considerations (and not others) become active—temporarily or over the longer term—as respondents voice support for (or opposition to) specific policies.

This understanding of opinion formation defines "multiperspectival" news coverage (Benson 2009) characterized by "viewpoint diversity" (Napoli 1999) as coverage presenting many ideologically varied, culturally resonant issue frames with capacities to activate different considerations. That kind of media environment should position greater numbers of people to express internally coherent survey responses on specific policy issues—in other words, responses that advance their predispositions, defined as their material interests and general social values. Consequently, public policy opinions expressed in polls derive from the interaction of people's predispositions and their engagement with political (especially media) discourse, as that discourse activates ideologically flavored mental considerations. Previous research has highlighted the importance of factual information and insightful interpretations for the expression of coherent policy opinions (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Page and Shapiro 1992, 355–398; Sniderman and Theriault 2004). Despite the democratic importance of multiperspectival news coverage, however, few studies have applied the concept of issue framing specifically to assess relative ideological diversity in real-world coverage of U.S. policy debates and investigate its possible impacts on public opinion.[4]

I define predispositional "material interests" cautiously, focusing on immediate, direct, concrete, tangible costs and benefits that people in various socioeconomic circumstances are likely to experience from particular policies. For instance, in the context of tax policy, a plan that provides most of its immediate tax reductions (e.g., changes in rates, deductions, and credits) to upper-middle-class and wealthy Americans contradicts the material interests of people at the median income level and below. Under these circumstances—which clearly apply to the 1981 Reagan, 2001 Bush, 2010 Bush extension, and 2017 Trump tax plans—such people are *predisposed* to reject (or at least to not support)

this policy. That does not foreclose the possibility of longer-run, more indirect benefits from such plans that may flow to middle- and lower-income people (as in some Reaganite arguments for supply-side economics), much less the potential political resonance of such purported benefits for middle- and lower-income people: predispositions do not guarantee opinion outcomes. Indeed, that many such people have expressed support in public opinion polls for these kinds of policies has been, I argue, in no small part because of media influence. Over the years scholars have turned up little convincing empirical evidence that material interests defined in this narrow way are in fact closely related to people's expressed policy preferences (Green and Gerkin 1989, 2). However, experimental studies have shown that these relationships are much stronger when policy costs and benefits are made clear and explicit (Chong, Citrin, and Conley 2001). As I demonstrate in this book, it is precisely such clarity and transparency that the commercially driven U.S. corporate media environment has discouraged through superficial news coverage and narrow issue framing in recent decades.

In order to promote analytic precision and rigor in detecting effects on public opinion, some scholars call for moving away from research on emphasis framing in favor of work on "equivalency framing" (i.e., presenting logically and factually identical items of information in different ways) (Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar 2016; Scheufele and Iyengar 2014). However, this book makes a case for the continued relevance of emphasis framing in political communication. In real-world news coverage of public policy, informational content and interpretative presentation are rarely empirically distinguishable. Rather than merely changing depictions of otherwise objectively equivalent information, different framings of an issue usually change the very nature of the claims being communicated. Depictions of policy issues advanced by political actors in and through the media are politically contested. It may be possible to categorize some particular issue interpretations as relatively more or less well-grounded in verifiable factual information than others. And some items of information circulated by the news media are not communicated through explicit ideological frames. Still, emphasis framing is pervasive in political discourse. To the extent that the character, variety, and frequency of such publicly circulated issue interpretations are important for democratic opinion formation, research on emphasis framing remains vital to generate results with real-world political meaning.

In late 20th- and early 21st-century U.S. political news, most substantive issue frames privilege right- or left-leaning interpretations of social or economic circumstances, and right- or left-leaning actions to address those circumstances. Our knowledge of how frames can affect public opinion by selectively activating mental considerations and connecting them to specific policy issues, then, calls for empirical research on the ideological inflections of emphasis framing. This

research must include media content analyses designed around the textual elements that are most likely to shape opinion (Entman 2007). These elements include the ideological tendencies, frequencies, and proportions of culturally resonant emphasis frames that pertain to particular policy issues.

Applied to the politics of economic inequality during the neoliberal turn, this understanding of media and public opinion generates two key questions: (1) Which kinds of issue frames appear most frequently in wide-reaching news coverage of key policy debates, and which appear less frequently (or are shut out altogether)? (2) How do such framing patterns operate to shape public opinion among people with different predispositions—especially those, such as lower-income people, who have relatively less political and economic power, and whose material stakes in these debates loom largest?[5]

My conceptual framework for media effects sheds light on the apparent ideological inconsistencies of U.S. public opinion toward economic and social welfare issues. To recall, Americans have tended to express conservative philosophical views, left-of-center opinions on general policy questions, and strong support for specific right-leaning public policies across the neoliberal era. Because most Americans do not pay consistent and close attention to political discourse featuring detailed policy arguments, they lack chronically activated, well-organized, coherent permutations of considerations that are *connected to specific policies*. Therefore, tightly bounded episodes characterized by widespread news coverage featuring highly charged political discourse create conditions under which opinions about specific policies are particularly open to short- or medium-term influence. Since 1980, neoliberal-New Right political actors have often successfully linked philosophically conservative considerations to specific public policies. Culturally resonant issue frames drawing such connections have circulated through the news media much more frequently than left-leaning frames. These media environments are likely to activate configurations of considerations that facilitate right-leaning responses to survey questions about particular domestic economic and social welfare policies, leading to poll results such as those in Table 2.1.

My empirical analyses in this book mainly concern short- or medium-term effects on public policy opinions of ideologically inflected messages in news coverage. However, it would be a mistake to dismiss these effects as fleeting. Recall that consistent patterns of issue framing in popular media outlets can make corresponding ideologically flavored mental considerations routinely salient and accessible in popular thinking. This means that some considerations favorable to neoliberal perspectives may now be chronic elements of public consciousness: these considerations are quickly called to mind by large numbers of people and easily amenable to connections with neoliberal policies as specific public debates periodically occur. Moreover, decades of empirical research on

"cultivation" processes demonstrate that dominant messages projected through multiple media genres operate to reproduce and reinforce public beliefs and worldviews which justify sociopolitical and economic inequality (Jamieson and Roemer 2015; Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorielli 2012). Such long-term, cumulative dynamics are important in themselves. However, they may also facilitate shorter-term effects on public opinion by laying consistent foundations upon which specific ideological messages in the news can operate in focused episodes of policy debate.[6] Aside from any long-term impacts of ideological issue framing in the news, these shorter-term effects contribute to opinion climates that have legitimated specific neoliberal policies at key historical points.

Media Can Still Move the Middle

A vibrant strand of public opinion theory and research has focused on "motivated reasoning," or the tendency of people to form policy preferences (or make voting choices) based not on the information or media content with which they engage but on their pre-existing, deeply rooted, enduring partisan orientations (Taber and Lodge 2016; Taber, Lodge, and Glathar 2001). That body of work suggests that we first develop partisan attachments (largely based on parental socialization, emotional connections, and other semi-conscious processes generally devoid of substantive policy elements), and then work forward to express "correct" opinions in more immediate political situations. This perspective finds direct or indirect support in empirical studies that illustrate a powerful role for simple partisan elite cues in reinforcing prior attitudes and in shaping mass public opinion generally (Berinsky 2009; Bullock 2011; Cohen 2003). Through selective exposure and attention to partisan cable TV and online media (Stroud 2011), we may even go so far as to automatically ignore or discount messages from actors who do not share our partisan identities and attach outsized credibility to messages from those who do. Theories of motivated reasoning provide compelling explanations for many important patterns, including the not-uncommon (and perhaps increasing) tendency to internalize factually incorrect information when it is consistent with partisan predispositions (Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 2003; Meirick 2012). However, this perspective is limited in what it can tell us about the role of mass-market news coverage in shaping public opinion during the neoliberal turn.

Partisan motivated reasoning is frequently induced in experimental settings, and it is surely a significant—and growing—phenomenon in American politics. However, research suggests that it is far from universal in real-world contexts. Motivated reasoning is most common among people who cling tightly to their political loyalties as core aspects of their identities. Despite increasing opportunities for selective exposure in a media landscape characterized by many

politically flavored news options—and despite some evidence, albeit contested, for significant mass partisan polarization in recent decades (Hetherington 2009)—such strong partisan attachments are not the norm in American politics. In fact, people with weak or moderately strong partisan and ideological identities and commitments constitute the largest fractions of the population. Today's entertainment cornucopia has induced many with low political motivation to tune out news and political engagement altogether (Prior 2007). But this does not mean that only strong, loyal, and highly engaged partisans remain in the attentive population. Depending on how they are measured, self-identified moderates and independents (including those who say they "lean" toward one of the major parties) constitute majorities or pluralities of the public (Jones 2016; Saad 2016). Americans' reported levels of political interest wax and wane with political-economic conditions, but tend to be modest over the longer term (Prior 2007, 20). Factual political knowledge, which is the best predictor of news attention (Price and Zaller 1993), follows a similar pattern: neither high nor low, but moderate, levels have been the norm in the United States over recent decades (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Pew Research Center 2015).

At the same time, politically driven selective exposure that enables motivated reasoning is not as common in the real world of mass politics as often supposed. Self-reports of exposure to cable news—partisan flavored or otherwise—are greatly inflated (Prior 2009, 2013). While audiences for hard news of any stripe have eroded, even today the total audience for putatively "objective" news (offline or online) dwarfs that for explicitly partisan outlets. Broadcast network and local TV are still highly popular news formats (Pew Research Center 2016). U.S. internet traffic has long been heavily concentrated at "legacy" sites maintained by commercial TV networks and national newspapers, most of which maintain conventional commitments to political neutrality (Alexa 2018; Mutz and Young 2011, 1027–1028; Olmstead, Mitchell, and Rosenstiel 2011). Moreover, the technical architecture (Hindman 2008) and political-economic dynamics (McChesney 2013) of digital political communication tend to push much online news content and exposure toward the corporate media mainstream. Social media services constitute a crucial area for political communication analysis in their own right, and they are becoming increasingly important portals for circulating news. However, a relatively small proportion of Americans consistently receives political content or hard news via social media (Shearer and Gottfried 2017), even as mainstream news remains a significant source of the political and policy-oriented material shared through platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. It should also be emphasized that opportunities for motivated reasoning based on politically driven selective exposure were extremely rare in the two primary historical case studies in this book. These policy episodes occurred well before the rise of partisan cable news, let alone the internet as we know it.

What was once called the "new media" cannot explain public opinion during these pivotal moments in the politics of economic inequality. In Chapter 6, I return to the rapidly changing communication environment to place my analyses of media and public opinion during the neoliberal policy turn in contemporary context.

Indeed, it is precisely those large numbers of Americans who rely on mainstream, commercial, ostensibly nonpartisan news outlets who are most susceptible to narrow issue framing: they are sufficiently politically interested and aware to consistently encounter hard news about public policy issues, but not so motivated as to routinely practice politically driven selective exposure or to successfully counter-argue with issue frames that contradict their values and interests (Iyengar 2014; Zaller 1992). While such characteristics by no means describe the entire U.S. adult population (or the entire politically attentive public), by any measure this group is large enough to be potentially decisive in polls that justify many crucial elite policy decisions.[7]

This discussion points out the broader need to analyze news coverage in the media outlets whose breadth of popular reach place them in position to most directly influence public policy opinions among the ordinary Americans from whose ranks the random samples in credible national polls are drawn. Even today—and most certainly in the definitional neoliberal policy debates of the 1980s and 1990s—that primarily means commercial TV networks and mass-market newspapers like those analyzed in this book. While the common political science practice of examining *New York Times* coverage is appropriate for many purposes, this outlet is not a good proxy for the political actors and ideological messages to which most people are consistently exposed during policy debates. Even if the *Times, Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* may often set the national news agenda in terms of key events and issues, analyzing their content is a roundabout way to assess possible effects on ordinary people's opinions. Audiences for these "prestige" newspapers are significantly skewed upward in socioeconomic status (Pew Research Center 2012b). Very few Americans without at least a four-year college degree will be consistently exposed to political content in either the print or online versions of such publications (Pew Research Center 2011a). And the micro-level psychological processes by which ideological issue framing shapes public opinion on policy issues are more fine-tuned than can be captured by assuming that content in mass-market news venues closely reflects that in prestige outlets: frequencies and proportions of culturally resonant, ideological issue frames attached to credible sources do not travel directly from the *Washington Post* to *ABC World News Tonight*.

Finally, while motivated reasoning is usually depicted (even if implicitly) as normatively undesirable from a democratic perspective, it takes on a different cast from the angle presented in this book. To form opinions on specific public

policies that are well-grounded in one's material and social predispositions is a way for ordinary people to express their own interests and values in the political process. To say that a low-income person who encounters left-leaning issue frames in the media is "motivated" by her material status to express opposition to large tax cuts for the wealthy is not necessarily to cast aspersions on her democratic reasoning processes. Except when it entails resistance to factual information, forging coherent connections between one's predispositions, on the one hand, and the ideologically inflected policy alternatives and possibilities discussed in the public realm, on the other, is a signal form of authentic political voice. This more positive democratic outlook on ideological reasoning is consistent with Converse's (1964) classic concept of attitude "constraint," in which making logical connections across policy issues based on larger philosophical principles and values pertaining to society and government is defined as a mode of high-level political thinking that is all too rare among Americans. My focus on news coverage and public opinion in the context of inequality echoes and extends this seminal perspective. I analyze the conditions that influence the propensity of ordinary people—especially people with relatively less political and economic power—to use ideological concepts coherently to advance their interests and values. In doing so, I highlight the media's importance in enabling those ideological connections to be made (or not), and explain how and why this process has been stunted during the turn toward neoliberal economic and social welfare policy in the United States.[8]

As suggested earlier, neither political scientists who study public policy and economic inequality, nor political communication researchers who analyze news content, have paid much attention to the news media as a political-economic institution in themselves. This oversight is striking, as the corporate and commercial media system is one venue in which the political-economic logic of neoliberalism has become deeply embedded, and may have operated in surprising ways to reproduce itself in mass- and elite-level politics.[9] In the next section, I pry open the black box of the U.S. media system to see what its inner workings might tell us about the role of news coverage in the right turn in economic and social welfare policy and, ultimately, about the power of that news coverage to shape public opinion and policy outcomes.

Media Refraction and Policy Debates: Inside the Commercial Media

Given that political scientists who study public policy episodes like those which punctuate the neoliberal turn in American politics know relatively little about

the messages propagated through news media during these debates, it is no surprise that this field has produced virtually no systematic knowledge of *why* the media generate such patterns of political discourse. If shallow and ideologically narrow news coverage can shape configurations of public opinion to support or oppose important public policies, the next question is, What accounts for such news coverage? Opening up this black box requires conceptualizing the news media as a political institution that is inextricably linked to the larger U.S. political structure (Cook 2005, 2006; Sparrow 1999). In suggesting that American politics scholars broaden and deepen their analytic perspectives, Gaines and Kuklinksi (2011, 8) observe that "most contemporary students of political communication trained in the behavioral tradition take the media and politicians as given, an assumption that takes the politics out of the study of political communication." My work extends such calls to "politicize" and "institutionalize" our understanding of political communication a step further by recognizing the news media as a *political-economic* institution (McChesney and Pickard 2014). In the United States, this institution elevates profit-making and commercialism to leading roles in its complex set of operational logics. And during the neoliberal era, these media imperatives have reached extreme levels.

In this section, I introduce my theory of media refraction as a framework for analyzing how the mainstream news media translate broader societal patterns of political information, discussion, and debate into news content that can shape public opinion in politically salient ways. In doing so, I explain how, as neoliberal trends in recent decades have reinforced the media's own structural and institutional logics, this translation process has encouraged superficial and narrow news coverage that supports neoliberal economic and social welfare policy. Understanding media refraction requires first identifying the influence of journalistic norms and practices in shaping political news production, and then elaborating the structural political-economic forces that channel how those norms and practices operate. I discuss these foundations of my theory in turn. I follow by explaining how they interact in particular political environments to shape media coverage of public policy debates.

News Norms and Practices

Like any professional field, journalism has developed explicit and implicit norms and work practices to help reporters, editors, and producers cope with environments characterized by political, economic, social, and cultural uncertainties. Politically relevant events, actions, information, and rhetoric are too multifaceted and complex for any news outlet to cover comprehensively. Over time, the mainstream media system has converged on a few basic codes

and practices for managing complexity in ways that allow news organizations to operate efficiently as profit-seeking businesses while maintaining a measure of political legitimacy. Such norms and practices are applied to a variety of situations to more or less reliably produce news reports that comply with organizational demands. The most important of these journalistic routines for U.S. news coverage of public policy issues are reliance on official sources and the ideal of objectivity.

Decades of empirical studies show that mainstream news organizations devote the lion's share of airtime and print (now online) space to the actions and messages of government officials (Bennett 2016; Gans 2004; Guardino 2018b). In the context of national-level policy debates, these officials are most often presidents and members of Congress. Heavy reliance on elite sources and basic deference to their views go hand in hand with the norm of objectivity (Schiller 1981; Tuchman 1978). Objectivity has generally been fulfilled by applying the twin ideals of political neutrality and partisan balance. News reporters (and editors or producers) have sought to play the role of disinterested, value-free observers chronicling events and discourse from no particular political perspective, and to more or less equally cover "both sides" of important controversies. As objectivity emerged historically in the context of a strong two-party system (Hallin and Mancini 2004), these two sides have usually been understood in practice as the Republican and Democratic parties. Reliance on officialdom combined with the norm of objectivity led Bennett (1990, 1996) to develop the indexing hypothesis. As the leading theoretical framework in political communication research on policy debates, indexing holds that news coverage will tend to register levels of elite policy conflict, opening the gates to a greater variety of sources and messages when high-profile government officials are in public disagreement, and narrowing (or shutting) those gates when officials appear to be in consensus. The broad outlines of indexing have been supported empirically in many studies (Hayes and Guardino 2013; Lawrence 2000b; Zaller and Chiu 1996), although most research has focused on foreign policy and national security issues.

Official source reliance, objectivity, and indexing dynamics have generally distilled to a journalistic focus on institutional power and those who wield it authoritatively (Althaus et al. 1996). News outlets stake much of their coverage not on providing contextual information that might be useful to citizens' political decision-making, nor on presenting audiences with policy interpretations or arguments for the purposes of political deliberation or discussion.[10] Instead, media organizations simplify the broader field of political action and discourse according to definitions of newsworthiness based on the perceived power of political actors to shape concrete outcomes, a process that has been dubbed "power indexing" (Zaller and Chiu 1996, 400). As Zaller (1999, 61) puts it, reporters

are keenly interested in "shedding light on future developments," and they use a "rule of anticipated importance" to select sources and messages to cover (see also Entman and Page 1994, 93–94). This means that "newsworthy"—thus, legitimate or credible—sources and political perspectives have been closely identified with political actors who are in position to make high-level, formal decisions like signing or vetoing legislative bills, issuing executive orders, or sending troops into battle. For example, before the invasion of Iraq in 2002 and 2003, mainstream media more or less ignored opposition to the war expressed by left-liberal Democratic and libertarian Republican members of Congress, because they were perceived as lacking significant influence over the outcome of this policy debate (Hayes and Guardino 2013).

Officially defined news, objectivity, and indexing have been aptly described by Bennett (1993) as amounting to a "norm of presumed democracy," through which mainstream journalists take for granted the existence of a generally functional political system and typically register only obvious deviations from that baseline. From this perspective, elected officials represent all legitimate policy views, faithfully (even too faithfully) reflect (or pander to) their constituents' policy preferences, and stand as accurate representatives of the social and economic interests that make up their party coalitions (which, by extension, are implicitly seen as the only newsworthy societal interests). Thus, media outlets tend to see major elected elites (and their staffers and appointees) as acceptable proxies for all relevant policy views in society. This journalistic norm corresponds with classic pluralist perspectives on the broader U.S. political system (Dahl 1961) and is consistent with a "pluralistic" conception of media power (Freedman 2015). It also complies with the practical, everyday need for journalists to maintain functional relationships with political elites—who, after all, supply most of the information and discourse that gets packaged in news stories—even if relationships occasionally break down and generate "feeding frenzies" of critical coverage when officials are caught in scandals that violate clear cultural or political standards (Sabato 1991; Sabato, Stencel, and Lichter 2000).

There can, however, be considerable tension, and even contradiction, among journalistic norms. In tension with mainstream media's conventional deference to government authority and consequent status-quo tendencies, the news industry over time has developed an image—and, unevenly, has played the role—of a public watchdog. This watchdog monitors the actions and rhetoric of government elites, those who aspire to office and, sometimes, powerful actors in other major institutions (such as the corporate sector or organized religion), bringing to light legal, ethical and political malfeasance. Along with this has come a considerable commitment to investigative reporting that has from time to time placed news outlets in an intensely adversarial stance vis–à–vis powerful officials (Hamilton 2016). The watchdog media function

developed as journalists won a measure of professional autonomy to use their skills to promote the public good, including by actively holding the powerful to account. Therefore, organizational and institutional imperatives to efficiently produce news that is deemed politically legitimate coexist uneasily with more expansive and active journalistic commitments to serve the public as democratic citizens.

Illuminating as it is in its broad outlines, this interpretation of political news production raises questions of why and how journalistic codes and practices operate in particular ways to shape particular patterns of coverage. Presumably, an abstract commitment to political detachment and partisan balance, or a basic deference to authoritative sources in national government that seem powerful, could generate very different patterns of news content under different political and media conditions. As suggested above, particular journalistic norms and practices might conflict in ways that sometimes produce right-leaning coverage, other times produce left-leaning coverage, and still other times produce diverse or mixed coverage. Moreover, some norms and practices may be more prominent, and applied more frequently and faithfully, when news outlets cover certain kinds of policy issues (Entman 2007, 2010), or in certain broader political-economic contexts.

Major U.S. media outlets have long devoted most of their time and space in national political and public policy-related news coverage to government officials. But as Cook (2006, 162) observes, "The news never mirrors exactly what officials say or do, even under the most favorable conditions." Several studies have focused on the frequency of media attention to particular kinds of political elites, generally finding that congressional leaders (and, predictably, senators who are running for president) are included in the news more often than other legislators (Cook 1989; Frantzich 2016; Hess 1986; Squire 1988), although attention can vary over time with contextual political conditions (Johnson and O'Grady 2013). Consistent with the idea of power indexing, comparative studies of European democracies confirm the importance of legislative leadership status for generating media opportunities (Van Aelst, Sehata, and Van Dalen 2010).

Still, the deeper roots, larger significance, and broader political effects of indexing and official-centric news are not well-understood. This is partly due to methodological obstacles. Surprisingly few studies have included both detailed analyses of ideological messages in the media during policy debates and separate measures of relatively "unmediated" discourse by political actors who might appear in the news. And most of that work has focused on election campaigns or foreign policy debates.[11] While studies of news coverage alone can say a great deal about the relative frequency and ideological distribution of voices and messages in media outlets, they cannot yield comparisons of that content to broader flows

of political discourse outside the media. In Chapters 3 and 4, I address this "unobserved population problem" (Baum and Groeling 2010) through analyses of the U.S. Congressional Record, supplemented by evidence of issue framing by policy experts, interest groups and social movement organizations.

Theoretical limitations also hinder our knowledge of how news codes and practices shape public policy coverage. Several important questions are difficult to answer if understood narrowly through the concepts that motivate most empirical studies of political news content. Aside from basic factors such as legislative leadership standing and journalists' implicit notions of differential capacities to affect policy outcomes, why do some elected officials (and associated issue frames) appear more frequently in the news than others? Beyond the conspicuous fact that prominent government officials make consequential national decisions, why are non-official voices that seem relevant to the substance of policy issues so rarely covered? How might structural contexts and institutional connections across media and government shape these patterns of inclusion and exclusion? And what are the larger consequences for democratic politics, especially in light of the potential for news coverage to shape mass public opinion?

Addressing these questions requires moving beyond the basic norms and practices of newswork into how these norms and practices relate to political-economic structures—in the media industry as much as in government. We need to identify factors in the U.S. media system itself that may shape power indexing and its peculiar patterns of deference to elite sources. Doing so requires viewing the media holistically as a structurally embedded, relatively autonomous political institution driven primarily (if not simply and solely) by profit interests. Trailblazing work in political science (Cook 2005) and media studies (e.g., Smythe 1979) has charted a promising course. But it remains to be mapped out precisely how structural characteristics of the media might generate politically consequential patterns of news coverage during policy debates.

Bringing the Political Economy of the Media into Political View

In part through its analyses of journalistic norms and practices, political communication research has begun to significantly influence the broader American politics field. Scholarship that is not centrally concerned with the media has been enriched by distilling and integrating these insights on the news. For example, Jacobs and Shapiro (2000, 155–187) and Hacker and Pierson (2005b, 174–181; 2010, 105, 155–158) have discussed how media focus on dramatic partisan conflict has interacted with elite political strategies to impact public

opinion and policymaking in ways that undermine democratic values. What is less appreciated in political science—including in much specialized research on media and politics—is that news norms and practices are firmly grounded in the corporate and commercial logics that drive the media. These logics demand that news organizations quickly and inexpensively produce politically defensible content that will not alienate core advertiser-defined audiences.

Media in the contemporary United States (and, by now, much of the rest of the world) are businesses primarily oriented toward producing large, steady, and growing profits for owners and investors. Like any business, media companies (of which major news outlets are usually just one part) have workers and customers. To maximize profits, workers—including reporters, editors, and other creative personnel—must be managed efficiently, and customers must be offered attractive products. As highly educated professionals, journalists have over time won a measure of work autonomy to accord with their social status and cultural image as guardians of democracy, even if this image has steadily eroded since the mid-1970s (Gronke and Cook 2007; McCutcheon 2017). Still, reporters are employees who sell their labor at a price. In the process, they agree explicitly or implicitly to news norms, rules, and procedures, and answer to a hierarchical chain of command that is not altogether different from the authority structures that prevail in other corporate workplaces, and even in mass-production industrial settings (Huws 2014, 117–124). Institutionalized codes and authority structures explain why the largely center-left partisan preferences expressed by most national journalists in surveys rarely translate consistently into significant ideological slant in systematic studies of news coverage (Niven 2002; Schiffer 2018).

Meanwhile, commercial media's primary customers are not news or entertainment consumers but other businesses seeking to induce those consumers to buy their goods and services. Thus, the ultimate product for most media businesses is not content but "audience commodities" constructed and assembled from consumer and ratings data, professional assumptions and industry folkways, and eventually sold to corporate advertisers (Baker 1994; Meehan 2005; Smythe 1979; Turow 2012). Media outlets must deliver access to audiences—and, in online contexts, valuable audience data—whose size, composition, and consumer potential will attract advertisers. These complex institutional connections impose structural limits on the autonomy of individual news organizations, let alone individual journalists.

Theoretical and historical work in media and communication studies has explained and documented how the basic tendencies of this media system, especially as they have been magnified in recent decades by corporate consolidation and expanding commercialization, create circumstances that may be conducive

to narrow and shallow news coverage (Bagdikian 2004; Baker 1994, 2007; Smythe 1979). This work suggests that the media's fundamental economic calculus privileges content that appeals easily to the demographics coveted by most major advertisers: white, middle- and upper-middle-class Americans with disposable income. More generally, corporate media tends to disseminate content that cultivates consumer mindsets, which may encourage the news to take superficial angles on political and social issues, and avoid complex and troubling topics that challenge audiences' (and corporate elites') conventional political-economic assumptions (Herman and Chomsky 1988, 14–18; Smythe 1979; Sparrow 1999, 76–85). Empirical evidence of U.S. news content consistent with these imperatives includes coverage that favors wealthy interest groups (Danielian and Page 1994; Thrall 2006); depicts social protests and labor strikes sparsely and superficially (Gitlin 1980; Martin 2004; McLeod and Hertog 1992; Wittebols 1996); and misrepresents events and issues concerned with race, class, poverty, gender, and crime (Gilens 1999; Heider 2004; Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorielli 2012). Moreover, comparative work on media systems in industrialized democracies has shown systematic coverage differences between heavily profit-oriented and commercialized systems such as the United States, and nonprofit, public service-oriented systems (Aalberg, Van Aelst, and Curran 2010; Benson 2011).

Still, we need to examine more carefully how the norms and practices that shape news coverage may relate to structural political-economic features of the media system. One angle that sheds light on these connections concerns the historical origins and emergence of journalistic codes and practices. Objectivity and reliance on official sources were consolidated as defining features of major U.S. news media barely more than a century ago. Objectivity grew in part from the crystallization of journalists' professional identity as nonpartisan servants of the public good. But it was also deeply rooted in news organizations' role in an emerging corporate capitalism. As media rapidly developed into facilitators for consumer markets, steadily concentrated in larger corporations, and centralized in newspaper chains from the late 19th into the early 20th century, a news standard was required that could appeal widely to middle-class readerships (later, broadcast audiences) with purchasing power. At the same time, news outlets were compelled to routinely produce content that softened or deflected criticism from both the government elites who wielded potential regulatory authority over the industry and the powerful business interests that provided most of their revenue under the new media system. The standard of objectivity met all of those needs (Cook 2005; Schiller 1981; Schudson 2003). Connections between news routines and political-economic logics also come into clearer focus when journalists are recognized as a labor force that media companies seek to

utilize efficiently in order to generate profit. Indeed, political economists have documented how workers in "creative industries" over recent decades have been subjected to amplified labor discipline through work "intensification" and "speed-up" (Huws 2014, 114–115). These tendencies are seen, for instance, in pressures on local TV news personnel to produce more content, faster, with fewer resources (Sussman and Higgins-Dobney 2016).

In these ways, communication theorists and media historians have charted the structural and institutional dimensions of the U.S. news industry, suggesting how they might impact broader patterns of news coverage and mass politics. Evidence of media content in several contexts has fleshed out these expectations. But the more directly and explicitly political effects of news norms and practices under shifting political-economic conditions remain underexplored. In electoral contexts, research has demonstrated that corporate-owned news outlets and those controlled by large national chains are more likely to produce "game-framed" coverage and less likely to cover substantive issues (Dunaway 2008; Dunaway and Lawrence 2015). And there is evidence from other capitalist democracies that reliance on commercial advertising diminishes frame diversity in the news (Benson 2009). How such broad political-economic factors might shape patterns of media content in important U.S. public policy debates, however, is largely unknown.

It is time to take the next step and apply our rich historical and theoretical knowledge of media structures and institutions to empirical analyses of news coverage and public opinion. These analyses must explicitly integrate the political-economic dynamics that link media and government. Media political economy research has sometimes been criticized—usually unfairly—for assuming that patterns of ownership and control mechanically determine news content, and even public attitudes and behaviors. But the strongest work in this tradition recognizes that broader structural and institutional investigations must be supplemented by "careful analysis that includes micro studies of production and work, texts, and people's engagement with texts" (Hardy 2014, 106). Systematic, concrete study of the ideological parameters of media coverage during pivotal policy debates should be high on that research agenda. As Cook (2006, 168–169) asserts, "Understanding the range of sources, issues, and points of view—and the limits of that range—is vital in testing the institutional approach to the news." Integrating structural and institutional perspectives with empirical analyses of media content and opinion effects is a particularly promising approach for understanding the neoliberal turn in U.S. public policy. That ideological shift has influenced not only tax policy, welfare policy, financial regulatory policy, and other key areas, but also the media industry itself and the specific government policies that shape the industry.

Media Refraction as Process

I explain the new media's political role in policy debates through the theory of media refraction. Media refraction specifies the ways in which journalistic norms and practices embedded within the political-economic structure of the media system interact with institutional politics to shape "whose views make the news."[12] Through these historically contingent, deeply political processes, media organizations translate the array of information and discourse across society into news content that can influence public policy opinions. My theory defines the mass communication system as a key "intermediary institution" connecting elite policymaking to popular political opinion and behavior (Campbell 2012). As such, media refraction places mass-market news media—particularly their most "objective," nonpartisan components—squarely alongside other nongovernmental institutions, like parties and interest groups, that political scientists more typically define as "political."

Figure 2.1 provides a schematic view of media refraction and its potential effects on public opinion. Clockwise from the top left, the diagram depicts (1) the funneling of political discourse from inside and outside government, (2) through the structurally embedded institutional logics of the media, to produce (3) ideological issue framing in the news, which can (4) interact with people's predispositions and mental considerations to generate opinions during policy debates. As seen by the arrow on the left side of the figure, poll results based on these opinions may then feed back into political discourse.

Media refraction operates as a filtering mechanism, in which corporate media structures interact with news routines to form a kind of "processing plant"

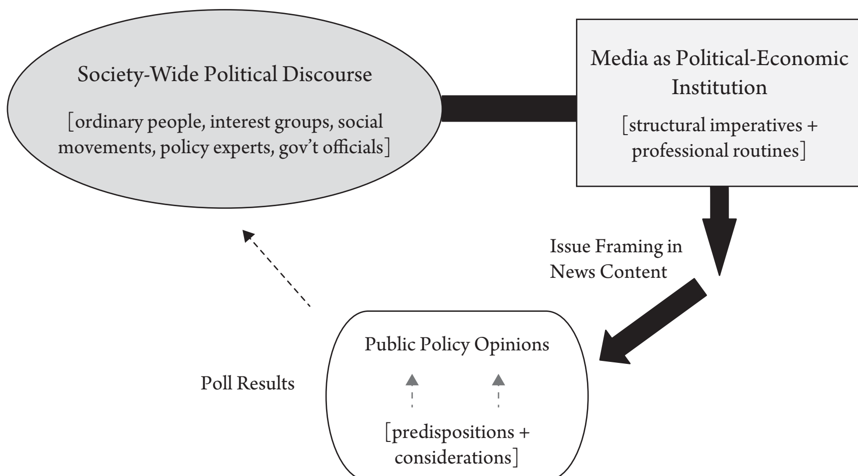

Figure 2.1 Media Refraction in News Coverage of Public Policy Debates

which "converts inputs rather than merely carrying them" (Hardy 2014, 197). My theory builds on indexing by explaining how news organizations define what Hallin (1994) calls the "sphere of legitimate controversy" and enforce the "sphere of consensus" in relation to major-party elected representatives, as much as to nongovernmental voices. Media refraction clarifies not only why most non-official actors face an uphill climb to receive news coverage, but why media outlets deem some official sources "less official" than others—especially in situations of intense elite conflict during major national policy debates. Some simplification and ordering of political events and discourse is a defining element of news in any form, and those processes as they operate through any single media outlet will always be somewhat reductive: no news organization could relay to its audience all ideas and information that are potentially politically relevant. However, in several popular sources of news during key economic and social welfare policy debates across the neoliberal era, media refraction has had significant ideological effects and important political consequences.

Media refraction effects depend on the interaction of three elements: (1) news outlets' political-economic imperatives, (2) journalistic norms and practices, and (3) alignments of formal authority and apparent political power in major government institutions. Each of these elements can vary in character and strength, according to shifting industry structures, media policy regimes, professional standards, policy issues under debate, and other factors.

From the time when the modern corporate, commercial media system crystallized in the decades spanning World War II (McChesney 1993; Meehan 2005, 28–42; Pickard 2014), news outlets' most fundamental political-economic imperatives (no. 1 in the list above) have been relatively stable. Key norms and practices in popular, mass-market media outlets (no. 2) that correspond with these imperatives—such as reliance on official sources and devaluing of policy expertise—generally encourage meager, superficial, and ideologically narrow coverage. These news routines flow from institutional demands to enable efficient and predictable content production, and to attract and keep commercially amenable audiences.

When public debate is ideologically conflictual among government officials who are considered legitimate (no. 3), news outlets tend to circulate relatively more diverse and informative coverage of policy issues. When these conditions are not met, ideological diversity and depth in the news contract. In either case, there are limits beyond which even robust and substantive official debate probably will not translate into more expansive news coverage: in a profit-oriented, advertising-based media system, imperatives to control the cost of newswork and cultivate revenue-producing audience commodities (no. 1) will tend to suppress the democratic quality of the news.

Still, different norms and practices (no. 2) can become more or less important over time (and in more extreme cases, new norms may arise and old ones disappear altogether) according to changes in the political-economic context. In the first instance, news norms and practices must be adapted to the economic requirements of the industry. However, depending on how political-economic imperatives in the media (no. 1) interact with power alignments in the government (no. 3), some norms and practices can become more salient, and more effective in generating ideologically diverse issue framing in news coverage of policy issues.

For privately owned, for-profit news organizations, certain media policies form an important part of that political-economic context. These may include content standards that mandate substantive and diverse news, or limit advertising volume and prevalence; economic regulations that ease profit pressures and commercial influences by limiting ownership centralization and concentration; and labor provisions that affect the organization and leverage of journalists' unions, among others. Under such policy conditions, the volume, substance, and diversity of policy news should be relatively greater. Certain forms of government content oversight (e.g., the Fairness Doctrine, discussed in Chapter 3) may incentivize news outlets to produce higher-quality coverage. In addition, with cost-cutting and commercial pressures more contained, and journalists collectively more assertive in protecting their autonomy and demanding resources, professional commitments to accuracy, skepticism of official power, and democratic contestation (no. 2) should operate more fully and consistently. Even in cases of limited official conflict (no. 3), these processes should produce higher-quality news coverage characterized by somewhat more diverse issue framing. Under such political-economic conditions, framing diversity should be especially high in policy cases featuring conflictual public discourse among prominent officials.

While my theory defines profit-making and commercial logics as structural parameters that condition journalistic norms and practices, these political-economic pressures do not determine media production or news content in a linear or mechanical fashion. In some circumstances, news norms (e.g., presenting a clash of political perspectives) and practices (e.g., confirming information through multiple sources) can work against these pressures, resulting in more substantive and ideologically diverse coverage. In recent decades, however, configurations of news norms and practices have become more closely aligned with U.S. mainstream media's fundamental political-economic imperatives. As explained below, neoliberal media policies have enabled already potent corporate influences and commercial tendencies to elevate journalistic routines that constrain informative reporting, thoughtful story angles, and wide-ranging

sourcing. That historical context has also featured the rise to prominent official positions of a bipartisan political elite advocating neoliberal approaches to domestic policy. Thus, even in cases of vocal and intense official (and nongovernmental) contestation over these issues, news codes and practices filtered political conflict according to the media's corporate and commercial logics. This led to superficial news coverage featuring narrow issue framing that favored neoliberal perspectives.

My theory conceptualizes indexing processes as fundamentally rooted in, though not reducible to, the profit pressures and commercial tendencies of the U.S. media system. Indexing predicts that when elites in the two major parties publicly, frequently, and consistently express disagreement, media coverage will reflect this official conflict (Bennett 1990). Such episodes of official, two-party debate will also prompt news outlets to open themselves to policy perspectives and sources from outside government, such as interest groups, nongovernmental policy experts, social movement voices, and ordinary people. In bringing the historically contingent political-economic imperatives of the media industry more clearly into the picture, media refraction expands on and complicates this view. Reporters' judgments about the newsworthiness of particular government officials are not straightforward. Instead, these judgments are influenced by implicit readings of credibility, legitimacy, and power that are attuned to the institutional logics of corporate media.

These processes can have important ideological implications and political consequences. Media refraction explains why—even in domestic policy cases characterized by intense official conflict—major-party elites are sometimes significantly underrepresented, marginalized, or ignored, even as sources and views from outside government barely make the news at all. Under these circumstances, media outlets may deny the public reasonable opportunities to hear the views of their own elected representatives, let alone the perspectives of nongovernmental voices. All else equal, while official conflict will tend to encourage more diverse framing in the news, it is not always enough to foster robust and informed public debate.

Media refraction reserves a central role for journalistic norms and practices. But my theory stresses that *how* these routines operate to generate news coverage of policy debates is conditioned by the media's corporate structure and commercial tendencies. Thus, by bringing the interaction of systemic media political-economic imperatives and government political alignments into focus, media refraction elaborates an additional way in which journalists' scrupulous adherence to conventional professional codes can result in public policy coverage whose effects are anything but ideologically vacant and politically neutral (Kuklinksi and Sigelman 1992).

Media Refraction in Neoliberal Economic and Social Welfare Policy Debates

Media refraction has been a defining element of the political news environment at least since the postwar period. However, its magnitude and ideological implications may vary across historical contexts and specific issue areas. Refraction should push issue framing in the news toward the right during debates over major economic and social welfare policies that have occurred in recent decades. Three key factors support this expectation: (1) tensions between left-leaning perspectives on these issues and the broad political-economic interests of media corporations, (2) the neoliberal shift in the U.S. media policy regime, and (3) the emergence of a largely bipartisan leadership bloc in the national government that favors neoliberal approaches to economic and social welfare policy.

First, frequent circulation of left-leaning issue frames from diverse voices in government and across society during these policy debates may pose potential challenges to key aspects of the political-economic system that sustain media institutions as business enterprises. For instance, calls for stronger labor regulations or higher taxes on the wealthy and big business may threaten corporate media profits. It is generally not in the interests of major corporations to buck the political status quo in significant ways that may endanger their long-run economic prospects. This principle should apply to media as much as non-media businesses (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Kellner 1990; Page and Shapiro 1992, 378–379; Sparrow 1999).

Again, media businesses' material interests do not decide news coverage in any straightforward or deterministic manner. Recall that media policy environments, elements of journalistic professionalism, and shifting elite political alignments may encourage news outlets to produce coverage that clashes with media political-economic imperatives. Media corporations' short- and long-term material interests may also be in tension during some policy debates. Still, even if owners or executives rarely directly intervene in news decisions, left-leaning economic and social welfare policy messages begin with a disadvantage rooted in the fundamentals of the American political economy. On the other hand, there is little reason to expect media refraction to necessarily encourage right-leaning discourse during debates over sociocultural issues like same-sex marriage, or issues like immigration with more complex and contradictory material implications for business interests and class power.

Second, since the late 1970s the media industry itself has undergone profound changes that have made corporate prerogatives and commercial logics more central than ever to news operations. These changes have been induced and enabled by shifts in the policy regime that governs U.S. media (Aufderheide 1990, 1999;

Bagdikian 2004; Kellner 1990, 63–66; McAllister 2002; McChesney 2004; McChesney and Nichols 2010; Meehan 2005, 48–50). While the seeds of neoliberal media policy can be traced to the postwar entrenchment of a lightly regulated commercial broadcast sector under an ideology of "corporate libertarianism" (Pickard 2014), these seeds only fully blossomed when neoliberalism ascended to the heights of the broader American political system. In a process that began slowly a few years before Reagan took office and picked up major momentum by the mid-1990s, media policy was pushed steadily toward the free-market right. These decisions have generally been made in "subterranean" venues (Hacker 2004) such as Federal Communication Commission (FCC) hearings and obscure congressional subcommittee meetings, or major legislative moves that garnered bipartisan official support and little critical news coverage (Gilens and Hertzmann 2000). Neoliberal media policy has been supported—and often championed—by the New Right and New Democrat elites who also catalyzed the neoliberal shift in tax policy, welfare policy, and other areas.

Public interest regulation and public investment in noncommercial news and educational media have always been weaker in the United States than in other industrialized democracies (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Iyengar 2016, 28–44). However, most elements even of the postwar U.S. media policy framework of limited social responsibility have virtually disappeared in the neoliberal tide. Antitrust rules and other curbs on corporate consolidation have been formally relaxed, less rigorously enforced or eliminated altogether (Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2004). Both consumer and political advertising in the media have been unleashed (Hardy 2014, 135–156), as the few regulatory curbs on the former were loosened or abandoned, and changing campaign finance rules and practices encouraged proliferation of the latter (Nichols and McChesney 2013). Public service broadcast licensing conditions have been weakened and public monitoring of media practices made more difficult through FCC rule changes, while tax incentives for women- and minority-owned broadcast stations and nonprofit news outlets have been cut (Horwitz 2005). Neoliberalism has also magnified political opposition to public broadcasting—already a shadow of systems in other nations—thereby encouraging that sector to mimic commercial media in many ways (Aufderheide 2000, 99–120; Hoynes 1994).

Of course, these policy changes did not occur in a vacuum. New technologies (especially cable TV and, later, the internet) allowed information and entertainment sources to proliferate, even if most content that most Americans regularly access through these sources is informationally and ideologically similar to that which dominates "old media." Indeed, neoliberal media policy advocates claim that public interest regulations and obligations are obsolete in a technological environment bursting with political and cultural diversity guided by the genius of free consumer choice (Crews 2003). Moreover, the technical arguments used by

many media policymakers and experts to justify the post–World War II regime often rang hollow in light of these exhilarating technological shifts (Horwitz 2005). Still, while the push for neoliberal media policy has been bound up with technological developments, in a different political context such developments could have emerged under a very different policy regime that emphasized collective obligation and social regulation on democratic grounds, even if the specific shape of media policies would need to change as new technologies and audience landscapes develop. Over the last four decades, however, media policy has enabled and empowered the U.S. media industry to place profit above all else, including informed political debate and other broader public goods.

Neoliberalization has reinforced media political-economic imperatives in ways that encourage journalists to produce standardized, superficial and narrow coverage favoring conventional policy perspectives.[13] "News holes" have shrunk as media organizations come under greater financial pressures amid mergers and acquisitions, and norms that once restrained commercialism have loosened. Government-enabled media consolidation and commercialization have also led to retrenchment of resources and erosion of value commitments underpinning substantive political news coverage, analytical reporting, and investigative journalism (Hamilton 2016; Sussman and Higgins-Dobney 2016). Producing these forms of content is expensive and labor-intensive in a time of newsroom austerity. It is also commercially risky in an environment of burgeoning entertainment options, soft news, infotainment, and competing news coverage more focused on dramatizing breaking events than on facilitating democratic deliberation (Feldman, Huddie, and Marcus 2015, ch. 7; Hamilton 2004).

At the same time, productivity pressures have intensified as media organizations have cut journalistic positions (McChesney and Nichols 2010; Sussman and Higgins-Dobney 2016), demands for fresh content have ramped up as news outlets face competition from cable channels and online sources (Starkman 2010), and expectations to cater to market imperatives have increased in a fierce struggle for lucrative audiences. Disruption of the predictable news cycle, which afforded set periods between broadcasts and print runs that could be used for research, fact-checking, reaching beyond conventional sources, and adding depth and nuance to news stories, has also discouraged diverse and rich coverage of policy debates. Paradoxically, the endless time and space to fill in a 24/7 news culture privileges reliance on conventional thinking and standardized routines, rather than political fortitude, policy depth, and creative experimentation.

Collectively, these factors have created a perfect storm for reporters who cover policy issues to hew ever more closely to formulaic news templates, orthodox assumptions, and mainstream official sources. Under such circumstances, the path of least professional and political resistance is to fall back on conventional ideas and practices when defining newsworthy political actors and

legitimate ideological perspectives. Evidence suggests that neoliberalization has encouraged similar dynamics in political communication contexts beyond national-level policy debates. For example, local TV stations increasingly use canned "video news releases" (i.e., segments prepackaged by corporate and governmental interests) in place of original news stories (Harmon and White 2001; Tewksbury, Jensen, and Coe 2011). More broadly, the ratio of public relations professionals to working journalists increased from about 0.75-to-1 in 1960, to more than 2-to-1 in 1990, to 4-to-1 in 2012 (McChesney 2013, 183).

Perceptions of anticipated audience interest, informed by a corporate television ratings complex that poorly measures the type of content that most people actually prefer (Meehan 2005), also play a role in media refraction. News audiences, in particular, are often incorrectly assumed to be attracted only to policy simplicity, political melodrama, and high-profile elite personalities (Belt and Just 2008; Patterson 1994). Commercially driven media outlets may also form assumptions about audience political moods based on observations of prominent governing elites.[14] While the "norm of presumed democracy" (Bennett 1993) predates the neoliberal media era, it may be reinforced in a newsroom climate that increasingly privileges market values, even as it discourages careful, broad-minded journalistic judgment.

Finally, media neoliberalization coincided with historic shifts in broader elite political alignments starting in the early 1980s. Even as the New Right brought neoliberal perspectives to the pinnacle of national power, a more market-friendly, pro-corporate leadership bloc emerged in the Democratic Party. Spearheaded by the DLC, this slow, uneven, yet steady move rightward has centered on economic and social welfare policy.[15] Many Democrats with strong left-leaning views in these policy areas remained in Congress throughout the 1980s, 1990s and, to a lesser extent, the 2000s and beyond (especially in the House of Representatives). Still, much of the party's power center has increasingly come from the neoliberal faction. This political reconfiguration created a situation in which official sources identified as most "newsworthy" through media refraction were increasingly converging ideologically. Indeed, by advocating neoliberal media policies, many New Right and New Democrat elites indirectly cultivated favorable institutional conditions for news outlets to circulate their views on other policy issues.

This rightward shift in media-sanctioned elites was accompanied by the growth of an increasingly sophisticated neoliberal-New Right opinion-shaping apparatus. In addition to the policy organizations, think tanks, and specialized media discussed earlier, this apparatus has drawn on ingenious public relations, internal polling and strategic communications practices that have steadily penetrated governing institutions (Cook 2005, 117–163; Druckman and Jacobs 2015; Ewen 1996; Hertsgaard 1988). Such efforts are more likely to meet with

success in a political-economic environment that has diminished the time, resources, incentives, and organizational support for independent news reporting and analysis.

In connecting media institutions, news coverage, public opinion, and economic and social welfare policymaking, the theory of media refraction underscores neoliberalism's broad political-economic scope. It explains how shifts in governing authority interacted with structural and institutional tendencies within the media to promote the broader neoliberal turn, as the richer and wider array of policy perspectives across society was distilled through news practices grounded in corporate and commercial logics that were themselves reinforced by neoliberal media policy. In economic and social welfare policy debates since the early 1980s, the political effects of media refraction have occurred through three interrelated mechanisms:

(1) Reducing the *volume of hard news*. Media outlets have allocated more time and space to soft news, infotainment, and advertising itself, and less to politics, social issues, and public policy.
(2) Circulating hard news that *marginalizes the substance* of policy debates. Media organizations have devoted greater attention to elite strategy and tactics or internal governmental process, and less to ideologically principled argument and factual, policy-relevant information.
(3) Narrowing the *political range* of content circulated during policy debates. Substantive news coverage has strongly emphasized official voices, especially those deemed powerful according to media political-economic imperatives. This has suppressed ideological diversity in issue framing.

Collectively, media refraction processes have built upon each other to funnel broader political discourse into news coverage that encourages public opinion climates favorable to neoliberalism: reducing the amount of hard news, deflecting that news away from substantive policy matters, and shading the remaining policy-focused news toward neoliberal perspectives. I illustrate these effects using a variety of measures applied to large and wide-reaching slices of the political communication environment.

Media refraction processes have occurred under Republican and Democratic presidents, and in periods of unified and divided government. Crucially, in the cases of the 1981 economic plan and welfare reform, a variety of left-leaning, oppositional issue frames were regularly voiced by organized actors outside of government and on Capitol Hill alike. While official and unofficial political conflict was intense, oppositional messages received little play in the mainstream media. In this regard, my work extends Meehan's (2005, 6) critique of corporate TV to a more explicitly political arena. Just as media political-economic logics ensure

that entertainment programming does not fully "reflect(s) who we are" socially and culturally, similar logics distort "who we are" politically by narrowing the voices and ideological perspectives consistently made available in news coverage of policy debates: Even as left-liberal members of Congress, progressive interest groups and research organizations, grassroots social justice movements, and many ordinary Americans have consistently spoken and acted against the neoliberal policy turn, media refraction has systematically blurred or erased these segments of political society from the picture of reality presented by mainstream news outlets.

While all three media refraction mechanisms have consistently affected news coverage, my empirical analyses show that they did so in different ways and to different extents in particular economic and social welfare policy debates across recent decades, consistent with the media industry and political environments of the time. In particular, my analyses in Chapters 3 and 4 show a sharp decline in the volume of hard news and the provision of relevant policy information as neoliberalization of the media proceeded from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. The experiment reported in Chapter 5 focuses on narrow ideological issue framing as the most direct and consistent pathway through which media refraction can influence public opinion to support neoliberal policies.

To be clear, my argument ought not to be understood as evaluating media coverage of economic and social welfare issues in the neoliberal era in direct comparison to richer, more diverse coverage in the 1960s or 1970s, often seen popularly as the "golden age" of American journalism. In fact, several studies have documented official-centric and ideologically narrow news coverage during that period (Gans 2004; Hallin 1986). As discussed earlier, the key corporate and commercial imperatives that encourage shallow and narrow coverage of policy debates have operated for decades, even if within greater constraints in the period before about 1980. I do not provide an empirical comparison of news coverage before and during the neoliberal era. However, the strengthening of institutional logics driving media refraction in the context of neoliberal media policies and practices has been well documented. Moreover, the extensive empirical evidence from political discourse and media coverage I do present is consistent with my theoretical and historical interpretation of the forces that shape news coverage of domestic policy debates. This evidence suggests that media refraction has been a remarkably durable feature of political communication since the early Reagan era.

Crucially, the policy debates comprising the two main case studies in this book predate the rise of the nationally prominent right-wing media establishment that is often thought to affect story agendas and framing dynamics in ostensibly nonpartisan outlets. In the 1980s and mid-1990s, neither Fox News nor the conservative blogosphere existed, and right-wing talk radio, while gaining

strength and popularity, wielded nothing like the influence it later would. As elaborated in Chapters 3 and 4, the three national television networks, the Associated Press (AP), and (later) *USA Today* dominated political and public policy news flows that reached broadly into the U.S. population.[16] This gave the issue frames and information appearing in these outlets unparalleled capacity to shape ordinary people's policy opinions, especially those expressed by the many Americans who lacked strong political predispositions.

Even in 2018, audiences for corporate, commercial mainstream news (in traditional and online forms) remain very large by any measure, including media use self-reports, circulation numbers, TV ratings data, and web traffic analytics. I elaborate these points in Chapter 6 as I situate my argument and findings in the context of more recent political communication dynamics. Moreover, like the broader market-oriented, pro-corporate policy trend of which it is a part, the neoliberal era of media policies and practices seems unlikely to soon run its course. As I discuss in Chapter 7, neoliberalism's staying power makes the continuing influence of media refraction on mass policy opinion a critical subject for American democracy in the 21st century.

Bringing the Media into Analyses of Power in American Politics

At the broadest level, this book contributes to a renewed empirical focus in the past decade or so on the dynamics of material power in American politics that has been inspired by seminal political science and sociological research of the 1960s and 1970s (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Gaventa 1980; Lindblom 1977; Lukes 2005). My analysis enriches these recent efforts to understand both the larger power dynamics of contemporary American public policymaking (Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013; Volscho and Kelly 2012; Winters and Page 2009), and how neoliberal institutions, policies, and practices specifically have shaped patterns of political-economic inequality and material insecurity in the United States (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). The consolidation and mobilization of corporate and upper-income power to turn U.S. politics rightward in recent decades has occurred not just through party and interest group organization (Bartels 2008; Hacker and Pierson 2010), campaign contributions (Ferguson and Rogers 1986), quasi-grassroots movements (Skocpol and Williamson 2012), and an explicitly conservative media complex that cultivates and amplifies the influence of right-wing elites and thought leaders (Jamieson and Cappella 2008). It has also occurred through the mainstream, popular news media themselves, which are often viewed as a center-left force in American politics (Swift 2017).

While the U.S. media system is largely free of formal, legal content restrictions, this does not mean the public flow of policy ideas and information goes unregulated. Even if they are not the product of direct and explicit government mandates, the processes that perform this regulation are deeply political. These processes tend to reinforce certain conventional, officially sanctioned policy perspectives. At the same time, such processes are in significant part the historical outcome of a series of power-inflected public policy decisions about how to organize and structure the media system itself (McChesney 1993; Pickard 2014). In that sense, media refraction highlights an underappreciated way in which the U.S. press is, in fact, less "free" than textbook democratic mythologies suggest. In taking account of political-economic dynamics in the media that influence news coverage, my work shows how public opinion in focused moments of debate has facilitated a profound policy shift that has worsened economic inequality—and the disparities in political power that this inequality has both grown from and reinforced.

As such, this book charts another way in which neoliberalism has developed in significant tension with egalitarian popular democracy (Brown 2015). Neoliberal ideas and institutional logics have constructed a thin form of racialized market citizenship for the poor through the new welfare regime (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011), and neoliberal public policies leading to epic concentrations of wealth and income have promoted a sharp upward redistribution of political power through inequalities in political voice (Gilens 2012). I show how neoliberalism has also had potent political implications for the news media, which remain the key institutional mechanism through which public policies are discussed and debated, and a major influence on the patterns of public opinion that help construct legitimacy for government action. In these ways, the ideas, practices, and institutions that make up the neoliberal regime in the domain of the media have supported neoliberalism and its attendant power relations in U.S. economic and social welfare policy at large.

To comprehend the constraints on democratic agency and political equality in contemporary American politics, as well as the potential opportunities for redressing these power disparities, it is important to have a clear historical understanding of the news media's role in the neoliberal turn. Despite the election of a two-term Democratic president, the rise (and dissipation) of the Occupy Wall Street movement and the upstart presidential campaign of a democratic socialist senator, neoliberalism continues to exert potent influences on economic and social welfare policy, even as income and wealth inequality reach ever-greater levels. For instance, President Obama ran for re-election on a platform that included cutting the corporate tax rate (Calmes 2012), and has praised neoliberal welfare reform (Obama 2013). And the leading 2016 Republican

presidential candidates—even as they positioned themselves as outsiders to the party establishment—strengthened the neoliberal line on tax policy (O'Brien 2016). In that context, analyses of the debates over the 1981 Reagan economic plan and 1996 welfare reform plan could not be timelier.

3

"Gipper Sweeps Congress"

Commercial News Media and the Launch of the Reagan Revolution

In an April 29, 1981, news story headlined, "A Setting Hollywood Couldn't Have Matched," an Associated Press special correspondent reported on Ronald Reagan's economic policy speech to a joint session of Congress. This was the president's first major public appearance since being wounded by the apparently fame-obsessed John Hinckley Jr. While "the scene was standard," the correspondent wrote, "the performance was a guaranteed hit." Reagan was "the leading man," a "star" in a grand political "drama," facing "the glare of television lights." Already a beloved national leader, the film actor turned transformative Republican president scored an impressive political triumph in the ongoing conservative "effort to sell his proposals," making passage of his economic plan nearly inevitable. As the reporter observed, "In circumstances like those Tuesday night, an amateur would have been a star. And Reagan is a pro" (Mears 1981).

This 807-word story communicates virtually no substantive policy content—and no substantive criticism of Reagan's neoliberal-New Right policy proposals, in the voice of the correspondent, Democratic Party elites, or anyone else. Still, its likely implications for public opinion on the president's economic agenda are favorable. It depicts Reagan as a skilled leader, self-assured and competent, as a cowboy "riding high" in the polls, and it uncritically repeats the president's populist assertions that "the people" are on his side. Fulfilling the professional journalistic obligation to portray elite—preferably dramatic—conflict, the story does claim that Reagan "probably will have to compromise later on his three-year, 30 percent tax reduction plan." However, such policy compromise would be, in the end, minimal.

This AP report vividly captures U.S. mainstream news outlets' typical treatment of public policy debates, and their depiction of debate over Reagan's inaugural economic program in particular, during a historical moment when the

moderately regulated, more socially responsible post–World War II corporate media complex was beginning its transition to a system driven by profit-seeking and commercial imperatives above all else. Reagan's initiative, which included the largest federal tax cut to date coupled with the largest spending decrease in history, was the first major move in a profound ideological transformation of public discourse and domestic policy orientations. By the first decade of the 21st century, this neoliberal shift had helped catapult the New Right from the margins of political relevance and acceptability to the heights of institutional power (Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Frank 2008; Harvey 2005; Meeropol 1998; Phillips 1990). By the second decade of this century, neoliberal policies had played a major role in, among other social and economic effects, bringing income and wealth inequality in the United States to levels not seen since before the Great Depression (Matthews 2014; Saez 2015).

Despite these high economic, social, and political stakes, news outlets in the months leading up to Reagan's signing of the Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA) gave government officials—especially administration voices—a near-monopoly platform to relay their ideological messages and policy perspectives. Mainstream media did provide more frequent hard news coverage of this debate than would become typical in succeeding years as neoliberalism swept over the media structures, institutions, and practices entrusted with promoting informed public deliberation. Still, much of this coverage consisted of highly dramatized depictions of the strategic and tactical moves deployed by Republican and Democratic Party elites, as "the Gipper"—portrayed as the rising political star of a new conservative wave in American politics—battled the liberal "old guard" led by House of Representatives Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr.[1] At the same time, media outlets rarely reported concrete policy information on the economic plan, and left-leaning criticism in news stories was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of support for the Reagan agenda. Some of these dynamics were especially pronounced on the three commercial broadcast TV networks, belying their popular reputations for liberal bias and hard-hitting investigative reporting aimed at the powerful.

This chapter presents evidence from a wide-ranging content analysis of mainstream print and TV coverage of the 1981 Reagan economic plan. Several indicators applied to more than 400 news reports show that both AP and evening network television content significantly favored this crucial early neoliberal policy proposal. Print and TV outlets covered the debate in somewhat different ways that seem to reflect their distinctive institutional norms and structural positions in the political economy of the early 1980s media complex. In each media format, however, ideological messages claiming or suggesting that the Reagan plan (or similar neoliberal, "supply-side" approaches) would boost the national economy, and those opposing federal

government social welfare or business regulatory programs, comprised the largest categories of issue frames. Critical, left-leaning frames—especially those evoking class dimensions of the plan—were infrequently circulated. And key items of factual information that might cast doubt on Reaganite policy were rarely reported by the news outlets upon which large portions of the American population relied.

Media coverage in this case stands out for its overwhelming reliance on the voices of major government officials—especially those from the Reagan administration, and especially on television. Moreover, while mass-market media outlets provided significantly more coverage of this policy debate than audiences were likely to encounter in the 1990s and 2000s, a large proportion of news during the 1981 debate sidelined substantive policy discussion and ideological argument. Indeed, nearly three out of every four TV stories were focused on superficial elements of elite political strategy and tactics or governmental process. These patterns reflect the structural and institutional landscape of U.S. political news in the earliest stages of neoliberalism. At that time, stronger professional norms of civic responsibility and residual federal broadcast oversight still placed some constraints on fundamental political-economic tendencies that had long driven the media system. Still, these constraints constituted only limited counterweights to the corporate and commercial imperatives of media refraction.

I then present evidence from a quantitative analysis of congressional discussion based on every statement about the Reagan plan made on the floor of the House of Representatives or Senate during the weeks leading up to key votes on ERTA in the summer of 1981. I supplement these data with a qualitative exploration of policy discourse from nongovernmental sources that challenged neoliberal-New Right perspectives on tax policy in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This evidence also indicates that media refraction during the Reagan economic plan debate operated in line with the political-economic conditions of the news system at the time. In a proportional sense, both TV news and AP coverage did reflect fairly closely the ample elite dissent to the Reagan policy voiced by (primarily Democratic) members of Congress. However, mainstream media virtually shut out nongovernmental opposition to the emerging neoliberal policy agenda, despite the fact that such opposition was abundantly available from think tanks, academic researchers, and grassroots protesters. The chapter concludes by situating contemporary poll results on the Reagan economic plan in this mass communication context. The media's inflection toward elite-sponsored frames endorsing unfettered private markets and casting aspersions on the welfare state placed right-of-center political forces in a favorable position to shape public opinion and win a significant measure of popular support at neoliberalism's initial stages.

My evidence suggests that the corporate and commercial pressures that produce media refraction were somewhat less potent in 1981 than they would later become. However, the structural and institutional dynamics of the U.S. political communication system even before its thoroughgoing transformation under neoliberal policies and practices nonetheless encouraged highly favorable news coverage of the Reagan plan. In the early 1980s, New Right elites led by the Reagan administration were, to an impressive degree, publicly united behind neoliberal perspectives on economic policy. Commercial media's near-religious deference to elite sources, especially those from apparently popular presidential administrations, ensured strong reflection of those right-leaning views. Even as this official deference narrowed the perspectives made available to the public when the news did cover the merits of the Reagan plan, the media's overall marginalization of policy substance trivialized the debate and limited the informational resources with which ordinary Americans might form principled policy opinions. Professional journalistic norms of civic responsibility and a state-sanctioned commitment to broader social goods only mildly counteracted mainstream media's drive to inexpensively produce commercially attractive news. My evidence in this chapter suggests that the "consent of the governed" is deeply implicated in the media environment which circulates political information and ideas. Analyses of public policy attitudes which ignore that environment do so at a significant intellectual cost. Before turning to media coverage, political discourse, and public opinion, however, I summarize the Reagan economic plan itself.

Supply-Side Tax Cuts by Popular Demand?

President Reagan's signature domestic policy achievement was at the time the largest federal tax reduction in American history, with an estimated cost of $750 billion over five years. Billed as a bold response to the economic stagnation and steep inflation that gripped the nation during the 1970s, the administration's original proposal called for a 33 percent cut in personal income tax rates over three years (including reducing the top marginal statutory rate from 70 percent to 50 percent), along with cuts in the capital gains rate (including reducing the top marginal rate from 28 percent to 20 percent), large reductions in estate and gift taxes, incentives for private retirement savings, an accelerated capital depreciation schedule for business assets such as plants and equipment, and expanded corporate investment credits. After compromise with deficit-leery members of Congress, the three-year personal rate reductions were shaved to 25 percent, but the bulk of the program as the White House proposed it was enacted by bipartisan congressional majorities and signed in August 1981 (D. Baker 2007, 65–68;

CQ Researcher 1982; Meeropol 1998, 79–81; Steuerle 1992, 39–56). Despite frequent opposition voiced by Democratic legislators on the floor of Congress, most Senate and House Democrats voted for the Reagan tax plan, reflecting the successful incorporation of a significant share of national Democratic elites into the gathering neoliberal tide even in its early stages. ERTA passed by wide margins, buoyed by Republicans' unexpected capture of the Senate and significant House gains in the 1980 elections. The legislation cleared the Senate 67–8, with just 7 of 46 Democrats voting against the plan. In the House, the final tally was 282–95, with 94 of 244 Democrats opposing the policy.

A prominent conservative-leaning research organization asserted at the time that the administration "achieved at least 90 percent of its initial objectives" in the tax bill (Tax Foundation 1981, 2). Several provisions were added in Congress—mostly in a bid to attract conservative Southern Democratic support—including easing the so-called marriage penalty on two-earner households and reducing taxation of income earned abroad. The Reagan administration and its New Right allies had publicly supported most of these changes, and advocated that they become parts of future policy proposals. Significantly, the personal income tax reductions—though proportional (or "across the board"), in the sense that the percentage rate decrease was the same for all income levels—were projected at the time (and evaluated in subsequent analyses) to heavily favor affluent people and the very wealthiest Americans. In 1980, the median income for a family of four was $25,400. By 1984, those with incomes of $30,000 and up would reap more than 63 percent of the total income tax cuts, those making $50,000 or more would get about one-third of the total cuts, and those with incomes of $100,000 or greater would receive more than 13 percent of the cuts (Tax Foundation 1981, 6–7).[2]

Among the provisions not initially advocated by the Reagan administration but added by Congress was the indexation for inflation of income tax rates and deductions after 1984. Much of the perceived mass political demand for the Reagan tax agenda—in the 1980 presidential campaign, the 1981 policy debate, and later political commentary and scholarly analyses—has been attributed to "bracket creep," as inflation pushed those of modest means into higher tax brackets (Morgan 2007, 33; Prasad 2012). But even conservative analysts have pointed out that ending bracket creep, thus easing the federal tax obligations of some low- and middle-income workers (and, arguably, increasing their incentives to earn more), could have been accomplished more directly, effectively, and equitably with no statutory rate reductions for high-income people, no cuts in tax rates on investment income, and no easing of estate or gift taxes (Steuerle 1992, 43–44; Tax Foundation 1981, 11–13). In any case, the overall rise in individual tax responsibilities borne by Americans from 1945 through 1980 is almost entirely attributable to increases in federal payroll (i.e., Social

Security and Medicare) taxes and in state or local taxes, which were not reduced by the 1981 Reagan plan (Morgan 2007, 34, fig. 2.2). Unlike personal and corporate income taxes and estate taxes, payroll and state or local sales and consumption taxes are regressive, falling more heavily on lower- and middle-income than upper-income people. In fact, responding to losses in federal aid mandated by the first Reagan budget, many states increased sales, gasoline, and cigarette taxes. Moreover, since most states' income tax statutes were linked to the federal code, the large, regressive federal cut automatically reduced state income tax rates in a similar way (CQ Researcher 1982, 4). In sum, it is difficult to argue that the direct tax effects of ERTA were financially beneficial to the middle-income people who are often identified as its chief political impetus, let along to low-income Americans.

While the effects of the business tax reductions in the bill were complex, a former Reagan and George H.W. Bush administration Treasury Department official asserts that, contrary to frequent claims by the White House and congressional supporters, ERTA's accelerated capital depreciation schedule actually harmed new and struggling small businesses (Steuerle 1992, 47). In addition, the 1981 business tax changes inspired what Steuerle (1992, 48–52) terms a "tax shelter bonanza" by encouraging complex tax-avoidance arrangements for well-heeled individuals and corporations with the means to hire accountants and lawyers.[3] Altogether, there is strong evidence that the business and individual tax provisions of the Reagan plan played a major role in the increasing economic inequality of the 1980s and 1990s (Phillips 1990, 2002).

Reagan and his allies grounded their basic rationale for the plan in a logic developed by a group of supply-side economists during the 1970s whose ideas had long been marginalized in mainstream academic and elite policymaking discourse. The central proposition was that drastic reductions in marginal tax rates (on salaries and investment income alike)—especially in upper-income brackets, and, in particular, cuts in the top rates—would spur economic expansion by incentivizing private savings, capital investment and earnings. Coupled with this was the drive to liberalize depreciation allowances for physical infrastructure, which would lead businesses to modernize and expand hiring. Such cuts would boost growth to the extent that overall tax revenues would increase dramatically, thereby eventually eliminating budget deficits.[4] The immediate origins of the Reagan plan were in the 1978 Kemp-Roth tax initiative, which attracted tepid legislative support at the time but which proved an ideological harbinger of the neoliberal-New Right policy turn (Meeropol 1998, 79). As Steuerle (1992, 40) notes, supply-side theory has close conceptual connections to older ideas that only a regressive "head tax"—that is, a system in which each person pays exactly the same amount of tax, regardless of wealth or earnings—results in an optimally efficient allocation of resources across society. Differences

and similarities between supply-side theory and long-running conservative doctrine that tax cuts for the wealthiest segments of society are in the economic interests of all—panned by critics as "trickle-down economics"—are contested. But White House budget director David Stockman told journalist William Greider (1982, 49–50) shortly after the Reagan tax plan was enacted that sophisticated supply-side concepts had been deployed as a means to "sell" upper-bracket tax reduction: "Kemp-Roth was always a Trojan horse to bring down the top rate," he said.[5]

In short, if the apparent grassroots public demand for the Reagan program (Prasad 2012; Quirk and Hinchliffe 1998) was based on a desire to reduce taxes that materially affected ordinary Americans, then ERTA was an odd response to that demand. While there is ample evidence of public support for the Reagan economic plan, such support was manifested primarily in poll results on the specific policy that were generated as debate over its provisions ensued in 1981, not in earlier public calls for reduced taxes, much less in any popular mandate derived from the 1980 election (Dahl 1990; Hibbs 1982). That policy debate occurred in a news media environment dominated by pro-neoliberal coverage.

The Reagan administration's fiscal 1982 budget proposal—which, in its major outlines, received congressional approval in the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981—featured significant reductions in a host of social welfare and business regulatory programs. These cuts were coupled with a $20 billion increase in Pentagon spending, which ultimately led to what has been described as the largest peacetime military buildup in U.S. history. At the behest of some Republicans and conservative Southern Democrats, the ultimate budget blueprint included even larger total domestic spending cuts than the administration had publicly advocated, and constituted the biggest reduction in projected federal spending in history (D. Baker 2007, 74–75; Ferguson and Rogers 1986, 127–130; Meeropol 1998, 81–98). Eligibility rules were tightened and benefit allocations were cut for cash welfare (called Aid to Families with Dependent Children at the time), food stamps, child nutrition, Medicaid, foster care and child care programs, Social Security Disability Income, subsidized housing, low-income fuel assistance, higher education grants, and unemployment assistance. There were also reductions in aid for workers laid off because of falling trade barriers, benefits for occupationally impaired miners, community service employment programs, aid to state and municipal governments, and funding for environmental protection and civil rights enforcement.[6] These moves came in addition to a number of other industry-backed regulatory provisions, including a loosening of broadcast ownership rules that presaged the neoliberal media policy shift that, as I discuss in Chapter 4, was consummated on a grander scale under the Clinton administration.[7]

In sum, the Reagan tax and budget plans of 1981 set a significant precedent in federal policy and its relationship to private markets.[8] These enactments paved the way for a series of moves throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s—many of them accomplished with significant, if uneven, bipartisan elite support—that further reconfigured the U.S. political economy in line with neoliberal ideas, practices, and policy priorities. Reagan's massive first-term tax cuts, social welfare reductions, and moves against business regulation were instrumental in shifting the national domestic policy agenda, the terms of mainstream public discourse, and the news media environment, with implications that lingered beyond the Obama era. Key aspects of the Reagan economic plan became blueprints for later neoliberal policy moves. For example, the 1981 tax cuts inspired similar George W. Bush administration plans in 2001 and 2003, as well as the Trump administration tax cut enacted in 2017. And the squeeze on antipoverty programs foreshadowed Clinton-era welfare reform and more recent moves to restrict social assistance. Some effects of this initial turn toward neoliberal economic and social welfare policy were relatively direct and explicit. Others were subtle and longer term, such as the generation of self-reinforcing fiscal and political pressures for further tax and domestic spending cuts (Hacker and Pierson 2010). Perhaps most importantly, the 1981 economic plan and its policy progeny have been instrumental in pushing income, wealth, and political power upward in American society to a staggering degree (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012).

The story of this profound policy shift features a configuration of multiple, complexly interacting political causes. Campaign finance, party strategy, interest group dynamics, and other factors are all important for understanding the ascendance of neoliberal ideas and policies in the realm of domestic economic and social welfare issues. But the relationships among elite discourse, the political economy of mainstream news coverage, and mass public opinion constitute a key dimension of the narrative that has remained largely unexamined. Not only has political science paid little attention to how the media covered the 1981 economic plan (among other neoliberal domestic policies). We have also neglected to consider how the broader politics and policy dynamics of the U.S. media complex may be implicated in the overall rightward shift that has had such important economic and political effects. Indeed, the scaling back of media ownership rules in Reagan's first budget was a test run of the more comprehensive and far-reaching provisions of the bipartisan Telecommunications Act of 1996. Thus, the 1981 economic program that the news media treated so favorably included a little-noticed provision catalyzing the neoliberal shift in media policy and practices. That institutional shift supported news coverage that has facilitated the broader right turn in economic and social welfare policy. With these connections in mind, I begin my discussion of media content and public opinion on the Reagan economic plan by sketching the outlines of the U.S. news

system in the early 1980s, and summarizing my methodological approach to analyzing its coverage.

Corporate News at the Dawn of Neoliberalism: Public Service and Creeping Commercialism

In the early 1980s, the neoliberalization of U.S. media structures and institutions was in its initial stages. The major regulatory policy changes that promoted corporate media concentration, centralization, and consolidation were still a few years away. Still, many policy analysts and bureaucrats had since the late 1970s started to move away from public interest conceptions of the news as a social good and toward free-market notions that defined—and often celebrated—the news as another saleable commodity. Affirmative social conceptions of the media, along with the regulatory and subsidy policies that support them, had always been much more limited and constrained in the United States than in other industrialized democracies (Hallin and Mancini 2004). However, since the 1930s the FCC, the Antitrust Division of the Justice Department, and other government authorities had administered a number of measures aimed at curbing the potential harms that centralized, profit-driven, commercially oriented media might inflict on a democratic society (Horwitz 2005). The dominant corporate and commercial character of the U.S. media system (especially in radio and television broadcasting) was crystallized by the 1940s. But this crystallization entailed a political settlement whereby media organizations accepted some public regulation, oversight, and social responsibility in the service of healthy democratic discourse (McChesney 1993; Pickard 2014). That settlement, though it had been slowly eroding for several decades, was still in force in the early 1980s. While the seeds for the unleashing of corporate and commercial imperatives through media refraction during public policy debates were being sown, those seeds had yet to bloom.

U.S. News Media at the Start of the Reagan Revolution

Until the neoliberal wave swept most of them away, a number of federal government policies encouraged norms and practices of civic duty and social responsibility in the U.S. news media. Key provisions of this regime included antitrust rules and other restraints on media concentration and centralization (such as limits on audience market reach, and bans on cross-ownership of newspapers and broadcast stations), restrictions on advertising time and placement, and

public interest requirements for broadcast licensees, such as affirmative action mandates aimed at promoting social and ideological diversity in media content (Horwitz 2005). While it lagged far behind its older and better-funded counterparts in Western Europe (Aaron 2011), noncommercial, taxpayer-supported media had received federal sanction with the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. Even as they have faced severe economic and political pressure, and have struggled to attract large audiences (Hoynes 1994), U.S. public news media have provided a significant alternative to commercial fare (Aufderheide 2000, 99–120). Most prominently, the Fairness Doctrine had since the late 1940s required TV and radio stations to provide coverage of important and controversial public issues, and to do so in a way that afforded reasonable opportunities for diverse voices and perspectives to be heard. The FCC effectively nullified this policy in 1987, five years after Reagan administration FCC chairman Mark Fowler famously described television as nothing more than "a toaster with pictures" (Aufderheide 1990).

In the early 1980s, the three major broadcast networks (CBS, NBC, and relative latecomer ABC) dominated the market for national TV news, and were extremely popular sources of news overall. These networks' audience demographics mirrored fairly closely the U.S. population as a whole. National cable news played virtually no role in the debate over the Reagan economic plan. (CNN was founded about a year before the president signed ERTA, but it had a small audience reach and apparently did not air a single substantive news story on the issue.) As is the case even today, broadcast news produced by local commercial TV stations was a very popular viewing choice in 1981. Local stations sometimes carried news stories on national-level issues produced by the networks. Notably, this practice would become much more common starting in the 1980s, in part because the Reagan-era FCC abolished the 1971 Primer on Ascertainment of Community Problems, which had encouraged broadcasters to cover issues in ways that were responsive to local community concerns (DeLuca 1976). This regulatory cutback was one way in which neoliberal media policy promoted the wider circulation of standardized news content subject to corporate pressures and commercial tendencies, since replaying national network stories is cheaper than producing original local content. Still, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, most stories broadcast on local news that touched on national politics and public policy were likely to be specialized reports featuring local members of Congress and issues with particular local connections, such as targeted funding for infrastructure projects.

Even in 1981, the broadcast networks (and their local station affiliates) embodied the commercial character of electronic news in the United States. News divisions were embedded within corporate entertainment leviathans, in which entertainment values reigned and commercial advertising—with its

indirect and direct economic and political constraints on media operations and content (Baker 1994; Meehan 2005)—was the dominant revenue source. Nevertheless, counterpressures for more substantive and ideologically diverse news were significant. Most important among these were a formidable culture of journalistic professionalism that provided a measure of insulation from corporate and commercial imperatives (a culture that perhaps reached its zenith in the 1960s and early 1970s), and some deference toward FCC and other governmental requirements and expectations that media provide news and public affairs content of civic and social value. To be sure, heavy reliance on elite sources—especially in government, but also in corporations and major interest groups—trivialization of protest movements, and discounting of views outside the middle range of the national Democratic and Republican parties had long characterized mainstream news in the United States, perhaps most strongly on television (Gans 2004). But while commercial pressures had increased and the regulatory environment had already weakened since the 1940s, the three broadcast networks at the dawn of the Reagan era generally saw fit to provide a significant quantity and quality of hard news on issues of public concern. This was no doubt partly because the networks defined their news divisions more as builders of brand prestige, and signals to regulators and audiences of civic commitment, than as money-making centers in themselves. As such, while boosting news ratings was important (not least because drawing people to the evening news made it more likely they would stay with a channel to watch the revenue-producing detective shows, comedies, and other programs that followed), network executives were often content to let profits from their entertainment divisions largely subsidize the news (Hamilton 2004, 163–165). Producing and circulating original, serious, substantive news about politics and public policy remains very costly even today, when digital technology has lowered some financial barriers (McChesney 2013). Despite the more captive TV audiences of the pre-cable, pre-internet era, advertising revenues would probably never have generated large and consistently growing profits from national news programming of high civic value. Thus, left to their own devices, commercial media tend to underproduce serious public affairs content, despite its considerable longer-term benefits to society (Hamilton 2004, 2016). That was surely the case for the national networks in 1981, even if professional and regulatory factors mitigated such underproduction.

While the AP wire service is a nonprofit consortium, its purpose is to supply national news to the overwhelmingly commercial (and increasingly corporate-controlled) regional and local newspapers that collectively own it. In fact, the AP, formed in the mid-19th century to provide reports exclusively to member papers, has played a crucial role in the centralization of political information flows, the concentration of newspaper ownership, and the commodification

of news itself. The AP was created to enable papers to quickly and efficiently receive via telegraph standardized (and often formulaic) news reports on national events and issues. Such reports were designed to allow publications in far-flung corners of the country to circulate them in original form (or shorten and edit them to add local angles), without alienating controversy-shy commercial advertisers and mass readerships centered on the growing middle class (Carey 1989; Kielbowicz 2015, 30–33; Starr 2004, 183–187). The AP identifies itself as "the first private sector organization in the U.S. to operate on a national scale" (Associated Press n.d.).

Daily papers that fed from the AP were very popular news sources in 1981, especially among the population of Americans from whom the random samples in national polls were drawn. The small proportion of original, locally generated stories in regional and local papers that touched on national-level events focused almost entirely on narrow concerns, such as congressional efforts to promote local industries or bring public facilities to the area, or the election campaigns of local members of Congress (Arnold 2004; Cook 1989). Moreover, then as now, most of these papers lacked their own Washington, DC, bureaus. Because there was no national, mass-market daily newspaper in the United States in 1981 that covered political and public policy-related news, the AP (and, to a lesser extent, other wire services) played that basic role in the news ecosystem. As such, AP stories should be expected to respond indirectly to many of the broad corporate and commercial tendencies that facilitate media refraction in TV news.

In short, at this time the broadcast networks were large, profitable, corporate empires with massive market power whose business model was built on producing commercially amenable entertainment, but which maintained serious news operations to demonstrate commitment to a public-spirited ethos, in large part out of enlightened self-interest. The Associated Press, in turn, served up standardized reports to commercial (and increasingly local monopoly and chain-owned) newspapers that nevertheless operated within a journalistic culture of civic obligation to cover issues and events of broad democratic concern. These structural and institutional tendencies should have generated significant media refraction during policy debates, even if that refraction was somewhat limited by countervailing tendencies.

For the reasons outlined in the last chapter, any corporate and commercial media system is likely to rely heavily on mainstream, official government sources. Indeed, this dynamic has been demonstrated in news contexts that predate the neoliberal era (Gans 2004; Hallin 1994). Commercial imperatives to appeal to a mass consumer audience also militate in favor of familiar, stock narratives that are considered politically and culturally safe, and thus unlikely to produce friction with large advertisers or the white, middle-class consumer base that dominated TV audiences and newspaper readerships. At the same

time, certain aspects of civic-minded journalistic professionalism and concern with (actual or anticipated) government regulatory backlash should have placed some constraints on media refraction. Moreover, before massive cost-cutting fueled by deregulation and consolidation hit its stride in the late 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, media outlets maintained larger news staffs and more newsgathering resources, thereby reducing pressures on reporters to quickly produce a large volume of stories. Finally, the much more limited entertainment and infotainment programming choices in 1981 likely lessened commercial imperatives to produce news content geared to attract consumers who might otherwise tune into cable channels for lighter fare or turn their eyes to the internet (Prior 2007).

Analyzing Media Coverage of Neoliberal Economic and Social Welfare Policy Debates

Technical details on the story selection protocols and content analysis coding scheme for this chapter and those that follow are in Appendix A. I discuss the general features of my approach here.[9] Most content indicators are straightforward and are explained as I report the results. However, my most precise and complex measure (*issue frame*) merits some initial comment. An issue frame is a statement in a news story attributed to a person or persons, which carries some interpretation of the policy issue under debate (the 1981 Reagan economic plan, neoliberal welfare reform, the 2010 extension of the Bush tax cuts, or the repeal of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, in Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6, respectively). Sources associated with these issue frames can be named (e.g., "U.S. Chamber of Commerce officials") or unnamed ("labor union leaders"), individual ("the president") or collective ("Reagan administration staffers"), and general ("Democratic leaders in Congress") or specific ("House Speaker Tip O'Neill"). An issue frame, then, is a statement (or "utterance") voiced by a person or persons that conveys a complete thought pertaining to the policy issue under discussion.

To derive potential issue frames and ideological frame categories, I consulted secondary academic and contemporary primary source materials—such as political speeches, government reports, interest group publications, and essays in specialized intellectual and policy-oriented journals—to make initial lists of possible frames. I created mutually exclusive coding categories from this list and then defined each frame as ideologically right-leaning (in favor of neoliberal approaches to economic or social welfare policy), left-leaning (questioning or criticizing such approaches, or proffering approaches that contradicted neoliberal ideas), or neither clearly right- nor left-leaning. As I began coding AP and television stories on the 1981 economic plan, I added new frames to the

list. I followed this same procedure in analyzing media coverage in Chapters 4 through 6. Thus, the issue-frame definitions in my policy cases are built inductively—from the ground up—based on discourse circulated relatively independently of the mainstream media environment that I analyze as a possible influence on public opinion. Psychological research indicates that such frames can shape the policy preferences that individual people express (Chong and Druckman 2007b), opinions which are aggregated in the polls that political actors conduct, peruse, and deploy in the policy process (and which the media themselves often report).

As discussed in the previous section, the Reagan tax and budget plans, while passed in separate legislative pieces, were intimately linked in their policy, political, and ideological dimensions. To provide greater focus and to make more manageable what was already an unusually extensive exercise in content analysis, I restricted my analysis to news stories and passages of congressional debate that are primarily about the tax plan.[10] I hand-coded the full video content of every ABC, CBS, and NBC evening network TV story on the plan that aired from January 1 through August 13, 1981 (the day the president signed ERTA). I followed the same full-text, hand-coding procedure for AP stories.[11] Because the number of relevant AP reports is too large for a feasible hand-coding analysis along the numerous content dimensions I target, I instead gathered a sizeable random sample of these stories, which captured about one-third of all AP reports on the issue that were produced over the same time period. This strategy yielded a total of 402 television and newspaper stories (145 TV stories and 257 AP stories), which translates to approximately 13 stories per week.[12] Together, these two sources constitute a valid reflection of the national news environment that a broad swath of Americans likely encountered during the debate over the 1981 economic plan. Because every story contained multiple issue frames, and because I coded for other important coverage characteristics, this approach enabled a fine-grained analysis of the patterns of policy discourse circulated to the public in this debate.

I turn now to describe the news content about the Reagan economic plan that was disseminated through the corporate and commercial media complex at the inception of neoliberalism in the early 1980s. How much coverage did major news outlets provide? Which broad dimensions of the issue did media organizations focus on? Which voices carried the discourse, and which ideological issue frames did they communicate more or less frequently? Overall, how favorable to the neoliberal Reagan economic agenda was this coverage? Answers to these questions in the following section set the stage for my analysis of how congressional and nongovernmental discourse was refracted during this policy episode, and the discussion of poll results on the Reagan plan that concludes the chapter.

News Coverage of ERTA: The Liberal Media Leans to the Neoliberal Right

Mainstream media outlets provided relatively frequent news coverage of the 1981 Reagan tax plan. A large proportion of this coverage, however, was focused on matters of political strategy and tactics and the procedural machinations of political elites, especially the president and congressional leaders. When news outlets did circulate substantive policy ideas that carried ideological positions, this coverage decidedly—though not uniformly—favored neoliberal-New Right voices and messages. Several content indicators support this conclusion. Most significantly, media coverage was saturated with ideological issue frames (voiced primarily by prominent political elites, especially Reagan administration officials) that supported ERTA and its core neoliberal provisions. Moreover, news outlets rarely included key pieces of factual information about the economic plan that might have encouraged greater public opposition.

While these findings generally hold for both network TV and AP coverage, the two media formats exhibited some basic patterns to different extents and in somewhat different ways. Television was significantly less focused on substantive policy and ideological discourse than was the AP, and showed a greater reliance on elite sources (especially Reagan administration voices). At the same time, print coverage carried a stronger inflection of ideological issue framing in favor of neoliberal perspectives. These differences can be understood in light of the differing political-economic positions and technical requirements of network TV and the AP in the U.S. media system at the time, and the news norms and practices associated with those factors.

Overall, these results provide a strong foundation for understanding the media refraction process in the early stages of neoliberalism. Popular belief and conservative political elites and activists (Alterman 2003) have long characterized the mainstream American news media as left-leaning. Such an interpretation is difficult to sustain in the empirical and historical context of the 1981 Reagan economic plan.

News Volume and Topics

Mainstream news media produced much more hard news coverage of the Reagan economic plan than comparable media outlets provided during the debate over neoliberal welfare reform in 1995 and 1996. For instance, evening network television news circulated an average of four to five relevant stories per week during debate over the Reagan policy, compared to just one story every 11 days during debate over welfare reform. On average, the Associated Press produced

more than 23 stories per week on the Reagan plan, while *USA Today* published fewer than 1 news story per week on welfare reform. These differences are both highly statistically significant ($p < .01$) and substantively massive. Because AP news is produced for (and by) a large group of newspapers, differences in coverage volume for print media are not based on equivalent comparisons. Still, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the total amount of news about the Reagan policy that was available in the outlets relied upon by most Americans was much greater than what would be available 15 years later during an arguably equally important moment in the trajectory of the U.S. political economy.

A large portion of mainstream hard news about the Reagan plan, however, had little connection to the substantive design and possible effects of the policy, or to the ideological arguments driving the debate. This is evident in Figure 3.1, which shows the most frequent primary story topics in news coverage of the 1981 policy episode.[13] As depicted in the graph, nearly half the stories were focused on governmental process, elite political strategy, and tactical dimensions of the debate. Included in this category, for example, are news reports charting various bills' paths through the legislative process that included little or no substantive policy information or ideological argument, and stories focusing on the leadership skills of President Reagan or his opponents in Congress. As might be expected in light of neoliberal-New Right justifications based on supply-side principles, the largest substantive topic category concerned the macroeconomic implications of the Reagan plan.

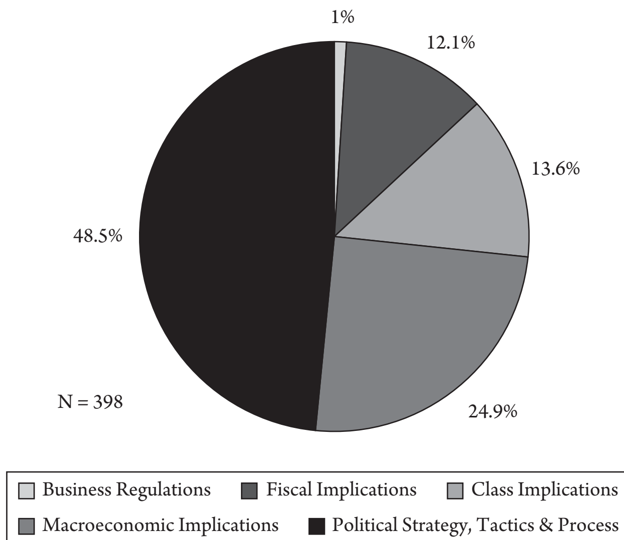

Figure 3.1 Reagan Economic Plan News Topics

Television coverage was mainly responsible for the heavy tilt toward political strategy and tactics or internal government procedure. Network evening news stories focused on these topics at an astounding rate of 70.8 percent, nearly double the proportion (35.8 percent) in print news. Moreover, just 10 percent of TV news reports on the Reagan tax plan (compared to more than 30 percent of AP stories) focused primarily on its implications for the broader economy. An additional 10 percent of television stories dealt primarily with the class implications of the plan (i.e., its effects on people at different levels of income or wealth, or its ramifications for the material prospects of workers and business owners). Consequently, print coverage both produced a proportionately greater share of substantive stories, and circulated more news that was concerned with the main ideological lines of debate over the Reagan policy.

Television news was particularly preoccupied with strategic and tactical jockeying among prominent political elites, especially Reagan himself and House Speaker O'Neill. Such reports typically portrayed these elites as players in a dramatic political contest, focusing intensely on the skills and personalities of individual leaders, and the instrumental approaches deployed by each side—White House public relations strategy and Reagan's oratorical effectiveness were especially popular angles—rather than their substantive ideas or ideological positions in the policy debate. Governmental process stories in this category homed in on the likelihood that particular versions of the bill would be approved at various stops in Congress. This overwhelming television focus on the mechanics of governmental process or political strategy and tactics may partially stem from the ease of conveying these themes through vivid visual representations. In addition, the shorter news segments on TV put a premium on simple presentations punctuated by pithy, dramatic quotes, with little attention to policy details and ideological argument grounded in substantive political principles. These characteristics are intensified in commercially driven, profit-oriented television systems. As Strate (2014, 75) puts it, "To best exploit the medium, private enterprise gives free rein to its attention-centered bias towards attractive visuals, dramatic presentations, excitement, novelty, and content that is easy to digest and above all entertaining, even if such content may be harmful in some way to the public and to the culture."

This evidence of frequent coverage punctuated by a heavy focus on nonsubstantive aspects of the Reagan economic plan debate is consistent with the U.S. media system's political-economic tendencies at the dawn of the 1980s. Despite the counterweights to corporate and commercial pressures described above, news outlets at this time likely presumed a strong interest in such coverage among the middle-class consumers whose value to advertisers formed a core revenue base for the media complex. First, the Reagan tax cuts promised potent effects on audiences (both directly through household finances

and indirectly through the broader economy), even if news coverage more often assumed than documented those effects. Consequently, stories focused on whether and when the policy would be adopted, rather than on its substantive merits and drawbacks, would be perceived to be in demand. Second, in the wake of the 1980 election and just a few years removed from earlier rumblings of conservative populist discontent in the 1978 California property tax revolt, Reagan nurtured an image as a charming, strong-willed, and politically skillful champion of aggrieved (implicitly white) middle-class taxpayers. While this image was buttressed by Reagan's early high approval ratings, media organizations emphasized it disproportionally to concrete evidence of his public support (King and Schudson 1995). Therefore, news stories on the economic plan focusing on the president's strategic and tactical moves to get his policy through Congress and lift up his "middle American" constituents would likely be seen as major audience draws.

This evidence is consistent with a key dimension of media refraction: the sidelining of policy substance and the principled merits of policy proposals, even when news outlets have significant financial resources and regulatory or reputational incentives to cover serious topics. Corporate media organizations followed the path of least resistance by focusing on the most superficial aspects of the Reagan economic plan debate. Perceived demand from commercially attractive audiences, combined with the practical difficulties of independent reporting on policy substance, encouraged these tendencies. As Democratic Senator Dale Bumpers of Arkansas recognized in a July 1981 speech to his colleagues, "Sometimes the information is slow to penetrate. The press does a lousy job of communicating anything except the politics of this problem."

In sum, while a commercial media system that was somewhat constrained by public service ethics and obligations provided more hard news about the Reagan economic plan than would become typical during the 1990s and later, much of this news had little connection to policy substance or ideological debate. Still, mainstream news outlets (even broadcast TV) offered Americans much more information on what their leaders were doing in Washington and on the progress of legislation than could plausibly be imagined in more recent times. As a point of comparison, the three major broadcast networks, in total, produced just 1.5 stories per week during the intense debate over extending the George W. Bush tax cuts during the fall of 2010. In separate analyses, I found that these three evening news programs offered just 13 total stories during the more than five-month debate that culminated in enactment of the first of those Bush tax cuts in 2001 (Guardino 2007). And broadcast evening news circulated just 11 total stories on the debate over raising the national minimum wage (one of President Obama's domestic policy priorities) in all of 2013 and 2014 (Guardino 2016). In sheer volume of hard news on economic and social welfare policy issues,

coverage of the 1981 Reagan plan was a high-water point in mass-market corporate and commercial media, even if the political-economic imperatives that drove this coverage evacuated much of the ideological and policy substance from the debate.

News Sourcing

Not surprisingly, official (governmental) voices predominated in coverage of the Reagan economic plan. Figure 3.2 shows the percentage of named and unnamed sources from different categories on network television news and in the Associated Press across the period of my analysis.[14] More than 88 percent of news voices were elected or appointed government officials (denoted by the darker bars in the graph).[15] Nearly half the total was from the Reagan administration, including the president himself. Other prominent administration sources included White House chief of staff James Baker, Treasury secretary Donald Regan, and budget director Stockman. Leading the voices of Democratic officials was House Speaker O'Neill, followed by House Ways and Means Committee chairman Dan Rostenkowski and House majority leader Jim Wright. While much scholarship theorizes and demonstrates the prevalence of elite sources in mainstream U.S. news coverage, these findings stand out for the magnitude of official dominance: studies of domestic policy debates have rarely documented

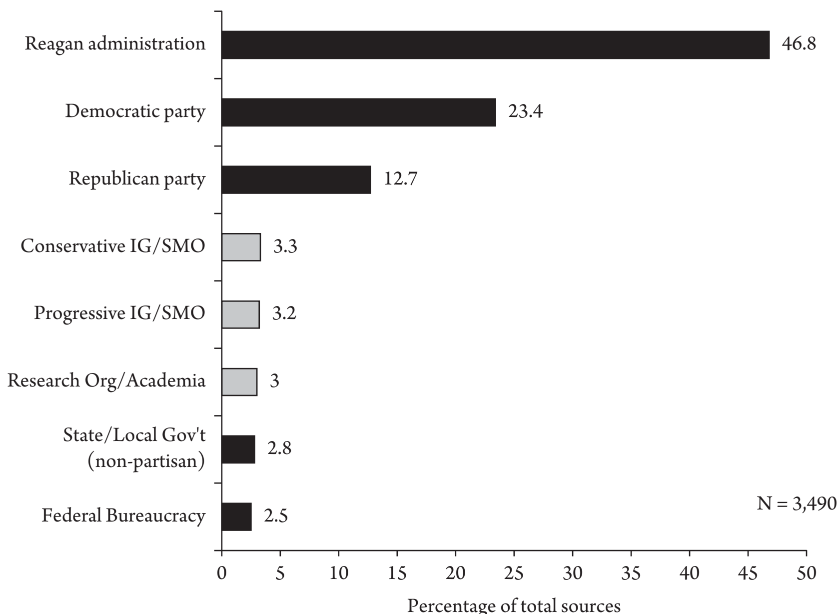

Figure 3.2 Reagan Economic Plan News Coverage: Specific Source Categories

a proportion of elite voices this large. In fact, the evidence here is in line with the higher end in methodologically comparable studies of foreign policy coverage: Althaus et al. (1996) find that elite voices (U.S. and foreign) made up 89 percent of all sources in *New York Times* coverage of the U.S.-Libya episode in 1985 and 1986. An analysis of the pre-invasion debate over the Iraq War in 2002 and 2003 shows that domestic and foreign official sources comprised 79 percent of the total on network TV (Hayes and Guardino 2010). Measured as who was quoted or paraphrased in the news most often, and compared to high-profile cases of national security policy and military intervention, U.S. government dominance of the Reagan economic plan debate is striking.

Journalistic reliance on official sources in network TV news reports is particularly notable: more than 95 percent of total voices in these stories came from political elites (compared to 84.7 percent in AP stories). Reagan administration voices made up 52.6 percent of total sources on television (43.9 percent in AP reports). Again, administration voices accounted for as much (or more) of the information and arguments on this domestic policy plan as in TV coverage of prominent episodes of foreign policy debate. For example, Bush administration voices on network news in the seven and a half months preceding the invasion of Iraq made up just 28 percent of total voices (Hayes and Guardino 2013, 38). Caution is warranted when directly comparing domestic to foreign policy debates, not least because mainstream journalistic norms can make non-U.S. elites newsworthy in foreign policy episodes (Hayes and Guardino 2010). Still, the much greater reliance by television news on administration voices during this key early neoliberal economic policy debate than during a debate that has popularly been understood as dominated by the Bush administration is noteworthy. Moreover, Reagan administration voices accounted for a much greater share of sources in this case than did Clinton administration voices during the welfare reform debate, Obama administration voices during the Bush tax cut extension debate, or even Trump administration voices in the Obamacare repeal debate.

In AP reports, conservative nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), progressive or liberal NGOs, and expert voices each made up about 4 percent of total sources, compared to 1.2 percent, 1.5 percent, and just 0.5 percent, respectively, on the network news. Newspapers' lesser reliance on official sources may in part be a function of greater textual space. This space perhaps allowed socially responsible and civic-minded print reporters to include some credible nongovernmental sources after the commercially driven, institutionally obligatory presentation of Republican and Democratic elites. Moreover, TV journalists—particularly on the network news, and especially during an age when these outlets attracted immense attention—may view their primary job as presenting the major headlines of the day. Thus, perhaps television focused more closely

on the most dramatic and apparently newsworthy actions by key elite players, avoiding detailed policy analysis and elaboration, where nongovernmental sources may be seen as more relevant.

Still, elite dominance in news sourcing was strong both on TV and in print, and nongovernmental groups and social movement organizations of any ideological stripe received very little attention in coverage of the 1981 economic plan: these voices made up just 6.5 percent of total sources, taking network television and AP reports together. And several of the most frequently quoted NGOs—such as the National Conservative PAC and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce—are best defined as elite-oriented, business-dominated organizations that were themselves integral parts of the neoliberal-New Right political project. My evidence here confirms and expands on the results of similar studies showing the marginalization in mass media coverage of nongovernmental groups, especially those outside a small proportion of well-funded lobbies: using a research design that probably overstates the frequency of non-official voices, Danielian and Page (1994) find that sources from nongovernmental groups comprised just 14.4 percent of the total in network TV coverage of 80 separate foreign and domestic policy issues from 1969 through 1982 (at 36.5 percent, business organizations made up the largest proportion of this set).[16]

Secondary analysis of the total population of approximately 750 AP reports on the Reagan economic plan circulated up to its August 1981 enactment also reveals just nine references to demonstrations or protests—all brief, largely nonsubstantive, and generally negatively inflected. For instance, in a July 7, 1981, story on the president's speech at a GOP fundraising event, headlined "Reagan Turns Up Heat on Tax Cut," the presence of some 5,000 protesters outside the hall was noted in the 12th paragraph. Readers learned in the next paragraph that police arrested some activists inside the venue for "creating a disturbance." The only substantive information on the protesters' positions came in the 14th paragraph of the 991-word story, where they were paraphrased as claiming that the administration's budget reductions "will hurt working people, the handicapped, students and the poor." The story included no quotes from activists, and the remainder of the piece was dominated by Reagan's comments to Republican partisans. And in a July 30, 1981, AP report headlined "Tax, Budget Victories Provide 'Economic Plan for the Future,' Reagan Says," just 6 of 24 paragraphs were devoted to protests outside the president's speaking engagement. One of these paragraphs concerned potential security concerns; just one quote from activists appeared in the story.

Television news, despite its attraction to compelling visuals, similarly marginalized even those left-leaning nongovernmental critics who mounted dramatic actions against the neoliberal-New Right Reagan agenda. Protests against the economic plan on Tax Day in 1981 merited two sentences at the end

of a piece on *ABC World News Tonight*. This story neither named the activists or group(s) they represented, nor reported why they opposed Reagan's plans so intensely that they attached themselves to a tour party and splattered blood on White House columns. "The blood was quickly removed, and the demonstrators quickly arrested," the ABC correspondent deadpanned at the close of the report.

People who read newspapers whose editors chose to carry a 235-word AP wire story on that year's Tax Day learned that these protesters—again anonymous—had carried the blood in baby bottles (presumably to underscore the impact of the economic plan on infants, although the report included no quotes from activists or their representatives and no mention of their substantive positions or organizational affiliations). Such readers also learned that, according to Deputy White House Press Secretary Larry Speakes, they were "not regarded as threats." In addition to the bottles, protesters threw federal tax forms at the pillars, and then "got down on their knees and started singing," according to a National Park Service employee working the grounds that day. The AP ended its dispatch with: "It was not known if President Reagan, recuperating upstairs in the White House living quarters, was aware of the protest." As Wittebols (1996, 358) observes, in the U.S. mainstream media, social activism is almost always depicted as a "sideshow" embedded within a larger elite-centered narrative: "A focus on the quirky or odd nature of protest relegates it to amusement or ridicule. At best, protest scenes are usually the backdrop or 'props' for introducing a debate that reflects elite, as opposed to grass-roots, perspectives." This pattern was no clearer than during debate over the first major neoliberal domestic policy initiative in the United States.

If organized nongovernmental groups were marginalized during the debate over ERTA, then ordinary people were essentially invisible in mainstream news media: these voices made up just 0.3 percent of total sources. Moreover, *none* of the AP reports in my sample of more than 250 stories included a direct or indirect statement from an ordinary American. As a point of comparison, ordinary people made up 5 percent of total voices in network TV coverage of the pre-Iraq War debate (Hayes and Guardino 2013, 44). Importantly, the near absence of ordinary Americans commenting on the Reagan economic program in the news, combined with the very limited circulation of issue frames from nongovernmental groups, means that even unofficial *supporters* of this first neoliberal policy venture barely registered in broad public debate. This does not mean, however, that conservative think tanks and advocacy groups were uninfluential in shaping neoliberal-New Right policy discourse. Indeed, in 1981 the Heritage Foundation published a comprehensive blueprint for the Reagan presidency titled *Mandate for Leadership*. Heritage and like-minded think tanks had spent years building a fertile intellectual and ideological environment for the rise of Reagan and other candidates who were to pursue the neoliberal-New Right agenda in office. Given

the institutional tendencies of the U.S. media system, such nongovernmental influences are more likely to register over longer periods of time and largely behind the scenes, rather than through direct, explicit inclusion in news coverage of policy debates. Still, if political momentum for the Reagan economic program welled up from a vibrant popular groundswell of ordinary workers, small business owners, and grassroots antitax activists working outside the government (Prasad 2012; Quirk and Hinchliffe 1998), these constituencies were eerily silent in the media that the majority of Americans paid attention to in 1981.

A basic deference to prominent major-party political elites to set the terms of policy debate has long been a core feature of U.S. news coverage (Gans 2004). Certain journalistic norms that were more active before the neoliberal media era took hold encourage substantive coverage of important public matters that may reach outside official circles. But other values and routines reflect and promote assumptions that the prevailing political-economic system functions smoothly, despite occasional scandals and breakdowns that are publicized when media outlets play their watchdog role (Bennett 1993). As Lewis (2001, 201) observes, "Reporters are caught up in a set of professional ideologies that make it difficult to go beyond the confines of elite political frameworks and a set of broader ideologies that make it difficult to question the notion of representative democracy." These mainstream journalistic norms, routines, and ideologies are constituted through a corporate-controlled media system whose primary driving force is commercial. Such taken-for-granted assumptions are even more likely to affect news coverage when prominent elites such as Reagan and leaders of the neoliberal-New Right "Reagan Revolution" Congress are perceived (or misperceived) to have been elected under broad public mandates, especially when those mandates center on the audience segments most attractive to major advertisers (Meehan 2005). Implicitly or explicitly, news outlets likely viewed the 1980 election as a popular move to the right that would be reflected in audience demand.

Indeed, the sourcing patterns in this policy debate constitute a key mechanism through which media refraction narrowed the range of news content in the early stages of neoliberalism. Reagan's persona as a new kind of political celebrity made frequent coverage of what the former Hollywood actor did and said during debate over his signature domestic policy initiative compelling commercial fodder for newspaper circulation and TV ratings. Of course, in the modern era the president has always carried something of a celebrity aura, in no small measure due to the imperatives of the television-dominated media complex. In part because of the de facto subsidy provided by the government public relations apparatus (Cook 2005), news driven by such high-profile elite sources is generally simple and inexpensive to collect and produce. This kind of news also holds strong visual appeal. The early 1980s political context, combined with Reagan's

apparent personal traits, reinforced these media tendencies during the debate over his economic policy. At the same time, Reagan's early personal and job approval ratings likely encouraged news outlets to identify him as an especially compelling presidential voice for commercially lucrative newspaper readers and TV viewers. As discussed later in this chapter, these dynamics had important implications for the extent to which the ideological issue frames attached to Reagan (and those attributed to his opponents) were likely to shape public opinion on the economic plan.

Ideological Issue Framing

Given the large number of news stories on the Reagan economic plan focused on elite political strategy or tactics and internal governmental procedure, it is not surprising that nearly half the issue frames circulated by the media did not carry explicit ideological inflections related to the substance of the policy debate. However, of frames that did present ideological claims dealing with the merits of the policy—i.e., those issue frames that tended to support or oppose the administration's neoliberal plan on principled grounds—nearly 70 percent were right-leaning. Figure 3.3 depicts these findings.[17] This is only a slightly greater percentage than appeared in mainstream news outlets during the 1995–1996 debate over neoliberal welfare reform, when the presence of a Democratic president might be expected to push issue framing well to the left (see Chapter 4).[18]

Figure 3.4 shows that the most frequent specific ideological issue frame circulated in news coverage of the Reagan economic plan comprised criticisms

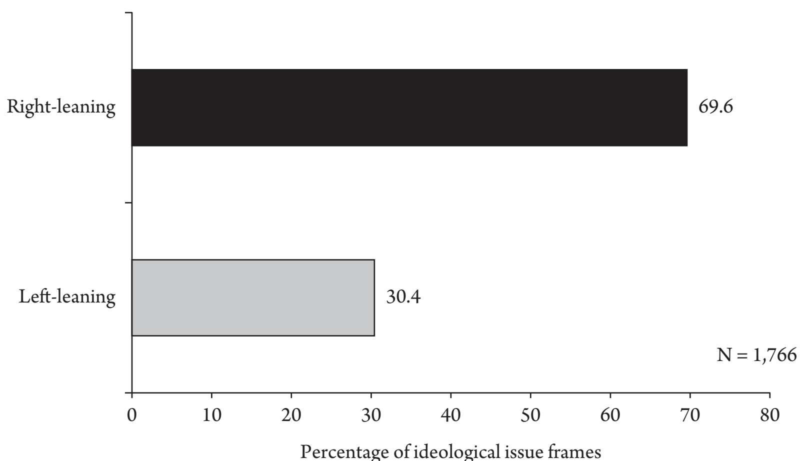

Figure 3.3 Reagan Economic Plan News Coverage: Issue Frames by Ideological Tendency

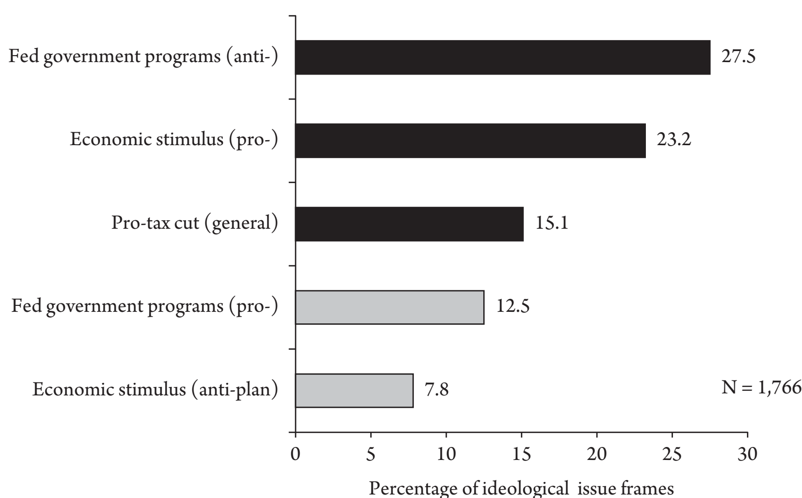

Figure 3.4 Reagan Economic Plan News Coverage: Specific Ideological Issue Frames

of federal social welfare or business regulatory programs. These messages made up 27.5 percent of the total.[19] This anti-federal government frame—a major element of news coverage in every neoliberal policy debate analyzed in this book—was followed closely by statements claiming that the administration's tax initiative would boost the national economy (23.2 percent). Messages that generally advocated tax cuts (or the Reagan plan in particular) without stating or implying reasons for this position made up the third largest category. Thus, the most common specific issue frames in network TV and AP coverage of the 1981 debate were right-leaning messages that favored neoliberal economic policy.

Statements claiming or implying that the Reagan tax plan (or similarly designed initiatives) would stimulate the economy outpaced those that questioned or criticized this idea nearly threefold. Messages that explicitly or implicitly opposed or criticized social or economic regulatory policy appeared more than twice as frequently as those that supported these programs. While media coverage of this policy episode was not monolithic, pro-neoliberal messages significantly outnumbered critical or oppositional issue frames, both in general tendency and when examining pairs of specific ideologically opposed frames. When such a large proportion of ideological discourse in the major media shades in one direction, people are less likely to express contrary policy preferences rooted in alternative considerations (Zaller 1992) that may more closely reflect their underlying values or material interests.

Corporate media marginalization of frames criticizing the Reagan economic plan for delivering most of its benefits to upper-middle-class and wealthy Americans was conspicuous, especially given the prevalence of this critique

among Democratic members of Congress and nongovernmental voices. Many statements coded in the pro-federal government category explicitly or implicitly critiqued the Reagan policy along these lines (e.g., suggesting that the massive tax reductions would lead to cuts in important programs that help low-income and working-class families). But Figure 3.4 shows that this category amounted to less than 13 percent of the total. Just 6.3 percent of total ideological issue frames comprised messages that directly criticized the tax plan for biasing its immediate financial benefits toward the top of the income and wealth distribution.[20] Thus, even under the most generous interpretation, fewer than one out of five specific ideological messages circulated by mainstream media during debate over the 1981 Reagan economic plan focused on its upward class tilt. This finding accords with the fact that just 13.6 percent of all news stories (and only 10.2 percent of TV reports) focused primarily on the class implications of this neoliberal policy proposal (see Figure 3.1). Minimization of class issues is consistent with media refraction dynamics surrounding elite and non-elite sourcing patterns, as well as commercial news outlets' perceptions of demand among white, middle-class audiences that were presumed to have turned in an economically individualist direction in the early 1980s.

Despite its somewhat greater reliance on Reagan administration sources, television news coverage was less tilted toward right-leaning ideological issue frames than was print coverage: 54.6 of issue frames on TV were right-leaning, compared to 74.3 percent in AP reports. This difference may reflect a stronger commitment to the professional journalistic norm of balance in TV news coverage, particularly a greater degree of "internal pluralism" (Hallin and Mancini 2004), in which individual news stories each display a more ideologically even-handed selection of messages. Overall, however, the issue framing patterns that characterized both newspaper and television coverage of the Reagan economic plan are consistent with a key media refraction process: the ideological narrowing of policy ideas according to political debate among certain easy-to-report mainstream governing elites, based on the commercial drive to hold valuable audiences.

Informational Content

Recall from Chapter 2 that the psychologically grounded model that best explains how the news media can shape public policy opinion identifies ideological issue framing as the key mechanism of influence (Chong and Druckman 2007a; Zaller 1992). Most of my media analyses in this book, as well as the experiment in Chapter 5 that demonstrates effects on policy attitudes, are based on this mechanism. However, other research has shown that raw information

(or misinformation) can also affect people's attitudes about policy issues (Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006; Kuklinksi et al. 2000). Even if issue framing in news coverage of the 1981 Reagan economic plan was heavily shaded in favor of neoliberal-New Right perspectives, perhaps major media outlets offered their audiences ample coverage of key items of concrete factual information that could illuminate the design, and, therefore, the probable impacts of the plan? Such information, if circulated widely and frequently, might offer a basis on which many people could express opinions in opposition to this neoliberal policy. Estimating how much concrete information news outlets circulated provides a richer context for the poll results on the economic plan I discuss at the end of this chapter. Such an analysis is also important for assessing how the structural and institutional contours of the commercial media system may refract the news that is made broadly available to the public during important policy debates.

My content analysis illustrates that news media rarely offered certain key items of basic, factual information related to the substance of the Reagan economic plan. I coded for inclusion of three categories of information: (1) the percentages of direct financial benefits in the administration tax plan (or in similar legislative initiatives) that would go to various income groups, (2) any numerical information on the business tax breaks included in the Reagan (or similar) plans (e.g., the total dollar value of such benefits or the percentage of the tax bill devoted to them), and (3) any numerical information on the relative share of income that payroll (i.e., Medicare and Social Security) taxes versus federal income taxes take up for families or individuals at various income levels. These were not the only important (or perhaps even the most important) facts connected to this policy episode. However, they were crucial and clearly relevant items of information in the larger historical and policy context of the neoliberal Reaganite agenda. These facts were especially salient in light of claims that the Reagan plan responded to grassroots democratic demands for lower taxes that would benefit broad segments of the American public.

Just 7 percent of total television and AP stories reported any numerical information on the business tax cuts contained in ERTA. Such information could have helped ordinary Americans evaluate the distributive fairness of direct tax benefits in the legislation, such as between businesses and individuals in general, businesses in various categories (e.g., smaller, labor-intensive businesses versus larger, capital-intensive corporations), or businesses (overall or in specific categories) versus individuals in different income categories. This information was the most commonly reported among the three categories. But mainstream media still circulated facts about business tax provisions just once every 14 news stories over the approximately seven-and-a-half-month period of analysis.

Information on the direct financial implications of the Reagan tax plan for those in various income brackets was even more sparsely reported: just

4.3 percent of TV and print news reports (or about 1 of every 23 stories) provided information on the relative direct benefits of the plan for people at different income levels. Moreover, just 10 times did journalists offer unattributed statements (i.e., statements not attached to particular political actors) about the plan's class implications, in a total of more than 400 broadcast TV and print stories. Overall, news audiences were rarely offered information on the direct material impacts of the Reagan plan on different segments of the population.

Perhaps as importantly, information that compared payroll taxes to income taxes in terms of their relative impacts on different class or income strata appeared in the news just three times during the policy debate (twice on network TV and once in the AP sample). Unlike income taxes, payroll taxes are highly regressive—i.e., they soak up a much larger proportion of disposable income from lower-income people than they do from higher-income people, and most people pay more in Medicare and Social Security taxes than they do in federal income taxes.[21] Neither Reagan's original tax proposal nor any major alternative circulated in Congress lowered the payroll tax rate, or otherwise reduced the amount of these taxes workers would owe. In fact, on a parallel policy track the Reagan administration at this time floated ideas for neoliberal reforms to save the Social Security system from ostensible insolvency. These ideas included increasing the payroll tax rate while leaving in place the Social Security deductions earnings cap, and reducing scheduled payouts by dramatically cutting early retirement benefits and eliminating the minimum grant.

Discussion of these dimensions of the policy debate—which complicate and contradict Reagan supporters' promises of broad-based tax benefits for ordinary Americans—was nearly absent in mainstream media coverage of the 1981 plan. This was despite frequent critiques by Democrats on the floor of Congress that connected ERTA with the issue of Social Security taxes.[22] Altogether, the fact that just 6.3 percent of ideological issue frames in the news criticized the tax plan's direct financial tilt toward upper-income people, the very limited circulation of concrete information on financial benefits by income group, and the media's near total failure to contextualize ERTA with reference to the Reagan administration's regressive Social Security plan, make it clear that news coverage offered Americans little chance to evaluate whether the White House's neoliberal tax policy served their material interests.

Such specific policy information in the mass media is unlikely to cause substantial shifts in public opinion by itself. However, the frequent inclusion of this information would have placed a more concrete and critical cast on neoliberal policy than was the case in a news environment dominated by abstract attacks on the welfare state and "big government," and generalized contentions that a supply-side tax plan would deliver broad-based benefits across income groups and sectors of society. If the media had consistently circulated facts about the

class implications of Reaganite tax policy, this information might have partially counteracted the influence of ideologically narrow issue framing by activating otherwise dormant left-leaning mental considerations (Zaller and Feldman 1992). That may have led many people to express opposition to the policy in public opinion polls.

Again, these empirical patterns are consistent with media refraction dynamics. Corporate news editors and producers tend to perceive little public demand for policy information, which is thought to be too complex for mass appreciation and too dry to attract audiences favored by advertisers. Moreover, content that lends itself to cognitively demanding engagement is not likely to encourage the consumer mindsets required by an advertising-based media system (Sparrow 1999). This is the case despite the fact that basic information about changes in income and payroll tax rates and their relative distribution might plausibly be considered "newsworthy," in the sense that this information would be useful to the core audiences central to the business model of commercial news media. Such policy information was easily available to media outlets during the ERTA debate: both nonpartisan government sources (such as the Congressional Research Service) and nongovernmental interest groups and policy organizations produced analyses that could have provided material for more informative news stories.

Most broadly, media favorability toward the neoliberal 1981 Reagan economic plan is confirmed by analyses of the "directional thrust" of news stories. Directional thrust is a global indicator measured at the story level that accounts for distribution of ideological issue frames, inclusion or exclusion of relevant factual information, and a multidimensional evaluation of journalistic tone (see Appendix A). Figure 3.5 depicts findings on this measure over the nearly

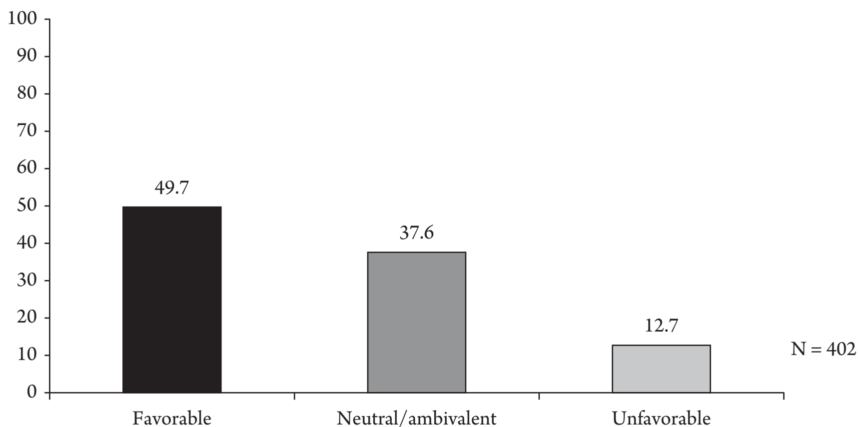

Figure 3.5 Reagan Economic Plan News Coverage: Policy Favorability by Story

eight-month period of analysis. (For ease of presentation in this graph, I combine the "very favorable" and "somewhat favorable," and the "very unfavorable" and "somewhat unfavorable" categories, respectively.)[23] While nearly half the stories were coded as "neutral" (containing no discernible ideological slant) or "ambivalent" (mixed or unclear in their ideological implications), reports that were favorable toward the neoliberal Reagan economic plan outpaced those unfavorable to the plan by a nearly three to one ratio. The mean level of favorability for all stories was 2.56 (about halfway between "neutral" [3] and "somewhat favorable" [2]). Based on a recoded four-point scale (1 = "very favorable" through 4 = "very unfavorable"), the mean for only stories that shaded left or right (N = 250) was 2.29.

Combining the directional thrust analysis with the analysis of story topics (see Figure 3.1) sheds additional light on the ideological character of news coverage in this case. While most stories that focused on political strategy and tactics or internal governmental process were neutral or ambivalent, a significant proportion were coded as "somewhat favorable" because they painted the Reagan plan (or neoliberal tax/economic policy more broadly) in a generally positive light. Included in this category, for example, are stories featuring positive portrayals of the president's leadership skills, and those that emphasized apparent public support for the president's plan or for neoliberal economic policy generally (sometimes backed by reporting of public opinion poll results). This heavy focus on political strategy, political tactics, and governmental process in the news (a pattern that was magnified on TV) deprived Americans of opportunities to consider the substantive merits of neoliberal tax policy in 1981. Given the commercial tendencies of corporate media in the political context of Reagan's rise to power, it also constituted a mechanism through which favorable public impressions of ERTA may have been indirectly encouraged.

Conclusion

In sum, hard news coverage of the 1981 Reagan economic plan was considerably more plentiful than it would become during later debates over neoliberal policy proposals in media environments which themselves would increasingly come under the institutional pressures of neoliberalism. However, coverage of the Reagan plan was heavily focused on political strategy or tactics and matters of governmental process, largely devoid of concrete information about the policy, and dominated by elite sources—especially Reagan administration voices. These patterns were especially evident on network television news, which was the primary forum for public policy discourse that might directly reach the broad American public in the early 1980s. Most importantly, my analysis shows

that television and AP coverage alike was clearly shaded in favor of neoliberal-New Right ideological perspectives on economic policy.

But were these patterns of news coverage reflective of a broader political ecosystem that decidedly supported neoliberal economic perspectives, and the Reagan plan in particular? If the vast majority of reasonably credible political actors outside and inside government favored such right-leaning ideas, then we might interpret this coverage as little more than a mirror of political discussion and debate "in the wild" (i.e., outside the newsroom). In that case, we might judge news outlets to be operating at peak democratic performance: while some selection of voices and viewpoints is inevitable, we might say that the media engaged in this selection in ways that merely reproduced the parameters of broader public debate and discussion. Such results would seem to be consistent with basic versions of indexing theory (Bennett 1990).

Moreover, if news outlets were, at the least, accurately mirroring debate inside the national government (i.e., relaying to audiences the ideological distribution of policy perspectives among their elected officials), then we could say they were meeting the standards of the "representative liberal" model of the public sphere (Feree et al. 2002, ch. 6). While these standards may not be democratically ambitious, one could make a case that such a media environment is adequate for helping people form opinions on specific policy issues that, collectively, can add up to legitimate signals of popular support (or opposition). How frequently, then, did members of Congress publicly criticize ERTA? Did NGOs mobilize against this plan or similar neoliberal economic policies that reached the national agenda in the late 1970s and early 1980s? I tackle these questions next.

Crossed Signals: Media Refraction in News Coverage of Neoliberal Tax Policy

My theory of media refraction suggests that structural and institutional tendencies in the media exert systematic, politically significant pressures on the quantity and quality of news coverage during public policy debates. These processes encourage journalists to focus on certain dimensions of issues and marginalize others, consistently circulate messages from certain kinds of political actors and rarely present the views of other kinds, and propagate some ideological interpretations more frequently and prominently than others. The institutional imperatives of media refraction derive from the ways in which professional codes consistent with corporate media structures and commercial operations interact with the dynamics of political power in different historical contexts. During the neoliberal era, I argue, the reinforcement of profit-making imperatives has

encouraged major news outlets to privilege right-leaning perspectives in their coverage of economic and social welfare policy issues. Consistent with this interpretation, media outlets severely marginalized left-leaning criticism of the 1981 Reagan economic plan from outside the corridors of government power, and de-emphasized criticism emanating from Congress. This marginalization of left-leaning elite dissent would become somewhat stronger as neoliberalism increasingly came to reorient the structures, institutions, and practices of the U.S. media system (see Chapter 4).

In this section, I sketch opposition to the neoliberal Reaganite agenda from several actors outside and inside the government. I also compare criticism of the 1981 plan in venues outside the mainstream media, on the one hand, to coverage of the issue in leading news outlets, on the other. Because these analyses identify key arguments and ideas that conceivably *could have* made the news, they provide important evidence to support the theory of media refraction. I begin with the nongovernmental perspectives on neoliberal economic policy that were nearly shut out of major TV and print news coverage, then focus on congressional rhetoric in key weeks of legislative debate on ERTA. Examining congressional discourse is especially important, because leading theories of news coverage (Bennett 1990, 1996) suggest that the level of dissensus or consensus publicly expressed by governmental elites tends to be accurately transmitted through the media. While I cannot provide a full accounting of tax policy views from outside or inside government at the dawn of neoliberalism in the United States, it is clear that left-leaning issue frames were consistently voiced by interest groups, research organizations, and national elected representatives, including some of the moderate Republicans who still made up a significant faction in Congress at the time. Media outlets working within corporate and commercial parameters, however, underreported this opposition to neoliberal policy, even as professional and regulatory constraints on profit-driven news operated to somewhat mitigate refraction compared to later economic and social welfare debates.

Left-Leaning Nongovernmental Discourse

Mainstream commercial news media's extreme deference to political elites during debate over the 1981 economic plan is clear. Just 12 percent of total sources came from outside the government. A mere 6.5 percent of issue frames was attributed to sources (progressive interest groups or social movement organizations, experts from research organizations or academic institutions, and ordinary citizens) that might plausibly have opposed the neoliberal-New Right policy agenda. Television news was particularly averse to unofficial voices. Just 5 percent of sources on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news programs were

from NGOs or interest groups of any kind. Moreover, despite TV's commercially and technically determined penchant for exciting visuals, these programs offered virtually no coverage of social protests against the Reagan economic agenda. In fact, not a single TV story out of 145 segments aired over seven and a half months of policy debate included footage of protesters.[24] Nongovernmental criticism of the Reagan plan found it hard to squeeze through the AP news gates, and nearly impossible to get a hearing in the public forum—broadcast TV—from which the largest percentage of ordinary Americans received their news.

Opposition to neoliberal-New Right economic policy was not difficult to find in the broader public sphere, however. While the mass media virtually ignored them, labor unions, grassroots progressive activist organizations, and left-of-center policy experts and academics offered frequent criticisms of Reaganite policies and similar neoliberal approaches as these ideas began to gain traction among political elites in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In an interview about his recently published memoir, economist John Kenneth Galbraith derided neoliberal supply-side doctrine as socially dangerous "pop economics" (Associated Press 1981). Massachusetts Institute of Technology economist Lester C. Thurow claimed that the Reagan administration's agenda was "designed to produce an American society with a more unequal distribution of income and wealth" (Ullmann 1981). Among prominent interest groups, Americans for Democratic Action was a frequent critic of the Reagan program, penning a letter to the *Washington Post* in February 1981 decrying the administration's "regressive tax cuts" as part of an upward redistribution of wealth (Mink 1981).

By most accounts, left-leaning think tanks and research organizations concerned with economic and social welfare policy in the late 1970s and early 1980s were much weaker than their neoliberal adversaries in material resources and elite political influence. However, these organizations (some newly formed to oppose the neoliberal turn and others founded in the early 1970s amid a brief resurgence of left-leaning institutional activism) had already begun to push back against the neoliberal-New Right tax policy agenda.[25] The Tax Reform Research Group offered an alternative to ERTA that would target tax reductions at low- and middle-income people, close corporate loopholes, and scale back or eliminate many benefits for businesses and the affluent (Jacobsen 1981). Founded in 1979, Citizens for Tax Justice (CTJ) frequently criticized the early Reaganite agenda's favoritism toward upper-income and corporate interests, and its neglect of working-class and middle-income Americans. CTJ director Robert S. McIntyre blasted the Reagan policy as a form of corporate welfare that would lower many businesses' taxes well below their statutory tax liability (Pine 1981). In an August 1981 report, CTJ elaborated its criticism of ERTA's business cuts, which the organization projected would gut state and local revenues driven by federally linked tax schedules (*Washington Post* 1981). Neither the Tax Reform

Research Group nor CTJ was mentioned on evening network news during the debate over the Reagan plan.

American labor unions were well into their steady decline in membership and political influence by the time Reagan took office. This decline would accelerate with the president's decision to fire striking federal air traffic controllers the year he signed ERTA, which kicked off a string of administration antilabor policies and practices (Davis 2007). Still, major unions did organize and mobilize against the neoliberal turn. For instance, the AFL-CIO joined with other progressive organizations to plan a series of protests against the Reagan policy agenda in 1981. Addressing the House Budget Committee in March 1981, AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland decried the "facade of equity" that hid the deep class unfairness of the Reagan tax plan. "We believe the administration's proposal is too generous in supporting the wealthy and the powerful," Kirkland said (Espo 1981). Later that year as Congress ramped up debate over ERTA, the labor leader likened Reagan's tax and budget program to the pre-New Deal laissez faire regime of the early 20th century, predicting it would create "social disaster" unless there was grassroots mobilization against the "right wing economic fakers" advocating these policies (Haney 1981).

Speaking as co-chair of a group called the Full Employment Action Council, Coretta Scott King, widow of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., suggested that the ascendance of the neoliberal New Right may necessitate "massive demonstrations" akin to those during the Civil Rights Movement (Ullmann 1981). Although such large-scale social protest did not materialize, there is clear evidence of significant nongovernmental opposition to the Reagan economic agenda at its emergence. As the Reverend Joseph Lowery, national president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said during a protest against the Reagan tax and budget cuts, "We have to let the administration and the nation know there's growing discontent among the people. We must let them know that just because the Democrats in Congress have capitulated, that doesn't mean the people in this country have capitulated. We refuse to sell out to jelly beans and cuff links" (Hunt 1981).

In fact, strong and coherent left-leaning criticism of neoliberal policy was voiced in conventional institutional venues more than two years before Congress passed the economic plan. On April 25, 1979, a public debate was held between scholar-activist Michael Harrington and GOP Representative Jack Kemp, cosponsor of the Kemp-Roth supply-side tax bill (Institute for Democratic Socialism 1979). While the event was sponsored by the New York Local of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee and the Institute for Democratic Socialism, it was moderated by Leonard Silk, the well-known economist and *New York Times* columnist who had previously written for years for the solidly mainstream *Businessweek*.[26] Harrington continued to speak and write in opposition

to Reaganism throughout the 1980s. His arguments in the 1979 forum with Kemp called for hiking upper-income and corporate taxes and expanding public jobs programs. However, not once did issue frames advocating either of these positions appear on network TV or in my large random sample of AP reports during the deliberations over ERTA in 1981. Mainstream, mass-market media outlets might conceivably have seen Silk's and Kemp's participation in an organized debate as signals that Harrington's left-leaning views fell within the "sphere of legitimate controversy" (Hallin 1994). Indeed, during this period the *Times* was virtually mandatory daily reading for mainstream journalists covering national political and public policy-related news. But the Harrington-Kemp debate went unmentioned on network TV when it occurred in 1979.

In sum, the mainstream media's neglect of nongovernmental voices and views critical of the Reagan program cannot be attributed to the silence of such voices or the absence of such views in the wider world beyond the newsroom. But even if news outlets largely ignored criticism of neoliberal economic policy from public intellectuals, interest groups, research organizations, labor unions, and social movement organizations, did they accurately reflect the proportions and parameters of ideological debate within the halls of government itself?

Congressional Opposition to the Reagan Tax Agenda

By most accounts, the national Democratic Party establishment was shocked and shaken by the 1980 election (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Wilentz 2008). Not only did Reagan, a candidate who on most issues was well to the right of the Republican Party's post–World War II center—and who was widely derided in Democratic circles as uniquely unserious and unqualified—win the nation's highest office in an Electoral College landslide, but the GOP also gained 12 seats in the Senate, taking control of a chamber of Congress for the first time since 1954, and picked up 35 seats in the House of Representatives, long a Democratic bastion. Given the substantial number of conservative southern Democrats in the House, these results gave the Reagan administration a solid ideological majority for most of its early economic and social welfare policy agenda.

Still, more than half the congressional membership (taking the House and Senate together) was comprised of Democrats. A large majority of Democratic senators and more than half of House Democrats ultimately voted for ERTA. However, leaders and rank-and-file legislators in both chambers—derisively labeled by White House budget director Stockman as "the liberal remnant" (Greider 1982, 13)—frequently criticized the plan from the left, even if their proposed alternatives were mild revisions of Reaganite policies that did not go nearly as far in rejecting neoliberal ideas as many nongovernmental groups demanded.[27]

Gauged according to the proportion of right- and left-leaning issue frames in the media, this elite opposition to ERTA was reflected fairly accurately in mainstream news coverage. However, the rare inclusion of Democratic Party voices suggests both that news outlets underreported congressional dissent when compared to the overall partisan breakdown in the national government, and that this opposition discourse was severely disadvantaged in shaping public opinion on the Reagan policy. Marginalization of left-leaning congressional discourse during the debate over the 1981 economic plan was not quite as strong as it would be during the mid-1990s debate over neoliberal welfare reform. Still, the disconnect between political elite discourse in formal representative institutions and political elite discourse in the media was statistically and substantively significant. This marginalization of official opposition to neoliberalism is consistent with commercially driven corporate media refraction.

As expected, the great majority (95.5 percent) of ideological issue frames attributed to Reagan administration officials in mainstream news was favorable to the president's neoliberal economic plan. This likely closely reflects the ideological tenor of administration public discourse in nonmedia forums, such as speeches, news conferences, and press releases. Therefore, mainstream media in the early 1980s promoted neoliberal approaches to economic and social welfare policy by accurately (and frequently) disseminating messages produced by a presidential administration that itself carried the banner of neoliberalism. Such coverage dynamics reflect the corporate media system's deference toward a presumably popular president elected with an apparent democratic mandate concentrated in core consumer demographics. These patterns of elite deference shaped by media refraction also help to explain news outlets' heavy marginalization of class-inflected opposition to the Reagan policy: with the media so attentive to messages from the administration and its congressional allies, little space or airtime remained for criticisms of the plan's bias in favor of upper-income people and large corporations.

As Figure 3.2 shows, Democratic elites made up just 23.4 percent of total voices in mainstream news. This is almost exactly half the share of discourse attributed to Reagan administration voices. Total Republican sources outnumbered total Democratic sources in media coverage of the policy by a ratio of more than 2.5 to 1. GOP officials appeared in the news at a rate well out of proportion to their representation in government, even considering the expectation that the president's power, authority, and political stature would draw a larger coverage share than is likely for even the most high-profile congressional leaders. Moreover, not all Democrats cited in the news expressed criticism of the president's neoliberal economic agenda. "Boll weevils"—conservative Southern Democrats who backed key elements of Reagan's philosophy, and

often called for deeper cuts in domestic social programs than the administration proposed—made up a substantial share of the Democratic caucus, especially in the House. Consequently, the percentage of Democratic elite voices in news coverage overstates the media's reflection of left-leaning ideological discourse in Congress, since a significant number of those voices actually propagated right-leaning issue frames.

In order to more systematically compare non-Reagan administration elite discourse on the 1981 economic plan to patterns of ideological issue framing among comparable voices in the news, I analyzed every statement related to the plan made in each house of Congress during the two-week periods leading up to each major floor vote on the legislation during the summer of 1981. I coded a total of 1,104 individual statements as favorable toward the neoliberal Reagan program (2), neutral/ambivalent (1), or opposed (0).[28]

Congressional rhetoric was significantly polarized by party: In the House, Democratic statements that communicated a clear pro-con position ran 91.4 percent against the Reagan economic plan, while GOP statements were 93.2 percent in favor. In the Senate, Democratic statements were 90.7 percent opposed, while Republican discourse was 76.2 percent in favor. The greater opposition to the Reagan plan among GOP senators compared to their co-partisans in the House was due primarily to a group of moderate Northeastern and Midwestern Republicans. These senators expressed skepticism about key aspects of supply-side economics and were particularly critical of large tax cuts on investment income. Still, more than three out of four statements by Republican senators supported the regressive Reagan economic plan. In any case, this moderate GOP faction would dwindle significantly leading up to the neoliberal welfare reform debate of the mid-1990s, and had virtually disappeared by the Obama presidency.

Ways and Means Committee Chairman Rostenkowski led all House Democrats with 13 floor statements in the weeks leading up to the key chamber and conference committee-version votes on ERTA in the summer of 1981. Kemp led Republicans (eight statements), followed closely by fellow New Yorker Benjamin Conable and Jack Fields of Texas (seven statements each). As previously noted, Kemp sponsored an earlier version of the neoliberal supply-side tax plan. Conable was the principle House sponsor of the bill that became ERTA.[29] Left-liberal stalwart Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, who had challenged Jimmy Carter for the Democratic presidential nomination a year earlier, led his party with 11 statements on the Senate floor. Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole of Kansas led Republican speakers in that chamber with 36 statements.

If we take non-Reagan administration discourse in the media as the comparison category and examine proportions of favorable and unfavorable policy

messages, news coverage of the 1981 tax plan was marginally more right-leaning than congressional discourse. Figure 3.6 shows the ideological breakdown of floor statements, as a percentage of total statements that were clearly right- or left-leaning. Because they cover a short time span of congressional discourse, these data should be interpreted cautiously. Analyses that include the previous six months of floor discussion (comprising many thousands of individual statements)—let alone discussions in Senate and House committee meetings—might yield results either more or less in favor of neoliberal perspectives.

Keeping those caveats in mind, I found that congressional rhetoric in the key weeks of legislative floor debate shaded in favor of neoliberal perspectives by eight percentage points. Ideological issue framing among non-administration voices in the news tracked this distribution of elite discourse fairly closely. As seen in Figure 3.7, 56.5 percent of policy messages attributed to these sources favored the Reagan economic plan.

I include issue frames attached to noncongressional, non-administration news voices in these data. While media outlets might roughly calibrate the ideological contours of coverage to the breakdown among members of Congress, they may seek out other voices (such as interest group officials or policy experts) as sources for these views. While many nongovernmental sources are generally aligned with the left or right side of the U.S. political spectrum (and, more loosely, with the Democratic or Republican parties), their location outside of government may constitute a base from which to introduce newer or more unfamiliar issue interpretations: on this view, a more democratic news environment during policy debates would include both a proportionate ideological breakdown of issue frames, and a greater richness and diversity of political actors. In fact, once

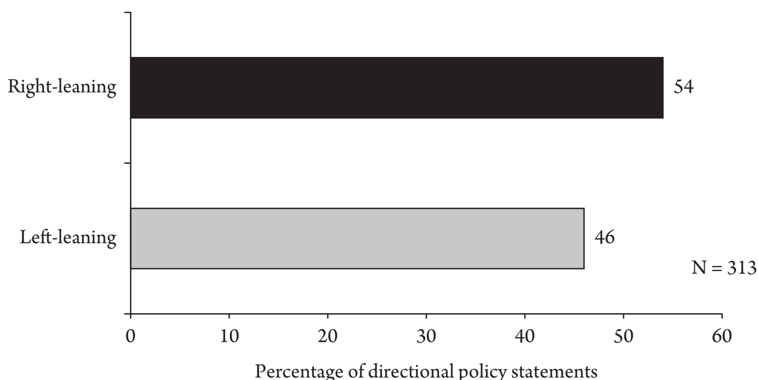

Figure 3.6 Directional Floor Statements on Reagan Economic Plan, U.S. Congress (Senate and House)

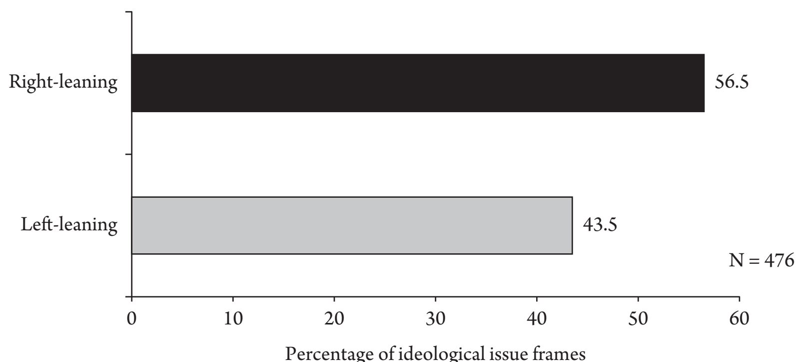

Figure 3.7 Reagan Economic Plan News Coverage: Non-Administration Issue Frames by Ideological Tendency

a robust left-right debate becomes clear among national elected officials, leading theories (Bennett 1990, 1996) predict that media outlets become more likely to seek out nongovernmental voices on each side of the issue, as institutionally sanctioned conflict provides a stamp of legitimacy to the policy controversy. This clearly did not happen, however, in the debate over the Reagan economic plan.

I put a finer point on these data by calculating the *legislative refraction differential*. This is the difference between the net ideological slant of congressional discourse and the net ideological slant of non-administration issue framing in the news. During debate over the 1981 tax plan, the legislative refraction differential was five points ($p < .05$).[30] While this difference is statistically significant, it is less than a quarter of the legislative refraction magnitude that emerged during debate over neoliberal welfare reform 15 years later.

Curiously, media refraction of congressional discourse appears to change direction when that rhetoric is compared to non-administration messages in the news specifically during the final weeks of legislative debate (taking the Senate and the House together, July 23 through August 4, 1981). In this brief period, mainstream news outlets seemed to amplify non-administration criticism of the Reagan plan, as left-leaning issue frames outpaced right-leaning frames 68.5 percent to 31.5 percent. This is a large reversal from the ideological distribution of non-administration messages in media coverage across the entire period of analysis. It is also a virtual mirror image of the breakdown in ideological issue framing among all sources in the media (see Figure 3.3).

However, even with this leftward inflection in non-administration issue framing in the media at the very end of the policy debate, overall news coverage in the final period was highly favorable to the neoliberal Reagan economic plan: 64.6 percent of all stories, and 88.9 percent of stories that were either right- or left-leaning, were favorable to the policy. This is a significantly higher level of policy favorability than in news coverage as a whole (see Figure 3.5).

These disjunctures are explained largely by the greater frequency of Reagan administration sources in the media during this later period, and the nearly perfect ideological homogeneity of their messages (almost 99 percent right-leaning). Administration voices also tended to be especially prominent in these later stories, appearing among the first four sources in a news report much more frequently than did critics of the Reagan agenda.

Moreover, the reportorial tone in many of the later stories favored the administration. These news reports in the final weeks often emphasized the inevitability of ERTA's passage. While they communicate no policy-related substance and carry no explicit ideological inflection, journalistic predictions that the economic plan was unstoppable—sometimes interspersed with unattributed, and often undocumented, assertions of Reagan's public support and "political momentum"—generate the appearance of popularly mandated power and success. News reports constructed on the policy assumption that income tax cuts necessarily stimulate the economy—with the key questions being how large they should be and for how long a duration—also subtly tilt the debate toward neoliberal-New Right perspectives. This favorable media treatment of President Reagan and the fundamentals of his agenda, particularly notable on the TV networks, was cultivated through the innovative image management and strategic communications techniques that preoccupied much of the White House staff at the time (Hertsgaard 1988; Kellner 1990, 135–139).

At the same time, it is important to recognize that many news stories published and broadcast during this final period of legislative debate on the 1981 tax plan were "moderately" (rather than "very") favorable. These reports typically included a substantial proportion of issue frames that were critical of neoliberal perspectives, along with a larger dose of Reagan administration messages. Such patterns suggest an imperative for journalists to seek some counterweight to administration messages, particularly during the most intense period of legislative debate, when conventional standards might define congressional voices as particularly newsworthy. A strong commitment to the norm of balance (understood through the lens of the two-party system) was a major component of the professional journalistic ideology that was dominant from about the late 1940s into the early 1980s. At a time when the U.S. corporate media system's commercial dimensions were somewhat more constrained by public service expectations and obligations, the drive to satisfy presumed consumer demand through favorable coverage of neoliberal policies trumpeted by a celebrity president may have been tempered by a civic commitment to provide diverse political perspectives to the public.

However, the profound official deference of news outlets during this era made it extremely difficult for nongovernmental critics of the Reagan agenda to receive a political platform to reach broader publics. These deficiencies were

only magnified by a context in which other communication channels were severely limited. Thus, despite marginal evidence for right-leaning media refraction as discourse made its way from the floor of Congress to newspaper pages and TV screens, news coverage set strong foundations for a climate of right-leaning public opinion on the 1981 economic plan. In fact, media inattention to non-elite voices was greater during this debate than it would be during the debate over neoliberal welfare reform. In this later episode, those who were most directly affected by the policy (and might be most motivated to express opposition) occupied a particularly powerless position in the American political economy and social structure. Conventional journalistic norms would seem to tag these low-income, disproportionately African-American single mothers—and those who opposed welfare reform in alliance with them—with low levels of source credibility. Still, nongovernmental sources comprised a somewhat larger share of coverage in that exceedingly unfavorable political context than during debate over the Reagan tax policy.

All told, patterns of news coverage on the 1981 tax plan are largely consistent with media refraction's tendency to privilege right-leaning messages on economic and social welfare policy issues. But these commercially driven influences appeared somewhat constrained by journalistic ethics of public service and social obligation that were more deeply ingrained in the corporate media structure than they would be 10 or 20 years later. In a proportional sense, mainstream news outlets depicted congressional opposition to the Reagan plan fairly accurately. However, this opposition was covered very infrequently, especially in light of the volume and nature of administration appearances in popular newspapers and on the airwaves. Moreover, nongovernmental criticism of this neoliberal economic policy was nearly shut out of the news altogether.

What influence might these patterns of coverage have had on public opinion toward the Reagan economic agenda? I explore the concrete effects of such news discourse on public attitudes more fully through the experiment reported in Chapter 5. But even if my study cannot yet establish causal relationships or empirically identify mechanisms of opinion influence, it is important to sketch the parameters of popular opinion on the Reagan plan as seen in major polls at the time. This would establish a level of plausibility for the media effects I posit during that key early neoliberal policy debate.

Media Coverage and Public Support for the Neoliberal-New Right Tax Agenda

Most contemporary polling results showed strong public backing for the 1981 Reagan economic agenda. Moreover, reported support for the tax portion of

the plan appeared to increase as the debate in Washington proceeded. A CBS News-*New York Times* poll conducted in late January 1981 showed that 24 percent of respondents wanted a "large income tax cut," 52 percent preferred a "smaller" cut, and just 16 percent wanted no cut at all. In the same survey, 58 percent reported a belief that the new president could "clean up the welfare system" (Clymer 1981a). An April 22–26 survey by the same organization indicated 37 percent approval for the Reagan tax plan, compared to just 11 percent disapproval, and 35 percent support for the administration's proposed cuts in domestic spending, compared to 14 percent opposition (Clymer 1981b). In an April 13–15, 1981, AP-NBC News survey, 58 percent of respondents said they favored the president's plan to "cut(ting) federal spending by $49 billion in the next year, reducing many programs," compared to 16 percent who opposed this idea. In the same poll, Reagan's plan to "cut(ting) federal income tax rates by 10 percent a year for each of the next three years" garnered 71 percent support against 15 percent opposition. And 79 percent said it was either "very" or "somewhat likely" that the tax and budget plan would boost the economy. These results were largely unchanged a little more than a month later: 56 percent expressed support for the Reagan budget cuts, compared to 18 percent opposed.[31] And 64 percent in this later poll signaled support for the administration's supply-side tax plan, compared to 22 percent who expressed opposition. Moreover, 69 percent of respondents to the May 1981 survey said federal income taxes were too high (compared to 25 percent who said they were "about right" and 1 percent who said they were too low). In the same poll, 29 percent said taxes on business were too high, compared to 24 percent who said they were "about right" and 20 percent who said such taxes were too low.

Mass opinion, however, does not form in a vacuum, and the public preferences expressed in polls do not come preformed to the arenas of political debate and policy decision. Public opinion emerges from complex processes that are deeply entwined with the power-laden dynamics of media communication. One set of results from a summer 1981 survey conducted by a Democratic polling firm is instructive here. Initially, this poll registered 53 percent approval for the Reagan tax proposal, compared to 37 percent opposition. But after respondents were informed of the upper-class skew of the plan's proximate financial benefits, support dropped to 21 percent, while opposition surged to 69 percent. In the words of a *Christian Science Monitor* article, " 'Support for Reagan's economic program is based largely on lack of public awareness of its contents, particularly its large tax cuts for the wealthy,' argues Democratic pollster Vic Fingerhut. 'As the public becomes more familiar with the specific cuts, support for Reagan's program is likely to drop, possibly precipitously' " (Cattani 1981). By the time this poll was fielded, however, mainstream media coverage had for months been shaded in favor of neoliberal-New Right perspectives—and it would continue to be so.

That coverage may well have forestalled any "precipitous" decline in reported popular support for the Reagan agenda.

Indeed, the prevailing media environment described in this chapter carries several significant implications for how ordinary Americans answered poll questions on the Reagan economic plan. First, a large majority of the general public is not intensely politically engaged or knowledgeable (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Consequently, for even elite (let alone non-elite) opposition and criticism to significantly affect the contours of public opinion requires news coverage of these messages to be both frequent and sustained. This was not the case during debate over the neoliberal 1981 economic plan. For example, on average, just 1.1 left-leaning issue frames per day appeared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news programs combined. And only about 50 TV and AP stories in my dataset (approximately 1.5 per week) shaded leftward, compared to around 200 (six per week) that privileged neoliberal-New Right sources and messages. Under these conditions, the consistent volume of messages necessary to undermine mass support for the Reagan plan in opinion polls was probably lacking.

Second, research suggests that when message volume is low, people with lower levels of basic political knowledge (a population which, importantly, is disproportionately comprised of lower-income and less-educated Americans) are less likely to be influenced by media discourse. This is both because they lack a foundation of relevant information and ideas that can facilitate the reception of specific messages they encounter, and because they are not exposed to the news as often as those with higher levels of political knowledge (Chong and Druckman 2007a; Zaller 1992). Under these circumstances, even highly resonant oppositional frames attached to credible voices are likely to have limited influence on public opinion if they only appear in major news venues on a handful of occasions over an eight-month policy debate. In this way, commercially driven media refraction can contribute to distorted patterns of opinion simply by diminishing the raw volume of left-leaning messages circulated in news coverage of policy debates.

So far, the evidence suggests that many people who expressed support for the neoliberal Reagan economic agenda in public opinion polls may not have done so if they had the opportunity to engage with a more ideologically diverse and informationally rich news environment. Structurally embedded institutional tendencies in the U.S. corporate media complex catalyzed the circulation of ideas that potentially encouraged a significant measure of popular support for the New Right's sweeping policy goals. Consequently, we should read polls suggesting democratic endorsement of the neoliberal domestic agenda at its inception with considerable skepticism.

Table 3.1 shows results from professional and academic surveys conducted during this politically crucial period. The bottom row reports mean levels of favorability and opposition to neoliberal tax policy in the 48 relevant survey questions asked of representative national samples by credible polling organizations during the 1981 debate. Several specific results selected from these data suggest linkages between news coverage and public attitudes on the Reagan economic plan. In fact, many of the issue frames that were most prevalent in mainstream media coverage of this policy are evoked in particular poll questions that garnered high levels of public support.

Foremost among such questions are those connected to the tax cut's purported effect on the national economy, which was a key rationale drawn from supply-side theory. These include poll questions on whether the plan would stimulate the economy (seen in the second row of Table 3.1) and would lead to higher wages and salaries (first row); whether taxes on nonsalary income, capital gains, and dividends should be reduced (third, sixth, and ninth rows of the table, respectively); general agreement with supply-side theory (seventh row); and support for various business tax cuts and benefits (fourth and eighth rows of the table). Reagan and his allies justified cuts in investment, dividend, and capital gains taxes, as well as the business provisions, on the idea that these measures would boost capital supply, thereby leading to greater economic activity. Such

Table 3.1 **Selected Public Opinion Results on the 1981 Reagan Economic Plan**

	Agree	*Disagree*
Tax cuts will lead to pay raises.	85	14
Tax and budget cuts will stimulate economy.	84	11
Cut taxes on non-salary income.	75	20
Provide business investment tax credits.	73	20
Reagan tax plan.	73	22
Cut capital gains taxes.	70	25
Supply-side theory.	66	29
Cut business taxes.	63	24
End "double taxation" of dividends.	63	29
Tax cuts justified despite effects on government programs.	46	39
Mean (N = 48)	**58.9**	**29.0**

Note: These data are from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research IPOLL Database (https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/CFIDE/cf/action/home/index.cfm). Cell entries represent percentages of survey respondents.

messages appeared very frequently in mainstream news coverage. Survey results indicating strong popular favorability toward the Reagan tax plan overall (seen in the fifth row of Table 3.1) correspond with the media's heavy circulation of issue frames urging support for the plan (or for neoliberal tax policy in general) with no further justification. As seen in Figure 3.4, these messages comprised more than 15 percent of ideological issue frames in TV and AP coverage of the debate, making them the third most frequent message. And poll questions that garnered high levels of support for the Reagan plan (or neoliberal tax cuts in general), even if those cuts would trigger reductions in federal government programs or services (seen, for example, in the bottom row of Table 3.1) clearly evoke the anti-federal government frame. This was the most common issue frame among all specific ideological messages in mainstream media coverage of the 1981 economic plan.

These poll results may also derive in part from the limited circulation by mainstream news outlets of basic, concrete factual information on the Reagan tax plan. Particularly notable is the meager provision of information on the direct financial implications of the plan for people at different income levels. In fact, matters of economic inequality and social class were rarely covered in any form during the 1981 debate. Issue frames criticizing or opposing the Reagan plan (or supply-side tax policy in general) for favoring affluent and wealthy Americans made up just 6.3 percent of substantive policy messages in the media. News stories focused on the class implications of the policy made up less than 14 percent of the total (see Figure 3.1). If these topics and interpretations had received more frequent news coverage, public support in polls for certain provisions (such as steep cuts in capital gains, investment and certain business taxes, and the policy's lack of attention to regressive payroll taxes)—as well as, perhaps, popular support for supply-side theory in general—may have been significantly lower.

Conclusion

President Reagan's regressive 1981 economic plan built a strong foundation and set a clear long-term trajectory for domestic policy in the United States. The evidence in this chapter suggests that corporate news media significantly enabled these effects, which persist nearly 40 years later. Despite apparent opposition to certain dimensions of neoliberal governance, insurgent GOP President Donald Trump's early-term tax policy agenda was thoroughly neoliberal. The massive cuts in upper-income and corporate taxes the president signed in late 2017 were constructed in the mold of ERTA (Bloomberg News 2017), and their structure seems likely to further increase economic inequality (Huang, Herrera, and

Duke 2017). Many key elements of neoliberal tax policy were pursued even by the Democratic administration of Barack Obama. President Obama supported some rollbacks of regressive tax policies. In 2010, however, Obama cooperated with Congress to extend the unequal 2001 and 2003 Bush tax cuts, and he has long supported lowering the U.S. corporate tax rate. Other critical planks of Reagan's early neoliberal policy agenda, including restricting means-tested social programs and cutting business regulations, have also been frequently pursued by both Republican and Democratic presidents, along with significant bipartisan factions in Congress.

To what extent has the majority of Americans endorsed this policy trend? Popular support for specific neoliberal tax plans has appeared strong (if far from unanimous) in opinion polls dating from the early Reagan era. But it is crucial to consider the historical drivers of that support, especially its sources in the domain of media communication. My analyses contest and complicate common interpretations of the relationship between Reagan's economic agenda and popular attitudes.

On the one hand, views of the Reaganite public policy regime as an entirely elite-driven phenomenon imposed in clear contradiction to public opinion (Ferguson and Rogers 1986) are inconsistent with well-documented evidence of public preferences on specific policies. To be sure, the president's personal appeal and his stances on other issues may have played larger roles in his 1980 election than did backing for the particular neoliberal economic prescriptions he promised. Moreover, generally worded survey items have long shown weak support for key aspects of neoliberal economic and social welfare policy (Cook and Barrett 1992; Page and Jacobs 2009; Page and Shapiro 1992). However, it is clear that poll questions gauging opinion on specific aspects of the 1981 Reagan economic plan—and on the plan as a whole—showed high levels of favorability. This suggests significant popular endorsement of the neoliberal agenda at its earliest stages in the United States.

At the same time, analyses that interpret the neoliberal turn as motivated by grassroots, democratic, middle-class backlash against burdensome taxation, domestic spending overreach, and excessive economic regulation (Prasad 2012; Quirk and Hinchliffe 1998) also miss the mark. As a central influence on public opinion about policy issues, mass media coverage narrowed the selection of political voices, the spectrum of ideological interpretations and the items of factual information that most Americans encountered during debate over the 1981 Reagan economic plan. This likely led to significantly higher levels of support than would otherwise have been expressed in polls. Media refraction processes in this political episode operated to legitimate a policy that itself has done far-reaching damage to democratic values and practices, including through

increasing the economic inequality which has generated striking levels of political inequality in recent decades (Gilens 2012).

Neoliberalism in the United States did have certain popular dimensions in its earliest stages, but these dimensions were far from democratic. During debate over the Reagan economic plan, mainstream media outlets frequently depicted official voices speaking a conservative populist language extolling the benefits of the neoliberal-New Right agenda for the majority of struggling workers, farmers, and small business owners. But ordinary people themselves—and representatives of nongovernmental groups who might voice their concerns—almost never appeared in the news to plead their own case, even indirectly as paraphrased by reporters. Instead, mainstream media in the early 1980s largely served as a platform for neoliberal political elites to pitch populist appeals and channel their version of popular interests, while marginalizing the actual voices of ordinary people, whether those voices were spoken individually or through organizations. Superficial, elite-centric, and ideologically distorted coverage of the Reagan economic plan illustrates how, even before the neoliberal wave in media policy and practices swept over the news, corporate and commercial tendencies in the U.S. mass communication system operated to undermine democratic values.

Research on public policy attitudes that marginalizes or ignores the sources of those attitudes in elite discourse and media coverage significantly hampers our understanding of politics. By allocating attention to topics, voices, frames, and information through processes that privilege certain actors who seem credible (because they seem powerful), and emphasize certain story lines (because they appear acceptable to commercially desirable audiences), media refraction may trigger undemocratic circuits of communication. Elites like Reagan—whom news outlets deem powerful and popular, and thus lavish with favorable attention—can use that attention to enlarge their power by influencing public attitudes and projecting images of popular support. This may dampen official opposition to their policy goals, even as it encourages continued media attention. When media structures and institutions interact with political authority in these ways, it can become very difficult for alternative voices and views—even those of elected leaders—to gain traction in shaping public opinion. The apparent unpopularity of such positions, in turn, may reinforce mainstream news outlets' tendency to downplay or ignore those voices and views.

The communication patterns discussed in this chapter not only created an environment conducive to significant popular endorsement of the 1981 economic plan, they also set in motion enduring trends in political news and elite discourse. Next, I fast-forward 15 years to a Democratic administration whose

leader has often been seen—whether fondly or derisively—as a left-liberal icon. This was also a period when, largely beneath the public radar, political-economic forces catalyzed by neoliberal policy had unleashed the U.S. media system's corporate and commercial imperatives beyond their already considerable scope and magnitude in the early 1980s. How did mainstream news cover the 1995–1996 debate over neoliberal welfare reform, one of the key unfinished planks of the Reaganite agenda? That is the subject of Chapter 4.

4

"No One Wants to Change the System as Much as Those Who Are Trapped by the System"

Commercial News Media and the End of Welfare as We Knew It

USA Today readers who opened their January 5, 1995, papers to page 6A may have been drawn to the headline, "A Family's Tales: Progress, Pitfalls." The text began by introducing Shannon, a single mother in Wisconsin who celebrated her 18th birthday by applying for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) benefits and moving away from home. Shannon expressed support for government social programs: "A lot of people put you down for using taxpayers' money," she said. "But that's what taxes are for" (Phillips 1995a).

Given the headline and initial sentences, readers curious about what welfare recipients thought of efforts to reduce benefits, institute stringent work requirements, and impose strict time limits for federal assistance might have assumed that the story would primarily present the issue from the standpoint of such recipients. Those readers would have been wrong. Most of this 1,211-word report—long by American newspaper standards, exceptionally long for *USA Today*—presented the views of national Republican and Democratic Party elites. These officials expressed a general consensus in favor of neoliberal reforms to combat the social pathologies bred by welfare dependency. The report ended with a perspective from Shannon's parents, who were said to be "enjoying the fruits of (state-run) mandatory job training." According to the story, they had warned their daughter that "welfare was a trap, but she wanted independence."

This report illustrates several key elements in mainstream news coverage of neoliberal welfare reform. On the very few occasions when AFDC recipients (current and former) were afforded a media platform, they were almost always examples of "success stories" (Schram and Soss 2001) who managed to leave the rolls prodded by state experiments with benefit cutbacks and "workfare" that activated feelings of personal initiative and self-respect. The primary ideological subtext for these stories, and for the bulk of *USA Today* and television news coverage, was the "neoliberal paternalist" narrative suggesting that government social provision saps the moral fiber, work ethic, self-esteem—even the soul—of low-income people (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Recipients themselves were often cast as testifying in favor of their need to be forced to develop into responsible workers and citizens. In general, however, mainstream media discussion of welfare reform was carried by the voices of prominent political elites who, despite some differences of degree and emphasis, communicated bipartisan agreement that AFDC must be made less generous and more punitive.

This chapter presents evidence from an extensive content analysis of mainstream print and television news coverage of welfare reform in 1995 and 1996. Using a variety of measures, I find that messages favoring neoliberal reform dominated critical messages in mass-market newspaper and TV coverage alike. The most frequent issue frames by far focused on the social and personal ills of welfare dependency, and the inefficiencies and wrong-headedness of federal social programs. And ordinary people critical of neoliberal welfare reform were relegated to near media invisibility. While race was not an explicit dimension of mass media treatment of the welfare debate, there is ample evidence of subtler racialized coding, especially on TV news. This racialization was compounded by the media's infrequent inclusion of concrete information on the breakdown of AFDC rolls by racial groups at the time. Despite not controlling the executive branch, Republican elites—nearly uniformly (and accurately) presented as supporting neoliberal welfare reform—held a substantial edge over all other sources in the news. Still, discourse attributed to the New Democrat Clinton administration was as heavily characterized by right-leaning issue frames as was the message environment overall.

I then present findings from a quantitative analysis of congressional debate on neoliberal welfare reform. This analysis is based on coding every statement about welfare policy made on the floor of the House of Representatives or Senate during the weeks leading up to key legislative votes on the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in the summer of 1996. I supplement these data with a qualitative description of policy discourse from nongovernmental sources that contested neoliberal perspectives

on welfare policy. This evidence shows clear indications of media refraction processes that narrowed the range of political voices and ideological perspectives made available to the public in the news. Both TV news and *USA Today* coverage significantly underrepresented the elite dissent voiced primarily by Democratic members of Congress. Opposition to neoliberal welfare reform was also abundant in nongovernmental discourse during the mid-1990s, in reports from think tanks and policy researchers, grassroots social protest campaigns, and other sources. My news content analyses show, however, that this criticism and opposition was muted and marginalized by the media institutions that reached most broadly into the American public. The chapter ends with a description of poll results suggesting that narrow media coverage may have shaped public opinion to support neoliberal welfare reform. This sets the stage for Chapter 5, which uses an experiment to gauge the concrete effects of coverage distorted through media refraction.

Differences in media depictions of welfare reform and the 1981 Reagan economic plan track the institutionalization of neoliberalism in the United States—in the media complex and the broader political system alike. Adapting to an industry landscape and media policy regime ever more oriented toward profit imperatives, news coverage of welfare reform was less frequent than during the earlier case. At the same time, the accommodation of many Democratic Party leaders to neoliberal political discourse and policy agendas ensured that corporately conditioned and commercially driven journalistic routines privileged right-leaning policy perspectives. This occurred as mainstream media outlets calibrated their coverage to what was understood as a shifting consensus among those governing elites considered legitimate according to conventional standards. Commercial audience dynamics made these media refraction processes especially potent. Social assistance for poor people is a policy issue that was not seen as directly relevant either to mainstream media's middle-class and affluent consumer base, or to marginal viewers and readers that news outlets sought to draw away from the entertainment content increasingly available on cable TV. These perceptions of popular demand further eroded incentives to provide substantive and ideologically diverse news coverage of welfare reform.

Before exploring media coverage and policy discourse in this crucial political episode, I put the 1995–1996 welfare debate in political-economic context. I begin by situating the policy changes that constituted a major unfinished project of the early Reagan era within the history of welfare politics. This background is critical for understanding the political significance of media messages about welfare reform. I then describe the changing shape of the U.S. media system in the 1990s. That discussion underscores how corporate concentration and commercialization solidified the political-economic foundations of neoliberal media refraction.

Neoliberal Welfare Reform in Political Perspective

Major changes to the federal system of cash grants and associated benefits for poor Americans were on the political agenda for several decades before PRWORA. During the roughly 40-year period after the New Deal, state and local officials in conservative regions led the charge for welfare retrenchment. The racialized and gendered character of these efforts is well documented. Early political calls to restrict benefits coincided with more African American women going on AFDC in the 1950s (Jost 1992). Backlash accelerated as poverty came to be seen by many whites—and was increasingly reflected in mainstream news coverage (Gilens 1999)—as a black urban issue. Persistent social and economic injustice that stunted legal gains in racial equality fueled widespread urban uprisings through the late 1960s. By the early 1970s, a newly militant welfare rights movement led by poor mothers had used local protests and federal courts to win a measure of broadened eligibility and administrative relief (Piven and Cloward 1977, 1993; Quadagno 1994, 120). It was in this context that the emerging New Right targeted welfare as the American political economy began its neoliberal turn.

Conservatives depicted AFDC and other means-tested programs as enabling idleness and irresponsibility that fed cultural deviancy and criminality, seen in sexual promiscuity, out-of-wedlock births, alcoholism and illegal drug use, and other pathologies (Jost 1992; Quadagno 1994). The Heritage Foundation was particularly active among neoliberal-New Right groups in elaborating and circulating these ideas. Beginning in the 1960s, various welfare reforms centering on mandatory work programs and behavioral control were implemented in piecemeal fashion, most at local and state levels but some at the national level. These included provisions to restrict or deny benefits for additional children, unwed teen mothers, families whose children skipped school, and welfare recipients who did not pay rent on time (Kellam 1994, 4). Social benefits were said to trap poor people in a cycle of indignity that robbed them of the chance to cultivate wholesome habits of financial thrift and economic initiative. As then-governor of California Ronald Reagan said in his 1967 inaugural address, "We are not going to perpetuate poverty by substituting a permanent dole for a paycheck." In fact, California set a national example by passing a major series of welfare restrictions and work requirements in 1971 (Jost 1992, 3). At the federal level, President Richard Nixon's proposal to replace AFDC with a guaranteed national income that included work incentives foundered in 1970. National employer groups such as the Chamber of Commerce condemned the plan for providing government support with insufficient work mandates, while Southern business interests feared it would undermine the low-wage labor market, and many liberal Democrats opposed the measure for not going far enough to guarantee a safety

net (Quadagno 1994, 117–134). Conservative reforms proceeded at state and local levels during the 1970s. But at a time when the Democratic Party held large majorities in the House of Representatives, its then-influential left-liberal faction ensured that the national guarantee of assistance to poor mothers first enshrined in the New Deal would not be substantially compromised.

Circumstances changed when neoliberal-New Right elites gained major institutional power at the national level. Reagan's 1981 budget plan marked a watershed in welfare politics. This measure significantly cut AFDC benefits, and for the first time enacted broad federal permission for states to implement large-scale work requirements, after congressional Democrats turned back the president's proposal to mandate such requirements. The law set off a flurry of "experiments" with work programs and other neoliberal paternalist prescriptions for welfare dependency (Fording 2003; Haskins 2006, 33–36). Significantly, Bill Clinton frequently claimed credit as a governor who cooperated with Republicans (including Reagan) to restrict welfare, and for implementing a mandatory work program in Arkansas in 1988.[1] President George H. W. Bush offered strong rhetorical backing for punitive reform efforts and continued to grant state waivers for new restrictions (Jost 1992, 1–2).

Neoliberal paternalist approaches to welfare gained momentum with the emergence of Democratic leaders determined to accommodate the party to the corporate-backed political tide that rolled in as the neoliberal era unfolded. Clinton burst onto the national scene in 1992 as the standard-bearer for these New Democrats. Centered in the increasingly powerful Democratic Leadership Council, New Democrats had long echoed New Right attacks on welfare dependency and personal irresponsibility, and advocated private markets as the way out of poverty. During the presidential campaign, Clinton famously promised to "end welfare as we know it" and often declared that "welfare should be a stepping stone, not a way of life" (Kellam 1994, 1). As the GOP congressional staffer whose book has been dubbed the "definitive inside account" of 1990s welfare politics wrote of Clinton's famous turn-of-phrase, "Here was a powerful slogan, one that we would have used if we had thought of it first" (Haskins 2006, 75).

As a presidential candidate, Clinton called for a two-year cap on welfare. In 1993, he offered a plan that would place time limits on benefits for women born after 1971; mandate work programs; offer employment training, child care, and transportation assistance; and provide government-funded jobs to those unable to find private-sector work after two years. Clinton's plan (one of hundreds of welfare bills introduced in his first two years) failed even to reach committee hearings in the Democratic-controlled Congress (Kellam 1994, 11; Meeropol 1998, 247–248). Still, the administration sped its approval of federal waivers for

neoliberal paternalist reforms; by 1996, 40 states had used these waivers to make their welfare programs less generous and more punitive (Meeropol 1998, 248).

In November 1994, voters swept into Congress the first bicameral Republican majority since 1948, propelling to power a leadership group spearheaded by Georgia Representative Newt Gingrich, and Texas congressmen Dick Armey and Tom DeLay. This group anointed itself heir to the Reagan legacy.[2] After more than two decades of multifaceted political organization and mobilization, the neoliberal-New Right bloc had a firm foothold in the national legislative branch (Phillips-Fein 2009). This "Republican Revolution" Congress advocated aggressive cutbacks in social welfare and business regulatory programs, administrative reforms framed as attacks on the liberal Washington establishment, a punitive law-and-order approach to crime, and a return to traditional cultural and religious values. Among key proposals in the Republican "Contract with America" was the Personal Responsibility Act (PRA). This welfare plan would end the federal guarantee of cash assistance for poor single mothers by transferring much smaller block grants that states would spend on programs to move recipients into low-wage private labor markets. The PRA would enact work mandates, limit cash benefits to two consecutive years and five years lifetime, and deny assistance to unwed mothers younger than 18 (Meeropol 1998, 248). This bill—and the 1996 legislation it spawned—provided increased flexibility to states, but they could generally use that flexibility only to implement tougher neoliberal paternalist reforms.[3] In line with neoliberal-New Right ideology, the PRA also shifted more responsibility for social services to private religious institutions and for-profit companies.

Clinton vetoed similar versions of this GOP welfare bill twice, once in late 1995 because it was folded into a large budget reconciliation act that included major Medicaid and Medicare cuts, and once in January 1996. Administration officials claimed that this latter policy was "too extreme"—it transferred food stamp and Medicaid programs to state authorities, and cut federal assistance for disabled children and for programs to help poor women get and keep jobs (Meeropol 1998, 248; Weaver 2002). Still, the version of welfare reform the president signed in August 1996, during the heat of his re-election campaign against then-Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, was very similar to the Contract with America proposal (Haskins 2006). Importantly, the law failed to guarantee government-funded jobs for people who could not obtain private-sector work after the two- and five-year time limits expired. The legislation placed a number of new restrictions on food stamp eligibility and benefit levels.[4] PRWORA also incentivized religious charities to provide social services, established the first nationwide abstinence-only sex education requirement, and created a large-scale program to collect child-support payments from the fathers of children on

welfare that some have criticized as counterproductive in fighting poverty and gender discrimination (A. M. Smith 2007).

Consistent with the neoliberal-New Right push for devolution, PRWORA greatly increased discretion for state and local political leaders, administrative personnel, and case managers in benefits eligibility and work standards enforcement. This encouraged aid restrictions and denials according to regional cultural norms and political pressures that are often deeply racialized (Fording, Soss, and Schram 2011).[5] More broadly, the law institutionalized a paradigm shift in social provision that promoted neoliberal paternalist values and practices. PRWORA encouraged a private market culture that featured social services contracts for corporations whose profits were tied to tightening aid eligibility and shrinking the number of recipients, performance-measurement strategies that incentivized government agencies to compete to cut welfare rolls, and the inscription of neoliberal discourse in program offices and brochures (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).[6]

Welfare reform also systematized and catalyzed coercive practices to monitor and control poor women's intimate lives in order to enforce the "personal responsibility" that would prepare them for low-wage work in the neoliberal political economy (Mink 2001; A. M. Smith 2007; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Neoliberalism's use of government power to support private markets and reinforce corporate prerogatives is illustrated by the close cooperation between local welfare agencies and Walmart. Under the post-1996 policy regime, the retail giant has taken a leading role not only in job placement and employment workshops, but in supplying gift cards used by caseworkers to incentivize welfare recipients to meet program rules (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011, 195–196). Those who comply can marginally raise the value of their benefits, but they are forced to funnel this extra money into the low-wage service sector that is expected to employ them. Failure to meet behavioral benchmarks can lead to benefits reduction and permanent termination of eligibility. As Mink (2001, 90) asserted in the early years of the neoliberal welfare regime, "Even as government scales back its affirmative role in mitigating poverty, it is intensifying its coercive reach into the lives of the poor."

Despite President Clinton's strong support for most provisions in the bill, congressional Democrats split nearly evenly on the final version of PRWORA. But the near unanimity within the GOP made the final votes overwhelming. On July 31, 1996, the House passed welfare reform 328 to 100, with two Republicans opposed; the Senate followed suit the next day by a 78 to 21 margin that included no GOP dissenters. House Democrats were divided 98 to 98; Senate Democrats voted 25 to 21 in favor of the legislation, which replaced AFDC with the new Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

PRWORA ultimately amounted to cuts of $55 billion in federal antipoverty spending over six years (Meeropol 1998, 248–249). From a broader political

perspective, the law institutionalized neoliberal logic in a major federal social policy championed by a Democratic president. Many Democratic Party politicians and advisors saw endorsing PRWORA as a shrewd strategy to appeal to (implicitly white) middle- and working-class constituencies who believed that social programs unfairly benefited a permanently unemployed (mostly black) underclass. Neoliberal welfare reform would remove from the national agenda a political weapon used by the New Right to attack progressive economic and social policy, thereby allowing Democrats to devote energy to advancing more popular dimensions of the welfare state (Soss and Schram 2007; Weaver 2002).[7] The extent to which this strategy has succeeded on its own terms in the years since 1996 is questionable. However, there is little doubt that the policy it endorsed—and the political dynamics surrounding that policy, including the largely bipartisan anti-welfare and anti-poor discourse that permeated the mid-1990s media environment—constituted a historic and long-lasting achievement for conservative Republicans.

During the welfare reform debate, neoliberal-New Right elites relentlessly attacked out-of-control social spending and the grotesque long-term dependency it generated. Speaking on the House floor, Republican congressman John Mica of Florida famously compared welfare recipients to "alligators" who ought not be fed, contending that "with our current handout, non-work welfare system we've upset the natural order" (Sparks 2003, 182). Recalling his efforts to enact neoliberal reforms, Haskins (2006, 17) characterized as "beyond dispute" the existence of a "massive welfare state" that provided "hundreds of billions of dollars" in social benefits for low-income people, often "on an entitlement basis." Over the six decades between the New Deal and the Contract with America, programs for the poor grew from an "acorn" to a "towering oak" (Haskins 2006, 40). By the time of the Republican Revolution, Americans were beset by "a blizzard of social programs and a flood of spending" (Haskins 2006, 7). This discourse contradicts concrete data on the financial burden and budget significance of cash welfare benefits (Jost 1992, 1; Meeropol 1998, 224–225), the typical duration and causes of welfare use (Sotirovic 2001, 759; D. Baker 2007, 212), and the prevalence of paid work by recipients (Cooper 1995; Stone 2007, 186). Moreover, the neoliberal paternalist contention that AFDC fueled single-motherhood is undermined by research demonstrating that broader cultural and economic trends contributed far more to rising out-of-wedlock births (Kellam 1994, 15; Piven and Cloward 1987).

As Haskins (2006, 7) candidly observes, "Of course, conservatives did not allow the lack of strong consensus in the social science literature to dull their claims about welfare and illegitimacy. The argument that guaranteed welfare benefits contributed to increased illegitimacy rates makes sense to most Americans." How and why did neoliberal-New Right elite claims like that one

appear to "make sense" to many ordinary people? And how and why did counter-frames appear to make less sense? These are the questions I tackle through empirical analyses of news coverage and political discourse in this chapter. To set the stage for these analyses, I turn now to the mid-1990s corporate news system. That neoliberalized media complex was uniquely positioned to amplify the neoliberal paternalist discourse that legitimated welfare reform.

Corporate News Media in the 1990s: Consolidation and Commercialization in High Gear

The neoliberalization of welfare policy proceeded in tandem with the neoliberalization of the media sector in the United States. Each trend emerged clearly at the national level in the early 1980s, and each was fully elaborated by the mid-1990s. Neoliberal shifts in welfare and media policy were undergirded by similar political-economic foundations and supported by similar ideological forces. Many prominent politicians—including Reagan, Clinton, and leaders of the "Republican Revolution" Congress—were active on both fronts. Moreover, the political decisions that enabled media neoliberalization tracked the broader trajectory of business deregulation as economic and fiscal policy shifted under the influence of New Right and New Democrat elites (Harris 2014).

These processes have engendered a media complex in which corporate and commercial imperatives that crystallized more than a century ago (Cook 2005, 17–60; Hallin and Mancini 2004, 198–248) and were bolstered in the 1930s and 1940s (McChesney 1993; Pickard 2014) have become a dominant influence on news production. These structural and institutional changes in the media have attracted little public notice, and almost no political science research. However, they are critical for understanding political news coverage in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Neoliberal political-economic tendencies are evident in all five major outlets whose welfare reform coverage I analyze in this chapter.

Neoliberal Media Policy and Democratic Discourse

While the neoliberalization of the U.S. media system has been marked by several significant national policy changes, two key moves sharply illustrate the trend and draw out its implications for the democratic quality of news coverage in the 1990s. As momentum for neoliberal deregulation gathered steam, corporate media lobbies achieved one of their most important political victories in 1987 as the Reagan-era FCC nullified the Fairness Doctrine. While it took a light touch

as a form of quasi-self-regulation and was unevenly enforced, since 1949 the Fairness Doctrine had imposed a measure of public obligation on commercial media that was unusual in the American political context in its direct regulation of news and public affairs content in service of the social good. As noted in the last chapter, this policy required radio and TV stations to broadcast programming on controversial issues of broad public importance, and to offer diverse perspectives on those issues. The end of the Fairness Doctrine prompted commercial broadcasters to scale back—in some cases, eliminate—serious coverage of political and social issues, particularly at the state and local level (Aufderheide 1990).[8] Such coverage tends to be more expensive and to draw less advertising revenue than do forms of soft news and infotainment.

By the mid-1990s, the neoliberal penchant for pro-corporate deregulation was reaching a fever pitch among leading elites of both major parties. Some of the most consequential regulatory cutbacks of the era were contained in the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Enthusiastically endorsed by the Clinton administration, this law substantially relaxed rules on TV and radio consolidation, energizing a growing wave of media mergers and acquisitions (Aufderheide 1999, 89–92). This policy and similar regulatory rollbacks beginning in the early 1980s encouraged ownership by single companies of news outlets in different media formats (e.g., TV stations, newspapers, radio stations), vertical integration across segments of media production chains (e.g., cable systems and TV networks), and increasing control of news outlets by global conglomerates with core business interests in sectors ranging from consumer technology and entertainment to aerospace and weapons production (McChesney 2004; Meehan 2005).

Cost-cutting and profit-taking fostered by policies like the Telecommunications Act have pushed coverage further toward soft news and infotainment, and have decimated labor-intensive investigative reporting, foreign affairs coverage, and coverage of state politics and government (McChesney 2004; McChesney and Nichols 2010). Like the end of the Fairness Doctrine, the Telecommunications Act struck a major blow to local broadcast news. Mergers and buyouts encouraged by this policy led media companies to extract profits through economies of scale by closing stations, centralizing staffing, and homogenizing programming. These trends led to less local hard news and public affairs coverage. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 had particularly striking effects on African American-owned radio and TV stations. Many minority station owners reacted to the growing market power of larger outlets by closing or selling to national chains and conglomerates. New corporate owners imposed journalistic and creative staffing austerity, reduced or eliminated localized content, and shifted programming away from issues of particular concern to minority communities in order to appeal to larger and wealthier audiences that would draw more advertising dollars (Aufderheide 1999; Common Cause 2005).

More broadly, neoliberal policies that have freed the news business from most remaining public service constraints and social responsibility expectations have invigorated the commercial dynamics that drive the U.S. media complex. These dynamics discourage content that is expensive and difficult to generate, such as research-intensive and in-depth news reporting, especially if it does not easily appeal to demographically significant, advertiser-coveted audiences. Because they are neither labor- nor capital-intensive, shallow reporting, soft news, infotainment, superficial punditry, and partisan commentary are increasingly seen as attractive ways to fill programming time and news space (Gunther 1999). As my analysis in Chapter 3 suggests, political news focusing on elite personalities and strategic maneuvering was already common in earlier stages of the U.S. media system, including at the dawn of neoliberalism. However, the increasingly corporate-driven and commercialized atmosphere engendered by neoliberal policy changes has reinforced tendencies to produce these forms of coverage.

Moreover, especially when combined with marketing and branding strategies and tactics that feature the latest audiovisual special effects (Hamilton 2004, 170–171), producing such superficial forms of content can be an effective strategy to draw and keep advertiser-favored audiences. These commercial imperatives are even more central in an environment in which news organizations increasingly compete with a burgeoning menu of pure entertainment programming (Prior 2007), even if a large share of seemingly distinct television channels, stations, and production companies are owned by a handful of corporate conglomerates (Meehan 2005, 53–81). At the same time, media in the neoliberal era have reduced their overall investment in news and public affairs content of any kind. This has been accompanied by the steady increase in TV and radio time devoted to (commercial and political) ads (Hamilton 2004, 163; McChesney 2004, 2013; Nichols and McChesney 2013).

Neoliberalization and Popular News Coverage in the 1990s

Corporate consolidation enabled and encouraged by the neoliberal shift in media structures and policies is evident in the fact that all three broadcast TV news networks and CNN underwent mergers or buyouts between 1981 and 1996. In the process, these networks became cogs in multinational conglomerates whose size and variety of business interests outside the news sector have only grown since then. General Electric purchased NBC in 1986. ABC merged with Capital Cities Communication the same year, then was bought by Disney in early 1996. CBS was bought by Westinghouse Electric Co. in 1995 (later becoming part of Viacom). After CNN gained notoriety and viewership with its foreign affairs coverage in the late 1980s and early 1990s, parent company Turner Broadcasting System was acquired by Time Warner in 1996. These moves led to significant

job cuts and loss of journalistic resources, as new owners demanded that news divisions generate ever larger and steadier profits to satisfy Wall Street investors (Gunther 1999; Pew Research Center 2010a). All the networks have endured the loss of reporting positions and the closure or scaling back of regional and foreign news bureaus starting in the late 1980s and continuing into recent years (Gunther 1999; Hamilton 2004; McChesney 2004; McChesney and Nichols 2010; Stelter and Carter 2010).

Overall, changes in the economic imperatives of television news wrought by media consolidation marked a major shift from the pre-neoliberal era, when news divisions were better resourced and less subject to profit pressures. Combined with weaker governmental and professional incentives for media to serve broad public purposes, such economic changes led to a system driven ever more powerfully by corporate and commercial tendencies. These trends are evident, for example, in broadcast TV news programs' more intense, fine-grained, and frequent attention to ratings. By the year 2000, audience attention was being measured on a minute-by-minute basis to provide data for shaping stories to appeal to advertiser-friendly audiences (Hamilton 2004, 172).

Meanwhile, in 1982 a new national newspaper was founded and soon became the country's second-highest-circulation daily publication (Glaberson 1995). *USA Today*, owned by the Gannett Company (one of the largest newspaper chains in the country), was launched as a light-reading, graphic-friendly, colorful alternative to the drab daily papers exemplified by what was once called "The Gray Lady" (*New York Times*). It was marketed explicitly to appeal to busy and impatient Americans increasingly preoccupied with growing and irregular work hours, long commutes, and the need to juggle family responsibilities in new ways, as two-earner households became more common in the 1980s under the economic pressures of neoliberalism in the context of changing gender norms. *USA Today*'s neoliberal business model was oriented directly toward a middle-class consumer base increasingly attracted to television (especially cable TV) as leisure options proliferated across the media landscape. It was designed to draw in otherwise distracted readers, including business travelers and those who had taken jobs in unfamiliar parts of the country. *USA Today* did this by offering heavy doses of sports, entertainment, and consumer lifestyle features, along with snapshots of political and other national news (Pérez-Peña 2007). Even the ubiquitous newspaper boxes for the publication dubbed "McPaper" by its detractors were designed specifically to look like TV sets.

USA Today exemplifies mainstream U.S. print news in the age of neoliberal media. The paper that as of 2018 was the country's most popular (traditional and online) daily publication was founded to commodify and deliver consumer audiences to corporate advertisers by offering a thin news product consistent with the minimalist model of "monitorial citizenship" (Schudson 1999,

310–311; Zaller 2003). *USA Today* has produced noteworthy serious investigative journalism on important public issues, including helping to break the story of the George W. Bush administration's warrantless domestic wiretapping program. However, the paper's political-economic foundation and organizational imperatives have tended toward simple and short hard news, along with large helpings of soft news and infotainment. Even before recent waves of job cuts, *USA Today* employed far fewer journalists than the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal*, its closest rivals in national circulation (Pérez-Peña 2007).

These supply- and demand-side tendencies in the U.S. corporate and commercial media system as it has been shaped by neoliberal media policies promote the basic mechanisms of media refraction: (1) reducing hard news coverage, (2) expanding superficial treatments of policy debates, and (3) narrowing the range of political voices and ideological perspectives. As journalists lose the time, resources, and social expectations that promote detailed, in-depth reporting, they are encouraged to rely on the easiest and quickest methods to produce the commercially amenable content on which their increasingly tenuous jobs depend. In neoliberal economic and social welfare policy debates, the resulting patterns of news coverage have had dubious consequences for democratic discourse.

During the 1990s, the three major broadcast networks, CNN, and *USA Today* collectively dominated the audience for national public policy-related news. While their absolute numbers had dipped substantially since the early 1980s, evening network news viewerships were still very large in 1995 and 1996 compared to any other national TV news option. Survey data from 1994 indicate that more than 70 percent of Americans watched television news "yesterday" (Pew Research Center 2010b). Cable news attracted much smaller audiences than broadcast news, but in the mid-1990s CNN was the unquestioned leader in that growing niche. Fox News did not launch until two months after PRWORA was signed. MSNBC, which debuted the same month Congress enacted welfare reform, provided no significant coverage of the policy debate.

The broad political significance of this command of the news audience comes into sharper focus when demographic factors are considered: *USA Today*'s readership has always been much more socioeconomically representative of the adult American population (and, consequently, of the potential pool of major national survey respondents) than the readerships of its closest circulation rivals. While the paper has pitched itself to middle- and upper-middle-class professionals with college and advanced degrees, it has consistently drawn in larger proportions of lower-middle- and working-class readers than its competitors. Audience demographics are similar for ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN (Pew Research Center 2012b). In particular, TV news has long been heavily relied on by lower-income Americans (Pew Research Center 2011a). Moreover, these four networks and *USA Today* collectively drew significant attention from parts of the American

population whose opinions were most open to media influence during policy debates. They were popular media choices among those interested and knowledgeable enough to consistently follow national political news, but who (unlike avid *New York Times* readers on the left, *Wall Street Journal* readers on the right, or devotees of specialized publications of all persuasions) lacked the strong ideological predispositions that might block effects (Zaller 1992).

Consequently, the broadest and most malleable segments of public opinion on specific policy issues largely overlapped with those Americans consistently exposed to the information and ideas circulated by a rapidly neoliberalizing mainstream news media. This media complex featured increasing financial pressures to use simplified news formulas to quickly produce content that was expected to appeal to advertiser-coveted audiences. During the mid-1990s, the institutional political-economic logics that drive media refraction were even more firmly in place than during the 1981 Reagan economic plan debate. To what extent did these processes operate to generate news coverage that encouraged right-leaning views on welfare reform, a key plank in the broader neoliberal policy platform? I turn to that question next.

Media Coverage of the Neoliberal Welfare Consensus: Government Is Still the Problem

For this chapter, I analyzed full texts of the entire population of news stories about welfare reform that appeared on the three broadcast network news shows, on CNN's evening news program, and in *USA Today*, from January 1, 1995 (just before the "Republican Revolution" Congress took office) through August 22, 1996 (the day President Clinton signed PRWORA).[9] Several indicators show that the limited substantive coverage of welfare reform that mainstream news outlets provided shaded significantly rightward. Media coverage was pervaded by issue frames, primarily voiced by prominent Republican and Democratic Party elites, that supported neoliberal paternalist welfare reform. The news very rarely included key items of factual information that cast doubt on this policy perspective. Moreover, issue frames sourced to the Clinton administration were nearly as favorable toward neoliberal perspectives on welfare as was issue framing overall. These findings hold for each news outlet individually, and for print and television stories alike.

Volume and Topics of News Coverage

The first finding that emerges from my content analysis is the sparse mainstream media coverage of neoliberal welfare reform in 1995 and 1996: across nearly 20 months of institutional political debate in Washington, just 54

stories appeared on national broadcast network evening television or CNN evening news, and just 60 articles were published in *USA Today*. Overall coverage volume was much higher during the 1981 Reagan economic plan debate than during the welfare reform episode: regular television news viewers might encounter a story on the Reagan plan roughly four to five times a week (145 reports over 7.5 months); during the latter debate, such viewers might watch a report on welfare reform just once every 11 days. These differences are even starker when we consider that a new channel had joined the Big Three networks as a potential source of serious public policy news. In fact, CNN's evening news program at the time aired just six stories on welfare reform over a period of nearly two years.

This extremely low volume of news coverage exemplifies a key media refraction process. By the mid-1990s, the news media (especially TV news) were devoting more airtime and space to commercial advertising, and less to news of any kind. Media outlets were also increasingly reallocating their "news hole" away from hard news, especially public policy-related coverage. For example, in 1995 and 1996, the three network broadcasts devoted an average of merely 19.9 and 19.6 minutes per-half hour show to news (News airtime was down to 18.8 minutes by 2013.) (Guskin, Jurkowitz, and Mitchell 2013). In 1981, more than 23 minutes of every broadcast consisted of news (Hamilton 2004, 174).

As the U.S. media system steadily neoliberalized and profit maximization took center stage, entertainment values also played a greater role in the selection and presentation of news stories. "Lifestyle news" (e.g., stories on personal health and finances); coverage of celebrities and commercial popular culture (Hamilton 2004, 177–185); quirky human-interest pieces; and dramatic, "episodic" coverage (Iyengar 1991) of violent crimes and natural disasters took up more time and space. For instance, the number of stories and total airtime devoted to celebrities on network evening broadcasts doubled from the early 1970s through the mid-1990s. At the same time, coverage of congressional votes on major policy issues—especially those deemed important by right- and left-leaning advocacy groups—plummeted; in the latter period, roughly half of key legislative votes received coverage on all three broadcast networks (down from about 70 percent in the early 1970s), while just one-third of ideologically crucial votes garnered airtime (compared to about 50 percent in the earlier period) (Hamilton 2004, 180–183). Especially central to these profit-driven calculations were attempts to reshape content to draw readers and viewers who were less interested in news, hard news, politics, and public affairs. Commanding the attention of those audiences is likely to expand the range and commercial potential of advertisers' reach (Hamilton 2004, 92–93). In these ways, the neoliberal media complex generated greater volumes of personally themed and "privatized" news. Media outlets produced more content

that appealed to audience members as consumers seeking entertainment and superficial emotional stimulation, and less content that looked outward to public debates like welfare reform with significant collective political, economic, and social consequences.

When mainstream mass-market news media did cover welfare reform, which broad dimensions of the issue did they focus on? As in the case of the Reagan tax plan, a large portion of stories was devoted to governmental process, elite political strategy, and tactical dimensions of the debate. Figure 4.1 depicts the primary topics of welfare reform news stories across the period of analysis.[10] While the percentage of news reports that did not deal mainly with substantive policy aspects of welfare reform was somewhat smaller than in the 1981 case, at 40.7 percent these stories still comprised the plurality. As in the earlier episode, such reports often presented highly dramatized, personalized (Bennett 2016), "game-framed" (Lawrence 2000a) portrayals of strategic jockeying among major political elites, especially President Clinton and Speaker Gingrich. As such, the potential social and economic consequences of neoliberal (or other forms of) welfare reform, and the ideological values and principles that informed the debate, were marginalized. This evidence points to another mechanism of media refraction. Superficial stories about policy issues can be produced quickly and cheaply and are thought to draw large, commercially desirable audiences. The significant share of reports devoted to process-oriented, strategic, and tactical dimensions of policy debates is consistent with a media system that responds to

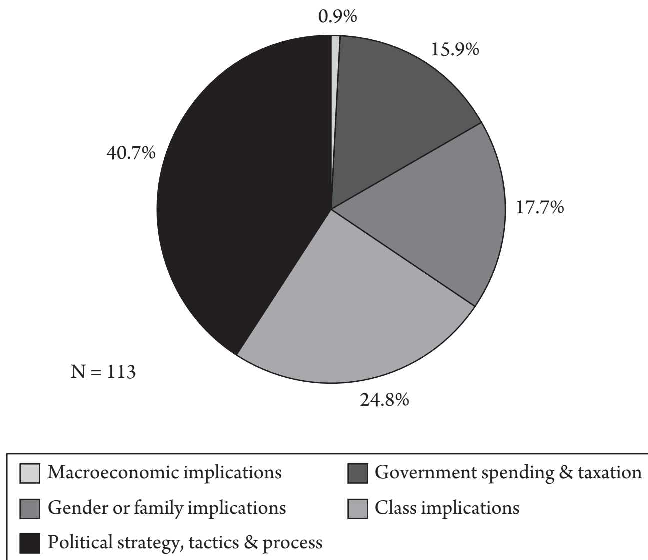

Figure 4.1 Welfare Reform News Topics

corporate and commercial pressures by limiting the airtime and column inches available to present the substantive ideological positions of political actors or concrete facts about public policy.

From the standpoint of the democratic character of public opinion expression, these initial findings suggest that news audiences during the welfare debate were generally less likely to encounter relevant substantive communications, broadly defined (i.e., stories that touched on the merits of welfare reform at all). But such results also suggest that audience opportunities for engaging with political discourse with which they might build dissenting opinions toward neoliberal policy were significantly limited: a smaller volume of coverage makes it much less likely that someone tuning in at any particular point in the policy debate will encounter substantive oppositional messages. To the extent that stories on internal governmental process and elite political maneuvering may have influenced public opinion toward welfare reform, the attitudes they encouraged probably would not have been based on principled ideological considerations (Zaller 1992). Instead, these news stories are likely to activate superficial thoughts associated with images of political elites as strategists or tacticians, or impressions about which side in the debate appeared to be "winning" or "losing." Such coverage positions audiences more as consumer-spectators than as engaged citizens likely to ground their opinions in meaningful arguments for or against a policy.

News Sourcing

As during debate over the 1981 economic plan, official government sources dominated mainstream media coverage of welfare reform during 1995 and 1996. As seen in Figure 4.2, elite voices from all levels of government (indicated by the darker bars) comprised 82.6 percent of the more than 1,100 sources cited directly or indirectly in *USA Today* and TV stories.[11]

In covering the major overhaul of a policy that had been a lynchpin of federal social provision for decades—and on which millions of low-income children, women, and men relied—the news almost exclusively relied on the voices of national elites of the two major political parties. Nongovernmental groups and social movement organizations of any ideological stripe appeared infrequently, comprising just 7.2 percent of total sources in *USA Today* and TV reports. The same was true for academic voices, policy researchers, and other ostensibly nonpartisan expert sources (2.8 percent). And ordinary people were largely invisible in mainstream news coverage of welfare reform, comprising just 4 percent of voices. One important constituency included in this latter category—current or former welfare recipients (named or unnamed)—made up a mere 1.5 percent of all sources.[12] Even in a domestic policy context in which nongovernmental

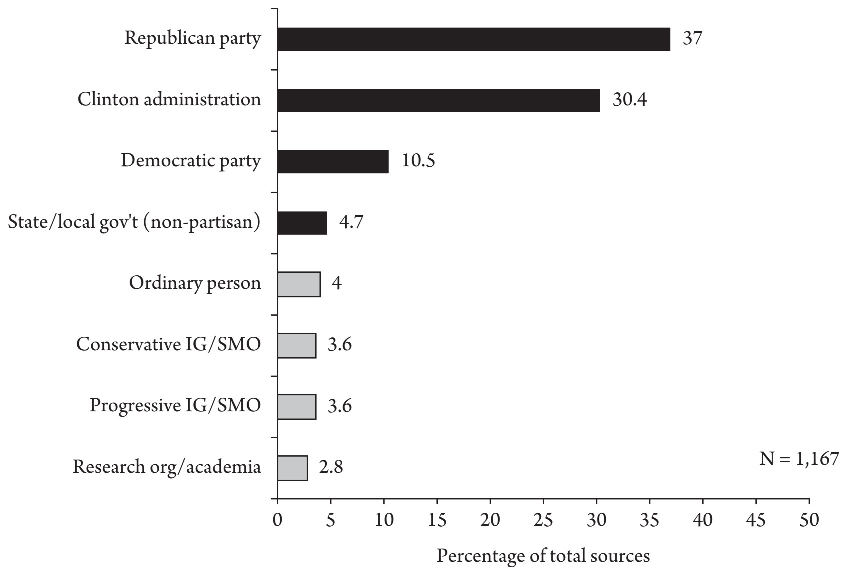

Figure 4.2 Welfare Reform News Coverage: Specific Source Categories

voices might seem particularly relevant, mainstream news furnished elites with nearly unchallenged ability to set the terms of debate. In fact, the proportion of official sources in coverage of neoliberal welfare reform again outpaced that in network TV coverage of the run-up to the Iraq War in 2002 and 2003 (Hayes and Guardino 2010, 2013).

Presidential administrations are often thought to set the public policy news agenda and influence the tone of coverage. However, Republican elites were the most frequently cited sources in welfare reform stories: in *USA Today* and TV news reports on the issue across the period of analysis, Republicans made up 37 percent of sources, compared to 30.4 percent for Clinton administration sources, and just 10.5 percent for other Democratic Party voices.[13] Given that Republican elites were almost universally in favor of neoliberal welfare reform, their prevalence in the news provides initial evidence of a strong rightward slant. Breaking down source categories into partisan camps (adding Clinton administration voices to those of other Democratic officials and comparing them to GOP sources) results in relatively even proportions (40.9 percent Democratic, 37 percent Republican). This rough partisan equilibrium in news sources across close to 20 months of policy coverage reflects mainstream media's professional norm of balance. Under this framework, good reporting in a two-party system amounts to giving "both sides" of each debate an equal chance to publicize their views, with these sides defined by major-party officials.

This application of balance in the welfare debate highlights the larger web of implicit political assumptions that drives major media coverage under the

norm of "presumed democracy" (Bennett 1993). News coverage of welfare reform seemed to reflect these assumptions closely: if national Democratic and Republican officials appear to agree on the merits of scaling back welfare and imposing strict employment and behavioral requirements, then a similar neoliberal paternalist consensus must obtain among the general public as well, the reasoning goes. As during debate over the 1981 economic plan, the media allowed the views of major-party elites to stand in for the range of legitimate ideological and policy discussion, with voices outside this orbit largely relegated to the "sphere of deviance" (Hallin 1994).

Heavy reliance on official sources in the welfare debate is also consistent with journalistic practices and routines oriented toward generating a saleable news product that draws and keeps commercially desirable audiences with limited investment of money and effort. Implicit norms of "presumed democracy" and news practices geared toward efficient production in a corporate-controlled and commercially driven media system are synergistic: relying on the most prominent mainstream political leaders for policy perspectives both meets financially driven organizational demands and supports the perception that such leaders have an unproblematic democratic warrant to debate and decide public policy. This is suggestive evidence for yet another media refraction process: the narrowing of political perspectives in the news. Especially in the political-economic context of the neoliberalized U.S. media system, reaching outside circles of well-known political elites is time-consuming and commercially risky. In fact, despite superficial tendencies toward partisan balance that characterize the presentation of official sources, news outlets rarely treat even national-level elected officials equally in allocating voices and views. Later in the chapter I examine more precisely how these commercial media imperatives distilled elite views on welfare reform.

Ideological Issue Framing

When *USA Today* and television news stories attributed substantive, ideologically charged messages to political actors, those perspectives were more likely to support cuts in aid, strict work requirements and time limits, and punitive sanctions to enforce desirable recipient behaviors, than to criticize or oppose such measures. As seen in Figure 4.3, issue frames broadly favoring neoliberal perspectives on welfare outnumbered themes that cut against this ideological current by more than two to one.[14]

Figure 4.4 breaks down substantive issue framing into specific right- and left-leaning messages.[15] As seen there, the most frequently occurring ideological frame (labeled "work ethic/dependency") comprises statements that depicted AFDC receipt as a negative influence, damaging poor people's personal initiative

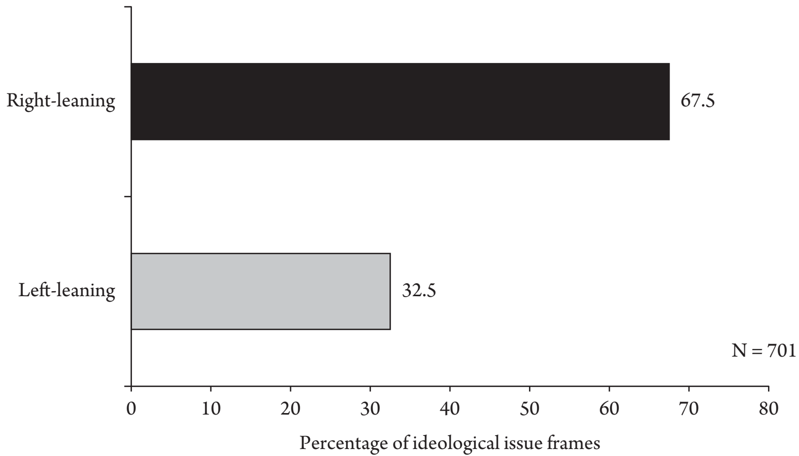

Figure 4.3 Welfare Reform News Coverage: Issue Frames by Ideological Tendency

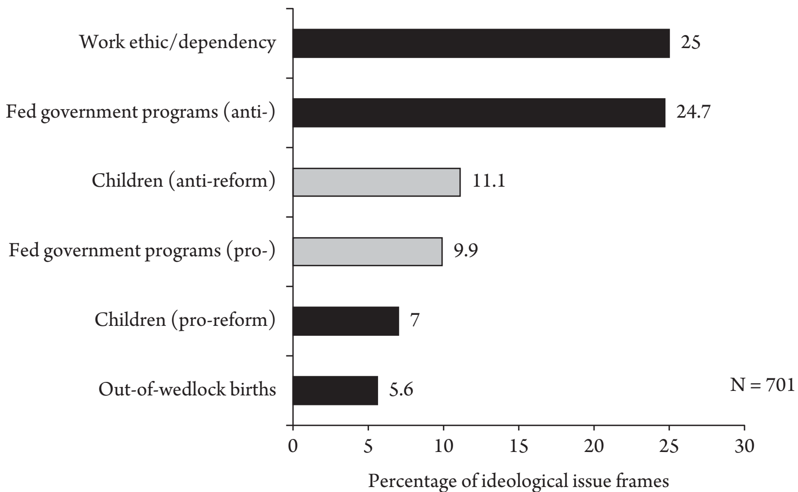

Figure 4.4 Welfare Reform News Coverage: Specific Ideological Issue Frames

and desire to support themselves through private-sector work, or otherwise creating an unfair economic and social burden on other citizens and on government. These messages made up one-quarter of total ideological issue frames in *USA Today* and TV coverage. In contrast, just nine times in 114 stories over nearly two years did a source in the news express criticism of or opposition to this message; such statements represented 1.3 percent of total issue frames, too small a proportion to appear in the graph.

The work ethic/welfare dependency frame was vividly illustrated when Republican Representative Helen Chenoweth of Idaho appeared in *USA Today*

proclaiming that "generation after generation, we put people in bondage with nothing more to look forward to than a handout" (Phillips 1995b). Social program dependency and its purported effects—from sexual irresponsibility and breakdown of the nuclear family, to alcoholism and drug use, to a general loss of personal and social respect—has been a consistent welfare theme since the early stirrings of the New Right in the 1960s. Conservative elites have tied these ideas to the alleged failure of the Lyndon B. Johnson administration's War on Poverty and Great Society programs, constructing a powerful discourse that connects social pathology to a large, expensive, and ineffective federal government.

This political context links the work ethic/welfare dependency message to the second most frequent issue frame in news coverage during 1995 and 1996: a more general neoliberal message targeting federal spending, social welfare and business regulatory programs, and oversight of state and local social policy. At 24.7 percent, this broader anti-government message was nearly as prevalent as the dependency frame. Importantly, the anti-government frame appeared more than twice as often as did the category of messages supporting federal social spending and oversight (9.9 percent). Messages suggesting or asserting that neoliberal welfare reform would help welfare recipients' children (for example, by teaching them habits of thrift and self-discipline) comprised 7 percent of issue frames. While it is closely connected to the other major right-leaning frames, I coded "out-of-wedlock births" as a separate message because of its special political and cultural salience in neoliberal-New Right anti-welfare discourse over recent decades (Mink 2001). This issue frame made up another 5.6 percent of total ideological messages in the news. In all, ideas favoring neoliberal welfare reform (depicted with the darker bars in Figure 4.4) comprised four of the six most frequently occurring frames in the news.

In stark contrast to the work ethic/dependency and anti-federal government issue frames, mainstream commercial news virtually ignored connections between government social provision and the market economy. Story-level topical analysis (depicted in Figure 4.1) demonstrates that just 0.9 percent of print and TV stories focused on macroeconomic dimensions of welfare, broadly defined (for example, the extent to which the economy could incorporate former welfare recipients into the labor force). Even more striking is the virtual absence of the "job creation" issue frame. This message suggests that the best way to help people avoid government social assistance is through policies to create more and better employment opportunities. Amid the apparently booming 1990s economy, this issue frame appeared just four times across nearly 20 months of media coverage, making up 0.006 percent of ideological messages (much too infrequently to appear in Figure 4.4).

Although the work ethic/dependency frame and other neoliberal welfare messages occasionally carried a softer tone when vocalized by Democratic elites,

by the 1990s they were thoroughly bipartisan themes. As Clinton claimed in his first address to a joint session of Congress in February 1993, "No one wants to change the welfare system as much as those who are trapped by the welfare system . . . It's time to end welfare as a way of life" (*Washington Post* 1993). Indeed, as Figure 4.5 shows, Clinton administration welfare discourse as circulated by the mainstream media tilted nearly as far to the right as did welfare discourse overall.

Figure 4.6 indicates that the specific breakdown of Clinton administration framing mirrors fairly closely the overall results from all sources in *USA Today* and TV news coverage. Again, the work ethic/dependency message was most prevalent, comprising 27.7 percent of ideological issue frames, actually slightly higher than in media coverage as a whole. Overall, three of the five most common issue frames attributed to administration sources during the welfare debate expressed neoliberal paternalist themes.[16]

At least when it comes to Clinton administration messages in the news, my analysis confirms Fording's (2003, 83) assertion that "by the 1990s the rhetoric of both Democrats and Republicans had come to reflect a belief that AFDC was ineffective, and that the program actually exacerbated poverty by providing work disincentives and by promoting a generally irresponsible lifestyle." In addition to the social, cultural, and racial assumptions connected to the dependency frame, the media's consistent, bipartisan focus on this idea likely reinforced factually incorrect beliefs that long-term welfare receipt was an objectively common (and expensive) phenomenon. Mainstream news coverage heavily emphasized the pathological trap of government dependency despite the fact that at the time more than a third of all families were on AFDC for one year or less, and more than 78 percent left the rolls before five years; just 6.8 percent of families received

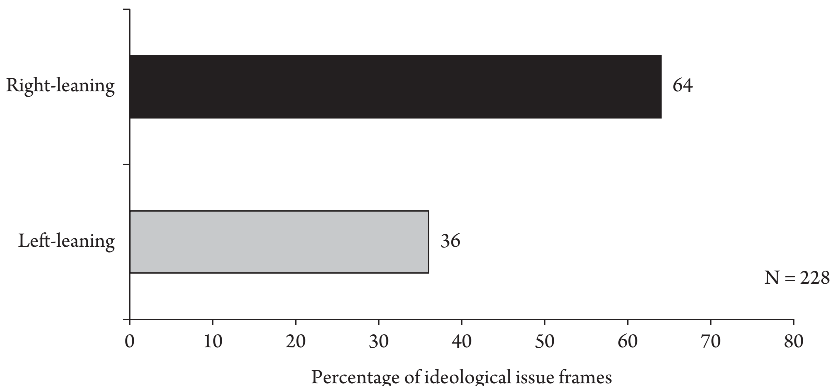

Figure 4.5 Welfare Reform News Coverage: Clinton Administration Issue Frames by Ideological Tendency

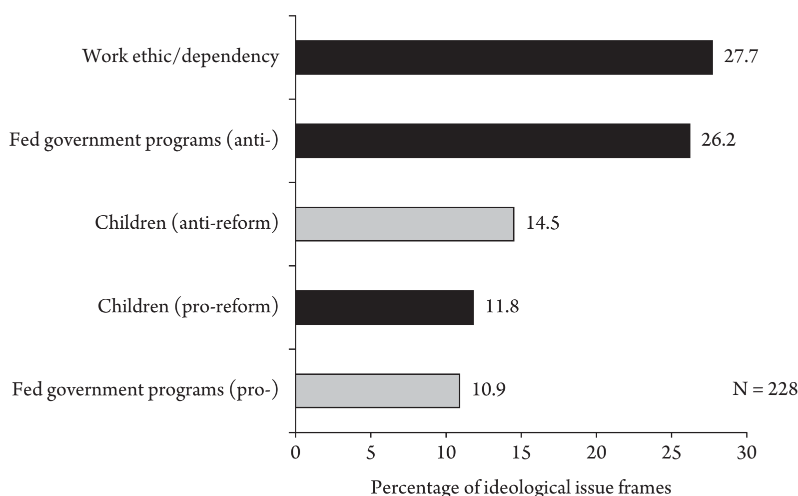

Figure 4.6 Specific Clinton Administration Issue Frames

benefits for 10 years or more (Phillips 1995a).[17] I discuss how media refraction shaped reporting of factual information in welfare coverage below.

During the welfare reform debate, the neoliberal anti-government theme—long a staple of New Right discourse and given perhaps its most concise and famous expression in Reagan's assertion in his first inaugural address that "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem"—often took concrete form in calls by GOP leaders to cede federal spending and regulatory authority to states and localities. This devolution initiative was grounded in assertions that lower levels of government could tailor policies to the specific socioeconomic needs and cultural tastes of their regions, and could run welfare programs more efficiently than (implicitly left-of-center) federal bureaucrats. Though they rarely appeared in mainstream news, critics worried that loosening federal benefits standards and oversight might allow state governments to shortchange needy residents. These provisions would expose welfare spending to the storms of state budget politics, especially when economic downturns that exacerbate poverty simultaneously drain state revenues, prompting local elites to cut social programs just as the need for social assistance outstrips set federal block grants.

My analysis shows that President Clinton never appeared on network TV or in *USA Today* publicly opposing turning over AFDC to the states and loosening federal standards for welfare assistance (although he did advocate for more Washington oversight than favored by GOP leaders). Clinton's message on government's role in domestic social policy is often understood as a split-the-difference, nuanced rhetoric advocating the need to downsize federal programs and make government less expensive and more efficient, while at the

same time retaining key areas of public spending and policy oversight. As he said in unveiling his "New Covenant" philosophy in the 1995 State of the Union speech, "We should not ask government to do what we should do for ourselves. We should rely on government as a partner to help us do more for ourselves and for each other" (*Washington Post* 1995). He also from time to time criticized Republican-crafted welfare cuts as "too tough on kids," although this was usually followed by the trope "too weak on work." However, in the mass-market news media that most Americans relied on, the anti-government strand of Clinton administration discourse was much more prevalent than the current advocating a retention of federal spending and oversight roles: at 26.2 percent, this issue frame comprised the second most frequent substantive policy message attributed to administration sources (see Figure 4.6). In contrast, messages supporting the federal government's role constituted a mere 10.9 percent of Clinton administration communications, representing a total of just 23 statements in 114 stories across nearly 20 months of news coverage.

Similarly, statements arguing specifically that GOP welfare initiatives would harm children by shredding pieces of the federal safety net that ought to protect them if their parents' benefits were cut off made up just 14.5 percent of Clinton administration messages in *USA Today* and TV coverage. This is not much more than the proportion of administration messages (11.8 percent) claiming that tough welfare policies would help children by encouraging responsible parenting, strict discipline, and "family values." Finally, only *once* across almost 20 months of coverage did the media attribute the "job creation" issue frame to a Clinton administration source (making up just 0.004 percent of total administration ideological issue framing). This was at a time when real wages for low- and middle-income people had been stagnant for at least two decades, and it was far from clear that most AFDC recipients were qualified for the bulk of the newly created jobs of the "Clinton recovery" (Cooper 1995). As Piven and Cloward (1993, 397) put it, "By the 1990s, the work-enforcing theme in anti-welfare rhetoric had become grandiose . . . By these accounts, rising unemployment, declining wage levels, and disappearing fringe benefits need not have concerned anyone."

Altogether, the consistent privileging of right-leaning frames in popular news coverage of welfare reform illustrates a key mechanism of media refraction: the narrowing of ideological discourse itself. Even amid limited attention to hard news in general and substantive policy news in particular, the pressures of an increasingly corporate-controlled and commercialized media environment encourage outlets to circumscribe the issue frames which fill that shrinking news space and airtime. These framing patterns are calibrated to the interaction of corporate journalistic practices and discourse in established centers of political power. During key economic and social welfare policy debates in the neoliberal

era, prominent government elites of both parties frequently voiced right-leaning issue frames. Turning to these high-profile elites as sources was an efficient use of journalists' dwindling time and professional resources. Right-leaning messages were also considered most appealing to the consumer audiences increasingly catered to in the drive for advertising dollars catalyzed by corporate media centralization and consolidation.

Informational Content

it is possible that consistent media reporting of factual information that raised doubts about neoliberal welfare reform encouraged opposition to the policy in opinion polls. Even if news coverage of welfare reform was relatively infrequent, superficial, and ideologically distorted, perhaps that coverage circulated concrete facts that undermined the rhetoric of New Right and New Democrat elites. If so, then we might evaluate the news media's democratic performance in the welfare debate more favorably. To investigate this possibility, I coded for the inclusion of two key items of information: (1) the percentage of welfare recipients by race (at the time, about 39 percent of AFDC clients were white and 37 percent were African American), and (2) the percentage of the federal budget (or of domestic spending) allocated to AFDC benefits.

These are not the only significant facts about welfare policy. Still, they are two clearly relevant items that have important critical implications for public opinion. Scholars have connected racial attitudes and stereotypes with opposition to welfare and redistributive policies generally (Fording 2003; Gilens 1999; Gilliam 1999; Quadagno 1994). Research has also identified linkages between racially distorted perceptions of welfare and benefits recipients, on the one hand, and TV news and entertainment exposure, on the other (Sotirovic 2001). In addition, Americans typically greatly overestimate federal welfare spending. This misperception is associated with support for program cuts (Kuklinski et al. 2000; Sotirovic 2001).

However, my analysis shows that mainstream news coverage in 1995 and 1996 provided very little factual information that might illuminate the concrete implications of neoliberal welfare reform, at least along these crucial dimensions of race and government spending. Some important information did appear relatively frequently in the news (especially in print): one of every five *USA Today* stories contained some quantitative information, often in graphic or tabular form (such as the percentage of teenage single mothers on welfare, and the dollar value of proposed spending cuts). However, only three times across nearly 20 months of coverage did *USA Today* and major TV news programs provide concrete information on the racial breakdown of the AFDC rolls. And just *once* during the policy debate were readers or viewers given the opportunity to learn

how much of the federal budget was spent on AFDC.[18] These results provide additional evidence for media refraction. As discussed in Chapter 3, commercial media logic militates against reporting concrete policy information. These tendencies are likely only reinforced in a political-economic environment that emphasizes efficient production of news geared toward desirable consumer audiences.

Altogether, the low volume, superficiality, elite-centrism, ideological narrowness, and factual deficiencies of welfare reform news coverage clearly illustrate media refraction processes in the neoliberal political-economic context. These characteristics are reflected in my overall story-level directional thrust analysis, depicted in Figure 4.7.[19] More than a quarter of news stories were "neutral or ambivalent," in large part due to the frequent media focus on internal governmental process and elite political tactics or strategy. However, reports that were favorable toward neoliberal welfare reform greatly outnumbered those that were unfavorable: more than five times as many print and TV stories generally supported benefit cutbacks, work mandates, and punitive sanctions as were generally critical of such measures. The mean level of favorability for all stories was 2.4 (more than halfway between "neutral" [3] and "somewhat favorable" [2]); the mean for only stories that shaded left or right ($N = 85$) was 2.2. This represents a significantly greater level of overall favorability toward neoliberal policy perspectives than during the debate over the 1981 economic plan described in Chapter 3 ($p < .05$).

Of course, news coverage of welfare reform was not homogeneous. More than 1 in every 10 stories clearly shaded against the proposed neoliberal welfare regime. Dissenting voices and issue frames were sprinkled throughout many other reports published or aired across the period. And less than 10 percent of stories fell on the most extreme right edge of the debate. In keeping with longstanding professional norms and practices of mainstream journalism,

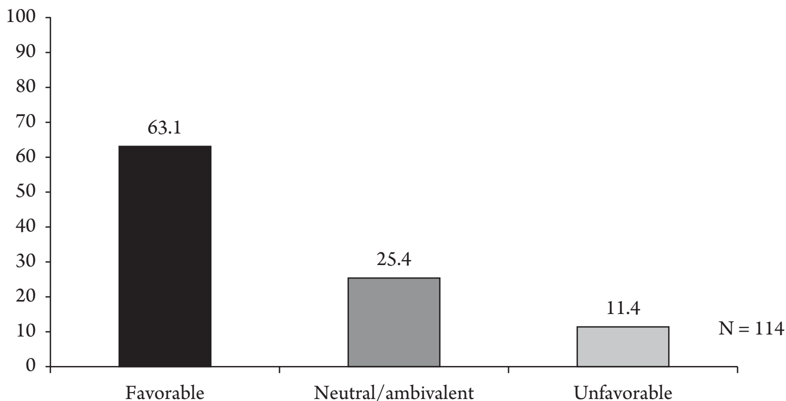

Figure 4.7 Welfare Reform News Coverage: Policy Favorability by Story

most reports included some internal pluralism in issue frames, even if it was almost entirely carried by the voices of major-party elites. Still, given expectations for robust ideological debate on domestic policy issues derived from the extremely limited legal restraints on U.S. political media coverage, the magnitude and consistency of rightward inflection in welfare reform news are conspicuous.

Racial Signals in Welfare Reform News

The fact that my content analysis did not include visual images limits its capacity to generate inferences about one crucial dimension of the neoliberal welfare reform debate: the intersection of poverty and race in the media. Many previous studies have documented the prevalence and public impact of racialized photographs and video footage in welfare policy news (Avery and Peffley 2003; Clawson and Trice 2000; Gilens 1999; van Doorn 2015). Curiously, my analysis of linguistic and verbal content shows that the racial implications of welfare reform were not an explicit part of political debate as depicted in *USA Today* or TV stories: none of the 114 news reports on the issue that appeared over nearly 20 months focused on the racial dimensions of welfare reform. Moreover, no sources who appeared in any of these stories invoked an explicitly racial frame when talking about the issue. In fact, the only times that race appeared explicitly in *USA Today* coverage of welfare during 1995 and 1996 were two occasions when the racial breakdown of AFDC recipients was included in graphical and tabular packages appended to stories whose text did not directly invoke race.[20]

Of course, the lack of explicit attention to racial dimensions in media coverage does not mean that race was absent as an ideological and cultural marker for policy debate in the news (Guardino 2018a, 454). To the contrary, 24.1 percent of TV reports on welfare reform in 1995 and 1996 included at least one video shot of African Americans depicted as current or former welfare recipients. Again, only rarely were these recipients offered a platform in the news to speak for themselves.[21] This supports the idea that welfare policy discourse in the media by the mid-1990s had become thoroughly racially coded. Racial frames in mainstream popular news and political culture were unlikely to be as direct or explicit as they were in the 1960s, 1970s, or even the 1980s. However, coded messages—messages that reflect and encourage more subtle "racial resentment," as opposed to "old-fashioned" racism (Kinder and Sanders 1996)—may be as politically consequential, and as likely to affect public opinion.

This explicit erasure of race from the verbal and textual elements of welfare reform news coverage at least avoids explicit racist stereotypes. But the suppression of race as a direct frame in news coverage might also reinforce and encourage avoidance of public discussion about the complex connections among race relations, the welfare system, poverty, and economic opportunity, including the roles of political-economic structures and public policies (Schram 2003). These connections have played a critical role in the neoliberal policy turn (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Any such structural contextualization of social problems—what Iyengar (1991) calls "thematic" framing—is rare in U.S. news coverage generally, and perhaps even less common in the neoliberal media environment of recent decades. Decontextualization and subtle racial coding may reflect another obstacle for democratic opinion formation in corporate-controlled, highly commercialized media systems. Gilens (1999, 206–207) suggests that subconscious racial stereotyping in news coverage of poverty could be mitigated if photo editors were more careful and deliberate. However, the conditions that enable such care and deliberation—never very common in the U.S. media system—appear to be eroding as neoliberalism has come to shape newswork.

Conclusion

Mainstream news outlets in 1995 and 1996 provided infrequent and elite-centric coverage of welfare reform that circulated limited concrete policy information. When media organizations did include substantive policy content and explicitly ideological messages relevant to the issue, that coverage was shaded decidedly in favor of key neoliberal-New Right themes, even if much of this rhetoric was voiced by the Clinton administration and other New Democrat sources. The strong inflection toward neoliberal messages raises a key question: Do these news coverage patterns reflect some substantively defensible, "representative" selection of available voices and views?

If there really was a thoroughgoing consensus in favor of neoliberal paternalist reforms to welfare shared by political elites, NGOs, and ordinary people alike, news outlets might not be expected to stray beyond that consensus. This is an especially important possibility to consider given that leading theories of public policy news coverage suggest that media outlets tend to mirror the range of voices and messages that emanate from governing elites. Did members of Congress voice significant criticism of neoliberal welfare reform? How about interest group and social movement representatives, or welfare recipients themselves?

Lost in Translation: How Corporate and Commercial Imperatives Distorted Welfare News

Media refraction explains why mainstream news outlets are unlikely to mechanically transmit the voices of major-party political elites or faithfully reflect the range of public policy debate among elected officials. It also explains why these outlets are even less likely to offer a substantively representative depiction of broader patterns of organized political debate and discourse occurring outside governmental venues. As in the debate over the Reagan economic plan, the evidence in this chapter shows that media refraction operated to generate news coverage of welfare reform that privileged neoliberal perspectives. In fact, when it comes to narrowing ideological discourse based on corporate- and commercially driven patterns of attention to political elite rhetoric, refraction was somewhat stronger in the 1995–1996 case than in the earlier policy episode.

This section describes challenges to the neoliberal welfare consensus from a variety of political actors, and compares the landscape of welfare reform opposition outside of media venues, on the one hand, to news coverage, on the other. I begin with the nongovernmental perspectives on welfare reform that were heavily marginalized in mainstream news coverage. I then turn to Clinton administration welfare policy rhetoric and congressional discourse in key weeks of legislative debate on PRWORA. While it is not possible to conduct a comprehensive census of mid-1990s welfare views from outside or inside government, evidence clearly shows that social movements, interest groups, policy organizations, and members of Congress frequently voiced skeptical and dissenting issue frames. However, news outlets operating according to corporate and commercial media imperatives reinforced by the neoliberal turn significantly underreported this opposition to neoliberal paternalist welfare reform.

Left-Leaning Nongovernmental Discourse

As reported in the previous section, 16.6 percent of total news sources in TV news and *USA Today* came from outside of government. Just 13 percent were nongovernmental voices (progressive interest groups and social movement organizations, academic and policy experts, and ordinary Americans) who might have questioned or opposed neoliberal welfare reform. Much of the mainstream national political establishment had by the mid-1990s become enamored of neoliberal paternalist approaches to welfare. But the period also featured vigorous criticism and opposition from grassroots organizations—including an active national group of former and current AFDC recipients—left-liberal think tanks, and academic sources. Corporate media, however, virtually ignored these voices during the 19-plus months leading up to enactment of PRWORA.

For example, in 1996, the Center on Law and Social Policy (CLASP) published a policy brief on the new welfare regime that questioned "the fundamental fairness of requiring work without a corresponding commitment to provide fair compensation for the work that is performed" (Savner 1996). Classified as still "on welfare," workfare clients and trainees (many employed by private agencies operating according to neoliberal principles), were not entitled to the collective bargaining rights and job-condition protections of legally recognized workers. Similarly, leading up to and in the immediate aftermath of PRWORA, many union officials and policy researchers publicly criticized neoliberal welfare reform for undercutting employment opportunities, wages, benefits, and job conditions by flooding labor markets with insecure and vulnerable former welfare recipients who lacked status as workers under labor law (Cook 1998). As the CLASP brief put it, the new law carried "serious risks for the displacement of incumbent workers" (Savner 1996). However, these potentially perverse effects of workfare programs on low-wage labor markets and on the living conditions of recipients themselves were never raised in network TV and *USA Today* news coverage. More generally, frequent calls by nongovernmental sources for massive, publicly funded job creation efforts stood in stark contrast to the 0.006 percent of ideological issue frames in the media that raised concerns about the number or quality of jobs available for former recipients.

In addition, an assertive welfare rights movement emerged in the mid-1960s to challenge the illegal denial of AFDC and other means-tested benefits (Piven and Cloward 1977, 1993). Through street demonstrations, occupations of welfare offices, and other disruptive tactics, and aided by federal court decisions, this movement ultimately helped secured benefit increases and relaxation of administrative rules. By the 1990s, the welfare rights movement had lost much of its energy. But the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) and allied groups did mobilize against neoliberal reform, staging dramatic protests; reaching out to social workers, attorneys, academics, and journalists; and working to forge connections with the U.S. labor movement (Cook 1998; Potash and Carpenter 1997). However, NWRO spokespeople or members were never quoted or paraphrased on evening TV news broadcasts or in *USA Today* in nearly two years of coverage leading to PRWORA's enactment. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that interest groups and movement organizations with limited material resources tend to receive very little mainstream media coverage (Thrall 2006) and face major obstacles in circulating issue frames to broader publics (Carragee and Roefs 2004). Messages propagated by groups that advocate for low-income people—especially those, like NWRO, that are largely led by people whose first-hand experience with poverty limits the financial resources they could contribute to their cause—face serious disadvantages in making their way into the mass media.

Corporate and commercial tendencies that increasingly drive media refraction in the neoliberal era reinforce these basic impediments to wider news coverage of policy debates. Not only is it costly and risky for news organizations to reach beyond the familiar corridors of government power, but it is precisely those groups (like the NWRO or homeless advocacy organizations) that lie furthest outside this commercial media spotlight that have the fewest resources for drawing news attention. Therefore, political-economic tendencies within the media themselves lead news outlets to focus ever more closely on sources that, because of their own political and economic power, already are in the best position to propagate their views. Moreover, it is hard to imagine an organization that neoliberalizing commercial news outlets would consider less likely to draw affluent, largely white, entertainment-oriented consumer audiences than one led by welfare recipients who use unconventional tactics to demand a "right to welfare" as part of a broader critique of unfettered capitalism.

But even when not depicted as part of NWRO or other political organizations, welfare recipients themselves rarely received a media platform to speak in their own voices about the impending neoliberal paternalist reforms. While welfare recipients made up a miniscule portion of sources in news coverage, major political elites, especially President Clinton, not infrequently attributed pro-reform views to (usually unnamed) recipients. Other studies have documented this mainstream media preference for elite ventriloquism over the actual voices of welfare recipients. Asen (1996) shows that the perspectives and experiences of welfare recipients were virtually excluded from congressional debate and media coverage regarding the GOP proposal that states be encouraged to place the children of unwed teenage mothers who lose AFDC eligibility in group homes or orphanages. Instead, government officials and policy experts attributed to these recipients views that favored neoliberal welfare reform.

Of course, like any other group of people, welfare recipients collectively should be expected to have held mixed and ambivalent views on a technically complex, culturally resonant, politically fraught, and (for them, above all others) immediately salient policy. Ethnographic research (Seccombe 1999) and qualitative analyses of the few public statements by welfare recipients in formal governmental venues (Sparks 2003) suggest as much. Recipients supported some aspects of AFDC, opposed others, and favored different kinds of reforms, including neoliberal paternalist approaches and social democratic alternatives that would increase benefits, provide generous child care and other social supports, and place recipients in public jobs paying living wages. Still, there is evidence of ample opposition to neoliberal welfare reform, and its underlying social and political assumptions, among current and former welfare recipients during the mid-1990s.

For instance, one recipient criticized the unfairness of a tax system that led some middle-class people to favor cuts in welfare. She suggested that the

single-minded neoliberal focus on forcing recipients into low-quality private-sector jobs was misplaced: "The rich people, they ain't kicking in enough damn taxes . . . The middle class can't take care of their families and us, and the prisoners, and all that too . . . When you get off AFDC, you're still going to be poor because the jobs around here aren't paying much" (Seccombe 1999, 160). Another criticized the neoliberal paternalist drive to place rigid time limits on benefits: "How can you put a timeline on someone's life? . . . I don't agree with that. Setting an arbitrary time limit on a system that is so dysfunctional to begin with that, you know, it's amazing that anyone gets off it" (Seecombe 1999, 168). Overall, as Sparks (2003, 171–172) puts it, "Marginalized at congressional hearings and mostly ignored or discounted by the press, welfare recipients ended up primarily on the sidelines of this critical dialogue . . . The result of this distortion is that some citizens' voices are consistently amplified in the context of democratic discussions, while others are muffled or silenced altogether."

To be sure, the limited invitations for current and former welfare recipients to testify in Congress—and, perhaps, many government officials' interest in selecting and channeling to the media the pro-neoliberal reform views of some recipients—made it more difficult for journalists to access skeptical recipients and report their views. But this is precisely the point of media refraction. With little time and few material resources to pursue in-depth stories, and increasing pressure to efficiently produce a news product that fulfills commercial and corporate demands, the neoliberal media complex tends to suppress journalists' capacity and incentives for creativity and broad-mindedness. This makes the news media less likely to seek out culturally, socially, and politically risky voices, especially if those voices oppose an apparent policy consensus among elites deemed legitimate because of their institutionalized positions of power. Reporters', editors', and producers' implicit (if partial) perceptions of audience policy interests are also likely to channel political discourse in favor of neoliberal perspectives: as an issue that is not immediately and obviously materially salient to the core consumer base whose attention is increasingly crucial to the commercial media complex, news outlets lack market incentives to produce rich and diverse coverage of welfare (Heider 2004). Journalists' implicit perceptions of audiences' racialized stereotypes may have interacted with these political-economic imperatives to further discourage reporting of dissenting perspectives on neoliberal welfare reform from left-leaning nongovernmental groups and recipients themselves.

Congressional Criticism of Neoliberal Welfare Reform

Media refraction also led to significant distortion of the range of welfare views voiced in the news by political actors from the authoritative centers of the national government. My analysis shows that the generally right-leaning views

expressed by the Clinton administration were accurately translated into mainstream news coverage. However, the considerably more ambivalent and oppositional perspectives advanced by Democratic members of Congress were distilled in ways that magnified views in favor of neoliberal reform and muted dissenting opinions. Of course, the administration's general support for neoliberal paternalist approaches to welfare indicates the extent to which neoliberal perspectives had gained force in the Democratic Party leadership, out of ideological principle, political-economic interest, strategic considerations, or some combination of these. Given mainstream media's consistent focus on high-profile elites, Clinton administration support in itself gives these views an advantage in the news. However, corporate and commercial imperatives bolstered by the neoliberalizing U.S. media system reinforced the tendency to marginalize oppositional perspectives on the issue from other Democrats that might have countered the views of administration officials and Republican elites.

To examine the relationship between Clinton administration welfare discourse and administration views as reported in the media, I conducted a content analysis of 23 public addresses on the issue delivered by the president from the beginning of his first term in 1993 through enactment of PRWORA in 1996.[22] My dataset includes every State of the Union address delivered in that time frame, Clinton's reactions to the congressional endorsement of PRWORA, his bill-signing speech, and several speeches on welfare archived by the U.S. Government Publishing Office (GPO).[23] I coded each paragraph that mentioned welfare policy as "in favor" of, "opposed" to, or "neutral/ambivalent" about neoliberal paternalist welfare reform (N = 206). Figure 4.8 shows the percentages of right-leaning and left-leaning paragraphs in the presidential dataset, as a proportion of all directional paragraphs.

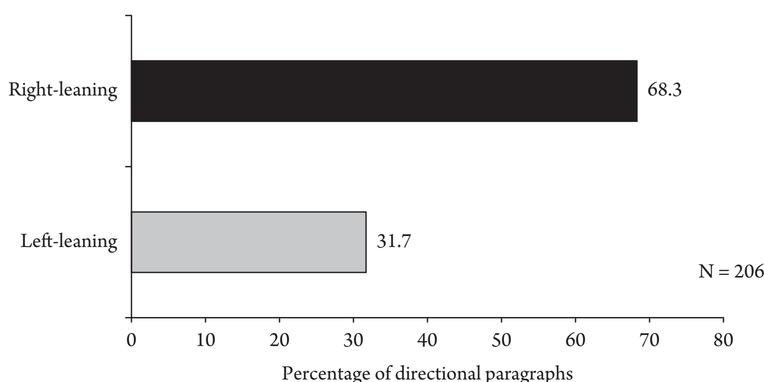

Figure 4.8 Directional Public Statements on Welfare Reform, President Bill Clinton, 1993–1996

As is clear from comparing this graph to the data in Figure 4.5, the 68.3 percent of Clinton's public statements that was right-leaning is close to the corresponding 64 percent of administration issue frames in media coverage of the issue. This difference between presidential discourse and administration messages in the news is not statistically significant, based on comparisons of mean left-right scores for Clinton statements and issue frames attributed to the administration. Not included in Figure 4.8 is the 40 percent of paragraphs from presidential discourse coded as neutral or ambivalent about neoliberal welfare reform. This is just one percentage point less than the proportion of total paragraphs that leaned toward the right. The large share of Clinton discourse that did not clearly favor or oppose neoliberal welfare reform provides further evidence of the administration's mixed stance, as the president often shifted seamlessly in a single paragraph from clear endorsement of neoliberal reforms, such as strict work requirements and time limits, to criticism of Republican-backed provisions he judged as too harsh on children or teenage mothers. Overall, these data suggest that the mainstream media reflected presidential discourse on welfare fairly accurately.

However, while the New Democrat administration of Bill Clinton vigorously backed most key aspects of neoliberal paternalist welfare reform (even if it expressed opposition to other aspects and contained some quiet conflict among cabinet officials and others), this was not true for the president's fellow partisans in Congress. Criticism and opposition among Democrats in the legislative branch, especially members of the Congressional Black Caucus and Congressional Progressive Caucus, were sustained and substantial. Half of House Democrats and nearly half of Democratic senators voted against PRWORA. Many others expressed public opposition to key aspects of the policy. However, as seen in Figure 4.2, non-administration Democratic elites made up just 10.5 percent of total voices in media coverage of welfare reform, including a mere 6.9 percent on TV news. Their discourse was swamped by the 37 percent of issue frames that came from Republicans, almost all of them members of Congress.

Following a procedure similar to that outlined in the last chapter for the Reagan economic plan, I analyzed every welfare-related statement made in each house of Congress during two key weeks leading up to each major floor vote on the legislation during the summer of 1996.[24] I coded a total of 686 individual statements about neoliberal welfare reform as "in favor" (2), "opposed" (0), or "neutral/ambivalent" (1).

Discourse on the floor of Congress was highly polarized by party. In the House, Democratic statements that communicated a clear pro-con position ran 92.6 percent against welfare reform, while GOP statements were an astounding 99.4 percent in favor. In the Senate, Democratic rhetoric was 86.3 percent opposed; Republican statements were 95.5 percent in favor. The somewhat less

opposed rhetoric among Senate Democrats and the greater percentage of ambivalent or neutral statements among members of that party in both chambers indicate the greater internal contestation among Democrats on welfare reform. The neoliberal-New Democrat tendencies represented in the Clinton administration had by the 1990s also had an impact in Congress.[25] In fact, two of the three most frequent Democratic speakers on the floor of Congress were New Democrats from Southern states: Senator John Breaux of Louisiana made 12 statements (tied with Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts), while Representative John Tanner of Tennessee led all House Democrats with 14 statements. Leading the Republicans were Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania (20 statements) and Representative Clay Shaw of Florida (13 statements). Despite greater intraparty conflict in the Democratic caucus, mean favorability scores show clear (and highly statistically significant) evidence of partisan division, with the average Republican statement carrying a rating of 1.83 (well on the favorable side of the mid-point), and the average Democratic statement garnering 0.46 (about halfway between neutral/ambivalent and opposed).

Democrats actually spoke about welfare reform somewhat more often than Republicans during these crucial legislative periods. Democrats made 52.6 percent of total floor statements, leading in both houses. This was in stark contrast to the GOP's more than three-to-one edge in news sourcing (see Figure 4.2). Put another way, members of Congress (almost all of them Democrats) made an average of nearly eight oppositional floor statements *per day* leading up to key votes. These statements came in addition to press releases, news conferences, speeches in Washington and in their home districts, and other venues through which members publicly communicated opposition to neoliberal welfare reform as the debate proceeded over nearly two years.

Overall, ideological issue framing in the media shaded significantly further in favor of neoliberal perspectives than did statements on the floor of Congress. Figure 4.9 shows the ideological tendency of total congressional statements during the weeks leading up to the key votes on welfare legislation.[26] While floor statements did tilt substantially rightward, the 15.4-percentage point net slant in congressional discourse was dwarfed by the corresponding 35-point slant in issue frames carried in the news media (see Figure 4.3). A skeptic might suggest that this legislative refraction differential of nearly 20 points is due largely to including Clinton administration framing in the media data, which, as we have seen, tilted substantially in favor of neoliberal interpretations. However, the magnitude of refraction only increases when administration messages are removed from the news content data.

As seen in Figure 4.10, non-Clinton administration issue framing was more heavily shaded in favor of neoliberal perspectives than was issue framing in the news overall. Modifying the analysis to include only non-administration voices

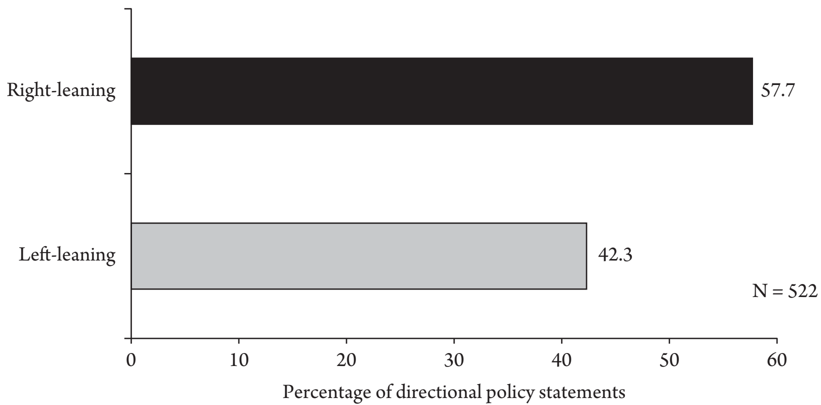

Figure 4.9 Directional Floor Statements on Welfare Reform, U.S. Congress (Senate and House)

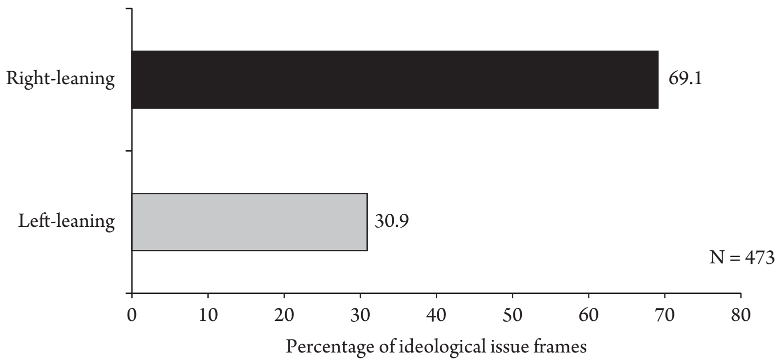

Figure 4.10 Welfare Reform News Coverage: Non-Clinton Administration Issue Frames by Ideological Tendency

increases the legislative refraction differential from 19.6 to 22.7 percentage points. Measured either way, ideological divergences between congressional statements and issue framing in the news are highly statistically significant ($p < .01$). Results from one of the few previous quantitative analyses of congressional discourse on welfare reform are consistent with a rightward legislative refraction differential. That study identified slightly more than half of committee hearing witnesses (including governmental and nongovernmental voices) as left-of-center (Mead 2011, 350, table 3).

A less powerful (yet still highly statistically significant) legislative refraction differential emerges when looking specifically at news media coverage during the same weeks for which I analyzed congressional floor statements (taking the Senate and the House together, July 12 through August 1, 1996). In the 21 total welfare stories that appeared in this period (11 in *USA Today*

and 10 on television), non-Clinton administration ideological issue framing tilted rightward 63.5 to 36.5 percent. Comparing this breakdown with congressional discourse yields a difference in net pro-neoliberal slant of 11.6 percentage points ($p < .01$).[27]

Still, two-thirds of the news stories that appeared during the key period of congressional debate were generally favorable toward neoliberal welfare reform, while just 14.3 percent were unfavorable. Put another way, 82.4 percent of stories produced during this period that leaned one way or the other were favorable toward welfare reform. As was the case during the analogous period in the debate over the Reagan economic plan, most oppositional issue frames circulated during these final weeks appeared toward the end of news stories: 56.9 percent of messages that opposed neoliberal welfare reform appeared in the seventh position or later, likely after many readers and viewers had ceased paying close attention.

This severe underreporting of elite opposition to neoliberal welfare reform—seen in the small share of news coverage devoted to non-Clinton administration Democratic elites, and in the proportional mismatch between ideological discourse in Congress and discourse in the news—illustrates what may be the most surprising mechanism of media refraction: the tendency of mainstream news outlets to narrow the range of ideological views they present even as compared to debate among elected political elites. As media outlets were increasingly driven to quickly produce news that generates saleable audiences for advertising markets, perhaps the simplest and most efficient way for journalists to achieve something resembling professionally normative balance was to assume that the issue frames expressed by the most visible political actor in the nation (President Clinton) reflected the views of his fellow party members in Congress. This propensity to rely on simple partisan labels rather than spend time, energy, and other resources to understand and report on the ideological tendencies that those labels often obscure, severely distorted the welfare policy positions staked out by national Democratic elected officials. The staffing austerity that has punctuated the neoliberalization of the media can only reinforce these dynamics. The fewer and less-experienced journalists remaining after mergers and buyouts have pushed better-paid veterans out of news organizations are less likely to have the subject-matter expertise to grasp the ideological complications of a difficult issue like welfare.

In 1995 and 1996, Democratic members of Congress clearly held formal authority (and at least some power) to delay, mitigate, or block key aspects of neoliberal welfare reform. For example, while Republicans controlled both houses, the GOP margin in the Senate was not large enough to head off a filibuster. Thus, power indexing theory (Zaller and Chiu 1996, 400) would seem to suggest that these elites should have appeared frequently in the news as opponents

of the policy. To be sure, rock-ribbed Republican support for benefit cutbacks and restrictions may have led mainstream journalists to perceive Democrats' ultimate power as limited. Still, leaving aside for the moment the crucial question of whether it serves democratic values to allocate news space and time through speculative calculations of the relative power of political actors, the evidence in this chapter and the last complicates existing theories of public policy coverage. During the Reagan economic plan debate, Democrats held a firm majority in one legislative chamber, and frequently and vehemently spoke against the Reagan tax plan and similar neoliberal policies on the floor of Congress. By any measure, the Democratic caucus in both houses was, on balance, opposed to these policies. And there was no Democratic president to which the media could plausibly peg institutionally sanctioned pro-neoliberal views. Still, there was a significant right-leaning mismatch between congressional discourse and news coverage in that earlier case. Whether gauged by the volume of news attention to Democratic opposition or by proportional distributions of ideological issue framing, this mismatch was reproduced in somewhat greater magnitude during the welfare reform debate. That debate occurred in a neoliberalized institutional environment that only reinforced the U.S. media system's premium on advertiser-friendly news that requires as few resources as possible to produce.

Some professional journalistic values and practices can work in tension with corporate and commercial tendencies. Under favorable political-economic conditions, these counterpressures may generate more ideologically diverse and substantively robust news coverage of certain policy debates. But as corporate and commercial imperatives are shored up by the neoliberalization of media institutions, norms that call for reporting diverse perspectives, and practices such as independent, policy-relevant background research, tend to fade. In these circumstances, professional codes and routines more closely aligned with profit imperatives, such as deference to high-profile government officials and story formulas focused on elite strategic dramas, become more potent.

Evidence of media refraction in the welfare reform episode suggests that news organizations again failed to meet even "representative liberal" criteria for a democratic public sphere (accurately reflecting the volume, range, and proportions of policy debate among relevant elected officials), let alone more demanding "participatory liberal," "discursive," or "constructionist" standards (Feree et al. 2002, ch. 6). If democracy requires that major channels of public communication consistently present an extensive and ideologically diverse selection of issue interpretations as voiced by elected officials, the evidence from two pivotal economic and social welfare policy debates from the last 40 years indicates that the U.S. news media fell short. If democracy additionally requires that the media reach beyond the halls of government, reporting ideological viewpoints from knowledgeable and affected people who can provide non-elite

perspectives that enrich policy debate and the expression of informed public opinion, then the mainstream media failed spectacularly both in the early 1980s and the mid-1990s.

Neoliberalism itself was in part responsible for the news media's performance in covering these signature neoliberal policy proposals. In the welfare reform debate, this is seen in the increasing prominence and bipartisan popularity of neoliberal views in government, which is the origin of the lion's share of voices and issue frames carried in the mainstream media. But neoliberal tendencies are also evident in the political-economic structures and institutional imperatives that shape the media. By encouraging speed, simplicity, and the routine generation of content that best commodifies audiences, corporate consolidation and commercialization have reinforced conditions especially conducive to hollowing out the substance of public policy news, and to narrowing ideological debate on economic and social welfare issues. In this environment, conventional Beltway wisdom, mainstream political common sense, and lowest-common-denominator images of consumer audience preferences become increasingly attractive as low-effort, low-cost, low-risk journalistic touchstones.

Media refraction constitutes another way in which the neoliberal trend has exhibited sharp tensions with egalitarian democracy (Brown 2015). In the welfare reform case specifically, a policy design that denigrated the social and political status of poor people (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011), and the process of public debate through the news media, both contradicted norms of political equality and popular participation. But how might these patterns of news coverage be connected to public opinion on welfare? After all, poll results seemingly opposed to AFDC and related programs long precede the debate over PRWORA.

News Coverage and Popular Support for Welfare Reform

The substantively thin and ideologically distorted news climate generated by the neoliberalized U.S. commercial media system likely had important implications for how people answered poll questions about welfare policy. Evidence suggests that this media coverage shaped an opinion climate that communicated popular support for the historic retrenchment and market reorientation of the welfare state enacted in 1996. Surveys during the period immediately leading up to and spanning the debate over PRWORA generally indicated strong support for key neoliberal paternalist components of the law, especially strict work requirements, stringent time limits, and sanctions to punish or deter deviant

behaviors like teenage pregnancy. Generally unfavorable attitudes toward the federal welfare system (and AFDC in particular) had been evident in polls beginning in the mid-1960s. However, these sentiments reached all-time highs in the mid-1990s (Pereira and Van Ryzin 1998; Weaver 2002; Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1995).

Table 4.1 shows selected results from commercial and academic surveys conducted during this crucial period of political debate. The bottom row reports mean levels of favorability and opposition to neoliberal welfare reform in the 109 relevant questions asked of representative national samples by credible polling organizations.[28] In addition to strong support for particular conservative policy components enshrined in PRWORA, these surveys indicate a pattern of underlying public orientations and beliefs centered on the pathologies

Table 4.1 **Selected Public Opinion Results on Welfare (1994–1996)**

	Agree	*Disagree*
Mandate work for recipients.	92	6
Two-year limit.	88	9
Poor are too dependent on government.	85	13
Most recipients are dependent forever.	82	11
Public assistance discourages work.	77	20
Jobs are available for most who want to work.	72	24
Public assistance system is not working well.	72	25
Welfare does more harm than good (family breakup, work ethic).	69	23
Government spends too much on welfare.	66	27
Shift control over welfare to states.	63	30
People not doing enough to help themselves is main cause of poverty.	60	30
Families generally get more welfare benefits than they need.	58	21
Government should not do more to help needy.	56	41
Most could get along without welfare if they tried.	48	35
Mean (N = 109)	**60.0**	**32.0**

Note: These data are from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research IPOLL Database (https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/CFIDE/cf/action/home/index.cfm). Cell entries represent percentages of survey respondents.

(and the prevalence) of long-term government dependency, the ineffectiveness of the current welfare system, the over-generosity of benefits, and individualistic explanations for poverty. This reading of public opinion has led many political actors, observers, and scholars to conclude that the 1996 law, despite its potential flaws and limitations on social and economic grounds, was a case in which elites democratically responded to grassroots, popular sentiment (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, 278–283; Wilentz 2008, 364–367). Several factors, however, urge caution in accepting this interpretation.

First, reported public attitudes toward government programs for the poor have long depended (perhaps more than many issues) on specific question wording. In particular, poll items about "welfare" spending have elicited highly negative reactions, while those probing attitudes toward "assistance to the poor" or similar constructions, and those that mention sympathetic groups like "poor children," have often garnered majority support (Gilens 1999; Weaver 2002; Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1995).[29] This suggests that issue-framing processes have worked for years to affect reported opinions on welfare. Question wording and news discourse alike have consistently triggered right-leaning considerations in public thinking. This may have made such ideas chronically accessible for large numbers of survey respondents. In other words, hearing the word *welfare* may call to mind a host of negative thoughts, images, and stereotypes—many of them racialized—consistently activated and elaborated over time through media and other socialization mechanisms. This is a particular context in which long-term cultivation of sociopolitical perceptions (Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorielli 2012) might support shorter-term effects on opinions in specific policy debates. As Sotirovic (2001, 752) observes, "Vivid, distinctive, and familiar media information and images may impose themselves in the mind of the audience and begin to serve as a point of reference. Once activated, this information and these images guide further processing and recall and may produce systematic distortions in perceptions."

Moreover, concrete knowledge of government policy is typically very low among the American public (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996); in particular, respondents greatly overestimate the amount of federal money spent on means-tested social programs in general, and on welfare specifically (Kuklinski et al. 2000; Sotirovic 2001; Weaver 2002, 109). Misperceptions such as these have likely interacted with cultural considerations to encourage negative public reactions.

News coverage has been shown to play a significant role in shaping poll results on welfare (e.g., Sotirovic 2001), particularly via racial perceptions as activated through news photographs and video footage (Gilens 1999; Gilliam 1999). Gilens (1999) demonstrates persuasively that increasing racialization of

poverty in mainstream media coverage beginning in the mid-1960s dampened reported public support for "welfare" programs. This research suggests that news coverage—and the elite rhetoric it largely circulates, even if in partial and distorted form—bears significant responsibility for increasingly negative public attitudes toward welfare. As neoliberalization of the U.S. political economy proceeded and the New Right and New Democrats gathered political momentum, this coverage may have prepared a favorable opinion climate for conservative changes before the debate that resulted in PRWORA began in earnest.[30]

Of course, real-world polling results and real-world media coverage cannot be neatly separated. Much conventional public opinion research, including insightful work about the neoliberal turn in U.S. public policy, is limited by its tendency to sideline, overlook, or assume away political communication environments (Althaus et al. 2011). In Chapter 5, I use an experiment to demonstrate that the patterns of media coverage documented in my case studies can play a significant causal role in shaping survey results—and, crucially, that different kinds of news discourse could encourage very different expressions of public opinion than have been typical in surveys on specific policy issues across the neoliberal era. For now, I identify key elements in mid-1990s public opinion suggesting that the volume and texture of short-term media coverage bore substantial responsibility for signals of popular support for the elite political push against AFDC and associated programs for the poor.

Public backing for requiring low-income mothers of very young children to work outside the home increased substantially in 1994 and 1995 (Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1995, 608–609), just as neoliberal paternalist rhetoric took center stage in mainstream news coverage. Moreover, reported support for explanations of poverty based on individual effort increased by 12 percentage points from November 1993 to April 1995 (Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1995, 615); support for cutting the amount of money provided to all people on welfare increased by 14 points from May 1992 to September 1995 (Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1995, 626); and agreement with the notion that too much is spent on welfare increased by 11 percentage points from November 1993 to April 1995 (Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1995, 619). Similar trends in these and other relevant questions are apparent in data spanning 1992 through 1994, which predate my media content analyses. However, it is plausible that patterns of news coverage during that period very similar to those I describe in this chapter played a key role in shaping such survey responses. Clinton's New Democrat arguments on welfare reform during his presidential run and first two years in the White House, along with the Republicans' aggressive national congressional campaign, likely generated fodder for media refraction processes before the Gingrich Congress took office.

Returning to Table 4.1, several specific poll results suggest connections between media coverage of welfare reform and public opinion. The large majorities agreeing with the right-leaning, neoliberal paternalist response to the first five questions reflect the most frequently occurring ideological message in mainstream media coverage. The work ethic/dependency frame is also evident in responses to the 11th, 12th, and 14th entries in the table ("people not doing enough," "families generally get more," and "most could get along"), and is partially reflected in the item labeled "welfare does more harm than good." The second most frequent ideological message in news coverage (the anti-federal government frame) may also be indirectly reflected in these survey questions: Any program that encourages or allows "most recipients to be dependent forever" is probably not a program associated with public faith in government. Three other poll items on which significant majorities expressed support for the neoliberal position are more explicitly reflective of the anti-government frame: "Government spends too much on welfare," "Shift control over welfare to states," and "Government should not do more to help needy." Finally, the striking 72 percent of Americans maintaining that "jobs are available for most who want to work" (sixth line of Table 4.1) calls to mind the virtual absence of mainstream news coverage that linked the welfare debate to the condition of the U.S. (and global) economy (see Figure 4.1). This survey response also evokes the near media blackout of welfare reform criticism focused on the availability or quality of jobs for former AFDC recipients.

These poll results may also be linked to the limited concrete factual information on welfare policy offered by popular news media in 1995 and 1996. Arguably, all the data in Table 4.1 suggest the negative racial coding attached to welfare for many decades (Gilens 1999; Kinder and Sanders 1996). In turn, the sparse media reporting on the racial and ethnic composition of the welfare recipient population—such information was circulated just three times across almost 20 months—posed little challenge to racialized patterns of public opinion. Finally, survey results that evoke federal government control, spending, and overall social provision for the poor suggest clear connections to the media's failure to inform Americans how much of the federal budget was actually devoted to welfare. Again, this information appeared just once in the more than 100 news stories I analyzed.

Media discourse during the welfare reform debate suggests that significant and sustained activation of the ideological considerations that undergird public opinion occurred almost entirely in support of neoliberal paternalist benefit cutbacks and restrictions, punitive sanctions, and the exposure of poor mothers and their children to low-wage labor markets. Under such conditions of public communication, it is difficult to imagine how poll results on welfare

in the mid-1990s could have looked much different than they did. The observation that cash welfare “was almost devoid of powerful and vocal defenders within government” (Weaver 2002, 116) is accurate on its own terms. But such characterizations raise the question of what it means in the context of contemporary mass communication for a policy to have “powerful and vocal defenders” (or critics) who might play a part in shaping public opinion. While neoliberal welfare reform may have lacked critics who were powerful according to dominant corporate and commercial media definitions, critics were both numerous and vocal. Yet again, the media’s role as public arbiter of the ideological parameters and informational bases of policy debate is central. While opponents of the conservative push for welfare reform made up a large share of Democrats in Congress, they formed a very small share of news content. Neoliberalization of the corporate media system itself made it less likely that these members of Congress, nongovernmental voices, and even Clinton administration officials who took left-of-center perspectives on some aspect of neoliberal welfare reform would appear in the news. Corporate and commercial pressures that have been reinforced in recent decades encouraged meager, shallow, and narrow coverage of welfare reform in the media venues upon which most Americans relied when forming their opinions.

Conclusion

Welfare rarely makes national headlines in mainstream news outlets today. However, it remains a crucial policy issue for the overall neoliberal trajectory in American politics, and the 1995–1996 debate decidedly shaped its socioeconomic and political dimensions. For example, states have exploited the flexibility to restrict social benefits that PRWORA afforded to push grotesquely punitive and stigmatizing provisions, such as Kansas’s bid to limit daily TANF benefits to $25, while banning withdrawals from ATM machines at nail salons, movie theaters, tattoo parlors, liquor stores, casinos—even on cruise ships (Covert 2015). A growing number of states also test welfare recipients for illegal drugs; more than half the states have enacted or introduced such legislation since 2010, despite no credible empirical evidence that recipients use drugs at higher rates than the general population (Lewis and Kenefick 2011; National Conference of State Legislatures 2016). President Donald Trump and congressional Republicans have also made moves to reform what they depict as an overly generous and permissive public assistance system, extending neoliberal paternalism beyond TANF to food stamps, Medicaid, and public housing benefits. While I have not conducted a content analysis of elite statements or media coverage on

welfare in recent years, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the neoliberal-New Right discourse that dominated the debate over PRWORA continues in force.[31] For example, state Senator Michael O'Donnell evoked the work ethic/dependency frame when he proclaimed that the Kansas restrictions were designed to go "back to the 'T' and mak(e) sure this is 'temporary'" (Covert 2015). And President Trump (2018) borrowed one of former President Clinton's rhetorical staples when he proclaimed in a State of the Union address, "We can lift our citizens from welfare to work, from dependence to independence, and from poverty to prosperity." The continuing political and policy salience of the neoliberal makeover of social programs despite rising rates of extreme poverty and growing economic inequality underscores the need to examine the anti-welfare tide historically. Evidence from this chapter suggests that mainstream media coverage goes a long way toward explaining why so many Americans endorsed PRWORA in public opinion polls.

Comparing the 1995–1996 welfare case and the 1981 Reagan economic plan case yields a few important conclusions. Just 11.4 percent of welfare stories were generally unfavorable toward the neoliberal paternalist agenda (including a mere 1.8 percent—or two news reports across nearly 20 months of coverage—that were "very unfavorable"); 63.1 percent were favorable. During the 1981 debate, while only 12.7 percent of stories were either "very" or "somewhat" unfavorable, 3.2 percent fell into the former category. Moreover, a substantially smaller share of reports (49.7 percent) was favorable toward Reaganite economic policy than was favorable toward welfare reform. As discussed in Chapter 2, my study relies on a "memory-based" model of opinion formation, in which the specific ideological messages that people encounter over time lead to the policy attitudes they express (Zaller and Feldman 1992). However, it is possible that some people instead form a series of "online" evaluations. In other words, they might update their impressions of policy proposals based on running tallies that derive from the overall content of each news report they encounter, and then forget the specific bases of these tallies (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). If so, while the balance of audience judgments would have shaded strongly rightward in each policy case, it would have been more heavily weighted in favor of neoliberal policy during the welfare episode (which featured one unfavorable story for every 5.5 favorable reports) than during debate over the 1981 economic plan (one unfavorable news report for every 3.9 favorable reports). Intensified media refraction is also evident in the much lower volume of welfare reform news in any form, and in the less frequent reporting of substantive, policy-relevant information. Viewers and readers encountered at least one item of concrete information on proposed neoliberal policy changes approximately once every 4.1 stories in 1981, compared to just once every 8.1 stories in 1995 and 1996.

Despites these differences, media refraction operated in the Reagan economic plan and welfare reform cases alike to de-emphasize the substantive dimensions of policy debates and to ideologically circumscribe the substantive news that was produced. As neoliberalism took hold, the center of gravity for economic and social welfare policy in the national Democratic Party leadership shifted to the right. This made it less likely that major partisan officials would stake out sharply divergent positions on these issues. Media themselves adapted to the elite-level rightward turn both by following the lead of this more limited landscape of institutional policy contestation, and by muffling remaining elite left-of-center voices, such as congressional Democrats who opposed neoliberal paternalist welfare reform. News outlets, increasingly integrated into national chains and giant transindustrial conglomerates, also offered less policy coverage; media responded to intensified pressures to draw commercial audiences and generate profits by focusing less on hard political news in general—and even less on issues like welfare, which were thought to turn off the affluent consumer base and entertainment-oriented viewers that drive ratings and advertising revenue. As these processes occurred, even the serious public policy coverage that mainstream media did provide was increasingly filtered, as news outlets reacted to the financial constraints of neoliberalization in their own industry by relying ever more on standardized, simplifying norms and practices that amplified the voices of official political actors who advocated neoliberal economic and social welfare policies.

As in 1981, skeptical and oppositional voices and perspectives on welfare were available in public discourse, both outside and inside the government. But these voices and perspectives were effectively marginalized or ignored by a mainstream media complex that by 1995 and 1996 was itself deeply implicated in neoliberalism. This suggests that the level of popular support for neoliberal welfare reform expressed in polls—sometimes depicted as a bottom-up, democratic wave endorsing the new policy regime—*could* have been different, had the landscape of news coverage been different. In the next chapter, I present an experimental analysis demonstrating that patterns of refracted media discourse like those that have characterized key neoliberal economic and social welfare policy debates can shape public opinion.

5

Framing Inequality at the Ground Level

An Experiment

When stalwart antitax conservative Steve Forbes challenged Texas Governor George W. Bush during a 2000 Republican presidential primary debate to promise never to raise taxes, Bush shot back with an answer that would define his domestic policy agenda and help put to rest the ghost of his father's political struggles a decade earlier: "This is not only 'no new taxes,'" the younger Bush told the traditionally tax-averse New Hampshire crowd. "This is 'tax cuts, so help me God'" (ABC 2000). Bush survived a primary campaign punctuated by ads from Forbes and others that aggressively questioned his tax-cutting credentials.[1] But after his historically narrow general election triumph, the prospects for major legislative action on the issue appeared dim. Not only did most polls register anemic public support for tax cuts during the campaign, but the Senate was nearly evenly divided along party lines, and political residue in the aftermath of the election dispute seemed to threaten the president's governing agenda. Yet, less than six months after taking office, Bush had managed to sign the largest federal tax reduction since the landmark 1981 Reagan plan that inaugurated the neoliberal policy turn. President Bush not only had marshaled through Congress a plan that closely mirrored his campaign proposal, but he set a pattern of economic and social welfare policy success that featured three more substantial tax cuts disproportionately benefiting upper-income people and large corporations.[2] Indeed, until the 2008 crash temporarily downsized the richest Americans' portfolios, economic inequality increased substantially during the Bush years, continuing a trend that has been largely unabated since the mid-1970s.[3]

Throughout the 2000 campaign season, public polls and academic surveys suggested that Americans ranked tax cuts well below other domestic policy priorities, such as increased spending on public education or health care

services. Tax cuts did not seem to be an urgent public demand, and were not perceived by most people to be a sensible use of what was then a sizeable budget surplus (Hacker and Pierson 2005a, 2005b). Yet by spring 2001, substantial majorities—including among low- and middle-income citizens, whose finances stood to benefit the least—backed the massively unequal Bush plan. Scholars have puzzled over this support for a policy that promised to only further increase economic inequality. Bartels (2005) finds that even many Americans who saw the trend of rising inequality as a significant problem proceeded to endorse the 2001 tax plan and a similarly regressive 2003 plan. Moreover, general survey questions for decades have shown strong support for increasing—and miniscule support for decreasing—taxes on wealthy people and big corporations (Page and Jacobs 2009; Page and Shapiro 1992).

However, the potential role of the mass media in the Bush tax cuts debate has received scant research attention. As with other key policy debates since the Reagan era, there is some evidence to suggest that news coverage may have influenced many people to support the Bush plans (Bell and Entman 2011; Guardino 2007; Limbert and Bullock 2009). What is lacking are studies that can more firmly ground that explanation by explicitly linking actual media content that characterized these debates, on the one hand, to people's opinions on specific neoliberal policies, on the other—and can do so while accounting for other forces that shape public attitudes. The experiment described in this chapter is designed to do just that. To set the stage for this analysis of public opinion, I also explore whether earlier patterns of ideologically narrow media coverage translated to a neoliberal policy debate during the Obama presidency.

Consequently, this chapter engages three key questions: (1) Is the right-leaning news coverage of neoliberal policy proposals that I describe in case studies from the 1980s and 1990s consistent with coverage of a comparable debate in the 2000s? (2) To what extent can such patterns of media coverage shape public opinion to support policies that contribute to economic inequality? (3) Which individual-level factors might moderate, limit or facilitate these effects?

I start by summarizing key aspects of the heavily neoliberalized U.S. corporate and commercial news system of the early 21st century. I then present the results of a content analysis describing mainstream media coverage of the 2010 debate over extending the Bush tax cuts. By this time, rapid technological change and shifting market dynamics had transformed many dimensions of the broader media system. However, my analysis of *USA Today* coverage of the tax plan extension debate generally corroborates the effects of media refraction seen in coverage of the 1981 Reagan economic plan and welfare reform. Key patterns include a marginalization of nongovernmental sources and ordinary citizens' voices, significant inflection toward right-leaning issue frames, and overall

favorability toward the neoliberal ideas and policy provisions that formed the core of the Bush plans. Media refraction dynamics were also evident in *USA Today*'s continued fascination with process-oriented, strategic, and tactical dimensions of the debate.

I next describe the design of an online experiment fielded to a demographically diverse sample of Americans in the summer of 2016. Study participants read or watched fictitious but realistic versions of print and television news stories about a debate over lowering the corporate tax rate. The results demonstrate that right-leaning news coverage that closely mirrors my historical case studies can shape public opinion to support neoliberal economic policies. People without strong partisan predispositions were particularly susceptible to the effects of narrow issue framing. Perhaps most importantly, my experiment shows that right-leaning news coverage can encourage support even among many people who might be expected to oppose neoliberal policies that promote economic inequality. These include low- and middle-income Americans, and people who adhere generally to egalitarian values. This evidence suggests that a more ideologically diverse mainstream news landscape less impacted by the political-economic tendencies that drive media refraction would have prompted substantially greater opposition to neoliberal policies among politically pivotal groups during key debates in recent decades.

Media effects, of course, are far from uniform or all-powerful. Near the end of the chapter, I demonstrate that higher levels of factual knowledge about politics and public policy can insulate low- and middle-income people from the influence of ideologically narrow news coverage. This knowledge can help such people more coherently connect their material interests to their stances on specific economic policies. However, the very low—and unequal—levels of knowledge among the public at large caution against assuming that such knowledge in itself provides broad protection against ideological distortions in the news media.

Neoliberal Media Coverage in the Wake of the Great Recession

By the time of Barack Obama's first inauguration, the U.S. media system had changed significantly since the dawn of the neoliberal era. An explosion of online news and digital political content—not to mention the maturation of cable television—had altered both supply- and demand-side factors that shape how political discourse on policy issues is conveyed to the public. Economic fallout from the Great Recession interacted with the rise of these new technologies to speed the ongoing implosion of much of the print newspaper industry. The few

papers that continued to thrive were mainly prestige publications providing specialized news and information appealing primarily to affluent and highly educated readers (McChesney and Nichols 2010). There is reason to believe that many of these recent and ongoing changes in the media system are intensifying the powerful corporate and commercial imperatives of the American news landscape (see Chapter 6).

During the Obama era, prominent commercial media outlets—including those that remained committed in principle to conventional journalistic practices, with their democratic strengths and limitations—were extremely popular sources of news. National and local network TV news programs continued to command large audiences. While cable news grew significantly starting in the mid-1990s, its older broadcast cousins still attracted greater overall attention from ordinary Americans (Prior 2013). As during the 1995–1996 welfare reform debate, *USA Today* was the nation's second-highest circulation daily newspaper in 2010, including print and online editions (Shea 2010). Readerships for its closest rivals (the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*) also remained more concentrated among highly educated, affluent professionals, and wealthy investors and corporate managers. Nearly every one of the most popular online news sites was owned and operated by a major corporate, commercial media organization. Most of these organizations have long held prominent positions in the offline world (Mutz and Young 2011, 1027–1028). *USA Today* has been among the leaders in online news traffic from 2010 though the time of this writing (Alexa 2018; Olmstead, Mitchell, and Rosenstiel 2011). "McPaper's" persistent reach and potential influence on broad patterns of public policy opinion exemplify the underappreciated continuities of the U.S. corporate media system, even amid important shifts generated by the rise of digital and online news.

Late 2010 witnessed another major political debate in the neoliberal turn in U.S. public policy. As a tumultuous first two years in office wound to a close and an anemic recovery from the Great Recession dragged on, President Obama faced the decision of whether to push for renewing all, part, or none of the Bush administration's 2001 and 2003 tax cuts. These policies were based largely on Reagan's pioneering supply-side model that has exacerbated rising income and wealth inequality over recent decades (Krugman 2001; Steuerle 2008). Running largely on a neoliberal agenda of upwardly redistributive tax cuts, regulatory rollbacks and domestic spending cuts, Republicans retook control of Congress that fall in a wave of conservative fervor sparked by the Tea Party movement (Guardino and Snyder 2012). However, Democrats would retain their bicameral majorities until the new Congress was seated in 2011. And left-leaning members loudly protested plans to renew the Bush policies. Still, facing a Senate filibuster, Obama in December 2010 agreed to extend all the tax cuts,

in exchange for continuing unemployment benefits that had been enacted on an emergency basis in response to the recession.

To examine whether earlier patterns in commercial media coverage of neoliberal policy issues continued into the Obama era, I analyzed all *USA Today* stories about the Bush tax plan extension debate produced from September 1 through December 17, 2010 (when the president signed the Tax Relief, Unemployment Insurance Reauthorization, and Job Creation Act of 2010).[4] As seen in Figure 5.1, more than 60 percent of ideological issue frames in the news favored full extension of the neoliberal Bush tax cuts.

While this proportion is not quite as high as in coverage of the Reagan economic plan and neoliberal welfare reform, its ideological inflection is substantial. The somewhat lower percentage of right-leaning frames is hardly surprising. A Democrat occupied the White House at the time, and for most of the debate, Obama staked out a compromise position, advocating for renewing the Bush income tax cuts for all but those making more than $250,000 a year. Elite power alignments in government are a crucial element in media refraction processes, and we should expect news outlets to have frequently circulated the left-leaning aspects of the president's policy position. Moreover, during the period of analysis, Democrats retained their majority status in Congress. Still, mainstream media circulated issue frames in favor of the neoliberal Bush tax cuts significantly more frequently than left-leaning frames. In fact, Republican sources (43.7 percent) appeared in the news nearly twice as often as did non-administration Democrats (23.4 percent). Obama administration voices comprised just 16.4 percent of the total.

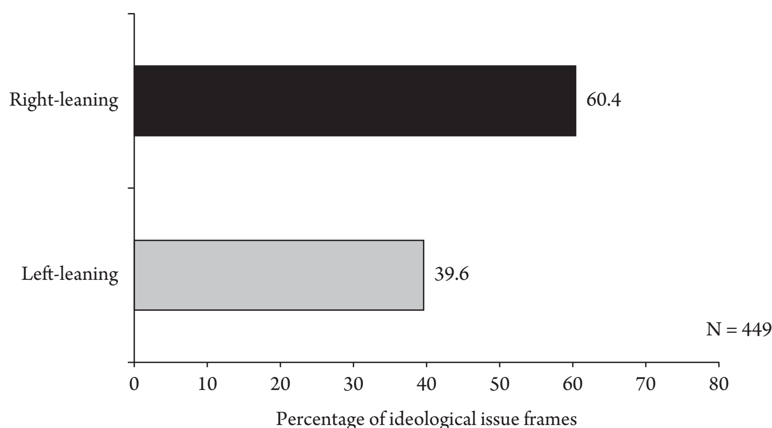

Figure 5.1 Bush Tax Plan Extension News Coverage: Issue Frames by Ideological Tendency

This inflection in favor of neoliberal policy perspectives is also evident in the overall directional thrust of news reports, shown in Figure 5.2.[5] As seen in the graph, *USA Today* stories favorable to full extension of the Bush tax cuts outpaced those that were unfavorable by nearly four to one. Taking into account only those news reports shaded either to the left or to the right, 81.1 percent supported this neoliberal policy. This overall favorability toward full extension of the Bush tax plans resembled Associated Press coverage of the Reagan debate three decades earlier: 49.4 percent of print stories generally supported the Reagan policy, compared to 16.7 percent opposed. Similarly, print news outlets in each of these tax debates devoted little attention to the class dimensions of the policies. Just 15.3 percent of AP stories in 1981 focused on the distributional aspects of the Reagan policy; a mere 11.6 percent of *USA Today* reports in 2010 carried this primary focus.

Beyond ideological issue framing and the overall rightward inclination of news stories, the debate over extending the Bush tax cuts illustrates two other enduring media refraction effects: (1) heavy reliance on official sources, and (2) marginalization of policy substance and ideological argument overall. Nearly identical proportions of voices in *USA Today* coverage of the Bush tax cuts extension (85 percent) and AP coverage of the Reagan economic plan (84.7 percent) were made up of political elites. And 33.3 percent of news reports during the 2010 episode focused primarily on process-oriented, strategic, and tactical dimensions of the debate, compared to 35.8 percent of print stories during the Reagan-era case.

News coverage of the 2010 tax debate was far from homogeneous. But the evidence suggests that substantively thin, elite-driven, and ideologically narrow coverage of major neoliberal policy debates continued into the 21st century. Indeed,

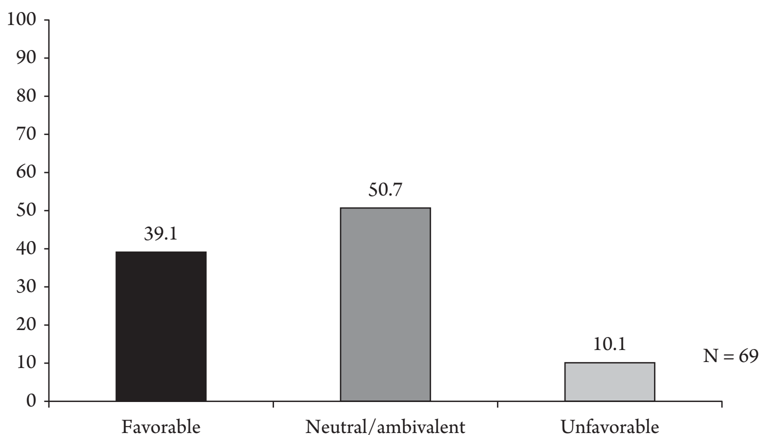

Figure 5.2 Bush Tax Plan Extension News Coverage: Policy Favorability by Story

a previous analysis of every evening network television news report during the five-month debate over the initial 2001 Bush tax cuts shows that 79.4 percent of ideological issue frames were right-leaning (Guardino 2007). Adding my analysis of the 2017 debate over repealing Obamacare reported in the next chapter, more than 68 percent of ideological frames appearing in corporate news coverage over a 36-year period supported neoliberal policy perspectives.[6]

Despite major technological and economic changes in the media industry, there is strong reason to believe that this kind of coverage (even if it is increasingly delivered online) remains positioned to shape public policy preferences—especially those expressed by the large and politically crucial fraction of Americans without strong partisan commitments. But can this news coverage actually influence opinions on specific policies that people offer in the surveys that generate poll results? The experiment described in the next section was devised to answer that question.

Experimental Design

Can ideologically narrow configurations of issue framing in the news cause people to express support for neoliberal policies? Would more ideologically diverse coverage lead to different patterns of opinion? In particular, can right-leaning issue framing—which my case studies show was common in key policy debates during the neoliberal turn—make some people more likely to express policy positions that contradict their tangible material interests or broader sociopolitical values? And which individual-level factors might facilitate or limit such effects? In order to gauge these possible media influences and use a more rigorous approach to build on the suggestive evidence for opinion effects presented in Chapters 3 and 4, I conducted an experiment in the summer of 2016 using Amazon.com's online Mechanical Turk (MTurk) service.

One of the key strengths of the study I report here is its realism. Of course, the main purpose of social scientific experiments is to test whether the apparent connections between cause(s) and effect(s) we observe and infer in the "real world" (for example, how media coverage may appear to shape policy opinions) are the product of the actual processes that our theories and observations suggest, rather than due to other factors we have not identified. In that sense, precise fidelity to every aspect of "natural" political environments is neither possible nor necessary in experimental settings (Fridkin and Kenney 2010). At the same time, experiments have sometimes been justly criticized for creating situations that are so artificial that they can say very little about what might happen in the much messier political and social world. For these reasons, when resources permit, media-effects experiments are increasingly

conducted with random samples of the population (rather than the typical samples of college undergraduates), in order to better generalize results outside of laboratory settings (Vavreck and Iyengar 2011). Experiments are also beginning to use more realistic media portrayals, rather than highly stylized and sterilized depictions that do not reflect the actual form and content of news stories (Gaines and Kuklinski 2011).

Such realism is especially important in a large-scale analysis like the one in this book, which explores the effects on actual public opinion (as expressed in polls) of a specific, historically embedded media tendency (ideologically narrow commercial news coverage of economic and social welfare policy issues). As such, in this experiment I was careful to design news stories that closely mimicked (1) the form, tone, and most popular sources of actual media coverage of neoliberal policy issues; (2) the specific patterns of news content that my analyses of real-world debates from the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s have identified; and (3) an actual neoliberal policy proposal that has been a major subject of debate in recent years. In addition, I wanted to deliver these stories to a sample of Americans that closely reflected both the audiences for mainstream, corporate news sources, and the respondents to the national polls on economic and social welfare policy issues that my broader study seeks to explain.

Sample and Survey

A total of 1,055 adult U.S. residents participated in the experiment.[7] While MTurk samples are not statistically representative of the American population, previous studies have shown them to be much more demographically diverse and generalizable than are college student samples (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling 2011). My sample mirrors the U.S. population reasonably closely in terms of most demographic characteristics, and is far more representative than the student samples still often used in experiments. Study participants were much more highly educated than the population as a whole. As is usual for MTurk, the sample was also considerably more Democratic- and liberal-identifying than the population: 45 percent of Americans identified as Democratic (or leaning Democratic) in 2016 (Jones 2016), compared to 57.2 percent in my study, while 24 percent of the U.S. population identified as liberal (Saad 2016), compared to 56.6 percent in my study. As explained below, however, far from threatening the validity of my findings, these differences strongly suggest that the effects of neoliberal issue framing in the news in this experiment likely *understate* the influence of such media coverage on policy opinions in the real world. Full sample characteristics are available in Appendix B1.[8]

The first part of my survey contained standard demographic items, questions on media use, and partisan and ideological identification items; a series of questions that measures participants' support for egalitarian values; and two batteries of political and economic/social welfare policy knowledge questions. The key policy opinion question asked participants: "On a scale of 0 to 6 (0 = oppose very strongly and 6 = favor very strongly), how much do you favor or oppose the tax plan that is being debated by politicians in Washington, D.C.?" This question was asked again after participants read or watched the various news stories to which they were randomly assigned.[9] Several apolitical distraction questions were also placed in the survey after the pre-test policy opinion question but prior to the news stories. The entire survey is reproduced in Appendix B1.

News Treatments

Before answering the post-test questions, study participants either read a news story modeled on the online edition of a popular national daily newspaper or watched a video modeled on the online version of a national broadcast network news program. These stories concerned a proposal to lower the federal corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 28 percent. All the treatments included the same basic information about the plan, along with configurations of left- and right-leaning quotes and paraphrased messages from President Obama, Republican and Democratic members of Congress, and prominent nongovernmental groups and policy experts on each side of the issue.

Lowering corporate taxes has long been a key elite priority during the neoliberal turn in public policy, pursued consistently by Republicans and by many Democrats. In 2012, Obama proposed lowering the corporate tax rate through a similar plan as the one depicted in the news stories. Republicans have long called for cutting (or eliminating) this tax on corporate profits. In 2017, President Donald Trump signed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which reduced the corporate rate to 21 percent. This legislation—which also lowers the top income tax rate, eliminates the corporate alternative minimum tax and doubles the value of assets exempt from the estate tax (Bloomberg News 2017)—is likely to worsen already historic levels of economic inequality in the United States (Huang, Herrera, and Duke 2017).

Participants in the experiment were randomly assigned to read or watch one of eight news stories. These stories varied along two dimensions: (1) ideological direction of issue framing (left-leaning, mixed, right-leaning, or control), and (2) media format (print or TV). I included the second dimension primarily because of the consistently massive audiences drawn to commercial television news across the neoliberal era, rather than to gauge possible differences

in the effects of ideologically narrow issue framing by media format.[10] With minor exceptions, randomization to experimental conditions worked properly. While there were no statistically significant differences on demographic traits or predispositional variables among those assigned to left-leaning, mixed, right-leaning, or control conditions as a whole, a few small differences emerged when measuring subsample characteristics by media format.[11] However, results in this chapter are based on comparing effects among participants in left-leaning, mixed, right-leaning, and control conditions (combining newspaper and TV stories in each category). Therefore, randomization procedures were effective in allowing me to test the impacts of ideological issue framing in the news while controlling for extraneous factors. In all the regression models discussed below, I also apply statistical controls for partisanship, ideology, and a range of demographic traits.

I designed the news stories to closely mirror the substance of U.S. mass-market media coverage of economic and social welfare policy during the neoliberal era. In the left-leaning treatments, left-leaning issue frames outnumbered right-leaning issue frames by a ratio of two to one. In the mixed treatments, left- and right-leaning issue frames were equal in number. In the right-leaning treatments, right-leaning issue frames outnumbered left-leaning issue frames two to one. Proportions are derived directly from my findings in Chapters 3 and 4 that right-leaning frames made up 65 percent to 70 percent of all ideological frames in coverage of the Reagan economic plan and neoliberal welfare reform. These results are largely corroborated by analyses of the 2010 Bush tax cuts extension debate reported previously, the 2017 debate over repealing Obamacare discussed in the next chapter, and the 2001 Bush tax plan debate (Guardino 2007).

Aside from ideological framing differences, each set of print and TV treatment stories was virtually identical. The control stories did not pertain to politics (the newspaper report was about an actor joining the cast of a superhero TV drama and the television story was a breaking-news piece about severe flooding in West Virginia).[12] In addition, the appearance, form, and style of each report were carefully calibrated to mimic popular daily newspaper and network TV news coverage, including length in words or seconds, complexity of language, font sizes and shapes, and narrative structure.[13]

In all the news stories, I held constant the "strength" of issue frames so as to focus on the effects of different ideological distributions of these frames. Following Chong and Druckman (2007a) and others, frame strength refers to (1) the credibility of the sources to which frames are attached and (2) the cultural resonance of particular issue frames. I ensured plausible source credibility by connecting all frames to national-level, major-party political elites (many of

whom, such as Obama, House Speaker Paul Ryan, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, would be familiar to moderately politically aware Americans at the time of the study), or actors from high-profile interest groups engaged with national tax policy. I ensured plausible cultural resonance by using issue frames drawn from the analyses of media coverage in my policy case studies, which were grounded in readings of primary and secondary source materials concerning the neoliberal policy turn. Keep in mind that this experiment was not designed to compare the influence of *particular* left- or right-leaning issue frames. Rather, it was devised to gauge the effects of overall ideological diversity or homogeneity in a realistic way by presenting collective framing configurations that point in different ideological directions. Minor differences in frame strength or likely individual-level variation in the extent to which particular frames were culturally resonant with study participants, as well as differences in the extent to which participants deemed particular sources credible, pose no obstacles to my analysis.

Expectations of Opinion Effects

Previous research suggests that high-quality political information and communication environments encourage people to connect specific electoral contests and policy debates, on the one hand, to their predispositions (i.e., their material interests or sociopolitical values), on the other. Low-quality information and communication environments make it more likely that people will fail to connect (or will misconnect) these political contests and issue debates to their predispositions (Lau, Smith, and Fiske 1991; McCall and Manza 2011; Shen and Edwards 2005; Sniderman and Theriault 2004).

In the context of debates over specific neoliberal economic and social welfare policies, the most relevant predispositions are best measured by (1) annual income (to represent people's immediate material interests in the policy outcome) and (2) level of egalitarianism (to represent basic sociopolitical values in this issue domain). These predispositions are closely linked to the particular policy debates that I focus on in this book, as well as to broader political concerns about rising economic inequality and persistent poverty that have characterized the neoliberal era.

A widely cited literature provides evidence that citizens' individual material interests often play a weak role in driving policy preferences (Green and Gerkin 1989). However, research suggests that self-interest can strongly affect expressed preferences on economic policy issues (e.g., Lau and Sears 1981), and when the material stakes of alternatives are made clear by providing citizens with relevant information that may be used as evaluative criteria (Chong, Citrin,

and Conley 2001). Each of these conditions was met in my study. My egalitarianism measure is based on a battery of eight questions tapping people's general orientations toward socioeconomic inequality, including their overall concern about rising inequality, beliefs about the sources of inequality, and general views of government's role in mitigating inequality. Three of these questions are frequently used in major academic surveys, such as the American National Election Studies. The others were specially designed for my study.[14]

Like all measures, my measures of material and social predispositions are partial and imperfect. However, they are solidly grounded in extensive empirical and theoretical work on the role of public opinion in the politics of economic inequality. Previous research has sought to understand why lower- and middle-income people have tended to express support for specific tax policies that disproportionately benefit the wealthy (Bartels 2005; Hacker and Pierson 2005a), and scholars have long explored the complex linkages between Americans' abstract political-economic beliefs and their views about relevant public policies (Feldman and Zaller 1992; Page and Jacobs 2009; Sniderman and Theriault 2004). My approach also heeds Zaller's (1992, 27) admonition to use "domain-specific measures of political values" (rather than general partisan or ideological indicators) to explore the possible influence of media coverage on policy opinions.

In this study, I extend existing research on linkages between political communication environments and people's preferences regarding specific public policies by exploring how patterns of ideological issue framing in the media may shape attitudes among subgroups who might generally be expected to oppose neoliberal economic policies. Therefore, I predicted that *low- and middle-income* participants would express greater support for the neoliberal corporate tax cut after reading or watching right-leaning news coverage, compared to similar participants exposed to mixed or left-leaning coverage. I expected an analogous outcome for *highly egalitarian* participants. After being exposed to right-leaning news coverage, these participants would express greater support for the tax plan than would similar participants who read or watched mixed or left-leaning coverage.

Research also indicates that the command of information about general political processes, actors, and institutions (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), and about specific issues (Gilens 2001; Kuklinski et al. 2000), can help people express policy opinions that conform with their basic values and interests. Moreover, these forms of knowledge seem to help people express more ideologically coherent and politically relevant worldviews (Michaud, Carlisle, and Smith 2009). Factual knowledge encourages chronic attention to the political world (Price and Zaller 1993) and sets a context within which people can better

evaluate the implications of arguments and rhetoric they encounter through the news media during issue debates.

Therefore, I expected that low- and middle-income participants in my study with greater levels of *political and policy knowledge* would express less support for the neoliberal corporate tax cut after they read or watched right-leaning news coverage than would similar participants with lower levels of knowledge. I expected an analogous process to operate for highly egalitarian study participants: more knowledgeable people with strong egalitarian values would report lower levels of support for this tax cut after being exposed to right-leaning news coverage than would similar participants with lower levels of knowledge. I discuss my measures of general political knowledge and specific policy knowledge in reporting the results below.

Aggregate Effects of Ideological Issue Framing

Before discussing the effects of ideological issue framing in the media among low- and middle-income people, those with differing levels of egalitarianism, and those with differing levels of political knowledge, I set the stage by reporting basic results. I first discuss effects on policy opinion among the sample as a whole, and end this section by exploring the role of partisanship and ideological identification. These analyses constitute an initial step in determining how participants' opinions on corporate tax policy may have been influenced by the ideological configurations of issue frames in the stories they read or watched.

Descriptive Results

The most politically significant potential effects of right-leaning ideological issue framing in news coverage are those that occur specifically among people we might otherwise expect to oppose neoliberal policies. However, the theoretical foundation for my study suggests that different ideological issue-framing environments should also affect policy opinions overall. Moreover, those effects should be over and above differences in policy preferences that might be due to demographic traits and basic partisan or ideological identities. Evidence of such effects would lay a strong basis for the idea that ideological issue framing in the media matters for the opinions on specific economic policy issues reflected in polls. This is precisely what my study shows.

I begin with descriptive results. Figure 5.3 depicts opinion toward the neoliberal corporate tax cut proposal among study participants after they have read or watched right-leaning, ideologically mixed, left-leaning, and apolitical (control)

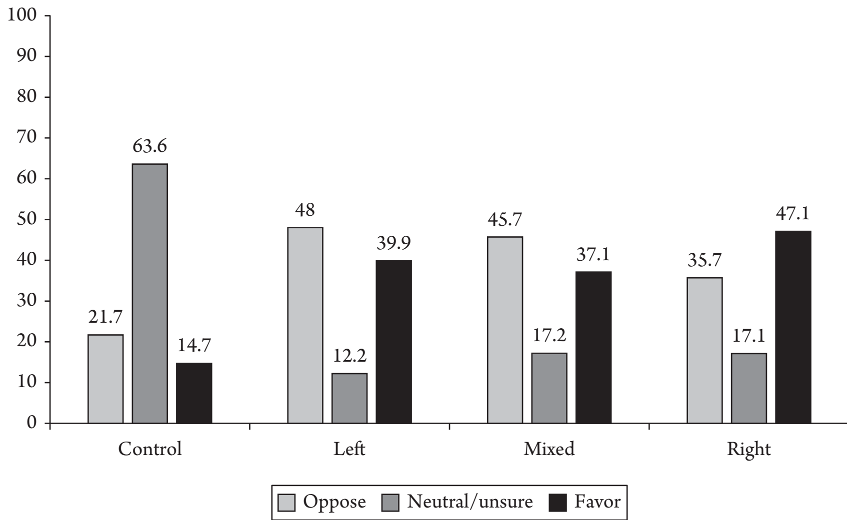

Figure 5.3 Public Opinion on Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy after Media Exposure

news coverage.[15] Favorability toward the policy was significantly higher among those exposed to the right-leaning stories than those exposed to the ideologically mixed or left-leaning stories ($p < .05$ for both comparisons). While favorability toward the neoliberal tax plan was slightly higher among participants in the left-leaning condition than those in the mixed condition, this difference is not statistically significant.

I focus on post-test results, because they are the most substantively meaningful. At the time of the study, no particular major tax plan was under public debate in Washington, so participants were not referring to a single, specific policy when they expressed their preferences before reading or watching the news stories in the experiment. Still, comparing pre- and post-media exposure responses clearly supports the results in Figure 5.3. Before reading or watching the stories, all opinion differences among participants across the different conditions were statistically insignificant. After media exposure, clear differences emerged in line with the news coverage that people were exposed to. Both the increase in policy favorability from the pre- to the post- stage among those in the right-leaning condition and the increases in opposition among those in the left-leaning and ideologically mixed conditions were statistically significant ($p < .05$). As expected, there were no significant changes in opinion from the pre- to the post-media exposure stages among participants in the control conditions.[16]

These results indicate that, on the whole, participants in the study seemed to react to the left-leaning and ideologically mixed stories similarly. However, my content analyses show that right-leaning stories have been the norm in

mainstream commercial media coverage of key neoliberal policy debates over recent decades. Moreover, much content in neutral or ideologically ambivalent stories has been nonsubstantive, focusing on elite political strategy and tactics or internal governmental procedure, rather than on principled arguments for or against different approaches to economic and social welfare policy. In addition, analyses of ideological issue framing in these debates consistently demonstrate the predominance of specific right-leaning messages. Thus, so far, the experiment suggests that if substantive news coverage featuring relatively high frequencies of left-leaning issue frames attached to a range of voices had been more frequent, public opinion in important political episodes would have been less favorable to neoliberal policy proposals. This would likely be the case whether those framing distributions were primarily manifested in internal pluralism (large numbers of ideologically mixed stories) or external pluralism (relatively even numbers of right- and left-leaning stories). Still, because clearly left-leaning news stories were rare in all the case studies, I focus most comparisons of media effects in this chapter on right-leaning vs. ideologically mixed coverage.

Characteristics of my study sample suggest that, taken as a whole, participants were considerably more resistant to the effects of right-leaning ideological issue framing than a random sample of Americans adults would be. My sample is more heavily Democratic and liberal than the overall population, so its basic partisan and ideological inclinations should tend to dampen levels of favorability toward neoliberal economic policy. The sample is also much more highly educated (and politically knowledgeable) than are representative samples of Americans. This means that framing effects which ran counter to people's immediate material interests and social values were probably less prevalent in the sample. These factors suggest that the overall outcome of right-leaning issue framing in news coverage is likely to be greater in the real world today than my experiment shows. Similarly, media-induced support for particular neoliberal policies in previous debates was also likely to have been greater than my results demonstrate here, even apart from the fact that the media technology of the 1980s and 1990s offered fewer widely accessible left-leaning alternative news options than have emerged in more recent years.

Regression Models

To more precisely measure these aggregate influences, I estimated a series of logistic regression models showing the effects of news exposure on post-test policy preferences across the conditions. These analyses confirm the primary descriptive findings: exposure to the right-leaning media stories increased the odds that participants would express support for the corporate tax cut plan, compared with exposure to the other stories. Effects persisted with controls for party and

ideological identification, views of President Obama's performance in office, and key demographic traits.

Controlling for party, ideology, race, sex, age, and education level, exposure to the right-leaning news stories increased the likelihood of supporting the neoliberal tax plan, when compared with exposure to ideologically mixed stories ($p < .01$).[17] In this model, exposure to left-leaning news coverage did not produce significant effects. Using a similar model but defining the control condition (apolitical news) as the comparison category, exposure to right-leaning, left-leaning, and ideologically mixed media coverage alike increased support for the tax plan. But the magnitude of effects from exposure to right-leaning coverage was much greater than that generated by exposure to the other stories.[18] Logistic regression is an appropriate technique for this analysis because it measures the likelihood that people will express policy support (as opposed to opposition, neutrality, or uncertainty) without regard to the intensity of that support. This measure most closely mirrors how the vast majority of poll results during real-world policy debates are publicly reported. Such poll results shape the political environment that influences and legitimates elite policy decisions.

Still, a series of comparable ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models generated even stronger findings. Applying the same demographic and political controls, these analyses show that reading or watching right-leaning news coverage caused greater support for neoliberal tax policy among the sample as a whole, as compared to ideologically mixed coverage (p. = .003) or left-leaning coverage (p. = .010). This suggests that reading or watching a small volume of news coverage which mirrors prevailing commercial media content can cause movement toward greater support for neoliberal policies, even if that movement does not always register as a shift into the "favorable" category. This is important, because outside of necessarily artificial settings like the one in my experiment, these media effects may be cumulative as policy debates proceed over periods of weeks or months. Ideologically narrow mainstream media coverage is likely to be particularly powerful in shaping opinions among the large numbers of people who do not frequently attend to alternative sources of news (such as public media, foreign news outlets that cover U.S. policy debates, or left-leaning advocacy journalism and activist websites). These OLS regression results suggest that exposure over time to commercial news coverage during these kinds of policy debates may have strong effects on public attitudes.

My findings that right-leaning news stories made participants significantly more likely to endorse the neoliberal corporate tax cut plan regardless of party affiliation and ratings of President Obama are especially important. The role of partisan predispositions and partisan cue-taking in shaping policy opinions has been well documented (Berinsky 2009; Bullock 2011; Cohen 2003). As is the case in real new stories, most ideological issue frames in my experiment

were attached to prominent partisan leaders in government. A skeptic might also claim that many study participants supported the policy because Obama (the most prominent partisan leader of them all) endorsed it in all versions of the treatment stories. However, my results strongly suggest that participants based their policy positions not on officials' partisan identities, nor on presidential cues, but rather on the ideological configuration of substantive issue frames in the treatments. To be sure, partisan and ideological identification were the only other factors that significantly affected overall opinion toward the neoliberal tax plan (with Republicans and self-described conservatives more supportive than Democrats and liberals). Nevertheless, these results show clearly that ideological issue framing has significant effects that are independent of partisan and ideological labels, as well as other key individual-level traits.

Moving the Middle

At the same time, my analyses indicate that self-identified political independents, weak partisans, and ideological moderates were much more likely to support the corporate tax cut plan after being exposed to right-leaning news coverage than were strong party identifiers, and liberals or conservatives, respectively. Figure 5.4 shows policy opinion among these 770 participants after they read or watched apolitical, left-leaning, ideologically mixed, or right-leaning coverage.[19]

As the graph indicates, participants with weaker partisan or ideological identities expressed substantially greater support for the neoliberal corporate

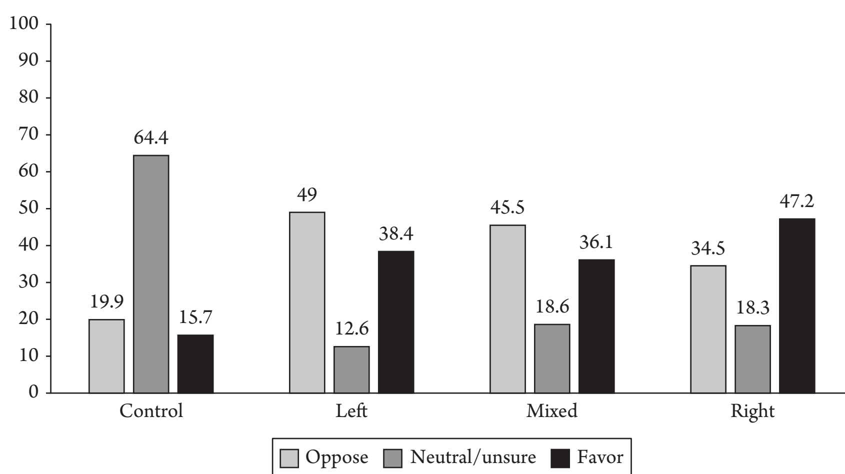

Figure 5.4 Opinion on Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy after Media Exposure: Independents, Weak Partisans, and Moderates

tax cut plan in the right- than in the left-leaning treatments ($p < .05$). Policy support among participants in the right-leaning condition was also higher than among those in the mixed condition ($p < .05$). Regression analyses confirm these results. Controlling for race, sex, age, and level of education, exposure to right-leaning news coverage (compared with exposure to ideologically mixed coverage) made independents, weak partisans, and moderates significantly more likely to support the neoliberal corporate tax plan ($p < .05$). Reading or watching media coverage (regardless of its ideological slant) had no statistically significant effect on the policy preferences expressed by participants with stronger partisan and ideological identities.[20]

This is a critical finding, as these middle segments of the population are often politically decisive in turning the tide of popular support during policy debates (not to mention election campaigns). And in the context of the real-world policy debates in my study, the opinions they express—especially about specific, often technical economic and social welfare issues—tend to be more malleable. This is not only because they have weaker partisan and ideological predispositions (and, usually, lower levels of factual political and policy knowledge), but also because they are likely to engage with news coverage in ways that make them more prone to being influenced by the issue frames they encounter.

Self-indentified moderates, independents, and (to a lesser extent) weak partisans are unlikely to take advantage of today's fragmented electronic media environment to actively select news outlets in order to expose themselves to like-minded content. When they pay attention to political or public policy-related news, they are more likely to receive it from sources that adhere to mainstream journalistic conventions, such as commercial network and local TV news, and mass-market newspapers (in print, online, or via social media). Moreover, when moderates, independents, and weak partisans engage with news coverage, their political predispositions provide little insulation from the influence of ideological issue framing. To be sure, the media environment of the last two decades has generated a proliferation of non-news options for the less politically interested, thereby shrinking the total audience for news and concentrating the politically knowledgeable and active within that audience (Prior 2007). Still, many Americans have neither dropped out of news exposure entirely, nor migrated to the new, often partisan outlets available on cable TV and online. These people pay enough attention to national political and policy-related news to be sufficiently exposed to ideological issue framing, but not enough to have formed strong partisan predispositions or high levels of political knowledge that would moderate the effects of such framing. Underappreciated by many pundits and scholars, this large portion of the U.S. population remains an important bloc for political elites to win over in service of their policy goals.

According to National Election Studies data, in 2012, self-identified moderates made up nearly a third of the population. Importantly, these respondents were concentrated among low- and middle-income people, and those with lower levels of education. Independents and weak partisans comprised a full 65 percent of Americans.[21]

Having established that ideological issue framing in the media can shape public opinion on neoliberal policy independent of demographic traits and basic political identities, and that those without strong partisan and ideological attachments are most susceptible to this influence, I turn to a crucial segment of Americans who have arguably been most harmed by these policies: low- and middle-income people. Does right-leaning news coverage cause some of these people to take positions on specific policies that contradict their immediate material interests?

Effects by Income: Narrow Issue Framing and Material Interests

Can the ideologically narrow coverage of neoliberal economic and social welfare policies that mainstream commercial news outlets have produced in recent decades shape the opinions of those who are most materially disadvantaged by these policies? Cutting the corporate tax rate provides no immediate, direct benefit for low- and middle-income people. Moreover, evidence that this neoliberal policy prescription carries significant longer-term, indirect benefits for such constituencies through job creation, wage growth, or increased savings from rising equity markets is—at best—weak (Bivens 2017; Wile 2017).

If the media system is playing its democratic role by facilitating informative and expansive public discussions of important issues, we might expect most low- and middle-income Americans to express opposition to (or, at least, fail to express support for) specific neoliberal policies that sustain or exacerbate economic inequality. Or, if media coverage is less important for public opinion than I argue, we might expect such people to strongly resist the effects of ideological issue framing that promotes interpretations which contradict their material interests. In that case, low- and middle-income people would be able to rely on their concrete experiences (or those of people they know) to anchor opinions in opposition to policies that worsen their conditions, no matter what the news might suggest. My experiment shows clearly, however, that ideologically narrow media coverage can increase support for neoliberal policies even among those whose material predispositions would lead them to oppose such policies.

Descriptive Results

Figure 5.5 shows opinion toward the neoliberal tax plan among low- and middle-income participants after they read or watched the various versions of news coverage. I define as low and middle income those who reported annual household incomes of $54,999 or below.[22] As the graph shows, these 662 participants expressed much greater support for the corporate tax cut plan in the right- than in the left-leaning treatments ($p < .05$). Policy support among participants in the right-leaning conditions was also substantially higher than among those who saw the ideologically mixed stories ($p < .05$).

In fact, after reading or watching right-leaning news coverage, a plurality of low- and middle-income participants endorsed the neoliberal corporate tax plan. Again, comparing pre- and post-media exposure responses backs up these results. Before the news stories, opinion differences among participants were minimal and statistically insignificant. After exposure, clear differences emerged in line with the news coverage. Both the increase in policy favorability from the pre- to the post-media exposure stage among low- and middle-income people in the right-leaning condition, and the increases in opposition among those in the left-leaning and ideologically mixed conditions, were statistically significant ($p < .05$). There were no significant changes in policy preferences from pre- to post-media exposure stages among participants assigned to the control conditions.[23]

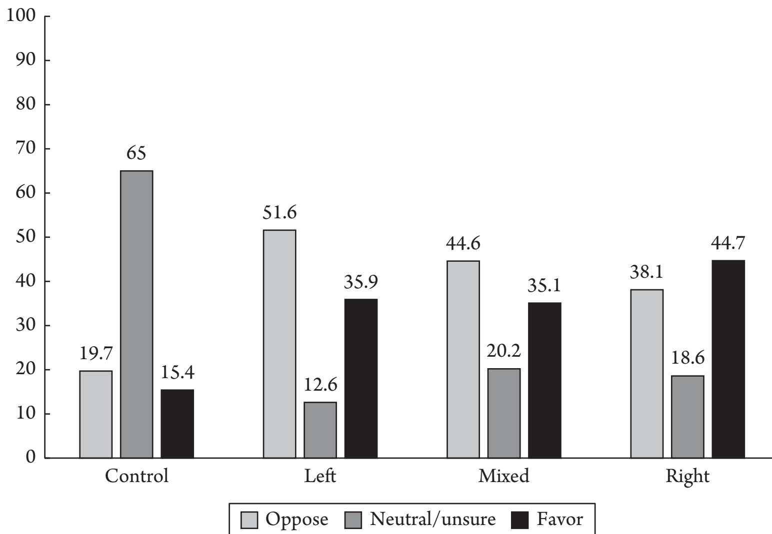

Figure 5.5 Opinion on Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy after Media Exposure: Low- and Middle-Income People

When considering only participants who expressed a favorable or opposed position, my analysis shows that right-leaning issue framing in news coverage tended to push opinion on the corporate tax plan among low- and middle-income participants closer to that of their high-income counterparts exposed to the same coverage. Among low- and middle-income people assigned to read or watch a left-leaning news story, 58.9 percent expressed opposition to the plan, compared to just 48.5 percent of high-income people in the same conditions. However, among low- and middle-income participants in the right-leaning conditions, a full 55 percent expressed *support* for the neoliberal policy, only marginally less than the 60.2 percent of high-income people in those conditions which favored the plan. These findings suggest that consistent patterns of right-leaning news coverage during neoliberal economic and social welfare policy debates may obscure what would otherwise be clear differences in policy opinion among people at different income levels.[24]

Regression Models

Regression analyses support these results, providing more precise evidence that right-leaning issue framing in news coverage can make even low- and middle-income people substantially more likely to endorse neoliberal policies that are out of step with their immediate material interests. Logistic regression models that control for party identification, race, gender, education, and age show that reading or watching right-leaning coverage (as compared to ideologically mixed coverage) increases the odds of low- and middle-income participants supporting the corporate tax cut plan by 57.8 percent ($p. < .05$). Effects of right-leaning coverage as compared to left-leaning coverage are statistically significant at a more conservative level ($p = .077$). Similar OLS models corroborate these results, showing significant movement in the direction of policy support from watching or reading right-leaning news coverage ($p = .046$ when compared to ideologically mixed coverage, $p = .023$ compared to left-leaning coverage). A final logistic regression model shows highly significant effects compared to apolitical coverage (the control conditions), indicating that exposure to right-leaning news coverage dramatically increases the odds of supporting the neoliberal tax plan ($p = .000$).[25]

Overall, my analyses show that issue framing in corporate news media, even if its ideological inflection is fairly subtle, can substantially influence policy opinion among people who might otherwise be expected to resist these effects. The results in this section point to another important political consequence of news coverage during debates over specific economic policies. Scholars have been perplexed by the fact that low- and middle-income people have often expressed strong support

for policies, like the 2001 and 2003 Bush tax plans, that appear (at least according to political analysts and regular readers of outlets like the *New York Times*) to significantly harm their interests. A major part of the answer, I argue, is that the places where many Americans get their news about these policies—venues like national and local network TV news, *USA Today*, and national wire services—have long been subject to commercially driven media refraction processes that encourage sparse, shallow, and ideologically narrow coverage.

Studies that account for policy framing and political information suggest that material interests can have significant effects on public opinion, especially in domains like tax policy that feature concrete and substantial costs and benefits (Chong, Citrin, and Conley 2001; Mettler and Guardino 2011). My experiment extends this line of research by showing how ideological diversity in news coverage can clarify or obscure people's material interests in the context of specific public policies. Still, values—or abstract views of how society and politics ought to work—can also guide policy opinions (Alvarez and Brehm 2002). Some research argues that people who lack strong partisan predispositions, or for whom conventional left-right ideological labels have little meaning, can use their basic values (for example, economic individualism or moral traditionalism) to help them sift through the morass of political information and discourse. But what role might media coverage play in these processes? Can ideological framing of specific policy issues in the news make it harder (or easier) for people to translate their values into opinions on particular policies? More specifically for the argument of this book, how might ideologically narrow news coverage during the neoliberal turn have obscured connections between particular policies and the values that many ordinary Americans hold?

Effects by Levels of Egalitarianism: Narrow Issue Framing and Sociopolitical Values

In this analysis, I focus on the value of *economic egalitarianism*, defined as relative belief in the desirability of a more economically equal society. I measured this concept with an eight-question scale that covers six specific dimensions of egalitarianism: (1) general concern about rising economic inequality, (2) beliefs about the causes of increasing inequality (i.e., the relative roles of individual natural ability, individual work ethic, and individual financial acumen, versus unfair government policies, inadequate job opportunities, and disadvantages rooted in social structure), (3) the role of government versus private enterprise in addressing economic problems, (4) the role of social programs for poor people in encouraging dependency or providing an equal chance to succeed, (5) the

role of government spending in threatening or promoting individual freedom, and (6) the responsibility of society to actively redress inequality of economic opportunity. Question wordings and details of the scale construction and categories are in Appendix B1.

My focus on economic egalitarianism should not be understood to downplay the importance of racial, ethnic, gender, and other inequalities. Such identity-based inequalities are integrally related to disparities in wealth and income, and to the neoliberal policies that have widened those disparities over the last 40 years (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Moreover, as I discussed in Chapter 4 and have argued in other work (Guardino 2011, 2018a, 454), racial and gender inequalities are deeply implicated in media coverage of key policies related to rising economic inequality (see also Clawson and Trice 2000; Gilens 1999; Limbert and Bullock 2009). In that sense, beliefs about economic inequality are also necessarily (even if implicitly) beliefs about racial, gender, and other inequalities. Moreover, favoring (opposing) policy and institutional changes to make American society more economically (un)equal also entails favoring (opposing) changes to make society more (un)equal along these other dimensions. While surely some (perhaps many) study participants answered some of the egalitarianism questions in racially coded or gendered ways, I designed the questions to avoid explicit reference to these social identities.

Because economic egalitarianism is an abstract value, none of its underlying survey questions refers to specific policy issues or debates. This analysis is designed to explore how ideological issue framing in news coverage might encourage people to connect *particular policy issues* (here, a plan to cut corporate taxes) to the more *general value orientations* that are relevant to those issues. All questions in the egalitarianism scale are related to key debates about neoliberal economic and social welfare policy that have occurred in recent decades. However, it is one thing to be worried, in the abstract, about rising economic inequality, or to believe that society should act collectively to redress that inequality. It is another matter entirely to form and express opinions about specific policies (such as changes to welfare programs or the estate tax) that are consistent with those general beliefs. The ease of making such links ought never to be assumed, and media coverage might play a strong role in helping people connect (or misconnect) their basic beliefs to particular policy debates that have major implications for those beliefs.

Descriptive Results

Figure 5.6 depicts opinion toward the neoliberal corporate tax plan among the 602 study participants classified as highly egalitarian according to scores on the egalitarianism scale. As seen in the graph, highly egalitarian people expressed

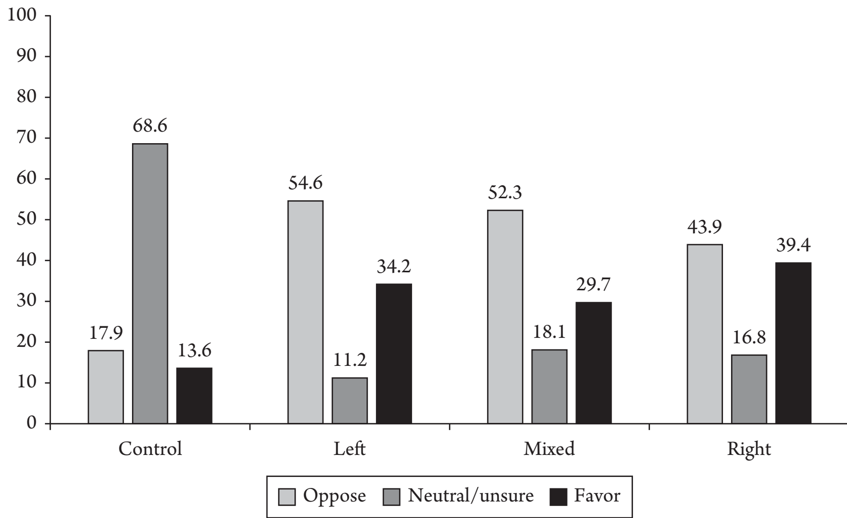

Figure 5.6 Opinion on Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy after Media Exposure: Highly Egalitarian People

greater opposition to the tax cut in the left- than in the right-leaning treatments, though this difference did not quite reach conventional statistical significance ($p = .057$). Policy support among participants in the right-leaning conditions was substantially higher than among those exposed to the ideologically mixed stories ($p = .022$), and opposition in the left-leaning conditions was much higher than among participants in the control groups ($p = .000$).

A plurality of participants who most strongly favored a more economically equal society opposed the corporate tax plan even after reading or watching right-leaning news coverage. However, the gap between support and opposition among those participants was much smaller than among their counterparts assigned to the left-leaning conditions. As with the analyses of opinion among low- and middle-income people discussed in the previous section, pre- and post-exposure results confirm these analyses. Before the news stories, policy opinion distributions among highly egalitarian participants were virtually identical. But after engaging with different configurations of ideological issue framing, clear differences appeared. Both the increase in policy favorability from the pre- and the post-exposure stage among those in the right-leaning condition, and the increase in opposition among those in the ideologically mixed condition, were statistically significant ($p < .05$). However, the movement toward opposition after participants watched or read left-leaning stories was substantially larger, reflecting a change of nearly 45 percentage points from the pre- to the post-exposure stage ($p < .01$). There were no significant changes in opinion between the pre- and the post-media exposure stages in the control conditions.[26]

As with the results by income category reported in the last section, a leveling effect in policy opinion emerged between highly egalitarian and less egalitarian participants exposed to right-leaning news content. Among highly egalitarian people who reported a pro or con opinion after engaging with a left-leaning news story, a full 74.4 percent expressed opposition to the corporate tax plan, compared to just 48.2 percent of less egalitarian people who watched or read the same coverage. However, in the right-leaning conditions, nearly half (48.9 percent) of highly egalitarian people expressed *support* for the policy, much closer to the 57.2 percent of their less egalitarian counterparts who favored the plan. Thus, it seems that ideologically narrow media coverage may also have the capacity to blunt the influence that egalitarian worldviews might otherwise exert on people's preferences regarding specific neoliberal policies.[27]

Regression Models

In general, the effects of ideological issue framing in the media among highly egalitarian participants were neither as strong nor as consistent as those that emerged among low- and middle-income people. Among highly egalitarian people, a series of logistic regression models (again, controlling for party identification, race, gender, age, and education level) showed marginally significant effects of right-leaning coverage, as compared to ideologically mixed coverage ($p = .064$), but no significant differences in the odds of favoring the neoliberal tax policy when compared to participants assigned to read or watch left-leaning news stories. When I compared policy opinions in the treatment groups to opinions expressed by participants assigned to the apolitical news stories, I found that all three treatments boosted the odds of supporting the tax cut plan. However, the difference among those assigned to the right-leaning conditions was by far the largest ($p = .000$).[28] Because OLS regression can measure subtler shifts in opinion than binary logistic regression, an OLS model showed somewhat clearer effects of right-leaning coverage compared to mixed coverage ($p < .05$).

Overall, these analyses suggest that right-leaning news coverage can cause movement toward support for neoliberal policies among people who most strongly endorse economic egalitarianism. But such participants are somewhat more resistant than low- and middle-income people to the ideologically narrow framing that has characterized news coverage of these issues over recent decades. My findings are also in line with research showing that sociopolitical values can more firmly anchor policy opinions than material interests (Sears 1993). This suggests that it may take more frequent and consistent exposure to ideologically narrow news coverage to strongly affect economic and social

welfare policy preferences among highly egalitarian people, as opposed to low- and middle-income people. Of course, the magnitude of such media influence on highly egalitarian people in the real world is an empirical question my study cannot answer directly. While right-leaning depictions of economic and social welfare policy debates have been quite common in mainstream corporate media over recent decades, there are increasing opportunities for politically motivated people to select news sources that confirm their worldviews, and many people with strong beliefs in economic equality no doubt do so.

Still, my analyses indicate that right-leaning media coverage of specific policy debates can have real effects even on people whose basic values would otherwise lead them to oppose (or at least to not support) neoliberal policies. As suggested previously, these effects are probably concentrated among highly egalitarian people who do not have strong (likely Democratic) partisan identities. While such people may not make up a very large share of the U.S. population, the views they express can still contribute to popular political climates conducive to maintaining and enacting neoliberal policies that increase economic inequality.

Individual people's immediate material interests and sociopolitical values may sometimes conflict in the context of specific policy debates. For example, billionaire CEO Warren Buffett may hold egalitarian values that lead him to oppose large tax cuts that disproportionately benefit the wealthy, even as some low-income people may support these tax policies on the basis of inegalitarian values. Which predispositions will orient policy opinions in specific cases is likely a product of several factors, including the mass media coverage that people engage with. My analysis here should not be misunderstood to suggest that one or the other set of predispositions should necessarily be privileged, either analytically or in terms of democratic criteria for how people ought to form opinions or otherwise act politically. Rather, my point is that for many people (especially for that large segment without strong partisan identities), news coverage of specific policy debates is crucial in forging connections to whichever predispositions might be strongest or most important for them. From a democratic perspective, media coverage should consistently offer ideologically wide-ranging issue perspectives that resonate with a variety of material interests and sociopolitical values. However, this kind of coverage has not been the norm for U.S. mainstream news in the neoliberal era.

Research in this book and in previous studies also demonstrates that commercial news generally circulates very little policy-specific information to the public. Moreover, the incentives for reporting such information may be eroding as media refraction processes intensify amid the neoliberalization of media structures, institutions, and practices. However, does possessing this kind of factual knowledge (or more general political knowledge) moderate the effects of

ideologically narrow issue framing? Perhaps those who are more knowledgeable are better able to parse highly charged political rhetoric and confusing policy claims in the news. This might make it more likely that they express policy preferences in line with their material interests or sociopolitical values. That is the subject of my final set of empirical analyses.

Moderating Ideological Framing: The Crucial Role of Political and Policy Knowledge

To examine the potential role of preexisting political and policy knowledge in moderating the effects of ideological issue framing in the news, I presented each study participant with two batteries of factual questions. The first is based on a common five-item list created by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) to measure knowledge of general political actors, processes, and institutions at the national level. The second is a five-item battery of questions I created to measure basic knowledge related to national economic and social welfare policy. This battery asked participants in a series of multiple-choice questions to very roughly estimate the percentage of the federal budget spent on food stamps, cash welfare, and education aid, and to choose which of several federal taxes took up the largest percentage of disposable income for low- and middle-income families. Participants also indicated if it was true or false that total taxes in the United States account for a larger share of GDP than in Western European countries.

Previous studies have found each type of knowledge to be important in shaping public opinion toward policy issues (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Feldman, Huddy, and Marcus 2015; Gilens 2001; Kuklinksi et al. 2000; Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 2003; Mettler and Guardino 2011). Political and policy knowledge has been investigated as both an outcome of news coverage (Eveland and Garrett 2014) and a factor that promotes attention to that coverage (Price and Zaller 1993). Its specific role in moderating the effects of ideologically narrow issue framing in the media, however, has been less well examined. Familiarity with basic political and policy facts should help people connect ideological issue framing to their immediate material interests and sociopolitical values, and should especially aid them in resisting effects of narrow framing that clash with their predispositions. In other words, such knowledge should provide a contextual framework that helps people coherently understand media discourse, promoting critical processing of ideological issue framing that cuts against their interests and values.

I intended to analyze the moderating effects of general and specific knowledge separately, but that strategy became impractical when I discovered that there was

very little variation in the study sample on specific policy knowledge: 62.6 percent of participants answered zero or one of the five questions correctly, just 3 percent were correct on four questions, and no one answered all five correctly; the mean number of correct responses was just 1.31. While low policy knowledge is not unusual in the U.S. population, such extremely low levels are surprising, especially in a sample that is much more highly educated than the overall population. On the other hand, study participants performed better than the population on the general political knowledge scale: 61.8 percent managed a perfect score on these questions. I return to the larger implications of widespread ignorance of basic policy-related facts at the end of this section. For now, I merely note that I combined the general and specific knowledge batteries into an overall scale, which I use for subsequent analyses reported in this chapter. I classified participants who answered zero to five questions correctly as "low-knowledge," and those who answered six or more correctly as "high-knowledge" (as stated previously, no one got all 10 questions right). In addition to producing reasonably sized subsamples (40.9 percent low-knowledge, 59.1 percent high-knowledge), this measurement strategy ensures that no one who did not get at least one policy-specific question correct is categorized as high-knowledge.

Descriptive Results: Low- and Middle-Income Participants

I begin by analyzing the role of political knowledge in shaping opinion among low- and middle-income people who read or watched different versions of news coverage. Figures 5.7 and 5.8 depict opinion toward the neoliberal tax plan among low- and high-knowledge study participants assigned to the right-leaning and ideologically mixed conditions, respectively. Because those with lower levels of political knowledge are more likely to answer "don't know" or report neutrality, these graphs depict only participants who expressed a pro or con position on the tax plan.

As seen in the graphs, low- and middle-income people with low levels of political and policy knowledge were dramatically more favorable toward the corporate tax cut plan when exposed to right-leaning news coverage than when exposed to mixed coverage. Those differences were highly statistically significant ($p. < .001$). On the other hand, among low- and middle-income study participants with high levels of knowledge, there was no significant difference in policy support between the right-leaning and ideologically mixed conditions.

In fact, even after reading or watching news coverage shaded toward neoliberal perspectives, a majority of low- and middle-income people with high levels of political and policy knowledge *opposed* the tax plan. (Indeed, in all media treatment conditions, more of these high-knowledge, low- and middle-income

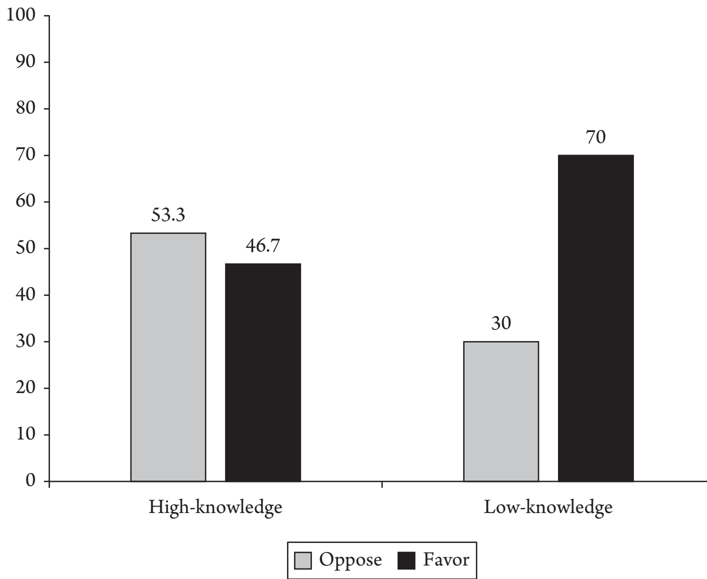

Figure 5.7 Pro/Con Opinion on Neoliberal Tax Policy, Right-Leaning Media Conditions: Low- and Middle-Income People, by Level of Political Knowledge

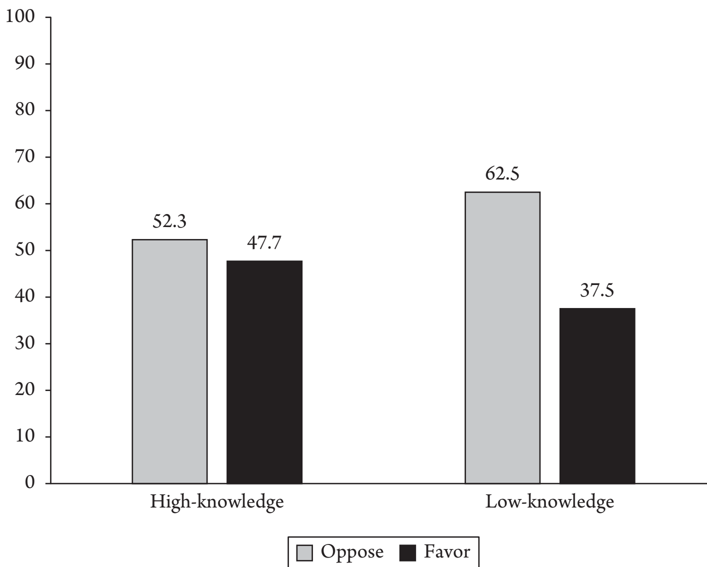

Figure 5.8 Pro/Con Opinion on Neoliberal Tax Policy, Ideologically Mixed Media Conditions: Low- and Middle-Income People, by Level of Political Knowledge

participants opposed than supported this neoliberal policy.) Conversely, while a firm majority of low-knowledge participants in the mixed conditions expressed opposition to the plan, a very large majority of similar participants who were exposed to right-leaning issue framing supported the corporate tax cut. High-knowledge and low-knowledge participants reacted similarly to the ideologically mixed conditions: there was no statistically significant difference in their levels of policy support after reading or watching those news stories. However, the greater level of support among low-knowledge than among high-knowledge participants in the right-leaning conditions was highly significant ($p = .002$).

These results suggest that preexisting knowledge of politics and public policy can help low- and middle-income people to express policy views that reflect their immediate material interests when they confront news coverage that pushes against those interests. Those with lower levels of knowledge, on the other hand, were less likely to resist the effects of ideologically narrow issue framing in the news and thus were more prone to express opinions that contradicted their interests. But do similar dynamics hold for highly egalitarian people, those whose sociopolitical values would generally lead them to oppose neoliberal economic policy? This is an important question to examine, as previous research has suggested that values are often stronger drivers of policy opinion than material interests.

Descriptive Results: Highly Egalitarian Participants

Figures 5.9 and 5.10 show opinion toward the tax plan among highly egalitarian participants, divided by level of political and policy knowledge, assigned to read or watch right-leaning or ideologically mixed news stories, respectively.

These data suggest that preexisting knowledge played a similar role in moderating effects of ideological issue framing among highly egalitarian participants as it did among low- and middle-income participants. Those with less political and policy knowledge were much more supportive of the corporate tax cut when they read or watched right-leaning news coverage than when they were exposed to mixed coverage. Those differences were highly statistically significant ($p. = .014$). Among participants with similar sociopolitical values but higher levels of knowledge, there was no significant difference in policy favorability between these two media conditions. As with the analyses of opinion among low- and middle-income people, most high-knowledge study participants opposed the tax cut plan even after being exposed to right-leaning issue framing in news coverage. Again, in all news treatment conditions, more of these highly egalitarian, high-knowledge participants opposed the policy than favored it. On

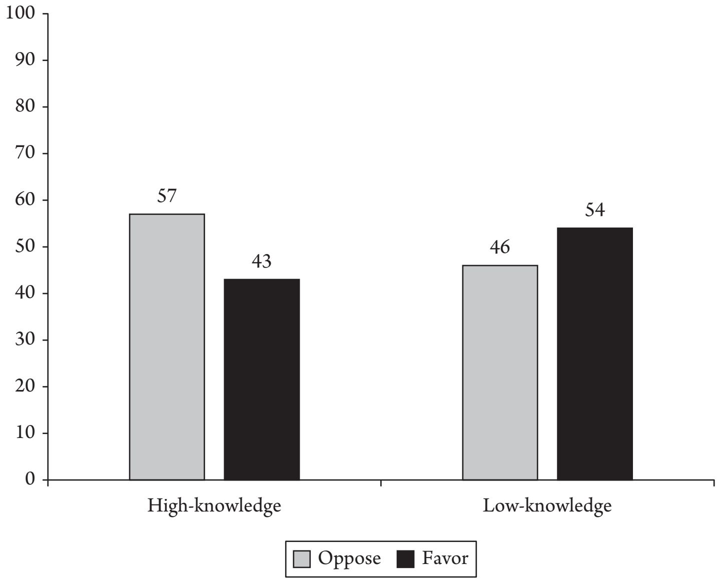

Figure 5.9 Pro/Con Opinion on Neoliberal Tax Policy, Right-Leaning Media Conditions: Highly Egalitarian People, by Level of Political Knowledge

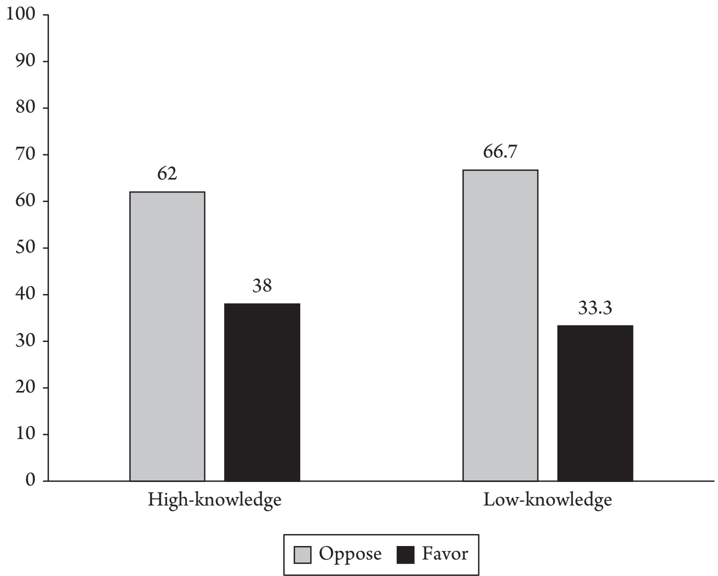

Figure 5.10 Pro/Con Opinion on Neoliberal Tax Policy, Ideologically Mixed Media Conditions: Highly Egalitarian People, by Level of Political Knowledge

the other hand, while a large majority of low-knowledge participants opposed the neoliberal tax cut after being exposed to ideologically mixed coverage, a majority of similar participants favored the plan after watching or reading right-leaning news coverage. There was no statistically significant difference in policy support between high- and low-knowledge participants in the ideologically mixed conditions, but the higher level of policy support among low-knowledge participants (compared to their more knowledgeable counterparts) in the right-leaning conditions was significant ($p < .05$).

To be sure, these results are not as consistent as those for low- and middle-income people. For example, the size of the difference in policy support among low-knowledge, highly egalitarian participants between the right-leaning and the ideologically mixed conditions was smaller than the difference among their low- and middle-income counterparts. This again may support the idea that values tend to play a stronger role than material interests in orienting policy preferences, although further analyses would be required to solidify that interpretation. However, it does seem that having basic factual knowledge of politics and government can help people express opinions that reflect their egalitarian values when faced with the kind of ideologically narrow news coverage that has been typical in mainstream commercial media depictions of key policy debates in the neoliberal era. Less knowledgeable people, conversely, were more likely to express opinions at odds with their basic beliefs and worldviews bearing on economic inequality, when they were confronted with ideologically narrow issue framing in the news.

Regression Models

Regression analyses support my findings on the role of political and policy knowledge for low- and middle-income participants, showing that such effects persist even when partisan identification and key demographic characteristics are taken into account. In the regression models reported in this section, I controlled for party identification, race, gender, and age. (I did not control for education because, as is typical in the population at large, levels of formal schooling were highly correlated with political and policy knowledge in my sample.) These models include interaction terms measuring the effects of each treatment among low-knowledge participants.

My logistic regression analyses show that the interactive effect of having low political and policy knowledge and reading or watching a right-leaning news story was very strong among low- and middle-income people. Compared to a high-knowledge participant at these income levels in the ideologically mixed media conditions, a low-knowledge participant exposed to right-leaning

news coverage was more than 4.5 times as likely to express support for the corporate tax cut ($p < .01$). Put another way, going from high levels of preexisting factual knowledge and ideologically mixed news exposure, on the one hand, to low levels of knowledge and right-leaning news exposure, on the other, increased the odds of supporting this neoliberal policy proposal by more than 350 percent.[29] A similar OLS regression model showed a powerful effect in the direction of support for the corporate tax cut among low-knowledge, low- and middle-income people assigned to the right-leaning conditions ($p. = .001$).

While right-leaning media coverage has strong effects on policy support among low-knowledge, low- and middle-income people, separate analyses (not reported here) indicate that being exposed to right-leaning coverage has no significant effect among their high-knowledge counterparts. And when these interactions with factual political and policy knowledge are accounted for, engaging with right-leaning coverage by itself has no significant effects on the odds that a low- or middle-income person will support the tax cut plan. Knowing basic facts about politics and economic/social welfare policy while engaging with ideologically diverse news coverage helps low- and middle-income people express opinions that conform with their immediate material interests, regardless of their age, gender, race, and partisan identification.

A similar story, however, does not emerge when analyzing policy views among highly egalitarian participants in the experiment. Regression analyses show no significant differences in the odds that a low-knowledge participant exposed to right-leaning news coverage would endorse the corporate tax plan, compared to a high-knowledge participant in the ideologically mixed condition. While low levels of knowledge combined with exposure to right-leaning media coverage may nudge highly egalitarian people toward supporting the policy, there is an approximately 18 percent probability that this apparent effect is due to chance. It seems that the powerful effects of political and policy knowledge (and ignorance) that help low- and middle-income people connect (misconnect) their material interests to specific policy opinions when confronted with ideological framing in the news may not hold for highly egalitarian people's translation of sociopolitical values to policy opinions.

Given the fairly low levels of factual political knowledge among the American public overall—and the even lower levels of knowledge pertaining to specific policy domains—my results from this segment of the experiment do not suggest bright prospects for a vibrant democratic politics engaging issues of economic inequality. If knowledge, as the "currency of democratic citizenship" (Kuklinski et al. 2000), is a key resource for expressing views on specific policies that are consistent with people's interests and values, then that resource appears to be as scarce today as it was during earlier stages of neoliberalism in the 1980s and

1990s. Two dimensions of this situation are of particular concern for my broader argument.

First, because those with lower incomes and lower levels of formal education are much more likely to be politically uninformed than are people in higher socioeconomic strata (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), major class disparities in factual political knowledge have likely reinforced growing political-economic power inequalities in recent decades. It is precisely those Americans with the most to lose from continued neoliberal economic and social welfare policies who may be worst positioned to resist the effects of ideologically narrow issue framing in the news. Lower-income and less-educated people are also most likely to be exposed to the kind of mainstream, commercial media content that I analyze in this book, and least likely to engage with alternative news venues online that may present a richer portrait of policy issues. Second, Americans as a whole appear to be deeply uninformed (or misinformed) about just how much economic inequality exists in the United States. While most people recognize that there are significant and growing gaps in income and wealth, they also tend to wildly underestimate how wide the gaps are (Norton and Ariely 2011). Thus, a set of policy-related facts that may be particularly important in facilitating critical reception of the ideological issue framing that has been encouraged by media refraction processes—and which might motivate more people to oppose neoliberal policies that worsen inequality—is not widely held.

Of course, the American public is diverse in both material interests and sociopolitical values. But my analysis shows that even those with the very least to gain from neoliberal economic and social welfare policy, and even those who hold generally egalitarian values, may not always translate those predispositions into policy preferences (and voting decisions) in the absence of a more substantive and diverse media environment than has been the norm for several decades at least. Moreover, we must keep in mind that news coverage not only shapes opinion through ideological issue framing (with preexisting knowledge moderating these effects), but is also a key potential source of that very information (Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006). The media can affect policy opinions directly by providing (or failing to provide) relevant facts. But this political information can also play an important indirect role in shaping opinions by facilitating or inhibiting the effects of ideologically narrow issue framing on people with different material interests and sociopolitical values. Consequently, mainstream media's long-term, structurally driven failure to consistently report policy-relevant information may have laid a foundation for shorter-term—yet politically important—opinion effects in specific policy debates.

Finally, comparative research increasingly demonstrates that the broader political-economic media systems in which news coverage is embedded have crucial effects on how much people know about politics and public policy. In

countries with strong public broadcasting sectors, greater regulation of news media in service of the social good, and more durable commitments to news norms that mitigate commercialism, knowledge is both higher overall and more equally distributed by socioeconomic status (Curran et al. 2009; Esser at al. 2012). Since political knowledge is a strong stimulant to political participation, these differences may contribute to the comparatively low levels of voter turnout in the United States. My analysis suggests that countries which have better resisted the neoliberal shift in media structures, news institutions, and journalistic practices (Aalberg, van Aelst, and Curran 2010; Pickard 2011) may also offer better conditions for enabling their citizens—especially those who are least powerful—to express policy attitudes that advance their interests and values.

Conclusion

My analyses in this chapter show that (1) the elite-focused, superficial, and narrow coverage that mainstream commercial news outlets produced during key economic and social welfare policy debates since 1980 continued into the 2000s, and (2) ideological issue framing matters for public policy opinions. In particular, right-leaning media coverage can make people more likely to support neoliberal policy proposals, even if their basic material and sociopolitical predispositions would otherwise push them against such proposals. These effects generally persist when partisan identification and key demographic traits are taken into account. This news coverage can cause both low- and middle-income people, and highly egalitarian people, to express support for neoliberal policies, whether these people are women or men, older or younger, white or of another race, and more or less educated. While the effects of narrow issue framing in the news seem to be concentrated among the large segment of Americans without strong partisan predispositions, individuals who identify as Democratic, Republican, or independent may be subject to this influence.

It is also important to note that my study showed fairly robust and consistent effects after single exposures to print and TV news stories. Experiment-induced effects on public opinion may decay over time (Matthes and Schemer 2012). However, if patterns of right-leaning issue framing persist in the real world over periods of weeks or months—as they have at crucial junctures across the neoliberal turn in U.S. public policy—then their influence is more likely to show up during major policy debates. Such relatively short-term effects on poll results during intense periods of public communication can be critical in efforts by political elites to enact or block public policies (Tesler and Zaller 2014). Combined with the evidence from media content, political discourse, and polling data in the last two chapters, my experiment suggests that news coverage produced

during the neoliberal turn in the U.S. media system shaped public opinion to support specific neoliberal economic and social welfare policies at key historical points. These effects are in tension with results from generally worded survey questions that for many decades have elicited left-leaning policy opinions from majorities or pluralities of Americans.

As a key outcome of media refraction in the U.S. commercial news system, ideologically narrow issue framing can encourage people to express specific views that differ from those they would express if they engaged with more diverse framing. These findings are troubling when viewed from a perspective focused on the intersection of political-economic power and media communication. My results in this chapter further illustrate neoliberalism's inconsistency with democratic principles: news coverage encouraged by neoliberal influences on media structures, institutions, and practices can push people's opinions away from their interests and values. And those who are already in less powerful positions in our political system and society appear to be most susceptible to these effects.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the continuing relevance of my argument in today's media environment. On its face, the communications landscape in the opening decades of the 21st century may seem to portend an era of wide-open ideological diversity in the issue frames to which ordinary Americans are routinely exposed. Has this new technological dawn nullified the influence of concentrated power in mass communication during policy debates? As I explain next, any democratic celebration of the demise of mainstream corporate media as a political force in the ongoing neoliberal policy turn is likely misplaced.

6

What's New? Media, Public Opinion, and Democracy in the 21st Century

Less than a year into his presidency, Donald Trump alerted his Twitter followers that he had at last chosen the winners of his "fake news awards" (Flegenheimer and Grynbaum 2018). It was perhaps the most dramatic move up to that point in the president's relentless campaign against political hostility and liberal bias in the mainstream media. But Trump's view of news outlets as an "enemy of the American people" (Grynbaum 2017) built on a decades-old tradition. While the president's stormy relationship with the news media stems from many sources, it cannot be fully understood outside the context of the New Right's long-running efforts to define those media as agents of a left-wing elite bent on undermining ordinary Americans. Trump's approach also manifests broader tendencies in public discourse to trace distortions in news coverage to the conscious, deliberate biases of individual media personnel, and to see these distortions through a straightforward partisan lens. According to this thinking, the news favors the Democratic Party (which, unlike the Republican Party, represents intellectual, cultural, and—implicitly—economic elites). And the news is biased because left-leaning "media elites" conspire to exercise power over and against the interests and values of patriotic, hard-working Americans.

It is also no accident that Trump chose an emerging tool of media technology as his favorite instrument for both attacking mainstream news outlets and attempting to circumvent their biases and fabrications. This, too, follows established tendencies in American political communication. Presidents of both parties have tried to use alternative modes of communication to avoid accountability by mainstream journalists. Recent examples include George W. Bush's cultivation of "middle American" local newspapers (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006) and Barack Obama's early social media efforts. President Trump's reliance on Twitter also reflects a long tradition that defines new technology as inherently an engine of progress and democracy, even if "progress" and "democracy" have

been understood quite differently according to particular social and political-economic interests in particular historical contexts.

My argument and evidence in this book challenge these common interpretations of U.S. media politics. At least in the context of economic and social welfare policy coverage over recent decades, mainstream news media—including ABC, NBC, and CNN, three outlets for which President Trump has reserved special scorn—have neither favored left-wing perspectives nor regularly fabricated information. Mainstream media's informational shortcomings have centered much more on important factual information about public policy that has been left out of news coverage than on misinformation deliberately included. While elite imperatives have indeed driven distortions of news coverage on economic and social welfare policy issues, this has not occurred in the ways that Trump, conservative activists, and many ordinary people contend. Rather than radical leftists seeking to overturn traditional American democratic capitalism, the elite voices and perspectives that have pervaded media coverage since the early 1980s have been drawn from a loose bipartisan coalition seeking to redirect government to strengthen market prerogatives and power relations central to the American version of corporate capitalism. Such ideological and informational distortions in the news are rooted less in the conscious, deliberate choices of individual journalists than in the structures and institutions of the U.S. media system. This system operates according to political-economic imperatives that have been reinforced and amplified by neoliberalism. Moreover, the media's structural and institutional tendencies invite skepticism that new technologies will, in themselves, democratize political communication or produce better-informed policy debates.

Many aspects of the U.S. news media environment are different in 2018 than they were 40, 20, 10, or even 5 years prior. Perhaps needless to say, the emergence of online news and digital information has reshaped the processes by which we communicate politically and form our opinions (e.g., Prior 2007; Stroud 2011; Williams and Delli Carpini 2011). Important as they are, however, these changes have not fundamentally disrupted the structural tendencies and power relations that have produced so much superficial and narrow news coverage over recent decades. In this chapter, I situate my historical argument and empirical analyses about the role of corporate news media in facilitating the neoliberal policy turn within the rapidly changing political communication landscape of the second decade of the 21st century. New technologies have radically destabilized crucial aspects of the U.S. media system, prompting some observers to toast the end of an era in which top-down state and corporate control of political communication thwarted democracy. However, these new technologies have emerged within and continue to operate under

political-economic constraints that suppress their potential for opening public policy debates to more substantive and diverse flows of information and ideas. Key elements of the U.S. media system that have encouraged the patterns of news coverage and public opinion expression presented in this book are far from quaint relics of the past. To take one example, "fake news" *is* a significant danger for democracy. However, it does not originate in mainstream media organizations propelled by an increasingly precarious mix of professional commitments to accurate and substantive reporting, on the one hand, and unyielding pressures to cut costs and increase revenue, on the other. Instead, fake news has been enabled and intensified by the commercially conditioned digital media technologies that many across the ideological spectrum have viewed as the savior of informed democratic debate.

I begin the chapter by explaining how proliferating sources and modes of political communication online bear important marks of the corporate and commercial logics that enable media refraction. This discussion focuses on how newer media forms are embedded within political-economic architectures that limit their capacity to democratize popular public policy discourse, while at the same time introducing dynamics of ideological distortion and misinformation that present new obstacles to wide-ranging and informed policy debates. I then discuss the underappreciated degree to which mainstream corporate news, even if it is increasingly delivered through online and mobile technologies, continues to penetrate the wider American public. While mainstream media's near stranglehold on popular communication during policy debates has loosened, these outlets retain significant power to shape broad patterns of public opinion.

Next, I explore the extent to which the evolving media environment of the last 5 to 10 years has changed the nature of economic and social welfare policy coverage circulated by mainstream outlets. My empirical analysis of news content during the 2017 debate over repealing the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) suggests that such outlets largely continued to produce the kind of substantively thin and ideologically narrow coverage seen in similar policy debates in 1981, 1995–1996, and 2010. The brief sketch of online media I can provide and the limited scope of my empirical analysis of mainstream news constrain the conclusions I can draw in this chapter. Still, there is strong reason to believe that the contemporary U.S. media system remains well positioned to foster public opinion formations that favor neoliberal economic and social welfare policy. These circumstances raise important questions about the prospects for democratizing media communication during policy debates, and about the political durability of the larger neoliberal policy regime. I address the first set of questions at the end of this chapter, and save the second for Chapter 7.

Media Refraction in the 21st Century: Changes and Continuities

Several aspects of the contemporary communications environment may seem at first glance to suggest that the processes and effects of media refraction described in this book have faded in significance. As technology has lowered costs of producing and circulating information, both the number and variety of sources of political messages, and the ideological diversity of those messages' content, seem to have become limitless. At least under conditions of net neutrality (a crucial open-internet policy, discussed later in the chapter), anyone online can expose herself to ideas from across any conceivable ideological spectrum, and to a richness and depth of political information unmatched in human history. That new landscape includes several digital-only outlets that feature serious investigative reporting and political analysis from a left-leaning angle. This might appear to obliterate any problems for democracy caused by a scarcity of ideologically diverse messages and robust information.

At the same time, the decline of traditional institutional media gatekeepers has allowed individual users to segment themselves by choice—and to be segmented by algorithms without their knowledge or explicit consent—fueling exposure to content flows that merely echo and bolster their political predispositions. This might seem to reduce the empirical prevalence of persuasion (understood as cases in which media messages change perceptions, beliefs, and opinions), and to render such occasions politically unimportant. Indeed, boundaries between media producers and media consumers have blurred, as users create, post, upload, and share text, photos, and video through email, blogs, and social media platforms. But despite all this, the mainstream corporate media complex has not lost its capacity to produce and circulate messages which can shape politically salient configurations of public opinion during major policy debates.

Online Media and Public Policy Debates

Scholarly attention and popular anxiety increasingly have centered on social media's role in circulating political misinformation and fostering public misperceptions (Hochschild and Einstein 2015; Southwell and Thorson 2015). Misinformation, understood as production and dissemination of demonstrably false information, long predates the internet. However, the changing media technology environment has contributed to its prevalence and potential influence. Related concerns revolve around "fake news," which I define as content featuring deliberately fabricated information circulated in forms that are designed to mimic items from credible media outlets. Understood this way,

fake news—which may or may not be part of larger disinformation campaigns (i.e., organized, strategic initiatives to produce and circulate false information for political or commercial ends)—is also far from new. However, the rise of the internet, and social media in particular, seems to have both encouraged its production and widened its reach, in part by harnessing technology to shape minute details of news items and their patterns of circulation to maximize desired audiences (McChesney 2013, 187–189). Both misinformation and the more particular phenomenon of fake news carry significant potential to increase and reinforce misperceptions (or confidently held false beliefs) in those exposed to them. Most serious observers recognize the profound dangers to democratic discourse posed by these kinds of information distortions. What may be less appreciated, however, is how the commercial character of the U.S. media system—in particular, advertising's role in the architecture of the internet—enables and amplifies these political dangers.

No adequate discussion of online political information can ignore the commercial tendencies that have been central—even essential—to the internet's development over the last two decades (McChesney 2013). This is one way in which the growth of online technologies has been bound up with the broader neoliberal media regime. Advertising, and the increasingly sophisticated markets in personal data that drive it, funds most content (news, entertainment, and otherwise) and most online services (e.g., search engines, social media platforms) that the majority of Americans engage with every day. Most importantly for my argument in this book, pressures to align news production and content with commercial imperatives may be increasing in the brave new digital world. Because the rise of the internet and its consumer tracking and profiling technologies have freed advertisers from having to deliver pitches through individual news (or other) outlets, these outlets are encouraged to tailor their format and contents ever more carefully to advertising demands in order draw the revenue that remains crucial to their profits, and sometimes even their very survival (Hardy 2014, 149–150; McChesney 2013, 155–158; Turow 2012). These circumstances are threatening the stable advertiser "subsidy" to serious journalism and political information that has been a vital cog in the U.S. media system for the last century or so (McChesney 2013, 172–215). But they may also create further pressures to attract and cultivate commercially amenable users. These pressures carry possibilities for direct and indirect political effects on news content.[1] This competition for ad dollars discourages hard news—especially news featuring substantive, policy-relevant information and serious, wide-ranging policy interpretations—in favor of shallower content increasingly derived from sophisticated algorithms designed to maximize story clicks by coveted consumers. Such trends are already evident in mainstream news media, although professional values and civic obligations, and pressures to reduce the

free-fall in news outlets' public credibility, have limited their worst effects. These limits have eroded for many explicitly partisan websites, and they are absent in the realm of fake news.

This increasing advertising influence both reinforces a key economic engine that drives media refraction during policy debates and encourages a broader media culture in which sales potential is more and more likely to determine content production and circulation. These basic dynamics operate both in mainstream, corporate media that adhere to traditional journalistic codes, and in other media that ignore or subvert those codes. Especially for the latter, the drive for consumer data and ad dollars—from purely commercial motivations, or because this revenue is essential to news outlets' partisan or ideological missions—can swamp other considerations, including whether the content that results is shallow, ideologically blinkered, racist, sexist, misleading, or downright false. All else equal, the more likely content is to generate attention—and thus, advertising revenue and valuable consumer data—the more likely it will be produced and circulated. Social media platforms constitute powerful vehicles for extending and reproducing these commercial logics, in policy debates and in other political communication contexts.

At the same time, obsessions with producing content constantly and quickly—institutionalized thanks to the emergence of online and social media—have accelerated the decline of constructive journalistic routines in mainstream news media. However flawed and misplaced they may be in other respects, professional codes and practices can mitigate the egregious political distortions of fake news and misinformation. The overall speed-up of news rhythms and the relentless production of dubious content not only challenge serious journalists' capacity to check questionable claims circulating online but also discourage reflective, careful, and thoughtful reporting that could moderate the pressures of media refraction in more routine coverage of public policy issues. Misinformation and fake news distort policy debates by introducing confusion, sowing destructive conflict and disengagement, and shaping public attitudes. But they may also indirectly degrade public discourse by occupying credible journalists with debunking false claims. This process redirects already shrinking newsroom resources away from producing informative and ideologically wide-ranging news.

For example, surveys on the ACA in 2010 and 2012 identify patterns of both misperception and public ignorance that encourage negative attitudes toward this policy. Beliefs that the law requires citizens to show government ID cards to receive hospital care, creates expert committees ("death panels") to decide eligibility for government-funded assistance, and mandates that low-income undocumented immigrants receive free health care are all prevalent among Americans (Pasek, Sood, and Krosnick 2015, 666, table 2, 668, table 3). Perhaps

surprisingly, ignorance of the law—simply lacking knowledge rather than firmly holding inaccurate beliefs—is even more common than misperceptions. Misinformation, often carried by fake news and spread through social media, is a serious concern in contemporary policy debates. However, public surveys about the ACA suggest that mainstream commercial news media's long-running failure to circulate basic facts continues to undermine democratic discourse by fostering garden-variety policy ignorance. Media efforts to correct misinformation about issues like Obamacare are crucial. But they also detract from ongoing coverage that could enrich public opinion.

These most egregious political information distortions do not exhaust the ways in which commercially driven online media dynamics are dimming the prospects for thoughtful and wide-ranging popular debate on policy issues. Much has been written and said about increasing opportunities in the online media environment to actively sequester ourselves in echo chambers that reinforce political predispositions and short-circuit the exchange of information and ideas across lines of ideological and social difference (Boutyline and Willer 2017). In the extreme, such ability to choose the content they are exposed to can trap some people in partisan silos that continually confirm narrow and even deeply misinformed views of public events and issues (Grimes 2017). These processes present serious challenges to healthy democratic discourse. Still, actively choosing to engage with and accept ideas that confirm political preconceptions is most common among relatively small groups of highly committed people. Among those whose political beliefs and loyalties are central identity traits, policy views are often resistant to change in the face of ideologically dissonant messages.

But there is a greater concern for the large share of Americans who are interested in public issues but lack rigid partisan loyalties or deep ideological commitments. This is the growing tendency for tech companies and content producers to use algorithms and online data to funnel news—with the ideological framing and (mis)information it carries—directly to users. In the name of giving us what we want (even if we do not know we want it) this commercially driven personalization of content is almost certain to narrow the range of issue framing that many people encounter during policy debates. It may also facilitate the self-reinforcing circulation of superficial news content through search engines and social media, as users' consumer "preferences" for such content—presumed by having clicked on, "liked," or shared a similar story—encourage more such stories to be directed to them. Eventually, news algorithms may create severe ideological and informational distortions only worsened by the lack of public transparency and meaningful consent to receiving content in these ways. As newer mechanisms by which structural political-economic tendencies narrow public discourse, online partisan silos and other forms of content

personalization complement media refraction processes that operate through more conventional modes in mainstream corporate news.

Moreover, research suggests that these technological processes appear especially likely to promote right-leaning discourse. Consequently, they may constitute another channel for circulating frames like those that have pervaded mainstream news coverage of economic and social welfare policy across the neoliberal era. Narrow online news networks may also distribute policy misinformation that pushes attitudes toward the right. Thus, these dynamics are more apt to support than to interrupt patterns of right-leaning opinion formation encouraged by media refraction in mainstream news. Several factors contribute to this ideological asymmetry.

First, partisan silos in online news and social media networks are significantly more likely to form on the right than on the left side of the political spectrum (Benkler et al. 2017; Boutyline and Willer 2017; Narayanan et al. 2018). Detailed survey data also indicate that right-leaning people are much less likely than left-leaning people to follow a variety of news sources (Kennedy and Prat 2018, 16). In addition, the emotional dynamics associated with news reception at the psychological level suggest that conservatives are more apt than progressives to accept ideologically congenial misinformation (Weeks 2015). There is also a greater overall volume of partisan-inflected, emotionally arousing content (for example, misrepresentative exaggeration) in right-leaning than in left-leaning media (Sobieraj and Berry 2011, 30–32). Finally, in the specific context of neoliberal policy debates, the logic of many prevalent misperceptions that may be cultivated through narrow online networks—not to mention more common patterns of mundane policy ignorance—tends to push public opinion to the right (Kuklinski et al. 2000; Pasek, Sood, and Krosnick 2015).

Communication scholars and political scientists continue to conduct important research on the production and effects of partisan propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation (Southwell and Thorson 2015). There is much to learn about how new modes of communication are shaping the democratic character of public policy discourse. Especially needed are critical analyses focused on how these often microlevel processes connect to the structures and institutions that shape power relations in the American (and global) political economy (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Pickard 2013). Still, the evidence so far suggests that online and social media have demonstrated but modest potential to deepen the information and widen the ideological perspectives that most ordinary people routinely encounter during policy debates. If anything, the interface of commerce, technology, and politics that has largely defined these media has generated new dynamics that stunt the democratic quality of public policy communication.

It is also important to recognize that social media provide another means by which profit-driven corporate news organizations cultivate commercially desirable audiences. For example, mainstream news outlets play an outsized role in circulating information through Twitter networks (Stocking, Barthel, and Grieco 2018). At the same time, given the speed pressures that the online news environment generates, growing demands on mainstream journalists to be constantly active on social media likely detract from careful, substantive reporting that may reach outside conventional elite circles and dominant ideological frameworks. More generally, the growing practice of mainstream news outlets delivering content via social media—e.g., news organizations making stories available via Facebook or YouTube, and journalists commenting on breaking events through Twitter—seems unlikely in itself to significantly boost the civic quality of that content. Rather than expanding the substantive information or ideological interpretations made broadly available to the public, much of this social media activity may be better understood as a mode of media refraction that diverts resources from journalistic practices that might widen and enrich policy debates, even as it reflects the unrelenting drive to produce and circulate news on the basis of market values.

Social media play a similar role for powerful political-economic actors not institutionally located in the mainstream media complex. These include prominent elected leaders, government officials, non-media corporate elites, and those well-funded nongovernmental groups whose interests have been best served by the neoliberal policy turn. To be clear, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube provide crucial means of communication for marginalized voices—those beyond government (such as social justice activist groups and left-leaning policy organizations), as well as within government (members of Congress outside the bipartisan neoliberal coalition). But these technologies also constitute another channel of influence for the same voices that dominate corporate news coverage of policy debates. Moreover, beyond any direct effects of the ideological frames it circulates, Twitter's 140-character limit and amenability to quick, unreflective commentary hamper this platform's capacity for substantive policy discussion. President Trump's tweets in particular may feed mainstream news media's increasingly superficial and personality-focused political coverage, even if that coverage is not often explicitly favorable—and is often quite unfavorable—to Trump's actions and demeanor. Indeed, these uses of social media (by political elites and those reacting to them) may tend to direct the news media and much of the public to officials' most dramatic and shocking statements and behaviors, thereby detracting attention from problematic policy moves they might pursue.

In sum, key dynamics of social media use in U.S. political communication are implicated in the basic political-economic processes that have shaped news

coverage across the neoliberal era. First, these dynamics are driven by broadly similar *commercial forces and unequal power relations* as those that motivate media refraction. Second, prevailing tendencies in networked media may *encourage media refraction processes* that have been evident in earlier policy debates. Finally, these tendencies may *facilitate new effects that complement media refraction* in depressing the quality of political information and narrowing policy discourse. But we also must consider whether mainstream corporate news media are quite the dinosaur they are sometimes assumed to be: Do these institutions continue to produce and circulate content that can shape public opinion on economic and social welfare policy issues in the midst of the rapidly changing technological environment of the early 21st century?

The Continuing Reach of Mainstream News

Given the political-economic tendencies that distort mainstream news and limit the democratizing potential of newer media technologies, the continuing reach of mainstream coverage into wider U.S. publics should not be neglected. Total audiences for corporate, commercial news outlets remain large. As of 2018, most online traffic for news and political content continued to flow to mainstream media organizations or news aggregators that rely heavily on them (Alexa 2018). And while Americans under 40 are steadily moving away from news delivered through conventional TV programs, television news remains highly popular overall (Pew Research Center 2016).

A sophisticated study based on a global sample of more than 70,000 people demonstrates the broad scope and profound implications of corporate media exposure in the 21st century. Gauging attention to a variety of specific news sources, this research shows that individual-level news attention in the United States is heavily concentrated in commercial outlets owned by a handful of multinational corporations (Kennedy and Prat 2018). Despite the fact that its methodology likely overstates exposure to internet-only news sources, the study indicates that corporate television maintains a dominant position in the media universe. More than 80 percent of the media companies whose breadth of audience reach and share of user attention best position them to shape public opinion worldwide are purveyors of TV news. Less than 6 percent are internet-only firms, and this short list is dominated by Facebook (Kennedy and Prat 2018, 18). In the United States, the firms with the greatest reach and largest attention share are News Corp and its spinoff companies (owners of Fox News, many broadcast stations, major commercial newspapers, and websites), Facebook, and Time Warner (the cable and internet service giant that owns CNN) (Kennedy and Prat 2018, 20, table VI). Moreover, the United States leads all industrialized nations in what the authors term "information inequality," a situation in which exposure to news

sources owned by multiple firms is concentrated in a small share of the population (Kennedy and Prat 2018, 17, figure III).

News exposure through corporate TV programs and mainstream newspapers is especially prevalent in two groups of Americans whose opinions hold major political significance, both generally and in terms of the politics of economic inequality in the neoliberal era: (1) older people, who tend to vote, contribute financially, and otherwise participate politically (at least in conventional forms) much more frequently than younger people; and (2) less-educated and lower-income people, whose opinions may be more susceptible to the influence of ideologically narrow issue framing, and whose material prospects are arguably most damaged by neoliberal public policy. Reliance on news outlets owned by a small number of corporations is closely linked to socioeconomic status. For example, the average high-income American man with a graduate degree follows nearly twice as many separately owned news outlets than the typical low-income woman without a college degree (Kennedy and Prat, 2018, 15, 55, figure B.1). The United States also has a very high level of "information poverty," defined as the percentage of the population that relies on just one news source or is exposed to no news at all. Indeed, it seems no accident that America is one of a handful of countries in which a relatively high degree of technical access to the internet is coupled with extreme information inequality, information poverty, and economic inequality (Kennedy and Prat 2018, 17, figure III).

Powerful structural factors continue to pull these audiences toward conventional corporate news sources. To be sure, content is much cheaper to produce and disseminate online than through traditional means. However, major media organizations tend to leverage their financial and branding resources to maintain technically attractive digital profiles that generate steady traffic, especially from people with little time, energy, interest, or skill to habitually explore the wider online political world. In addition, the more traffic these corporate media sites get, the higher they tend to be featured on search engine lists, and the more accessible their stories will be via news aggregation services (Hindman 2008). Material resources also provide bigger players greater ability to pay search engines for featured spots. Moreover, commercial television news (whether delivered through a TV set or online) rewards—and perhaps encourages—cognitive disengagement (Postman 1985) and thrives on forms of coverage that sideline broader social context and substantive policy discussion (Iyengar 1991). By and large, this kind of content is more easily consumed by those with less education, who tend to live at the lower levels of the American class structure. Accessing diverse and substantive digital news about public policy requires political knowledge and information literacy skills that are concentrated among higher-income people.

As of this writing, the most recent data suggest that 45 percent of Americans at least occasionally access news via Facebook and 11 percent receive news from Twitter (Shearer and Gottfried 2017). There is no doubt that social media constitute an increasingly popular mode of news exposure. But there are several reasons to be cautious in assuming that these platforms in themselves have broad capacities to shape people's opinions on specific policy issues.

First, a large (if shifting and variable) portion of the news content most widely circulated via social media comes from mainstream commercial media organizations (Pew Research Center 2012a). For instance, news outlets comprised the greatest proportion of links shared in immigration-related tweets during the first month of the Trump presidency (Stocking, Barthel, and Grieco 2018). This suggests that generalized self-reports of exposure to (and preferences for) news via social media should draw even greater methodological caution than do similar measures for offline media (Prior 2009, 2013). Directly comparing self-reports of news exposure through social media to exposure through national newspapers or television programs is misleading. Rather than actually producing content, social media comprise platforms for circulating content produced by a range of sources. It is more accurate to say that while one may get news *through* social media (e.g., a news video shared via Facebook or a White House pronouncement disseminated through Twitter), one gets that same news *from* somewhere else (CNN or President Trump). A survey indicating that 50 percent of Americans often get news from television (Gottfried and Shearer 2017) while 20 percent often get news from social media (Shearer and Gottfried 2017) does not mean that social media is just 30 percentage points less popular than TV as an actual *source of content*. I am not aware of studies that systematically examine how respondents interpret such media-use measures. However, my discussions with dozens of otherwise well-informed and technically sophisticated undergraduate students suggest anecdotally that distinctions between content producers and content platforms are not typically made. These measurement complications mean that common understandings of social media (and, more broadly, the internet) as news sources likely overstate exposure to messages produced outside the mainstream corporate media complex.

Finally, many respondents may have either very broad or idiosyncratic content in mind when considering their social media encounters with "news" as referenced by survey questions. The news that people report being exposed to via a platform like Facebook might comprise a wide range of content—from all manner of soft news and infotainment with no explicit political content to national hard news stories that do not directly tie their topics to political matters (e.g., stories about natural disasters or financial corruption in religious organizations) and national political stories that do not mention policy issues (e.g., stories

about personal conflicts between the president and congressional leaders); from a spectrum of state- and locally focused content (in various shades of hard and soft news) to non-policy-related blog posts, political talk, and political comedy items, to rumors shared by friends and family that relate in some way to (local or national) events or issues understood to be "in the news." Moreover, because social media architecture encourages accidental encounters with content and frequent diversions of attention, "getting news from" social media (a common survey phraseology) may often indicate a considerably fleeting and superficial activity, such as glancing at a headline or watching the first 10 seconds of a news video. The potential effects on public policy opinions facilitated by the unique features of online communication and social media (such as the ability to comment on news content or endorse particular stories via Facebook "likes," thereby sending credibility cues to "friends") constitute important areas of ongoing research. Still, mainstream news content that connects—or misconnects—policy issues to people's interests and values continues to make up a large portion of online discourse that is likely to shape public opinion about specific issues.

For all these reasons, my study of media's role in the neoliberal turn raises troubling questions not only about "content diversity" (i.e., which political voices, issue frames, and items of information receive more or less news coverage during key policy debates) but also "exposure diversity" (the extent to which whatever content diversity is present actually reaches people on a regular basis) (Napoli 2011). It is crucial to consider not just how widespread exposure diversity might be (i.e., the absolute sizes of audiences for outlets that provide ideologically multidimensional and information-rich news content) but also how equally distributed that exposure diversity is (whether exposure to such content is highly concentrated among certain social groups, especially those that already command disproportionate political power). A great deal of evidence suggests that exposure diversity as it pertains to U.S. public policy-related news continues to fare poorly on both counts, despite—and in some ways, because of—the rise of social media and other online modes of news delivery.

There are strong political-economic and technological obstacles to online information quality and ideological diversity in the context of public policy debates. Moreover, the major forces which lead to media refraction in news coverage of neoliberal policy debates appear no weaker in 2018 than they were in 1981, 1996, and 2010. Indeed, especially outside of prestige publications like the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, there is evidence that coverage of key issues related to inequality and poverty—not to mention hard news in general—remains both scarce and ideologically narrow (Chomsky 2018; FAIR 2012; Harrington 2016; Tyndall Report 2016b). In the next section, I report my own empirical analysis of mainstream news during a major neoliberal policy debate in the early Trump administration.

Media Coverage of the Attempt to Eliminate Obamacare: Plus ça Change?

To explore how the rise of social media and the rapidly changing political communication environment may be affecting mainstream, mass-market news about domestic policy controversies, I analyzed *USA Today* coverage of the debate over repealing the ACA during the spring and summer of 2017. To what extent have the political blossoming of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube; the increasing popularity of accessing news via search engines and aggregators; the explosion of partisan blogs and digital native websites; and the election of a president with a particularly confrontational stance toward the media changed the news content that major outlets circulate during economic and social welfare policy debates? Not very much, according to my analysis. Corporate media production of superficial and narrow news content continued into the Trump presidency. In fact, with some exceptions, coverage tendencies in the Obamacare repeal debate closely mirror those in key neoliberal policy episodes dating to the early Reagan era.

In this analysis, I examined every *USA Today* news story about the ACA repeal debate produced from March 7 through July 31, 2017.[2] These dates span the introduction of the first repeal bill in the House of Representatives through the demise of the so-called "skinny repeal" plan in the Senate. Continuing a nearly 25-year run of popularity, *USA Today* was the highest-circulation daily newspaper in the nation in 2017, measured by combined print and digital reach (Gannett 2018).

As in the earlier policy cases in this book, official government sources dominated coverage of the Obamacare repeal debate, comprising 83.8 percent of all voices carried by *USA Today*. Those official voices were made up largely of congressional Republicans, which alone comprised nearly half of all sources. Trump administration voices made up another 20 percent. All told, an astounding 69 percent of the 474 sources cited by the nation's most popular newspaper across 42 separate stories during the ACA repeal debate were Republican Party elites. Democratic officials comprised 14.6 percent of sources, or just 22.9 percent of non-administration official partisan voices. This is despite the fact that Democrats (and independents who caucused with them) made up more than 45 percent of Congress (including 48 percent of the Senate) at the time. I did not conduct a separate content analysis of unmediated congressional discourse. But as in earlier neoliberal policy episodes, these data suggest that Democratic elites were underrepresented in mainstream news coverage of the Obamacare repeal debate.

Overall dominance by official sources in this debate aligns closely with my findings on print coverage of the Reagan economic plan (about 84.7 percent

of all sources), the 1996 welfare reform law (82.7 percent), and the 2010 Bush tax cut extension plan (85 percent). Even amid widespread criticism of ACA repeal from progressive think tanks and interest groups, and vigorous grassroots organizing that prompted several GOP members of Congress to cancel town hall meetings in their districts, just 1.1 percent of all voices in *USA Today* coverage of the debate came from left-leaning nongovernmental actors. And a mere 1.7 percent of sources were ordinary people not identified as associated with a formal organization or institution. This amounted to just eight statements over nearly five months of news coverage.

Most significantly, as Figure 6.1 shows, more than two-thirds of all ideologically inflected issue frames circulated by *USA Today* during the ACA repeal debate were shaded toward the right. This is also in line with findings from earlier economic and social welfare policy debates across the neoliberal era: right-leaning frames made up 69.6 percent of ideologically shaded messages during the Reagan economic plan debate, 67.5 percent during the welfare reform debate, 79.4 percent during the 2001 George W. Bush tax plan debate (Guardino 2007), and 60.4 percent during the Bush tax cut extension debate.

Moreover, mainstream news media continued to generate infrequent and superficial coverage during the debate over repealing Obamacare. Over nearly five months, *USA Today* produced just 42 stories about this crucial issue. Fully two-thirds of these reports focused on legislative procedure or elite political strategy and tactics, the highest total among all four neoliberal policy debates analyzed in this book. Separate content analyses of all ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN evening news stories during the first two months of the 2017 Obamacare debate, reported elsewhere, are consistent with these findings (Guardino 2018b).[3] Given this heavy focus on nonsubstantive aspects of the policy debate, it is hardly

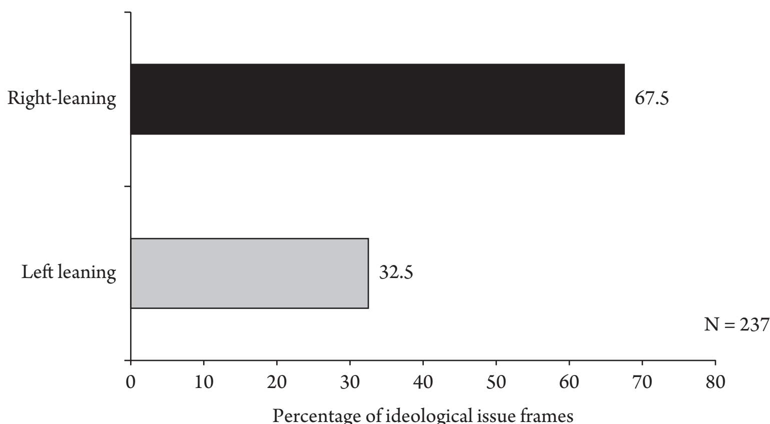

Figure 6.1 ACA Repeal News Coverage: Issue Frames by Ideological Tendency

surprising that most *USA Today* stories about the ACA repeal were neutral or ideologically ambivalent. Still, pro-repeal news reports (26.2 percent) outpaced oppositional stories (9.5 percent) by nearly a three-to-one ratio.

The one significant difference between coverage of the ACA repeal debate and coverage of earlier neoliberal policy episodes with similar partisan elite alignments was the relative sidelining of frames attributed to President Trump and his administration in favor of messages from his co-partisans in the congressional majority. This finding is not unexpected. Trump had an exceedingly chilly personal relationship with many mainstream journalists. Perhaps more importantly, his administration took a relatively less public, less active role in formulating and negotiating the repeal bills than is sometimes the case for presidents. Still, this sourcing anomaly had no discernible effect on the overall ideological tendency of news coverage during the debate.

While my analyses of the drive to eliminate Obamacare are not as extensive or detailed as those of earlier policy debates discussed in this book, the empirical patterns are consistent with prevailing media refraction dynamics across the neoliberal era. A handful of prestige newspapers saw significant increases in digital subscription revenue and additional investments in journalistic resources at the beginning of the Trump era (Doctor 2016). But corporate austerity and commercial pressures remain acute in the mass-market news media. Hard news coverage—especially coverage reaching any level of policy depth, nuance, and diversity of perspective—remains time-consuming, expensive, and risky in the neoliberal media environment. And productivity drives that intensified when social media joined the already restless 24/7 news culture (Starkman 2010) have likely only bolstered tendencies to rely on conventional news formulas, mainstream institutional sources, and orthodox wisdom from the centers of power.

As in earlier cases, *USA Today*'s heavy focus on political strategy and tactics or governmental procedure during the ACA repeal debate reflects media's commercially driven tendency to depict the internal machinations that affect the fate of policy proposals. This coverage crowded out substantive accounts of how policy changes might affect ordinary people. It also downplayed the democratic contestation of ideological arguments about health care that were occurring outside and inside government.

The 2017 Obamacare repeal debate occurred during a period of unified government through an uneasy coalition of the Trump administration and the latest incarnation of the New Right led by the congressional majority. Despite well-documented personality and stylistic clashes, the major substantive difference between President Trump and congressional Republicans over the ACA was over just how far to push health care policy back to the right. Given the interaction of this institutional political alignment with neoliberal media's political-economic imperatives, technological changes appeared to have little effect on

mainstream news tendencies to marginalize even those dissenting voices that came from inside Congress. As with the other cases in this book, coverage of the Obamacare repeal debate was not monolithic. Still, corporate media's near blackout of progressive nongovernmental voices and views from ordinary people is striking in light of the attention devoted to the anti-Trump "resistance" on social media, partisan blogs, and left-leaning digital news sites.

While the ACA in some ways itself supported private market approaches and corporate prerogatives, dismantling it as proposed in 2017 would have been a major victory for the policy trajectories and political forces driving neoliberalism in the United States. The ACA repeal debate featured (1) a proposal championed by a historically unpopular president who had provoked controversy even among fellow partisan elites, and had attracted significant personal criticism from the mainstream media; (2) a nearly equally unpopular congressional majority, facing a fairly close legislative margin and a Democratic leadership unified in opposition; (3) consistent and intense social protest activity, and substantial nongovernmental policy analysis that was highly critical of repeal; and (4) a broader media environment that included ample opposition in blogs and advocacy news sites, political comedy shows, and social media messages from ordinary people. Nevertheless, corporate news coverage was virtually as superficial, elite-centric, and ideologically narrow as it was in major economic and social welfare policy debates dating to the dawn of the neoliberal era.

Media Policy and American Democracy: Prospects for a More Democratic System

Understanding news coverage from the standpoint of media refraction suggests that substantively thin and ideologically narrow depictions of important public policy issues are deeply woven into the fabric of the American political economy and political discourse. Neither changes in media technologies, nor the organic proliferation of alternative online news outlets, nor even earnest exhortations for journalists to do their jobs better will be enough to reverse these trends. Media refraction is not merely the result of individual reporters' mistakes that could be corrected with better training in technical skills and seminars on democratic values. Rigorous and critical journalism education is crucial now more than ever. But most reporters already work hard to produce socially valuable news that helps us act as informed citizens. Like most Americans, however, media personnel work in hierarchical institutions bound by rules and norms shaped by political and economic pressures over which they have no immediate control as individuals. The neoliberalizing media system has intensified

those pressures in ways that make it increasingly difficult for even the very best journalists to meet their social responsibilities and democratic obligations. Mainstream journalists across the neoliberal era have produced brilliant political and economic reporting—perhaps more than we should expect, given the powerful forces pushing toward trivialization, superficiality, and narrow-mindedness in the news. In fact, journalists (current and former) are among the strongest critics of the trends that have led to media refraction (McChesney and Nichols 2010; Mitchell 2008). Lecturing journalists about what they are doing wrong is not likely to lead to lasting or meaningful solutions. The increasing availability of more substantive and less elite-driven news sources online, including inventive investigative reporting and political analysis outlets founded in the last 15 years, is a hopeful sign. However, even large numbers of news seekers turning to these sources would likely make little difference in the public discourse that shapes ordinary Americans' policy opinions, so long as alternative outlets remain structurally marginal and rely on inherently insecure funding from patrons, foundations, and individual contributors (Pareene 2018).

If shallow and narrow news coverage shaded toward ideological frames favored by powerful political elites poses serious problems for democracy, then systemic media policy responses deserve serious consideration. Largely outside the mainstream media spotlight, researchers and activists have worked for years to organize and mobilize for a better media architecture. This movement has achieved notable victories, such as FCC enactment of net neutrality rules restricting internet service companies from discriminating among content providers in connection speed or quality, which fostered more favorable conditions for small online news outlets and alternative social and political voices (Ruiz 2015). Most of these wins, however, have merely slowed the march of neoliberalism in the media system rather than significantly moved the United States toward a different framework for media governance.

It is outside the scope of this book to advocate for particular media policy changes that might help realize such an alternative framework. The problems of the U.S. media complex are deep and extensive, and there are no quick, magical fixes. As with any important issue, any media reforms ought to be subject to thorough democratic debate. Still, scholars and activists have developed a number of creative policy proposals that could help rebuild a media system that meets the best values of American democracy (Ackerman 2011; McChesney 2013, 216–232; McChesney 2014; Pickard 2014, 220–226). In that light, a few directions for reform merit discussion as coherent responses to the particular ways in which media refraction distorts news coverage of public policy issues.

Policy changes that encourage news outlets to harness new technology to produce more and better investigative journalism that digs beneath official

claims and mainstream narratives could significantly enrich public debate at all levels of government (Hamilton 2016, 279–316). Still, while it occupies an essential niche in democratic discourse, long-term, long-form investigative reporting has always constituted a small fraction of public affairs journalism. We also need to focus on how to improve the quantity and quality of more routine coverage of ongoing policy debates. In that context, three types of reforms seem especially promising: (1) policies to directly curb the influence of commercial advertising on news content, (2) new funding and organizational models for nonprofit, public media, and (3) action against corporate media concentration and centralization.

Reducing the corporate tax write-off for advertising as a business expense (McChesney and Nichols 2010, 211), taxing major news media companies on advertising they circulate, and restricting commercial practices online (including limiting the use of personal data) could significantly improve the quality of public policy news. Making advertising more expensive to generate and disseminate could reduce its prevalence in the media and the distortions of news coverage it encourages. Restrictions on how digital advertising is produced and circulated could curb its insidious impacts on both content and exposure diversity in online news. These responses would address multiple levels of the system that commercializes news content—the companies which produce and buy advertising (e.g., pharmaceutical and financial services firms), those that circulate it (media companies and the news outlets they control), and those which supply platforms and services for delivering consumers to both ads and the news content they shape (search engines, social media services, and ancillary firms such as data brokers).

Tax proceeds from these reforms could be directed specifically to subsidize new forms of noncommercial news (Aaron 2011). Reshaping and bolstering public media could have direct and indirect effects that counteract the worst influences of media refraction on news coverage of policy debates. By easing both revenue- and cost-side pressures, a more robust noncommercial media ecosystem could contribute directly to the richness and diversity of ideas available to Americans during policy debates. Over the longer term, growing audiences and public influence for these outlets could also impel commercial outlets to adjust journalistic operations to improve the quality of the news coverage they produce. Especially crucial are mechanisms to provide ample, secure, and politically insulated sources of funding for public media organizations. This is something that is largely taken for granted in other capitalist democracies. For instance, per-capita spending on public media is about 22 times greater in Canada than in the United States, 80 times greater in the United Kingdom, and more than 100 times greater in Denmark (McChesney and Nichols 2010, 300). Public subsidies might also be targeted at smaller and fledgling news outlets with little

or no reliance on commercial advertising. Direct subsidies could hold down subscription prices, or subsidies could take the form of vouchers for noncommercial news services (McChesney and Nichols 2010, 201–206). Cross-national research suggests that policies such as these encourage more informative and diverse public affairs coverage (Aalberg, van Aelst, and Curran 2010; Benson 2011; Curran et al. 2009).

Counteracting the forces that drive media refraction would also require limiting the size and reach of large media firms. Such moves would complement advertising and public media policies by alleviating the pressures to cut newsroom costs and amplify commercialism that accompany corporate mergers and acquisitions. The evidence in this book suggests that neoliberal changes in ownership and market concentration regulations contributed to serious distortions of news coverage. Realizing more substantive and diverse coverage of policy debates would seem to require aggressive reversal of these policy trends.

Any such reforms would be more viable if combined with robust and lasting protections for net neutrality. In one of the Trump administration's first major actions, the FCC eliminated these open-internet regulations (Fung 2018). Telecommunications companies themselves are oligopolies with increasing holdings in media content businesses. Granting such firms license to extract revenue from websites in exchange for better service threatens to undermine broad access and exposure to the more substantive and diverse news coverage that public, noncommercial, and independent outlets might create.

Thoughtful consideration of possible media policy responses cautions against taking the preferences of media audiences for granted—as unchanging, unchangeable, or self-evident. Simplistic recourse to ideas of consumer sovereignty is out of line with actually existing corporate media processes (Meehan 2005), not to mention actually existing economic processes in general (McChesney 2013, 23–62). Moreover, it contradicts documented experience in other capitalist democracies, where different structures and institutions of information and idea "supply" encourage different configurations of "demand." Taking consumer preferences as given also forecloses possibilities that different patterns of socialization, institutionalized through stronger civic and media education, could foster more robust and critical democratic engagement with the news. Perhaps most importantly, simply assuming that audiences would ignore more substantive and diverse public policy coverage detracts from systemic responses that challenge powerful actors that benefit both from the conditions that produce media refraction and from its effects on public discourse.

In that light, counteracting the consequences of media refraction also calls for policies aimed at cultivating our proficiency and motivation to evaluate media messages. Given the intersection of massive technological shifts with the political-economic trends and effects on news coverage discussed in this book,

such educational efforts are perhaps needed now more than ever. Those who are exposed to media content—especially the lower-income, less-educated and socioeconomically marginalized people whose opinions and interests have been most directly affected by distorted news coverage during the neoliberal turn—need to empower themselves to critique and produce messages during policy debates. These media literacy efforts would develop public capacities to form and to act on better-grounded democratic preferences.

By many accounts, civic education in U.S. secondary schools has changed over recent decades in ways that may make it more difficult to help students equip themselves to confront policy issues critically and thoughtfully. Particularly troubling are persistent socioeconomic inequalities in access to meaningful civic education opportunities (Levine 2012, 39–41). This trend has coincided with the turn toward neoliberal policies that emphasize narrowly technocratic approaches to preparing students for the job market and that marginalize broader notions of social, cultural, and political education. My evidence from Chapter 5 that factual knowledge of current politics and public issues can moderate the influence of ideologically distorted news coverage confirms the urgency to combat generational declines in civic knowledge (Niemi 2012, 17–20). Particularly needed are less sterilized curricula centered on strategies for thoughtfully engaging with political debates and policy controversies (Jamieson et al. 2011, 27–29; Niemi 2012, 33–34). Greater focus on practical democratic skills—such as how to gather and critically assess policy information and ideas, and how to communicate politically—might also help mitigate the downstream effects of media refraction.

A deliberate, systematic commitment to enriching public capacities to decode news messages and political discourse from multiple angles must be a central part of such civic education. This should include approaches in the broad tradition of critical media literacy, which embraces the inherently political dimensions of information, frames, and representations in the media (Funk, Kellner, and Share 2016; Kellner and Share 2007). Younger Americans command impressive technical skills and often possess sophisticated abilities to use information technology to engage in public debates and promote social change. But efforts are needed to help students strengthen their grasp of the historical and political-economic context of political message production and circulation in a variety of media forms. Especially important is greater focus on the political-economic interests that shape ideas and information; the role of material power in these dynamics; and the influence of government and corporate structures, institutions, and policies on the processes that determine how messages are produced, disseminated, and received. These themes should be combined with components that assist students in cultivating skills and motivation to explore what lies beneath the torrent of digital political and commercial (mis)

information, rhetoric, and imagery that confronts them each day (Wineburg et al. 2016).

Ultimately, the main obstacles in the way of more democratic arrangements of media production and engagement are not so much inadequacies in policy ideas and technological capacities as they are inadequacies in ideological imagination and political will among those in power in both major parties. Therefore, counteracting the impacts of media refraction on our political discourse may ultimately require making the U.S. media system itself a political issue on a level that it has only been during a handful critical historical junctures (Aufderheide 2000; Hoynes 1994; McChesney 1993, 2008; Pickard 2014). Given the challenges posed by corporate media lobbying and campaign financing (Nichols and McChesney 2013), major news outlets' still-formidable gatekeeping power during policy debates that directly concern their corporate interests (Bailard 2016; Gilens and Hertzman 2000), and the general obscurity of media policy in broad public consciousness, this would be a difficult task.

There are signs, however, that the intersection of media policy and democracy is sparking greater public concern. Indeed, the rise of digital technologies and declining trust in traditional news organizations may have converged to place us in a new critical juncture for the media (McChesney 2008, 2013). For example, the FCC received a record four million-plus public comments in favor of net neutrality regulations in 2014, with blogs, social media, online activism, and a satirical news show helping to raise awareness and catalyze action (Olmstead, Hitlin, and Vogt 2014; Williams and Shelton 2014). And in 2016, both major presidential campaigns expressed some level of criticism about the proposed $85.4 billion merger of AT&T and Time Warner, which promised to give one of the largest telecom providers control of a major media content company whose holdings include CNN (Neate 2016). In a possible sign of media policy's increasing political salience, in early 2018 the Trump Justice Department filed suit to block this merger (Cohn 2018).

Still, senators responsible for antitrust issues were less critical of the AT&T-Time Warner deal (Kang 2016). In most respects, the media policy positions staked out by the Republican administration and congressional leadership in 2017 and 2018 closely followed neoliberal lines. Indeed, an FCC statement framed the elimination of net neutrality in familiar neoliberal terms of "internet freedom" and "light-touch" (as opposed to "heavy-handed government") regulation (Federal Communications Commission 2017). Even as fewer large companies swallow more media outlets (Matsa 2017), the administration has moved aggressively against ownership limits and public-interest operating rules for television stations and newspapers (Fiegerman 2017). In addition to stripping news outlets of journalistic resources that could be deployed to produce better public affairs coverage at local and state levels, increasing concentration

is likely to encourage circulation of standardized content in the interests of cost-cutting. For the many local TV stations affiliated with major corporate broadcast networks or owned by large national chains, this will furnish yet another vehicle for informationally shallow and ideologically narrow policy news, whether it reaches the public through conventional newscasts, station websites, or social media. At the time of this writing, not quite two years into the Trump administration, any redirection of regulatory and funding policies that could move the U.S. media system toward more democratic models for news coverage appears improbable in the immediate future.

Major progress in that direction would likely require continued grassroots activism and persistent efforts to make democratic media policy a central element of party politics and election-year debates. But journalists themselves could also play an important role in movements for reform. An erosion of journalistic unions has accompanied the neoliberal turn in media institutions and practices. This decline in labor organization has facilitated, even as it has derived from, the cost-cutting and commercial pressures that catalyze the effects of media refraction. Journalists' self-reassertion as a collective force demanding greater resources devoted to serious reporting, along with working conditions that not only benefit them materially but help them serve the public by easing the pressures of refraction, could significantly boost broader reform efforts. Signs of such a revival have appeared in some digital news outlets, although neoliberal media culture and the demands of new technology have presented obstacles to unionization (DePillis 2015; McNary 2017). The potential for mainstream journalists to seize a more active political role in democratic reconstruction of the media system was dramatized in early 2018, as the news and editorial staff of the *Denver Post* took the highly unusual step of publishing scathing opinion pieces criticizing its hedge-fund owner for decimating journalistic capacity and abandoning any pretense of public service (Ember 2018).

Over the longer term, creative arrangements such as cooperative employee ownership under nonprofit or low-profit models might afford journalists greater autonomy from commercial pressures (Khouri 2018; McChesney and Nichols 2010, 186–188). Such models could establish structural bulwarks against media refraction that complement the tax, subsidy, and regulatory policies discussed earlier. Indeed, during the debates that led to the crystallization of mainstream professional journalism in the 1930s, the Newspaper Guild (the nation's leading print journalists' union, now called the NewsGuild), advocated for policies to insulate the press from corporate and government influences alike (McChesney and Nichols 2010, 45). Policies like these that endorse journalists' collective role in fostering critical evaluation of powerful institutions underscore the limitations of the common focus on individual bias and irresponsibility as primary causes of news distortions.

To be sure, innovative digital tools, evolving online media formats, and the steady rise of tech-savvy generations would no doubt be crucial to any major democratization of the U.S. news media, as well as to any sustained and effective efforts to tackle the economic and social problems associated with neoliberalism more broadly. However, technological and demographic changes in themselves do not produce social and political change. It is how political-economic institutions and actors engage with technological and demographic forces and trends that will determine what happens next. Counteracting corporate news media's anti-democratic influence on policy debates, and the levels and forms of popular support for neoliberalism in American politics that this influence has promoted, would likely require political efforts focused on the structural and institutional conditions of those media themselves.

Conclusion

New technologies have radically changed key aspects of the media climate in recent years. Still, there are clear signs that the U.S. political communication environment retains considerable capacity to shape and reinforce configurations of popular opinion that support neoliberal economic and social welfare policies. Despite countertrends that have opened public discourse to more substantive and diverse political messages, commercially driven media influence is likely to occur both through mainstream corporate news as it adapts its considerable political-economic weight to shifting technologies, and through emerging mechanisms of online communication. In light of these ongoing media dynamics, what does this book suggest about the staying power of the larger neoliberal policy regime?

At the time of this writing, the neoliberal turn in economic and social welfare policy appears unlikely to soon be reversed. Many of President Trump's 2016 voters may see their support as a rejection of aspects of neoliberalism that seem to threaten their economic security and opportunity. And there is growing discontent with neoliberal policies among many ordinary Democrats. These demands for change were evident in the strong presidential primary enthusiasm for Senator Bernie Sanders and increasing internal challenges to the party's neoliberal leadership bloc, which have been fed by an upsurge of activism since the 2011–2012 Occupy Wall Street movement. However, the Republican Party has redoubled its decades-long push for massive tax cuts, business deregulation, social welfare retrenchment, and privatization. While the situation on the Democratic side is more complicated and uncertain, it is far from clear that a vigorous rejection of neoliberalism in favor of a left-leaning vision and policy program—e.g., a social-democratic turn or a shift to some kind of 21st century

version of the New Deal-Great Society program—is in the party's immediate future.

Understanding the media's role in how our politics have reached this point is essential for understanding the dynamics of the present and the future. To that end, Chapter 7 summarizes my conclusions about mainstream news media and the neoliberal turn in U.S. economic and social welfare policy, suggests directions for future research on ideological framing and public opinion during policy debates, and explores the broader theoretical and substantive implications for democracy raised by this book. What do my historical argument and empirical findings suggest about corporate news media's role in the distribution and use of political-economic power in the United States? And, when seen in the context of news coverage and public opinion as shaped by media refraction, how entrenched is the neoliberal economic and social welfare policy regime as the Trump era in American politics unfolds?

7

Looking Backward, Looking Forward

Media, Power, and Inequality

To some media pundits and other political observers, the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th U.S. president signaled a fundamental redirection of governance and public policy. These predictions of political transformation may prove true in many important stylistic, strategic, and substantive respects. However, much of President Trump's first-term domestic policy agenda amplified the pro-corporate, market-oriented trajectory that Reagan carried to the national political stage nearly four decades ago. Trump's campaign rhetoric often positioned him as champion of downtrodden workers and the shrinking middle class. But with the significant exceptions of immigration and trade, most economic and social welfare policies Trump pursued in the first two years of his presidency were firmly in the neoliberal mold that has done so much to concentrate material resources and political power at the top echelons of American society.

Most of the president's appointments to key cabinet, advisory, and administrative positions have been strong supporters of upwardly redistributive and corporate-friendly tax cuts; rollbacks in social benefits programs for low-income people; business deregulation; and the privatization of public services from transportation and prisons to education, health care, and Social Security (Dayen 2016; Karaim 2017; Korkery 2016; *New York Times* 2018). For example, the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act that President Trump signed in 2017 is modeled closely on the neoliberal policies of the early Reagan and George W. Bush administrations (*Bloomberg News* 2017; Huang, Herrera, and Duke 2017). Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar has sharply criticized consumer protection regulations in Obamacare (King 2018). Intensifying the neoliberal-paternalist reforms enacted more than 20 years ago, the Trump administration has encouraged states to impose work requirements on Medicaid recipients, tightened similar mandates for food stamp recipients, and proposed restricting aid and adding work requirements for federal housing assistance (Cancryn 2018; Jan, Dewey, and Stein 2018; Khimm 2018). The Trump White

House even moved to slash staffing at the Social Security Administration (Davidson 2018). Indeed, Vice President Mike Pence has been a leader in the drive to privatize America's most popular social program (Kirkpatrick and Hulse 2005).

Meanwhile, many of the president's statements have drawn from the same free-market discourse that has undergirded and promoted the neoliberal turn in American politics. For example, on the campaign trail, Trump dismissed Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton's policy ideas as offering nothing but a "welfare check" (Morrongiello 2016), and—echoing 2012 GOP candidate Mitt Romney's famous "47 percent" comment—has warned that "eventually the 50 percent cannot carry . . . the other 50 percent" (Schwartz 2015). If neoliberalism is understood as an institutional and ideological framework through which government is reshaped to promote market imperatives and business power, then it is difficult to interpret the main lines of Trump's economic and social welfare policy vision as outside the basic neoliberal parameters that have governed the United States since the early 1980s. With Congress fully in control of a Republican Party that largely supports this political direction, as of 2018 the near-term prospects for a doubling down on neoliberal domestic policy are strong. Meanwhile, the disturbing social and economic trends of the neoliberal era continue, as income and wealth inequality increase, social mobility declines, wages stagnate, and poverty deepens (Casselman 2017; Chen 2016; Tankersley 2016). To take just one example, the wealthiest 2 percent of Americans increased their asset values in 2017 by more than enough to fund all U.S. social welfare programs combined (Buchheit 2018).

News coverage dynamics—and, in particular, the commercial logics that increasingly drive the U.S. media system in the neoliberal era—have been crucial to the rise of President Trump and the political and policy trends he represents (Pickard 2016). Trump drew much more TV news coverage than Democratic candidates Clinton and Bernie Sanders—about 2.7 times as much as Clinton and nearly 16 times as much as Sanders in 2015 (Tyndall Report 2016a). That amounted to an estimated $1.9 billion worth of "free" media time through March 2016 (Confessore and Yourish 2016). Many news outlets also afforded Trump unusual leeway for a presidential candidate—for example, extending open invitations to call in to Sunday morning network political programs for interviews at his chosen times and on his chosen terms, and broadcasting campaign rallies unedited and in full on cable channels (Strupp 2016).

It is unlikely that this frequent and sometimes positive coverage was primarily caused by any pro-Trump (or pro-Republican) political views held by national journalists, editors, and news producers. The more plausible explanation is that Trump's celebrity and political novelty were understood to draw large and

advertiser-friendly audiences—whether these audiences were jeering, cheering, or just curious. Moreover, candidate Trump's stylistic and substantive political traits fit nicely with the intersection of structural imperatives and news routines that increasingly defines the neoliberalizing U.S. media complex. These traits include not only Trump's frequently outrageous statements but his limited interest in policy details, his construction of a personal brand, and his appeal to a market-populist ethos based on a narrative of heroic entrepreneurship. Despite the increasingly diverse demographic makeup of the United States, the very large audience for corporate news media is concentrated among white, working- and middle-class Americans 40 and older. While the political leanings of this group are far from uniform, media executives understand it as a commercial goldmine for the kind of Trump coverage we witnessed during the election. As CBS executive chairman and CEO Leslie Moonves said at a media and telecommunications conference in February 2016, "I've never seen anything like this, and this is going to be a very good year for us. Sorry. It's a terrible thing to say. But, bring it on, Donald. Keep going . . . It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS . . . The money's rolling in and this is fun" (Fang 2016). In short, highly concentrated and centralized media corporations have profited immensely from this political moment.

Trump news coverage has not only been revenue generating; it has often been relatively cheap. As such, it complies well with the decades-long move away from investigative journalism and substantive analysis, in favor of inexpensive political infotainment and formulaic coverage based on narrow official perspectives and superficial punditry. Indeed, contemporary political circumstances seem tailor-made for the hyperdramatized and decontextualized news encouraged by neoliberal media institutions, policies, and practices. At some level, the president himself seems to have understood this, telling *Time* magazine, "I go on one of these shows and the ratings double, they triple. And that gives you power" (Joyella 2016).

This is not, however, a passing phenomenon caused by one celebrity's unique popularity in a highly unusual political context. Rather, Trump's rise has tapped into fundamental structural imperatives of the U.S. media complex. During the neoliberal era, these imperatives have promoted a favorable political environment for a steady move to the right in economic and social welfare policy that the Obama presidency only briefly and partially interrupted. In this final chapter, I summarize the supporting evidence I have compiled for that argument and elaborate my contributions to our understanding of news media, public opinion, and the neoliberal turn in public policy. I also discuss what my findings suggest about the underappreciated role of media communication in the broader politics of economic inequality, and in the material power dynamics of American politics more generally.

Ideological Framing in the Media and Public Policy Opinion: Findings and Contributions

This book was motivated by an enigma about public support for the neoliberal turn in economic and social welfare policy. Research going back decades shows that majorities or large pluralities of Americans tend to hold attitudes on basic policy directions that seem anything but favorable toward neoliberalism (Cook and Barrett 1992; Page and Jacobs 2009; Page and Shapiro 1992, 117–165). At the same time, majorities or large pluralities have endorsed specific neoliberal policies in several debates since 1980. I wanted to explore this apparent contradiction between Americans' support for high taxes on upper-income people and corporations, a variety of social spending programs and business regulations, and so on, and their support for policies like the regressive Reagan and Bush tax cuts, and the neoliberal welfare cutbacks and restrictions enacted during the Clinton administration. This puzzle goes to the heart of the foundations of popular consent for one of the most important policy shifts in U.S. political history.

Pinpointing a factor that has received little attention from scholars seeking to explaining this turn in public policy, I have argued that mainstream commercial news coverage was significantly responsible for patterns of popular support for key neoliberal policies. Empirical analyses of the 1981 Reagan economic plan in Chapter 3, welfare reform in Chapter 4, the Bush tax cuts extension in Chapter 5, and the proposed repeal of Obamacare in Chapter 6 demonstrate right-leaning media coverage along several dimensions. In particular, the news outlets that much of the American public has turned to across this period have circulated issue frames favoring neoliberal policy approaches much more often than they have circulated left-leaning frames. These coverage tendencies are consistent with public opinion at the height of key debates: poll results not only show high levels of support for the Reagan tax plan and neoliberal welfare reform but closely track the specific frames most frequently propagated through the mainstream media during these debates.

Key to this pattern of right-leaning coverage was the marginalization of nongovernmental opposition voices: interest groups and social movement organizations, academic and policy researchers, and ordinary people who challenged neoliberal policies received very little news attention. But the media's limited circulation of critical views also reached into the halls of the national government itself. In fact, in tension with much political communication research, I found that mainstream news outlets did not mirror the policy debate inside Congress. Instead, the media magnified the voices of neoliberal advocates while underrepresenting official opposition, including critical messages emanating

from well-known Democratic Party figures like the late Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts. Aside from these explicit ideological distortions, my empirical analyses demonstrate a news landscape heavily focused on the strategic games pursued by mainstream political elites and largely devoid of even basic policy information that could help people express substantive judgments when pollsters ask for their opinions.

I explain the shallow and narrow coverage of these key policy debates through a theory that defines the news media collectively as an institution that itself has been shaped by the broader political-economic tendencies of neoliberalism. My theory of media refraction highlights how the longstanding corporate and commercial imperatives of the U.S. media system have been reinforced and amplified as neoliberal policies and practices have penetrated news organizations. These imperatives encourage media outlets to rely heavily on simplistic news formulas, conventional political voices, and orthodox ideological views compatible with the profit requirements of an advertising-driven media system focused on drawing lucrative audiences at low costs. Patterns of mainstream news coverage consistent with media refraction have occurred under Republican and Democratic presidents; in times of divided and unified government; during debates over both tax and spending policies; and at periods in the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s featuring rapidly developing communication technologies. The primary thread connecting these cases is the powerful tendency of commercial news media to circumscribe, simplify, and filter policy debate in compliance with their increasingly well-entrenched institutional position in neoliberal corporate capitalism.

Finally, the online experiment in Chapter 5 shows that ideologically narrow issue framing encouraged through media refraction can actually shape people's opinions about specific policy proposals. Using realistic mainstream news depictions of a recent debate over the neoliberal push to lower corporate taxes, I demonstrated that these effects occur apart from the separate opinion-shaping influences of people's partisan identities, self-chosen ideological labels, and demographic traits. Importantly, narrow issue framing in the media can make people more likely to express specific policy opinions that are at odds with their material and sociopolitical predispositions. My experiment indicates that these framing effects are strongest among people who are less knowledgeable about politics and public policy, and those with weaker partisan identities, both of which constitute important political constituencies in policy debates and elections. In short, the ideological distribution of specific issue frames in the news matters for public policy opinions.

These opinions form a crucial part of the political climate during high-profile policy debates, as politicians point to poll numbers—and their indirect, often simplified reflection in the media—to legitimize favored policy stances and

pressure actual and potential opponents to follow their lead (Druckman and Jacobs 2015; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Especially as relatively small but vocal minorities express hardened views on opposite sides of many issues, credible claims to the democratic mantle of majority opinion can be a potent political resource for elites seeking to enact or block specific policies that advance their own ideological views and material interests, and those of their core support coalitions. My findings paint a disturbing picture of American democracy: not only can ideologically narrow issue framing in the media distort the processes by which popular opinion is formed and communicated, but it is those who are generally less powerful whose policy preferences are most likely to be shaped by this framing. At the same time, these lower-income and less-educated Americans are among the most economically and politically disadvantaged by neoliberal policies. Overall, political dynamics driven by media refraction may reinforce the striking redistribution of power in favor of the wealthy and large corporations that has characterized the neoliberal era (Gilens 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2010). I return to these broader implications for democracy in the last section of this chapter.

Taken together, my analyses in this book suggest that mainstream news coverage has been substantially responsible for shaping public opinion to support right-leaning economic and social welfare policies at key historical points in the neoliberal turn. Carrying out this project entailed gathering, analyzing, and interpreting several forms of empirical evidence. As importantly, it has required contextualizing that evidence in terms of what we know theoretically and historically about the neoliberal policy turn, the dynamics of news production and the U.S. media complex, and the processes through which ordinary people form their opinions. In doing this work, I have reached into different corners of political science and communication studies to try to render a holistic account of mechanisms that have often escaped the grasp of conventional analyses of U.S. politics. This broad, interdisciplinary approach is a promising one for understanding the media's role in policy debates and other political episodes in ways that are sensitive to processes of historical development and the operation of political power. I return to these methodological implications later in the chapter.

Political Communication and the Politics of Economic Inequality

Scholars of American politics have produced impressive research on the political causes and consequences of rising economic inequality (e.g., Gilens 2012; Jacobs and Skocpol 2005). While that rich body of historical and empirical

work has generated important insights, it is still a long way from adequately conceptualizing or analyzing the role of the news media in this major political story of our era. Many studies in this line of research have used news content as descriptive empirical evidence for elite political debates or background context for discussions of historical events, or have integrated the media as a secondary dimension of broader political explanations (Hacker and Pierson 2005b, 2010; McCall 2013). Most of the more focused attention that has been directed at media's role in the rightward policy shift over recent decades has been aimed at explicitly partisan popular media (Berry and Sobieraj 2014; Jamieson and Cappella 2008) or specialized intellectual publications (M. A. Smith 2007). Research on the politics of inequality has not treated the broad-reaching, apparently neutral commercial news media as a central institution welded to the contemporary U.S. political-economic structure. And very little work has applied this systemic understanding to concrete empirical analyses of news coverage and political discourse in policy debates across the right turn. These are oversights that I hope my book has made a small start in correcting. In this section, I discuss my work in the context of American political development, the American political system, and the future lines of historical and empirical research that my analytical approach suggests.

News Media and Political Development

In addition to improving our understanding of particular policy outcomes related to rising inequality, the broad and detailed account of the news media exemplified in this book can help historically oriented American politics scholarship more clearly recognize and fully understand the complex, shifting, and often self-reinforcing political dynamics of policy regimes. For example, my analysis suggests that informationally shallow news, ideologically narrow framing, and the broader consolidation of a favorable communication environment may have fostered a supportive popular and elite climate for neoliberalism over time. In part because of this political climate, some left-leaning policies which seemed possible 10, 20, 30, or 40 years ago are now deemed less possible (or impossible). These processes involve many forces and institutions, such as think tanks, intellectual journals, targeted partisan media, political parties, and more. Such elements are outside this book's central focus. However, the mainstream mass media certainly constitute one institution that merits much greater attention in American political development than it has so far received. While my own focus is on policy issues and debates, similar approaches could be applied to examine the role of campaign advertising and election news coverage in patterns of political development. For instance, how have structurally embedded

changes and continuities in commercially oriented political communication affected elections in the crucial decades since 1980? Political-economic analyses focused on this question could shed much-needed light both on American politics today, and on the possibilities for alternative—and potentially more democratic—trajectories.

Viewing the analyses in this book in a systemic and developmental light suggests that news media coverage has contributed substantially over time to the still formidable political momentum of the neoliberal turn in public policy. There are at least three related mechanisms through which this influence may have occurred:

(1) Shorter-term media influence on public opinion in debates at critical junctures (Pierson 2004, 17–78) has facilitated major policy shifts that may have fed back into the political system by changing the material opportunities and constraints facing elites (Campbell 2012). For example, the massive budget deficits enabled by the Reagan and Bush tax cuts encouraged Democratic leaders to lower their sights for new social programs and public works initiatives, and to make deficit reduction a central goal (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Meeropol 1998; Shefter and Ginsberg 1985). This might be one of the key ways in which political communication has magnified the influence of neoliberal ideas and policy approaches on the Democratic Party establishment.

(2) Longer-term influence of news coverage of certain economic and social welfare policy issues may have seeded public consciousness in ways that made it more likely that right-leaning messages in future debates would resonate with key segments of the public. For instance, consistent repetition of frames attacking "big government," "welfare queens," "death taxes," and so on (facilitated by the strategic public relations efforts of center-right political actors) may have made corresponding mental considerations increasingly salient and accessible (Chong and Druckman 2007a; Zaller 1992) to larger numbers of Americans. That, in turn, may have increased the potency of similar frames in future debates, such as depictions of Fortune 500 companies as heroic "job creators" that have been common in recent discourse justifying corporate tax cuts. Such effects are more likely in communications climates that sideline critical or oppositional frames. Consequently, the Democratic Party's steady ideological shift may itself have aided these processes, as elite-driven corporate news media became less likely to circulate dissenting messages on key issues, thereby fortifying opinion climates supportive of neoliberalism.

(3) A combination of media-influenced poll results in specific debates, Democratic leaders' rightward move on economic and social welfare issues,

> and the increasing normalization of right-leaning public understandings may have contributed to growing *perceptions* among journalists, pundits, and political elites that the neoliberal policy turn was strongly and broadly endorsed by the public. Even if such perceptions are based as much on interpretations of news coverage (Cook 1989; Jacobs et al. 1998) as on nuanced and comprehensive readings of polls, they could confirm implicit media judgments that right-leaning coverage is both commercially attractive and politically safe. Given vagaries of survey question wording, superficial and selective poll reporting in the news (Asher 2017, 161–189; Lewis 2001), Washington journalists' interpersonal and professional networks and off-the-record conversations with political actors (Bennett 2016), and circulation of ideas through the sprawling media ecosystem (e.g., to and from TV networks, prestige newspapers and popular news outlets), such perceptions may become widespread and self-confirming as common wisdom in key circles of power.

While it is beyond the purview of this book to detail these pathways of longer-term media influence on the politics of economic inequality, there is reason to believe that one or more of them may have operated to bolster the political momentum of the neoliberal turn. For example, in addition to the tax, regulatory, and labor policies that the Trump administration and Republican Congress aggressively pursued in 2017 and 2018, state- and national-level politicians in the second decade of the 21st century have built on neoliberal welfare reform to propose and enact a series of increasingly restrictive and punitive social program rules based on neoliberal-paternalist ideas (Lewis and Kenefick 2011; National Conference of State Legislatures 2016; Schram and Soss 2015). These policies are often justified through a familiar concoction of racialized rhetoric that blames poverty and social strife on government dependency. For example, Republican Representative Robert Pittenger of North Carolina told the BBC that African Americans were protesting in the wake of police violence because "they hate white people, because white people are successful and they're not . . . We have spent trillions of dollars on welfare, where we put people in bondage so that they cannot be all that they're capable of being" (Diaz 2016). In fact, key patterns of media coverage that facilitated the initial 1996 welfare reforms have continued in the intervening years (Clawson and Trice 2000; van Doorn 2015).

These dynamics of political discourse and news coverage have falsified the hopes of mainstream Democratic elites that neoliberal welfare reform would create a leftward feedback effect by detaching programs to aid low-income people from racialized stigmas of undeservingness (Soss and Schram 2007). Sacrificing TANF was considered a shrewd move to shore up seemingly more

popular elements of the welfare state. If anything, however, this process appears to be working in reverse. The Bush administration's 2005 Social Security privatization attempt ran aground on the rocks of activated senior citizens and allied interest groups. But cuts to so-called middle-class programs enjoy widespread support among key elites in both parties, and privatization remains a serious idea among neoliberal intellectuals, the Trump administration, and even some Democratic officials. New attempts to turn Social Security or Medicare over to the market may be on the horizon. If so, we might come to see that dynamics of the neoliberalized media environment like those I chart in this book have helped weaken public opposition to this key goal of the pro-corporate right.

News Media and the American Political System

More generally, my analysis suggests that scholarship on the politics of economic inequality in the United States ought to conceptualize the news media as a central political-economic institution. That institution deserves as much attention in historical and empirical accounts of public policy and electoral dynamics as do ideological advocacy groups, non-media corporations, labor unions, and even the political parties themselves. Additional research is needed to more fully identify how the political-economic contours of the media system—and the media policies that enable and support them—might shape concrete patterns of political information and debate. But as a political institution that has been conditioned by other political institutions—from interest groups like the National Association of Broadcasters to bureaucratic actors like the FCC—there is no doubt that the news media have been closely tied to the development of the American state (Cook 2005; Sparrow 1999; Starr 2004), both as that state was constructed over time and as it has been redirected and selectively dismantled under neoliberalism.

Moreover, because the news and information system plays a role in nearly every policy debate and political episode, its institutional elements are among the most important segments of the broader American political system. News media function as a kind of connective tissue for other political institutions and policy areas, linking complex elite- and popular-level flows of information, ideas, and imagery that are increasingly important to the substance and processes of politics and governance. Further, as the neoliberalization of the media system described in this book has made clear, news organizations and their parent companies are direct targets of policy intervention themselves. In the United States, the media also collectively constitute a corporate pressure group with powerful financial and political interests that has spent lavishly on lobbying and campaign contributions in recent decades (Common Cause 2005). While

various media companies, media trade associations, and peak business organizations have not always agreed on media policy issues, they—like big business as a whole—have been generally united on core material issues of common concern that have punctuated the neoliberal turn in the American political economy. In addition to support for corporate and upper-income tax cuts and weaker labor laws, these issues have included opposition to regulations that limit market concentration and ownership centralization in the media, public service rules and requirements aimed at mitigating commercialism, and—crucially—campaign finance reform (McChesney 2004, 2013; Nichols and McChesney 2013). It is a mark of just how deeply embedded the media are in the political-economic system that they constitute the only for-profit corporate sector that is politically, culturally, and constitutionally tasked with producing and circulating the information and discourse on which meaningful democracy rests. By tradition, law, and policy, the business practices of this corporate sector are especially lightly regulated, and it is largely free to try to influence government as an organized interest to advance its own political-economic goals (Sparrow 1999). For these reasons, Kellner's (1990, 96) assertion about TV carries special force when applied to news outlets in particular: "Although television functions according to the imperatives of profit maximization and capital accumulation, it also has social functions and effects that go far beyond those of any other business organization."

Understanding the structural position of the corporate and commercial media sheds light on the limited success of efforts by grassroots constituencies to use new digital technologies to widen democratic debate and shape public opinion to encourage political action against rising economic inequality. Extreme inequality in wealth and income—including its pernicious racial origins and effects—ascended on the elite, media and public agenda in the waning years of the Obama administration. Spurred on by Occupy Wall Street's emergence in 2011—which, tellingly, came as a shock to much of the mainstream media—the "Fight for $15" movement to raise the minimum wage, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Sanders presidential primary campaign, corporate media and mainstream political elites have paid greater attention to inequality in recent years. Social media's key role in these developments testifies to the potential for new information technologies to help democratize political communication. As a result, public awareness of issues like ballooning CEO compensation, the struggles of low-wage workers, the racialized connections between criminal justice policy and inequality, and the impact of housing foreclosures on middle-class families increased (e.g., Hitlin and Tan 2011; Pew Research Center 2011b). For example, after initially largely ignoring the Occupy demonstrations and encampments, major news outlets responded to activists' digital photos, videos,

and live feeds with increased coverage (DeLuca, Lawson, and Sun 2012). New technologies were also crucial in organizing and mobilizing participation in Occupy (Constanza-Chock 2012; Gaby and Caren 2012) and other anti-neoliberal movements.

However, elevation of these issues on the national agenda does not seem to have inspired the mainstream, corporate news media to produce and circulate more ideologically diverse messages during concrete policy debates. My discussion in Chapter 6 suggests that the new digitally based tactics and strategies deployed so skillfully by activists and alternative journalists have had but modest effects on widening the selection of information and ideas that a broad range of Americans, especially lower-income people and those middle-aged and older, is consistently exposed to. From a theoretical perspective, this situation highlights the difference between agenda setting (media's role in bringing events and issues to public prominence) (McCombs and Reynolds 2002) and framing (media's role in highlighting or obscuring particular, ideologically shaded and policy-salient dimensions of these events and issues). Both processes can be important in shaping different forms of public opinion, and both processes are embedded in the broader political and economic dynamics of the media complex. Moreover, being aware of an issue and considering it relatively important are necessary preconditions for expressing a meaningful policy preference related to it. Decades of research have shown, however, that the substantive content and ideological inflection of issue frames in the media constitute the most direct influence on policy opinions. There is little evidence that protest movements, advocacy news outlets, and social media have had significant and enduring effects in shifting the portrayals of economic and social welfare issues that have characterized U.S. commercial news for several decades.

An understanding of media refraction processes would suggest as much: neither the rise of new activist groups nor the emergence of new information technologies is sufficient to upend a news paradigm rooted in the basic political and economic logics that enable the media to function as profit-making enterprises. Seen in that light, it is unsurprising that economic inequality's newfound political salience failed to generate the level of organized popular support necessary to induce even the Democratic-controlled Congress of the early Obama years to enact policies firmly rejecting neoliberalism. Moreover, absent policy-induced structural changes in the media system, mainstream news outlets may not significantly broaden and deepen their coverage, unless many more critics or opponents of neoliberal economic and social welfare policy enter government. That alone would not guarantee major shifts in coverage, however. Because of commercial news

media's tendency to gravitate to those ideas associated with the most prominent and easily saleable political figures, strong critics of economic inequality and corporate power may need to hold high-profile positions of authority for considerable time before their messages are circulated on par with right-leaning ideas. And even with such forceful critics in the White House or congressional leadership, anti-neoliberal ideas may face obstacles in drawing mainstream news coverage, since they are in considerable tension with the economic interests of corporate media outlets and the commercial calculus that shapes the content these outlets produce.

Any significant redirection of media refraction dynamics would probably require major media policy changes. However, achieving those media policy changes would require, among other things, that the very opponents of neoliberalism who have had so much trouble getting their views circulated through mainstream news gain significant positions of executive and legislative authority. Grassroots organizing and mobilization facilitated through social media and other emerging technologies would be essential to any efforts to bring these political forces to power. But sustained electoral and policy success would demand the capacity to foster informed, robust debate about issues of inequality and corporate power among segments of the American public that are not easily reached through alternative digital-only news outlets and political content on social media.

These connections between media, government, media policy, and economic and social welfare policy suggest that the prospects for a more democratic and egalitarian society are intimately linked to the prospects for a more democratic and egalitarian media system. They also raise many questions about the influence of media policy on popular political communication, information provision, and, ultimately, public opinion and political behavior. How, precisely, might media reforms like those briefly discussed in Chapter 6 contribute to news climates that support more democratic political trajectories and more egalitarian policy regimes? While the linkages I have made in this book among media policies, economic pressures, journalistic practices, and political alignments have gone part of the way toward charting these pathways of influence in the neoliberal era, much more remains to be understood.

News Media, Political Institutions, and Political Behavior

Filling these gaps in our knowledge of the U.S. media system's political sources and implications calls for additional research on specific historical and contemporary dimensions of media policy. This represents a prime area in which political science can continue building research agendas that connect institutional

and behavioral approaches in nuanced ways (Bensel 2014; Mettler and Soss 2004). Such work can combine the strengths of careful qualitative analyses of policymaking processes with those of systematic political communication and public opinion research (Shapiro 2014). In particular, archival work and fieldwork within media organizations and related government agencies could help specify and clarify the rules, practices, and norms that shape political news coverage under shifting institutional conditions and media policy regimes. This work might build on the rich but largely unconnected traditions of these methods in political science (Carpenter 2001; Fenno 1978; Mettler 1998) and communication studies (Gans 2004; Luhtakallio and Eliasoph 2014; McChesney 1993; Pickard 2014; Tuchman 1978).

Research on policies and institutions should be connected (in single works or studies that build on each other) to quantitative analyses of the information, images, and ideas that the media produce and circulate, and the effects of that discourse on public opinion and political behavior. Especially needed are extensive, detailed, and context-sensitive analyses of public political discourse by official and unofficial actors, and of the news coverage that large numbers of Americans engage with in a variety of media formats. In studying public opinion and political development, relying on unexamined assumptions or vague impressions about information and communication environments is little better than ignoring such environments altogether (Althaus et al. 2011). Such work can be time-consuming and labor intensive, and it faces new methodological challenges in the digital era. However, content analysis of this scale and depth is an essential component in any broad research agenda that seeks to understand the historical roots and contemporary shape of American politics.

Government agencies and policies explicitly directed at the media ought to be seen as key elements in the complex story of how and why American politics has developed in particular ways, and not in others. The news media are neither a neutral conduit for partisan elites or nongovernmental actors, nor a simple propaganda instrument wielded by individual media owners and journalists. Rather, the media form a structured institutional field with its own imperatives that filter, redirect, shape, magnify, and mute patterns of political discourse that come from inside and outside government. An institutional understanding of media policy and news coverage as structural features of American politics suggests that political science should critically examine the media on its own terms, as both a political actor and a political object in critical historical junctures. Understanding the media is essential for understanding public opinion's role in the politics of economic inequality, including the challenges and opportunities that both opponents and supporters of neoliberalism will face in coming years. Indeed, such work is essential for understanding the larger power dynamics of American politics.

News Coverage, Policy Opinions, and Political-Economic Power

My argument and findings in this book suggest that news coverage of public policy is crucial to democracy and the dynamics of political power. By highlighting distortions in public discourse that have characterized policy debates over rising economic inequality, my work also points to the potential for media coverage to create conditions that enable and encourage all Americans to express their political voices. Ideologically diverse and substantively rich media coverage is not tangential to democratic politics, or something that matters for public policy preferences only in exceptional circumstances. Rather, we should understand this news coverage as a precondition of popular self-government and political equality. As such, the story of mainstream news coverage during the neoliberal turn in U.S. economic and social welfare policy raises critical questions about the responsiveness of government policy to public opinion, and about the ways in which political and economic power is exercised in America.

News Media, Public Opinion, and Public Policy

A long-running body of research has analyzed the connections between public opinion and the policies that political elites decide to maintain or enact. Studies have demonstrated a declining correspondence between broad public preferences and government policy since 1980 (Page 2002; Shapiro 2014), as well as striking class-based inequality in elite responsiveness to public opinion, largely over the same period (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012). Conceptualizing the news media as an integral part of the political-economic system, and analyzing its operation, output, and effects in depth and detail, promises to both enrich and complicate this critical line of work. Seen in that context, the research agenda advanced by this book highlights another mechanism through which democratic conditions have steadily eroded over recent decades.

Important research has demonstrated that, rather than merely responding to popular preferences, national political elites have increasingly used the growing volume and sophistication of survey data at their disposal, and the rapidly developing technologies and techniques of persuasion and media relations, to attempt to shape public opinion (Druckman and Jacobs 2015; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). These strategies have furnished elites with opportunities to enact policies favored by themselves and their core financial and ideological supporters, while escaping public accountability for unpopular actions. Much of the focus in this work, however, has been on the obstacles to changing public opinion, given the apparent neutralizing power of counterframes from elite opponents in a political

environment often characterized by intense partisan polarization (Chong and Druckman 2007b).

More fully accounting for the ideological contours and substantive content of news coverage, however, suggests that "elite manipulation" (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000) may be more effective than it is often thought to be. Most people only encounter elite strategic communication (e.g., presidential press conferences, speeches, and even tweets) through news coverage (traditional or online, directly or via social media). A different picture of potential manipulation of public opinion comes into focus when we conceptualize, and empirically analyze, news media as an institution that filters political information and discourse under internal logics that derive from its structural role in the American political economy. While media refraction does not itself stem from the conscious intentions of journalists, editors, or news executives, my theory suggests that the effectiveness of political elites' and interest groups' strategic attempts to influence public opinion depends crucially on how well such attempts are calibrated with the structural and institutional constraints of the news media.

Given the political-economic architecture of the media and the broader political conditions of the neoliberal era, media refraction processes have placed advocates of right-leaning economic and social welfare policies in better position than advocates of left-leaning policies to propagate strategic messages. Of course, as I show in Chapter 5, the extent to which these messages can actually shape public opinion among different segments of the population also depends crucially on individual-level factors. Still, an empirically based and historically contextualized understanding of media institutions and news content challenges common political science assumptions that "the diversity of well-resourced political entrepreneurs means that, for every frame pushing public opinion in one direction, another frame will likely push back" (Nelson 2011, 7).

Seen in this light, it is clear that a longer-term decline in consistency between broad public opinion and government policy over recent decades can coincide with punctuated periods of media-induced consistency in particular moments of intense—and politically consequential—policy debate. As Jacobs and Shapiro (2002) observe, studies of opinion-policy linkages that aggregate survey data from many issues in various policy contexts over time—especially those that use highly abstract and generalized measures of opinion (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002)—can miss crucial dynamics in particular political episodes. Thus, substantively thin and ideologically narrow news coverage of key policy debates may interact with elites' strategic efforts to manipulate public opinion to facilitate important cases of "simulated responsiveness" (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000) that turn popular democracy on its head.

Indeed, the neoliberalizing news media and broader political environment may have contributed to the apparent decline in consistency between public opinion and public policy since 1980. Majority or plurality support for specific neoliberal policies at the height of key political episodes may have encouraged political elites to ignore left-leaning opinion in future policy debates, when their strategic efforts to redirect such opinion appear unsuccessful. In other words, elites may take (public and private) poll results indicating support for particular neoliberal policies—along with their readings of public opinion through the media, as polls are selectively reported or preferences are attributed to "the American people" and other vague constructions—as anticipatory signals of democratic consent for future right-leaning policies. This may occur even if these later policies themselves do not accord with majority public opinion. These dynamics should be especially prevalent when elites face intense political demands from narrow interest groups and wealthy campaign contributors, and in cases of highly technical economic and fiscal (as well as foreign) policy debate, where officials are generally more likely to ignore or attempt to shape public opinion, and issue framing in the media and other communication dynamics make it more likely that people will be swayed (at least temporarily) by messages in their political environment.

My analyses are also largely consistent with and complementary to research on unequal responsiveness to public opinion. This path-breaking work shows that lower- and middle-income people tend to exert no apparent effect on policy outcomes, unless their preferences accord with high-income opinion (Gilens 2012). Here again, however, aggregate analyses of opinion on many policy issues over periods of years and decades, while yielding crucial insights, can obscure other important political dynamics. Effects on public opinion (including on low- and middle-income opinion) from ideologically narrow issue framing in the media that support particular elite-favored policy outcomes are too subtle to register in such large-scale analyses. It could simultaneously be the case that (1) in the aggregate, low- and middle-income opinion itself has little or no association with policy outcomes; and (2) news coverage has shaped such opinion to back neoliberal policies in particular debates, especially in the many situations where high-income opinion also endorses those policies. In short, media-enabled shaping of specific policy preferences during politically salient debates can coexist with broader patterns not only of weak responsiveness but unequal responsiveness to the public will. These parallel processes may complement each other in promoting and reinforcing policy regimes inconsistent with the values and interests of most Americans.

News Media and Power in American Politics

This book adds to recent efforts to empirically investigate the dynamics of class-based power in American politics. That important line of work has demonstrated the ability of high-income people (Gilens 2012)—including the top fraction of the wealthiest one percent of the population (Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013; Winters and Page 2009)—well-funded, largely corporate-driven interest groups (Gilens and Page 2014; Jacobs and Page 2005); and increasingly affluent political elites themselves (Carnes 2013) to get the government policies they want, to the detriment of middle-/lower-income and working class people. So far, political science has focused most closely on the capacity of wealthy and corporate interests to exert disproportionate influence through voting, campaign contributions, and lobbying. This research on power and economic inequality in American politics has only tentatively raised the possibility that institutions like the media may enable narrow interests to cultivate popular support for their policy goals that would not be expressed under more democratic conditions of communication.

To the extent that it addresses these possible influences, political science research on public opinion in the broader field of American politics often notes the empirical difficulties of identifying such dynamics. But decades of political communication studies show that these empirical difficulties, while real, are not insurmountable. Another obstacle for research on media power concerns tendencies in the study of American politics to conceptualize the media as a series of empty vessels for partisan elite messages and information. Assumptions that the news media are merely a kind of conveyer belt for messages produced by formal political actors operating within formal political institutions contradict what political communication and media political economy scholars know about what the media are—and how they act—in contemporary American politics. I have sought to challenge such assumptions in this book.

Additional work that carefully integrates the power dynamics of the broader U.S. political system with the contours of political communication—including both the effects of media content on public opinion and the political-economic/institutional dimensions of media organizations—promises to open new vistas on key questions about the political influence of wealthy and corporate interests. In what may be a sign of political science's general seclusion from the breadth and depth of contemporary media research, Winters and Page (2009, 732) list corporate-funded "think tanks, foundations, politically connected law firms, consultancies, and lobbying organizations"—but not media—as institutional mechanisms through which "oligarchs" may exercise power. Similarly, Jacobs and Soss (2010, 354–355) discuss the possibilities that government officials and institutions may act to maintain political-economic inequalities through

"communicative actions that threaten or reassure mass publics, reframe social reality in advantageous ways, alter beliefs and preferences of the citizenry, or distract attention from chronic social problems and injustices." Communications media—especially commercial news outlets—are essential to these communicative actions. But empirical analyses of power relations in American politics have largely ignored the media as sites of political analysis in their own right.

The news media in the United States are not only a mechanism of popular opinion influence. They are also part of corporate, highly centralized, commercially driven enterprises controlled by wealthy investors, CEOs, and upper-income professionals not unlike those who appear to increasingly exert outsized influence on government policy. Seen in this light, the concept of media refraction is consistent with the view that no deliberate, organized attempts at influence are necessary for concentrated wealth to exercise political power (Winters and Page 2009, 732–733).[1] Absent political restraints—e.g., government regulations or countervailing power centers such as labor unions—the regular institutional tendencies of business organizations generally accord with the profit interests of investors, owners, and top executives.[2] If we expect these material interests to operate politically in the case of fossil fuel corporations, Wall Street firms, or the health insurance industry, for example, we should expect them to operate in the media industry. In the case of the U.S. news media in the neoliberal era, evidence suggests that those material imperatives and power relations may increasingly be at odds with the conditions and values of popular democracy.

While American politics research has focused on the important class-power implications of the *effects* (or lack thereof) of public opinion on public policy (Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Winters and Page 2009), we also need to pay more attention to how material power dynamics shape the *sources* of those opinions. The media are a power-laden institution that political scientists concerned with economic inequality and the erosion of contemporary democracy need to know much more about. This is not least because news coverage can muffle or subvert the political voices of ordinary Americans, including low- and middle-income people and those with lower levels of political knowledge, who, as a result of that coverage, may come to endorse policies—and political candidates—they otherwise would not.

A holistic understanding of the media as a political-economic institution that can shape politics and public policy—and is simultaneously shaped by politics and public policy—adds a key element to these recent efforts to update and rejuvenate an important tradition of empirical power analysis in American politics (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Gaventa 1980; Lindblom 1977). My work suggests that ideological opinion influence in and through the corporate news media in the context of policy debates involves complex interrelations of material and symbolic dimensions. Media refraction highlights how news outlets

allocate "access power," as they regulate "whose voices, identities and interests get heard" (Hardy 2014, 197). This enables the exercise of "discursive power," as media institutions "privilege particular discourses and construct particular forms of reality" (Hardy 2014, 196–197). Crucially, the media's access power and discursive power are conditioned by their "resource power," "which concerns the ways in which those who own and control the media can affect the actions of state authorities" (Hardy 2014, 197) —by promoting policies favored by political-economic elites and policies that support corporate media interests themselves. Thus, my argument bridges "structural," "relational," and "behavioral" perspectives on political economy, while illuminating deep tensions between capitalism and democracy (Jacobs and Soss 2010, 348, Table 1). Media refraction highlights the structural imperatives of corporate media, the ways in which these imperatives can shape relations between news outlets and (non) governmental political actors, and the conditional effects of such processes on mass political behavior. These media power dynamics have helped to maintain and strengthen both economic and political inequality in the United States.

Conclusion

This book shows that mainstream media coverage plays a significant role in drawing the political boundaries of public policy discourse, and that the ideological diversity of issue framing in the news matters for the opinions that people express about key policies. In particular, I argue that our increasingly corporate-controlled and commercially driven media system had important effects during debates about some of the major policies that have helped make the United States into a society in which economic opportunities and political power are ever more unequally distributed. If media coverage of these debates had been different, then public opinion about the policy issues that helped drive the neoliberal turn likely would have been different. Placing these empirical patterns of news content and public opinion in the historical and institutional context of media political economy suggests that, had the U.S. media system itself been different, then news coverage of these debates may have been different. As such, this book identifies an underappreciated mechanism through which neoliberalism has become self-reinforcing, as the neoliberal media system operates to shape the parameters of public knowledge and popular discussion about neoliberalism itself.

Knowing the history of the media's role in debates over neoliberal public policy is crucial to better understand not only where we have been but where we might be going. Thinking historically about empirical patterns of media coverage and public opinion helps us better understand how those patterns fit into

larger dynamics of political-economic development. That can help us clarify the sources and consequences of the institutions and policies we have today. This is not only an exercise in gazing backward, however. It can also cast a critical light on the future prospects for public policy and democracy. Understanding how news coverage influenced key political debates during the neoliberal turn can help to denaturalize—or "de-construct"—the economic and social welfare policies that were legitimated through such debates, as well as the media structures, institutions, policies, and practices which shaped that news coverage. This can foster conditions that enable our democracy to make more informed decisions about issues that materially affect the lives of millions of people, as well as more informed decisions about the structure of our political news and information system.

Ultimately, the story of media's role in the neoliberal turn underscores the idea that public opinion cannot be defined neatly as an input factor for the machinery of government, or as a mysterious ghost determined by individual dispositions and social forces outside of politics (Mettler and Soss 2004). Instead, our preferences about policy issues are deeply shaped by the political-economic system. As a central part of that system, our media complex influences how we engage and seek to resolve a range of issues that affect us all—no matter our social and cultural identities, our economic circumstances, or whether we call ourselves Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives, socialists or libertarians. If public opinion, news coverage, and the media system itself are human constructions, then the door is open to consider how they might be reconstructed along more democratic lines. In light of our grave social, economic, and political challenges, rethinking the institutions that facilitate our democratic discourse could not be more urgent.

Appendix A

CONTENT ANALYSIS INFORMATION FOR CHAPTERS 3–6

News Content Coding Protocol (Chapters 3–6)

Sources were operationalized as named (e.g., "President Reagan," "Children's Defense Fund founder Marian Wright Edelman") or unnamed ("the president," "children's advocates") actors. Sources could also be individual ("House Speaker Tip O'Neill," "Heritage Foundation President Edwin J. Feulner") or collective ("House Democrats," "conservative experts") actors. These sources were then grouped into appropriate categories (see, for example, Figure 3.2).

Issue frames were operationalized as statements attributed to sources that relate to the policy issue in question. In each case, initial lists of source categories and frames were compiled by reading academic analyses, mainstream and specialized press coverage, political speeches, governmental and nongovernmental policy briefs, and other primary-source documents. As coding of the news media content proceeded, additional source categories and issue frames were added as needed to capture as fully as possible the scope of each debate as it appeared in the media.

In each debate, specific issue frames were categorized as (1) right-leaning; (2) left-leaning; or (3) neutral, unclear, or ambivalent. These categorizations were made through inductive judgments of the frame's meaning in the political context of each policy debate. Frames that proffered clear free-market or traditional conservative interpretations of policy issues (and which favored the neoliberal policy under debate in each case) were identified as right-leaning. Those that proffered clear social-democratic or New Deal-Great Society liberal interpretations (and which opposed or criticized the neoliberal policy from these broad perspectives) were identified as left-leaning (see, for example, Figure 3.3 and Figure 3.4). In the lists below, right-leaning frames are in **bold**

font; left-leaning frames are underlined; and neutral, unclear, or ambivalent frames are in regular type.

The unit of analysis for coding issue frames was the "complete thought" or "assertion." Since some sentences contained more than one complete thought, they were coded as containing more than one issue frame.[1] Here are two examples that appeared in news coverage of neoliberal welfare reform, and the attempt to repeal the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, respectively:

(1) "Clinton said a House-passed welfare-reform bill is 'too weak on work and too tough on children.' "[2]
This sentence contains one right-leaning frame (suggesting that welfare reform should feature strict work requirements) and one left-leaning frame (suggesting that the welfare system should continue to provide sufficient public assistance benefits for children). Both are attributed to President Clinton. Thus, according to the scheme laid out below, it was recorded as:
Source Category: 1, Issue Frame: 3, Issue Frame Ideology: 2
Source Category: 1, Issue Frame: 9, Issue Frame Ideology: 1

(2) "Speaking on NBC's Meet the Press, the former House Budget Committee chairman [Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price] said the bill would lead to 'more people covered than are covered right now, and at an average cost that is less.' "[3]
This sentence contains two right-leaning frames (one suggesting that repealing Obamacare—thus, reducing government's role in the market—would widen health care coverage and one suggesting that the move would reduce costs). Both are attributed to Price. Thus, according to the scheme laid out below, it was recorded as:
Source Category: 1, Issue Frame: 5, Issue Frame Ideology: 2
Source Category: 1, Issue Frame: 7, Issue Frame Ideology: 2

Topic is a straightforward measure of the basic aspect of the policy issue that each news story primarily focuses on (see, for example, Figure 3.1). *Information* is a story-level measure indicating whether a news report includes one of the listed items of policy information. *Favorability* (directional thrust) is a story-level indicator based on the ideological distribution and mix of issue frames on either side of the debate, combined with coders' judgment of the overall tone of each news report (see, for example, Figure 3.5). Tone takes into account unattributed information, journalistic statements not coded as issue frames, placement of ideological issue frames earlier or later in a story, and policy-relevant assumptions underpinning the news narrative.

Congressional Record Content Coding Protocol (Chapters 3–4)

To identify samples of congressional discourse, I located every speech that contained variants of the word *tax* (Chapter 3) or variants of the word *welfare* (Chapter 4) that was delivered on the floor of the Senate or House of Representatives during the key weeks of legislative debate for each policy noted in those chapters. I then removed speeches that did not pertain to each issue (the Reagan economic plan in Chapter 3 and welfare reform in Chapter 4). Thus, speeches that concerned, for example, gasoline taxes or military welfare programs were dropped from the analyses. Also excluded were speeches in which a member of Congress mentioned the policy issue only in passing (e.g., "We have spent so much time on the president's tax plan, I feel we have neglected the issue of our country's reliance on foreign energy"), statements that concerned matters of legislative procedure (e.g., the scheduling of debates or votes), and statements dealing primarily with political tactics and strategy (e.g., speeches praising President Clinton's public relations skills with no connection to policy substance or ideological arguments).

In coding remarks from the Congressional Record, I evaluated whether the speech generally favored the neoliberal policy under debate, opposed that policy, or expressed no clear perspective in either direction. This last category comprises some statements that were essentially neutral (i.e., they were merely descriptive or concerned only highly technical aspects of legislation), as well as some that included more or less equal presentation of ideological arguments for and against the policy. The percentage of such neutral or ambivalent speeches was considerably higher in the debate over the Reagan economic plan than in the welfare reform case, reflecting the greater technical complexity of that issue and the many legislative provisions that had no clear left- or right-leaning thrust.

I constructed these datasets to capture as best as possible the ideological tenor of public congressional discussion about each policy in the weeks leading up to major votes, while excluding discourse that had no reasonably discernible substantive connection to the neoliberal turn in public policy. Because the purpose of these analyses is to enable comparisons between elite discourse and mainstream news coverage, I interpreted congressional statements on a level of understanding that might be expected from a journalist covering national politics and public policy (rather than, for example, a tax accountant, social welfare administrator, or economist).

Media Content Analysis Information—Chapter 3 (1981 Reagan Economic Plan)

As described in Chapter 3, I drew a random sample of Associated Press news stories about the Reagan economic plan (as archived in the LexisNexis database) produced from January 1 through August 13, 1981 (when President Reagan signed the Economic Recovery Tax Act). Using overall policy favorability as the key story-level measure, sampling error for "favorable" stories at the 95 percent confidence level was 6.1 points. This is well within the difference between favorable (49.4 percent) and unfavorable (16.7 percent) story proportions calculated on the AP sample. Using ideological category of issue frames as the key within-story measure, sampling error for right-leaning frames was estimated at 2.5 points. This is well within the difference between right-leaning (74.3 percent) and left-leaning (25.7 percent) frame proportions calculated on the sample. All evening network television news stories about the plan (as contained in the Vanderbilt Television News Archive) produced in the same time period were also collected and coded.

TV Network Codes

1—ABC
2—CBS
3—NBC

Source Category Codes

1—Reagan Administration
2—Other Republican Party
3—Democratic Party
4—Conservative Interest Group/Social Movement Organization
5—Progressive Interest Group/Social Movement Organization
6—Research Organization/Academia
7—State/Local Government (no partisan ID)
8—Federal Bureaucracy (no partisan ID)
9—Ordinary Person
10—Anonymous

Issue Frame Codes

1—**Direct Financial Benefit** (plan provides direct monetary benefits to low-/middle-income people)
2—**Economic Stimulus (pro)** (plan will boost broader economy)
3—Economic Stimulus (con) (plan will not boost broader economy)
4—Affluent Direct Tilt (plan unjustly favors wealthy/affluent, is unfair to low/middle-income people)
5—Government Programs (pro) (domestic social/regulatory programs are beneficial; need to preserve or increase funding for them)
6—**Government Programs (con)** (domestic social/regulatory programs are harmful; need to cut or reduce growth of funding for them)
7—Fiscal Implications (plan will improve or damage government fiscal health)
8—Political Strategy, Tactics, or Process (internal governmental process; political jockeying, strategic and tactical calculations; lobbying and public relations machinations)
9—**Pro-Tax Cut (general)** (tax cuts—or Reagan plan in particular—are generally good)
10—**Pro-Affluent Tilt** (plan's tilt toward upper-income people is beneficial or fair)
11—Anti-Tax Cut (general) (tax cuts—or Reagan plan in particular—are generally bad)
12—**Financial Autonomy** (government unfairly confiscates money from private individuals or businesses)

Issue Frame Ideology Codes

1—Left-leaning
2—Right-leaning
3—Neither (or neutral)

Story Topic Codes

1—Class Implications
2—Macroeconomics
3—Political Strategy, Tactics, or Process
4—Fiscal Implications (e.g., debt, deficit)
5—Business Regulation
6—Other

Information Codes

1—Citizen benefits (by income group)
2—Business benefits
3—Payroll taxes

Story Favorability Codes

1—Very Favorable
2—Somewhat Favorable
3—Neutral or Ambivalent
4—Somewhat Unfavorable
5—Very Unfavorable

Media Content Analysis Information—Chapter 4 (Neoliberal Welfare Reform)

As described in Chapter 4, I coded all *USA Today* news stories (as archived in the LexisNexis database), and all evening network television and CNN news stories about welfare reform (as contained in the Vanderbilt Television News Archive), that were produced from January 1, 1995, through August 22, 1996 (when President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act).

TV Network Codes

1—ABC
2—CBS
3—NBC
4—CNN

Source Category Codes

1—Clinton Administration
2—Other Democratic Party
3—Republican Party
4—Conservative Interest Group/Social Movement Organization
5—Progressive Interest Group/Social Movement Organization

6—Research Organization/Academia
7—State/Local Government (no partisan ID)
8—Federal Bureaucracy (no partisan ID)
9—Ordinary Person
10—Anonymous

Issue Frame Codes

1—**Federal Government Programs (general-con)** (domestic social/regulatory programs are harmful; need to cut or reduce growth of funding for them)
2—Federal Government Programs (general-pro) (domestic social/regulatory programs are beneficial; need to preserve or increase funding for them)
3—**Work Ethic/Dependency** (welfare programs harm the work ethic, cause pathological dependency)
4—**Work Ethic/Dependency (racial)** (welfare programs harm the work ethic, cause pathological dependency specifically among members of racial minority groups)
5—**Anti-Tax** (welfare reform will reduce taxes)
6—**Gender (pro-reform)** (welfare reform will help women or sex/gender relations)
7—Gender (anti-reform) (welfare reform will harm women or sex/gender relations)
8—**Children (pro-reform)** (welfare reform will help children or families)
9—Children (anti-reform) (welfare reform will harm children or families)
10—**Urban Communities (pro-reform)** (welfare reform will help city neighborhoods)
11—Urban Communities (anti-reform) (welfare reform will harm city neighborhoods)
12—**Macroeconomics (pro-reform)** (welfare reform will help the broader economy)
13—Macroeconomics (anti-reform) (welfare reform will harm the broader economy)
14—Job Creation (policy should focus on increasing quantity or quality of employment opportunities)
15—**Out-of-Wedlock Births (pro-reform)** (welfare reform will reduce out-of-wedlock births)
16—Job Training (policy should focus on employment training and education)
17—Increase Poverty (anti-reform) (welfare reform will increase poverty)
18—**Decrease Poverty (pro-reform)** (welfare reform will decrease poverty)

19—Political Strategy, Tactics, or Process (internal governmental process; political jockeying, strategic and tactical calculations; lobbying and public relations machinations)
20—General Concern for Poor (government generally should focus on reducing poverty)
21—Out-of-Wedlock Births (anti-reform) (policy focus on out-of-wedlock births is misplaced or misleading)
22—Work Ethic/Dependency (anti-reform) (welfare programs do not harm the work ethic, cause pathological dependency)
23—**Immigrant Restrict (pro-)** (immigrants should have limited or no access to welfare benefits)
24—Immigrant Restrict (anti-) (immigrants should have greater or full access to welfare benefits)
25—"Transitional" social services (other than job training) (policy should focus on child care, transportation and other programs to help welfare recipients obtain and maintain wage work)

Issue Frame Ideology Codes

1—Left-leaning
2—Right-leaning
3—Neither (or neutral)

Story Topic Codes

1—Government Spending or Taxation
2—Class Implications
3—Racial Implications
4—Gender or Family Implications
5—Political Strategy, Tactics, or Process
6—Other

Information Codes

1—Welfare budget
2—Racial composition

Story Favorability Codes

1—Very Favorable
2—Somewhat Favorable
3—Neutral or Ambivalent
4—Somewhat Unfavorable
5—Very Unfavorable

Media Content Analysis Information—Chapter 5 (Extension of G. W. Bush Tax Cuts)

As described in Chapter 5, I coded all *USA Today* stories (as archived in the NewsBank database) that were produced from September 1 through December 17, 2010 (when President Obama signed the Tax Relief, Unemployment Insurance Reauthorization, and Job Creation Act).

Source Category Codes

1—Obama Administration
2—Other Democratic Party
3—Republican Party
4—Conservative Interest Group/Social Movement Organization
5—Progressive Interest Group/Social Movement Organization
6—Research Organization/Academia
7—State/Local Government (no partisan ID)
8—Federal Bureaucracy (no partisan ID)
9—Ordinary Person
10—Anonymous

Issue Frame Codes

1—**Direct Financial Benefit** (plan provides direct monetary benefits to low-/middle-income people)
2—**Economic Stimulus (pro)** (plan will boost broader economy)
3—<u>Economic Stimulus (con)</u> (plan will not boost broader economy)
4—<u>Affluent Direct Tilt</u> (plan unjustly favors wealthy/affluent, is unfair to low/middle-income people)

5—Government Programs (pro) (domestic social/regulatory programs are beneficial; need to preserve or increase funding for them)
6—**Government Programs (con)** (domestic social/regulatory programs are harmful; need to cut or reduce growth of funding for them)
7—Fiscal Implications (plan will improve or damage government fiscal health)
8—Political Strategy, Tactics, or Process (internal governmental process; political jockeying, strategic, and tactical calculations; lobbying and public relations machinations)
9—**Pro-Tax Cut (general)** (tax cuts—or Bush plan in particular—are generally good)
10—**Pro-Affluent Tilt** (plan's tilt toward upper-income people is beneficial or fair)
11—Anti-Tax Cut (general) (tax cuts—or Bush plan in particular—are generally bad)
12—**Financial Autonomy** (government unfairly confiscates money from private individuals or businesses)

Issue Frame Ideology Codes

1—Left-leaning
2—Right-leaning
3—Neither (or neutral)

Story Topic Codes

1—Class Implications
2—Macroeconomics
3—Political Strategy, Tactics, or Process
4—Fiscal Implications (e.g., debt, deficit)
5—Business Regulation
6—Other

Story Favorability Codes

1—Very Favorable
2—Somewhat Favorable
3—Neutral or Ambivalent
4—Somewhat Unfavorable
5—Very Unfavorable

Media Content Analysis Information—Chapter 6 (Proposed Repeal of Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act)

As described in Chapter 6, I coded all *USA Today* stories (as archived in the NewsBank database) that were produced from March 7 through July 31, 2017 (when the so-called skinny repeal bill was withdrawn from Senate consideration).

Source Category Codes

1—Trump Administration
2—Other Republican Party
3—Democratic Party
4—Conservative Interest Group/Social Movement Organization
5—Progressive Interest Group/Social Movement Organization
6—Research Organization/Academia
7—State/Local Government (no partisan ID)
8—Federal Bureaucracy (no partisan ID)
9—Ordinary Person
10—Anonymous

Issue Frame Codes

1—**Economic Stimulus (pro-repeal)** (repeal will boost broader economy)
2—Economic Stimulus (anti-repeal) (repeal will not boost broader economy)
3—**Government Programs (con)** (domestic social/regulatory programs are harmful; need to cut or reduce growth of funding for them)
4—Government Programs (pro) (domestic social/regulatory programs are beneficial; need to preserve or increase funding for them)
5—**Health (pro-repeal)** (repeal will improve quantity and/or quality of health care, health coverage, and/or people's health)
6—Health (anti-repeal) (repeal will not improve quantity and/or quality of health care, health coverage, and/or people's health)
7—**Costs (pro-repeal)** (repeal will reduce health care costs for individuals, businesses, government, and/or others)
8—Costs (anti-repeal) (repeal will not reduce health care costs for individuals, businesses, government, and/or others)
9—**Pro-repeal (general)** (repeal is generally good)
10—Anti-repeal (general) (repeal is generally bad)

11—Political Strategy, Tactics, or Process (internal governmental process; political jockeying, strategic, and tactical calculations; lobbying and public relations machinations)

Issue Frame Ideology Codes

1—Left-leaning
2—Right-leaning
3—Neither (or neutral)

Story Topic Codes

1—Class Implications
2—Health Coverage (general)
3—Macroeconomics
4—Political Strategy, Tactics, or Process
5—Fiscal Implications (e.g., debt, deficit)
6—Role of Government (general)
7—Business Regulation
8—Other

Story Favorability Codes

1—Very Favorable
2—Somewhat Favorable
3—Neutral or Ambivalent
4—Somewhat Unfavorable
5—Very Unfavorable

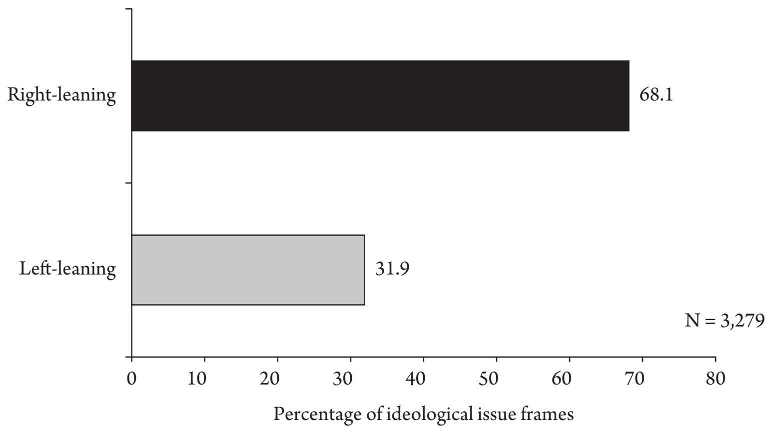

Figure A.1 Issue Frames by Ideological Tendency in News Coverage of Neoliberal Policy Debates, 1981–2017

Appendix B1

STUDY DESIGN INFORMATION FOR CHAPTER 5

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through the online service Mechanical Turk (MTurk—see https://www.mturk.com/mturk/welcome). A pilot version with 100 participants and newspaper treatments only was fielded in July 2016. The final experiment with 1,055 participants was conducted in late July and early August 2016. Each participant was paid $2.50 to complete the study. This payment was calculated based on hourly compensation of $10 and an estimated completion time of 15 minutes.[1] The survey experiment was created in Qualtrics and delivered to participants through the MTurk website. The Providence College Institutional Review Board approved the project in January 2016.

Design and Procedure

Quotas were used to obtain approximately equal numbers of low-, middle-, and high-income participants. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight groups: (1) ideologically slanted—right-leaning (print), (2) ideologically slanted—right-leaning (television), (3) ideologically mixed (print), (4) ideologically mixed (television), (5) ideologically slanted—left-leaning (print), (6) ideologically slanted—left-leaning (television), (7) control (print), (8) control (television).

After completing the informed consent statement, all participants answered a series of pre-test questions, including items on demographics, political attitudes and activities, social and political values, and political and policy knowledge. They then answered one pre-treatment policy opinion question and several apolitical distraction questions, read or watched one of eight news stories,

and answered several post-test questions (policy opinion and open-ended considerations probe, three manipulation checks, and remaining demographic questions). Finally, participants read a short debriefing statement on the study's purpose and the deceptions involved.

Sample Characteristics

	Study Sample (2016)	U.S. Population (2015)[2]
Gender	**Female:** 50.0 % **Male:** 49.3 % **Other:** 0.8 %	**Female:** 50.8 % **Male:** 49.2 %
Age	**Median:** 26–35 years	**Median:** 37.8 years
Race	**White (non-Hispanic/ Latino):** 77.5 % **African-American:** 7.8 % **Hispanic/Latino:** 5.5 % **Asian-American:** 6.8 %	**White (non-Hispanic/ Latino):** 61.5 % **African-American:** 12.7 % **Hispanic/Latino:** 17.6 % **Asian-American:** 5.4 %
Household Income	**Median:** $45,000–$54,999	**Median:** $56,516
Education[3]	**High school/GED or higher:** 99.5 % **Bachelor's or higher:** 87.5 %	**High school/GED or higher:** 87.1 % **Bachelor's or higher:** 30.6 %
Party ID[4]	**Republican:** 26.8 % **Independent:** 16.0 % **Democrat:** 57.3 %	**Republican:** 42 % **Independent:** 13 % **Democrat:** 45 %
Ideological ID	**Conservative:** 26.5 % **Moderate:** 18.5 % **Liberal:** 54 %	**Conservative:** 37.0 % **Moderate:** 35.0 % **Liberal:** 24.0 %

Randomization Checks

As noted in Chapter 5, when television and print conditions are combined, there were no significant demographic, partisan, or ideological differences among participants assigned to read or watch apolitical, left-leaning, right-leaning, and ideologically mixed news coverage. However, whites were overrepresented in

the ideologically slanted (left-leaning—television) condition, as compared to the ideologically mixed (television) condition; Republicans and conservatives were overrepresented in the ideologically mixed (print) condition, compared to the control (print) condition; conservatives were overrepresented in the ideologically slanted (right-leaning—print) condition, as compared to the control (print) condition; and Democrats were overrepresented in the ideologically slanted (right-leaning—television) condition, compared to the control (television) condition.

Egalitarianism Scale

The egalitarian scale was constructed from the answers to questions 10 through 17 below. For each of questions 10, 12–15, and 17, the less egalitarian response was coded 0 and the more egalitarian response was coded 1. For questions 11 and 16, responses were coded 0 through 3, in order from least egalitarian to most egalitarian.[5] Values for questions 10, 12, and 14 were summed to create a measure of beliefs about the causes of economic inequality (with possible scores from 0 to 3), and values for questions 13, 15, and 17 were summed to create a measure of beliefs about the role of government (with possible scores ranging from 0 to 3). These totals were then added to the sums from questions 11 and 16 (on concern about rising economic inequality and societal responsibility for promoting equal economic opportunity). Possible scores on the final scale ranged from 0 (least egalitarian) to 12 (most egalitarian). As stated in Chapter 5, Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.770. In the analyses reported in that chapter, participants who scored 0 through 8 were categorized as less egalitarian (42.9 percent of the sample), and those who scored 9 through 12 as highly egalitarian (57.1 percent).

Informed Consent Statement

You are invited to participate in a research study under the direction of Dr. Matt Guardino of the Department of Political Science, Providence College. Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. You must be at least 18 years old to participate. After completing the study, you will be compensated in accordance with the terms set for this Mechanical Turk task.

The purpose of this study is to understand people's political opinions. The benefit of the research project is that you will improve our knowledge of how people form their political beliefs and perceptions.

If you participate in this survey, it will take approximately 15 minutes. On the following pages, you will answer a series of questions, as well as read or watch a news report. You may refuse to answer any of the questions and you may stop your participation in this study at any time. If you decide to end your participation, you will not be compensated. This is in accordance with the payment terms set for the task.

There are no risks of participating in this study beyond those of daily life. All survey answers are completely anonymous. This means that your name or any other identifying information will not appear on the survey or data files generated from the survey. This anonymous data will also be confidential. This means that no one except the researcher will have access to the data. If results of this research study are published or reported at scientific meetings, the people who participated in this study will not be named or identified in any way.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the survey, you may contact Dr. Guardino at mguardin@providence.edu or (401) 865-2547. If you have any other questions about your rights as a research participant; if you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to discuss with someone other than Dr. Guardino; or if you cannot reach Dr. Guardino, you may contact the Providence College Institutional Review Board at (401) 865-2195.

Your willingness to participate in this research study is implied if you proceed with completing the survey.

Survey Questions[6]

(1) What is the total annual income (before taxes) for all people living in your household?

$0 to $19,999
$20,000 to $29,999
$30,000 to $39,999
$40,000 to $49,999
$50,000 to $59,999
$60,000 to $74,999
$75,000 to $99,999
$100,000 to $149,999
$150,000 or more

(2) During an average week, how many days do you read about national politics in a daily newspaper (including online newspapers)?

None
One
Two
Three
Four
Five or more

(3) During an average week, how many days do you watch national network TV news (i.e., ABC, CBS, or NBC)?

None
One
Two
Three
Four
Five or more

(4) During an average week, how many days do you watch national cable TV news or political programming (i.e., Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, CNBC)?

None
One
Two
Three
Four
Five or more

(5) Do you generally approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as president? How strongly do you approve or disapprove? ***(direction of response options randomly varied)***

Approve strongly
Approve somewhat
Neither approve nor disapprove
Disapprove somewhat
Disapprove strongly

(6) Here is a scale where the political party loyalties that people might have are arranged from "strong Democrat" to "strong Republican." Where do you place yourself on this scale? ***(direction of response options randomly varied)***

Strong Democrat
Not very strong Democrat
Independent, but closer to the Democratic Party
Independent—do not lean either way
Independent, but closer to the Republican Party
Not very strong Republican
Strong Republican

(7) Here is a scale where the general political views that people might have are arranged from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative." Where do you place yourself on this scale? ***(direction of response options randomly varied)***

Extremely liberal
Liberal
Slightly liberal
Moderate or middle-of-the road
Slightly conservative
Conservative
Extremely conservative
I haven't thought much about this

(8) Which candidate do you plan to vote for in the 2016 presidential election? ***(order of first two response options randomly varied)***

Hillary Clinton
Donald Trump
Another candidate
Unsure
I do not plan to vote

(9) During an average week, about how many days do you discuss national politics (including face-to-face, over the phone, or online) with family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, or other people?

None
One
Two
Three
Four
Five or more

(10) Why do you think some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others? Please choose which statement **comes closer** to your opinion. ***(order of response options randomly varied)***

Some people don't work as hard as others.

Some people have social, educational, or family disadvantages that hold them back.

(11) Over the last 40 years, the incomes of the wealthiest Americans have increased at a much greater rate than have the incomes of middle- and low-income people. Do you see this rising economic inequality as: ***(direction of response options randomly varied)***

A serious problem

Somewhat of a problem

Not much of a problem

Not a problem

(12) Why do you think some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others? Please choose which statement **comes closer** to your opinion. ***(order of response options randomly varied)***

Some people have more natural ability than others.

Government policies help high-income people more than low- or middle-income people.

(13) Please choose which statement **comes closer** to your opinion: ***(order of response options randomly varied)***

We need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems.

Private enterprise can handle today's complex economic problems without government being involved.

(14) Why do you think some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others? Please choose which statement **comes closer** to your opinion: ***(order of response options randomly varied)***

Some people are better at making economic and financial decisions than others.

Some people live in areas with better job opportunities than others.

(15) Please choose which statement **comes closer** to your opinion: ***(order of response options randomly varied)***

Government programs that provide aid to poor people encourage dependency.

Government programs that provide aid to poor people provide a fair chance to succeed.

(16) How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure everyone has an equal chance at economic success." ***(direction of response options randomly varied)***

Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree

(17) Please choose which statement **comes closer** to your opinion: ***(order of response options randomly varied)***

Government spending threatens individual freedom.
Government spending promotes individual freedom.

The next 10 questions are about the government in Washington and issues that are often discussed there. Many people don't know the answers to these questions, so if there are some you don't know, just indicate that and move on.

(18) What job or political office is now held by Joe Biden?

[Text Box]

(19) Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not?

The president
Congress
The Supreme Court
Don't know

(20) How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to override a presidential veto?

[Text Box]

(21) Which major political party currently has the most members in the House of Representatives?

[Text Box]

(22) Generally speaking, would you say that one of the major parties is more conservative than the other at the national level? If so, which party is more conservative?

[Text Box]

(23) Which federal tax typically requires families who make less than $50,000 a year to pay out the largest percentage of their disposable income?

Income tax
Capital gains tax
Payroll (i.e. Social Security and Medicare) tax
Estate tax
None of these
Don't know

(24) About how much of the total federal budget each year is spent on food stamps (a program to help low-income people purchase groceries)? ***(order of first four response options randomly varied)***

25 percent
2 percent
10 percent
5 percent
Don't know

(25) About how much of the total federal budget each year is spent on education (for example, money for local schools, scholarships, and loans for college students)? ***(order of first four response options randomly varied)***

10 percent
30 percent
2.5 percent
5 percent
Don't know

(26) About how much of the total federal budget each year is spent on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (a program—also known as "welfare"—that provides monthly grants to low-income people, mostly unmarried mothers)? ***(order of first four response options randomly varied)***

20 percent
1 percent
30 percent
0.5 percent
Don't know

(27) Please indicate whether this statement is true or false: "Americans pay a larger percentage of their country's economic output in taxes than do people who live in Western European countries." ***(order of response options randomly varied)***

True
False

(28) On a scale of 0 to 6 (0 = oppose very strongly and 6 = favor very strongly), how much do you favor or oppose the tax plan that is being debated by politicians in Washington, D.C.? ***(direction of response options randomly varied)***

0. Oppose very strongly
1. Oppose strongly
2. Oppose somewhat
3. Neutral
4. Favor somewhat
5. Favor strongly
6. Favor very strongly
No opinion

(29) What kind of television show do you most enjoy watching?

Comedy
Drama
Action/adventure
Science fiction
Reality show
Talk show
Other
I don't watch television

(30) Which sport do you watch most on television?

Baseball
Basketball
Football
Hockey
Motor sports (NASCAR, Formula 1, etc.)
Fight sports (wrestling, boxing, MMA etc.)
Soccer
I don't watch sports on television

Please indicate how accurately each of the following six statements describes you. ***(direction of response options for each question randomly varied)***

(31) I form opinions about everything.

Extremely inaccurately
Somewhat inaccurately
Uncertain
Somewhat accurately
Extremely accurately

(32) I often prefer to remain neutral about complex issues.

Extremely inaccurately
Somewhat inaccurately
Uncertain
Somewhat accurately
Extremely accurately

(33) It bothers me to remain neutral.

Extremely inaccurately
Somewhat inaccurately
Uncertain
Somewhat accurately
Extremely accurately

(34) I have many more opinions than the average person.

Extremely inaccurately
Somewhat inaccurately
Uncertain
Somewhat accurately
Extremely accurately

(35) I would rather have a strong opinion than no opinion at all.

Extremely inaccurately
Somewhat inaccurately
Uncertain
Somewhat accurately
Extremely accurately

(36) I am pretty much indifferent to many important issues.

Extremely inaccurately
Somewhat inaccurately
Uncertain
Somewhat accurately
Extremely accurately

(37) How often do you follow news about celebrities (through magazines, television shows, internet sites, Twitter or other sources)?

Every day
A few times a week
Once a week
Once every few weeks
Less often than this
Never

(38) How worried are you that during the next year you could be the victim of a natural disaster, such as a severe wildfire, flood or earthquake?

Very worried
Somewhat worried
A little worried
Not worried at all

[**At this point, participants watched an online TV news story or read an online newspaper story**]

(39) On a scale of 0 to 6 (0 = oppose very strongly and 6 = favor very strongly), how much do you favor or oppose the tax plan that is being debated by politicians in Washington, D.C.? ***(direction of response options randomly varied)***

0. Oppose very strongly
1. Oppose strongly

2. Oppose somewhat
3. Neutral
4. Favor somewhat
5. Favor strongly
6. Favor very strongly

No opinion

(40) Please take a few moments to list the thoughts or ideas that came to mind when you answered the last question. Don't worry about making complete sentences, just type whatever words or phrases you were thinking about.

[Text Box]

(41) According to the news story you just saw, the top corporate tax rate in the United States is currently: ***(order of response options randomly varied)***

75 percent
35 percent
20 percent
10 percent
I did not see a story about corporate taxes.

(42) According to the news story you just saw, President Obama has proposed to: ***(order of response options randomly varied)***

Lower the top corporate tax rate
Raise the top corporate tax rate
Keep the top corporate tax rate the same
I did not see a story about corporate taxes.

(43) Was the news story you just saw: ***(order of response options randomly varied)***

Biased in a liberal direction
Biased in a conservative direction
Neutral or balanced on the liberal and conservative sides
Not about politics at all

(44) How often do you follow news about celebrities (through magazines, television shows, internet sites, Twitter, or other sources)?

Every day
A few times a week

Once a week
Once every few weeks
Less often than this
Never

(45) How worried are you that during the next year you could be the victim of a natural disaster, such as a severe wildfire, flood, or earthquake?

Very worried
Somewhat worried
A little worried
Not worried at all

(46) What is your age?

18–25
26–35
36–45
46–55
56–65
66 or older

(47) How much formal education have you completed?

Less than a high school diploma or GED
High school diploma or GED
Some college or trade/professional school
An associate's (two-year) degree
A bachelor's (four-year) degree
A master's degree
A doctoral, law, or similar advanced degree

(48) Which racial or ethnic category best describes you?

African-American or black
Hispanic or Latino
Asian-American
Caucasian or white
Other

(49) What is your gender identity?

Male
Female
Other

Debriefing Message

Thank you very much for participating in this survey.

This was a study about news coverage regarding economic and social welfare policy issues in the United States. The news story you watched or read was fictional, although it depicted a realistic political debate with actual political figures.

The study was designed to test how people respond when they receive different ideological messages about policy issues. It seeks to ascertain whether ideologically slanted media coverage in newspaper or televised form can cause people to express policy opinions that contradict their social values or economic interests. It also investigates whether people who are more knowledgeable about politics are more resistant to these effects.

Based on random assignment, some of you read or watched a news story slanted in a conservative direction, some of you read or watched a story slanted in a liberal direction, some read or watched a story equally balanced between the two sides, and some read or watched a story unrelated to politics. The study will show how reading or watching these different kinds of news stories may have shaped your political opinions and perceptions.

The principal investigator for this study is Dr. Matt Guardino of Providence College. He can be contacted at mguardin@providence.edu or (401) 865-2547 if you have any questions or concerns about this research.

Appendix B2

SUPPLEMENTARY ANALYSES FOR CHAPTER 5

Manipulation Checks

Large majorities of participants in the experiment demonstrated accurate basic comprehension of the news stories. Of those assigned to read or watch a treatment story, 88.2 percent correctly responded that the current top corporate tax rate was 35 percent.[1] In response to the second manipulation check, 88.1 percent of those in the treatment conditions correctly responded that President Obama had proposed to lower this rate (in the control conditions, 92.6 percent and 91.8 percent correctly responded to these questions, indicating that they did not see a story about corporate taxes).[2] Both these items of information were featured in all six print and television treatment stories.

Unsurprisingly, responses to the third manipulation check, which tested whether participants recognized the ideological slant of the news stories, were less consistent. Substantially larger percentages of participants in the ideologically slanted conditions saw their stories as tilting toward the correct side than saw them as tilting toward the opposite side: 24.4 percent (compared to 12.2 percent) of those in the left-leaning conditions saw their story as biased toward the left, while 22.4 percent (compared to 8.4 percent) of participants in the right-leaning condition saw their story as tilting toward the right. However, the overall tendency for those in both the left- (61.5 percent) and right-leaning (68.4 percent) conditions was to see the story they read or watched as "neutral or balanced on the liberal and conservative sides." Of those assigned to the ideologically mixed conditions, 74.3 percent perceived these stories as "neutral or balanced" (nearly equal proportions of these participants, 12.1 percent and 11.3 percent, saw their story as biased toward the left or the right, respectively). Among those in the control conditions, 89.9 percent correctly responded that the story they watched or read was "not about corporate taxes."

That a majority of participants in each media treatment condition perceived the news story they read or watched to be ideologically neutral or balanced is not surprising. Political psychologists have argued that many effects of political messages on public attitudes work through automatic mental processes (Taber and Young 2013, 8–11). In fact, the most influential ideological issue frames in public communication may be those that audiences do not recognize as ideological. At most, the effects of ideological issue framing will be semi-conscious to most people who read newspaper stories or watch TV news, in part because most people in real political communication contexts do not attend closely to media content. Indeed, while the differences in issue-framing distributions across media treatments in my study were likely clear to those who paid very close attention to the stories, I deliberately constructed those differences to be subtle. Such subtle differences more realistically reflect the content of the major corporate and commercial media outlets whose effects I was interested in exploring. Rather than the influence on public opinion of overt political polemics (as might be found in newspaper editorials and partisan cable TV or online media sources), my concern is with news coverage of public policy debates which, because it generally complies with mainstream journalistic norms and narrative forms, will often not be seen on its face as "biased," especially by audiences without strong partisan or ideological predispositions.

To avoid question-order effects that might distort the results, I presented the manipulation checks after participants had answered the post-treatment policy opinion question. I also did not allow participants to go backwards on the survey, which kept them from revising their opinions after being prompted to consider the items of information I asked about or the ideological tilt of the stories. These design choices, however, may also be partly responsible for the fact that large percentages of participants assigned to the ideologically slanted conditions saw their stories as neutral or balanced. It is possible that some people characterized the stories they watched or read as unbiased as a post-hoc justification for the policy opinion they had expressed moments earlier. For example, a participant who expressed support for the neoliberal corporate tax plan might derive psychological comfort from the belief that he based that opinion on neutral or fair news coverage.

Despite these complications, it is important to emphasize that in both right- and left-leaning media conditions, more than twice as many participants correctly perceived the ideological tilt of the news stories they watched or read than incorrectly perceived it. Further, nearly three quarters of those assigned to the neutral or mixed conditions perceived their stories accurately. Overall, the manipulation checks indicate adequate and generally realistic levels of attention to the news stories.

Additional Results

Table B2.1 **The Effects of Ideological Issue Framing in the News on Public Opinion Toward Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy (Compared to Mixed Issue Framing)[3]**

Right-Leaning News	.448	**
	(.182)	
Left-Leaning News	.135	
	(.182)	
Nonpolitical News (Control)	−1.203	**
	(.221)	
Republican	.701	**
	(.253)	
Democrat	.581	**
	(.230)	
Ideology	.164	**
	(.066)	
White	.070	
	(.168)	
Female	.741	
	(1.140)	
Age	.030	
	(.060)	
Education	.021	
	(.051)	
Constant	−2.666	**
	(1.132)	
N	1,055	
Pseudo R^2	.135	
Log Likelihood	1,254.207	
x^2	109.099	

Table B2.2 **The Effects of Ideological Issue Framing in the News on Public Opinion Toward Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy (Compared to No Issue Framing [Control Conditions])[4]**

Right-Leaning News	1.651	**
	(.219)	
Left-Leaning News	1.339	**
	(.219)	
Ideologically Mixed News	1.203	**
	(.231)	
Republican	.701	**
	(.253)	
Democrat	.581	**
	(.230)	
Ideology	.164	**
	(.066)	
White	.070	
	(.168)	
Female	.741	
	(1.100)	
Age	.030	
	(.060)	
Education	.021	
	(.051)	
Constant	−3.869	**
	(1.143)	
N	1,055	
Pseudo R^2	.135	
Log Likelihood	1,254.207	
x^2	109.099	

Table B2.3 **The Effects of Ideological Issue Framing in the News on Public Opinion Toward Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy (Compared to Left-Leaning Issue Framing)**[5]

Right-Leaning News	.312	*
	(.179)	
Ideologically Mixed News	−.135	
	(.182)	
Nonpolitical News (Control)	−1.339	**
	(.219)	
Republican	.701	**
	(.253)	
Democrat	.581	**
	(.230)	
Ideology	.164	**
	(.066)	
White	.070	
	(.168)	
Female	.741	
	(1.100)	
Age	.030	
	(.060)	
Education	.021	
	(.051)	
Constant	−2.530	**
	(1.134)	
N	1,055	
Pseudo R^2	.135	
Log Likelihood	1,254.207	
x^2	109.099	

Table B2.4 **The Effects of Ideological Issue Framing in the News on Public Opinion Toward Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy: Moderates, Independents, and Weak Partisans (Compared to Mixed Issue Framing)**[6]

Right-Leaning News	.483	**
	(.211)	
Left-Leaning News	.093	
	(.214)	
Nonpolitical News	−1.108	**
	(.253)	
White	.141	
	(.193)	
Female	−.196	
	(.163)	
Age	.154	**
	(.071)	
Education	−.020	
	(.058)	
Constant	−.920	**
	(.353)	
N	770	
Pseudo R^2	.095	
Log Likelihood	935.525	
x^2	54.560	

Table B2.5 **The Effects of Ideological Issue Framing in the News on Public Opinion Toward Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy: Liberals, Conservatives, and Strong Partisans (Compared to Mixed Issue Framing)**[7]

Right-Leaning News	.273	
	(.339)	
Left-Leaning News	.233	
	(.334)	
Nonpolitical News	−1.589	**
	(.443)	
White	−.045	
	(.325)	
Female	−.287	
	(.265)	
Age	−.061	
	(.106)	
Education	.105	
	.101	
Constant	−.487	
	(.593)	
N	285	
Pseudo R^2	.133	
Log Likelihood	343.886	
x^2	29.020	

Table B2.6 **The Effects of Ideological Issue Framing in the News on Public Opinion Toward Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy: Low- and Middle-Income People (Compared to Mixed Issue Framing)**[8]

Right-Leaning News	.456	**
	(.230)	
Left-Leaning News	.046	
	(.239)	
Nonpolitical News (Control)	−1.055	**
	(.278)	
Republican	1.303	**
	(.310)	
Democrat	.594	**
	(.284)	
White	.106	
	(.220)	
Female	−.118	
	(.181)	
Age	−.055	
	(.077)	
Education	−.056	
	(.066)	
Constant	−1.310	**
	(.441)	
N	662	
Pseudo R^2	.129	
Log Likelihood	769.039	
x^2	63.917	

Table B2.7 **The Effects of Ideological Issue Framing in the News on Public Opinion Toward Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy: Low- and Middle-Income People (Compared to Left-Leaning Issue Framing)**[9]

Right-Leaning News	.410	*
	(.232)	
Ideologically Mixed News	–.046	
	(.239)	
Nonpolitical News (Control)	–1.101	**
	(.281)	
Republican	1.303	**
	(.310)	
Democrat	.594	**
	(.284)	
White	.106	
	(.22)	
Female	–.118	
	(.181)	
Age	.055	
	(.077)	
Education	–.056	
	(.066)	
Constant	–1.264	**
	(.450)	
N	662	
Pseudo R^2	.129	
Log Likelihood	769.039	
x^2	63.917	

Table B2.8 **The Effects of Ideological Issue Framing in the News on Public Opinion Toward Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy: Low- and Middle-Income People (Compared to No Issue Framing [Control Conditions])**[10]

Right-Leaning News	1.511	**
	(.273)	
Left-Leaning News	1.101	**
	(.281)	
Ideologically Mixed News	1.055	**
	(.278)	
Republican	1.303	**
	(.310)	
Democrat	.594	**
	(.284)	
White	.106	
	(.220)	
Female	−.118	
	(.181)	
Age	.055	
	(.077)	
Education	−.056	
	(.066)	
Constant	−2.365	**
	(.465)	
N	662	
Pseudo R^2	.129	
Log Likelihood	769.039	
x^2	63.917	

Table B2.9 **The Effects of Ideological Issue Framing in the News on Public Opinion Toward Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy: Highly Egalitarian People (Compared to Mixed Issue Framing)**[11]

Right-Leaning News	.454	*
	(.246)	
Left-Leaning News	.215	
	(.250)	
Nonpolitical News (Control)	−.975	**
	(.307)	
Republican	1.055	**
	(.413)	
Democrat	.647	**
	(.308)	
White	−.093	
	(.219)	
Female	−.264	
	(.190)	
Age	.090	
	(.081)	
Education	.031	
	(.069)	
Constant	−1.627	**
	(.480)	
N	602	
Pseudo R^2	.089	
Log Likelihood	689.102	
x^2	38.780	

Table B2.10 **The Effects of Ideological Issue Framing in the News on Public Opinion Toward Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy: Highly Egalitarian People (Compared to Left-Leaning Issue Framing)**[12]

Right-Leaning News	.239	
	(.240)	
Ideologically Mixed News	−.215	
	(.250)	
Nonpolitical News (Control)	−1.190	**
	(.303)	
Republican	1.055	**
	(.413)	
Democrat	.647	**
	(.308)	
White	−.093	
	(.219)	
Female	−.264	
	(.190)	
Age	.090	
	(.081)	
Education	.031	
	(.069)	
Constant	−1.412	**
	(.495)	
N	602	
Pseudo R^2	.089	
Log Likelihood	689.102	
x^2	38.780	

Table B2.11 **The Effects of Ideological Issue Framing in the News on Public Opinion Toward Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy: Highly Egalitarian People (Compared to No Issue Framing [Control Conditions])**[13]

Right-Leaning News	1.429	**
	(.301)	
Left-Leaning News	1.190	**
	(.303)	
Ideologically Mixed News	.975	**
	(.307)	
Republican	1.055	**
	(.413)	
Democrat	.647	**
	(.308)	
White	−.093	
	(.219)	
Female	−.264	
	(.190)	
Age	.090	
	(.081)	
Education	.031	
	(.069)	
Constant	−2.602	**
	(.523)	
N	602	
Pseudo R^2	.089	
Log Likelihood	689.102	
x^2	38.780	

Table B2.12 **The Interactive Effects of Ideological Issue Framing in the News and Political Knowledge on Public Opinion Toward Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy: Low- and Middle-Income People (Compared to Mixed Issue Framing)**[14]

Right-Leaning News	−.129 (.293)	
Left-Leaning News	−.438 (.309)	
Nonpolitical News (Control)	−2.091 (.480)	**
Low Political Knowledge	−.695 (.355)	*
Low-Knowledge x Right	1.522 (.482)	**
Low-Knowledge x Left	1.221 (.495)	**
Low-Knowledge x Control	1.897 (.616)	**
Republican	1.335 (.316)	**
Democrat	.618 (.289)	**
White	.131 (.225)	
Female	−.160 (.186)	
Age	.080 (.079)	
Constant	−1.338 (.410)	**
N	662	
Pseudo R^2	.163	
Log Likelihood	750.817	
x^2	82.138	

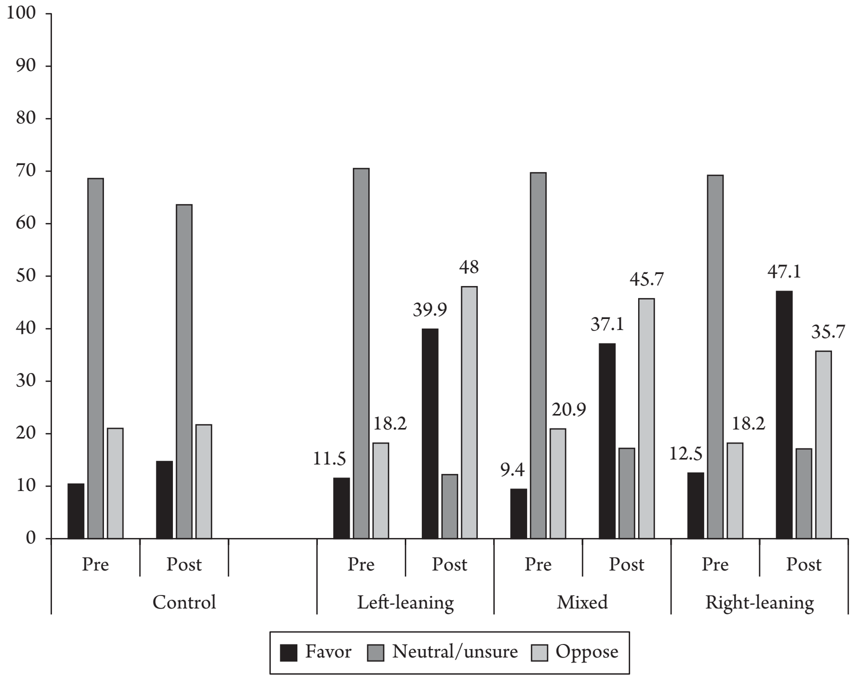

Figure B2.1 Public Opinion on Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy before and after Media Exposure

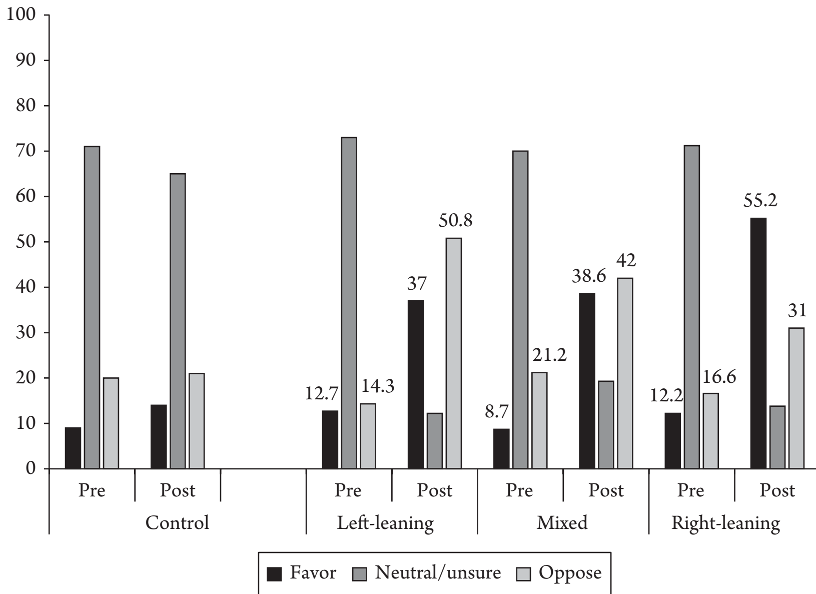

Figure B2.2 Public Opinion on Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy before and after Media Exposure: Low- and Middle-Income People

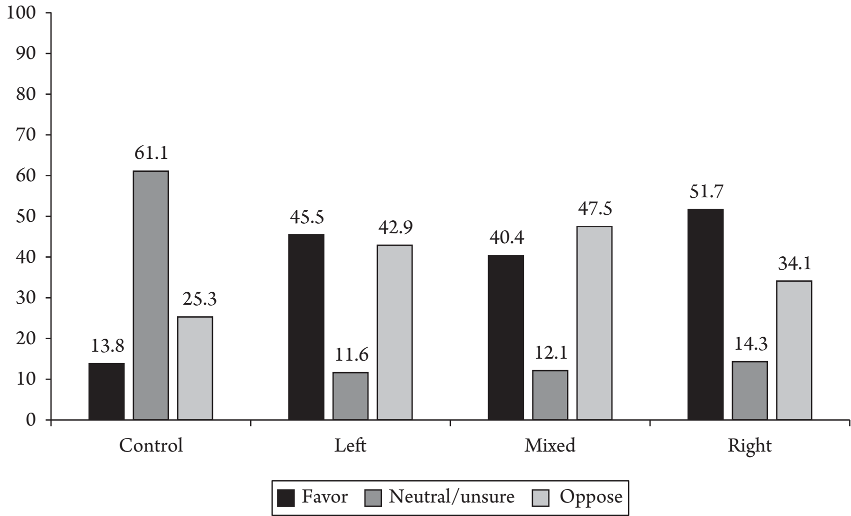

Figure B2.3 Opinion on Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy after Media Exposure: High-Income People

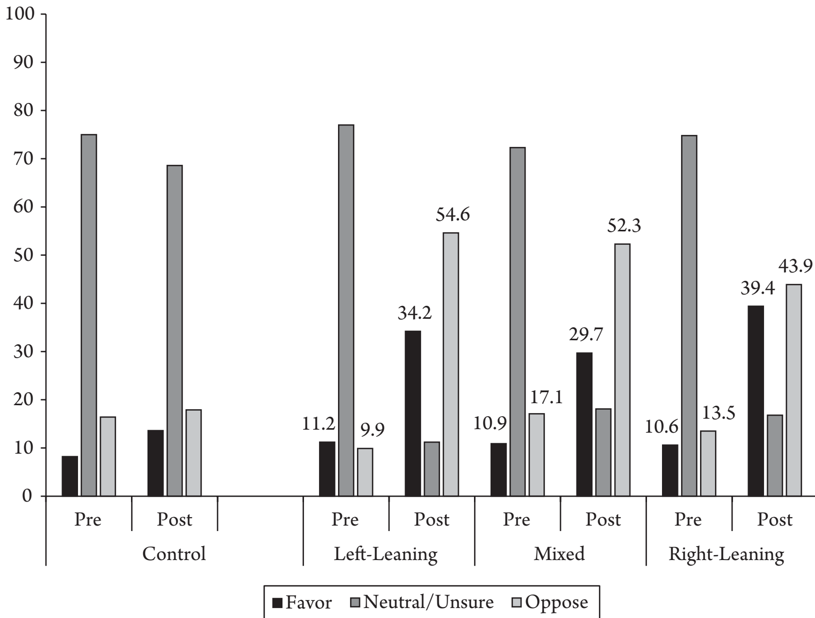

Figure B2.4 Public Opinion on Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy before and after Media Exposure: Highly Egalitarian People

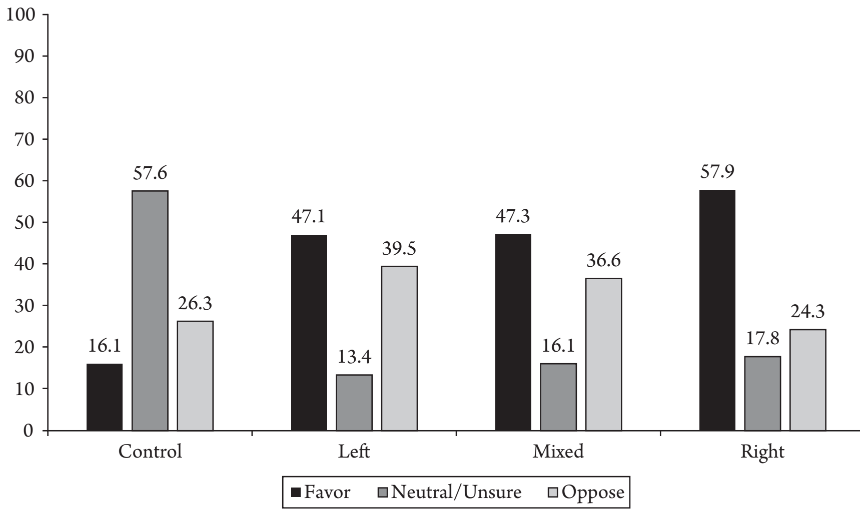

Figure B2.5 Opinion on Neoliberal Corporate Tax Policy after Media Exposure: Less-Egalitarian People

NOTES

Chapter 1

1. Although he does not explicitly discuss the press, Schattschneider (1975) seems to have implicitly understood this point in his seminal insights about the democratic importance of "widening the scope of conflict" during policy debates.

Chapter 2

1. More than 70 percent of Americans believe that "our freedom depends on the free enterprise system." In addition, more than three out of four people—including majorities of nonwhites, more than 70 percent of low-income Americans and more than half of unskilled white workers—believe that "it's still possible to start out poor in this country, work hard and become rich" (Page and Jacobs 2009, 51–52).
2. A 2007 survey shows 56 percent support for the notion that "our government should redistribute wealth by heavy taxes on the rich." This result—which was generated despite a prompt defining the idea as controversial—came before the 2008 financial crisis and Great Recession (Page and Jacobs 2009, 85).
3. The major exception to this trend was the Bush administration's 2005 proposal to begin privatizing Social Security, which never garnered majority polling support.
4. For example, Gandy's (2014) extensive review of framing research in the context of inequality says little about work on ideological issue framing in political debates about specific policy plans.
5. McCall and Manza (2011, 4) identify a pressing need for empirical research on the role of elite discourse and media coverage in conditioning class-differentiated patterns of public opinion.
6. This process may also work in reverse, as consistent public reception of particular, ideologically inflected issue frames in news coverage of specific policy debates lays the groundwork for longer-term influences. Considerations made chronically accessible and salient through this focused coverage may encourage or intensify broader message effects detected in large-scale studies of attitudes toward class, race, gender, violent crime, and other sociopolitical topics. The micro-psychological underpinnings of cultivation effects constitute an important research area that is only recently generating sustained empirical work (Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorielli 2012).
7. Beyond these conceptual and empirical limitations of motivated reasoning theories for explaining policy opinion during the neoliberal turn, the experiment in Chapter 5 explicitly accounts for partisan and ideological identification. This is in addition to the controls built into a properly randomized design.

8. While political scientists have long seen attitude constraint as a prized trait of democratic citizenship, that view has in recent decades coexisted uneasily with a distaste for ideologically driven political thinking and behavior. This difference in perspective is thrown into sharp relief by comparing Converse's (1964) thoroughly positive use of the term "ideologue" with its more recent common iterations in popular and scholarly worries about motivated reasoning and political polarization.
9. To take just one illustration, a broad-ranging and insightful essay in a leading general-interest political science journal which applies a "political economy framework" to "the politics of economic inequality" makes a single, brief reference to the media, in a passage describing mid-20th-century "power elite" theories (Jacobs and Soss 2010, 350). Nevertheless, the perspective I advance is consistent with these authors' invitation to apply political-economic analysis to research on inequality. I say more about these connections in Chapter 7.
10. Bennett (2016) has labeled this inattention to context in the news "fragmentation." See also Iyengar's (1991) classic distinction between dominant "episodic" news framing that emphasizes individual cases and persons, and less common "thematic" framing, which focuses on broader structural or institutional dimensions of political events and issues.
11. Among studies that use independent measures of elite discourse are Althaus et al. (1996), Callaghan and Schnell (2001), Vavreck (2009), Hayes (2010), and Hayes and Guardino (2013).
12. This phrase comes from the title of a study that empirically examines media inclusion and exclusion of political messages in foreign policy debates but does not theoretically elaborate the processes through which inclusion and exclusion occur (Hayes and Guardino 2010).
13. On product "standardization" as a common management response to neoliberal trends in creative industries more broadly, see Huws (2014, 115–116).
14. On broadcast networks' assumptions of a growing conservative audience for entertainment TV in the 1980s, see Kellner (1990, 61).
15. The apparent leftward movement on economic and social welfare issues among Democratic elites since the 1980s, as seen in congressional voting scores, can be attributed almost entirely to the defection of conservative white Southern Democratic elites from the party, and their partial replacement by largely progressive African-American members, rather than to any programmatic ideological shift. The corresponding move rightward on these policy issues among Republican elites has been both greater in magnitude and more deeply rooted in ideological commitments (Hacker and Pierson 2005b; Hetherington 2009).
16. The AP has long been the major news wire service feeding national (and international) content to U.S. regional and local daily newspapers. Wire services are by far the largest source of national public policy-related news appearing in these papers.

Chapter 3

1. The title of this chapter, drawn from journalist Mark Hertsgaard's (1988, 131) critical account of TV news coverage of the Reagan plan, references the president's Hollywood nickname to capture media's focus on the strategic drama of the policy debate.
2. By way of comparison, $50,000 in 1981 was equivalent to more than $142,000 in 2018; $100,000 was equivalent to nearly $285,000. On the effects of the Reagan program on nominal tax rates for different income brackets over its three years, see Meeropol (1998, 80, Table 5).
3. See also CQ Researcher (1982, 7) on the regressive tax expenditures expanded or added in the 1981 bill.
4. As Greider (1982, 95) described it, supply-side doctrine "promised a fundamental redirection of the national economy, without pain or dislocation."
5. Stockman had agreed to be interviewed by *Washington Post* reporter Greider over several months largely as a "background" source, even as debate over the Reagan program proceeded. His candid depiction of chaotic policymaking, dubious fiscal rationales, and deceptive administration rhetoric sparked a brief but intense controversy when published in an *Atlantic* magazine article (and later in a book). Reagan refused Stockman's resignation in November 1981.
6. The 1981 budget act did fail to implement the White House's favored "workfare" requirement for AFDC recipients; Congress decided instead to begin allowing states to create such

programs. In part because of the political and administrative momentum generated during the early Reagan administration (Fording 2003), nationally mandated workfare came to fruition 15 years later under President Clinton.

7. This broad budget pattern continued through Reagan's first term; the major factor behind the administration's oft-noted failure to reduce the total size and cost of the federal government during its eight years was a drastic acceleration of the trend toward increased military spending begun during the late Carter years (D. Baker 2007; CQ Researcher 1982; Greider 1982; Harvey 2005; Phillips 1990). This is in line with New Right policy goals and neoliberal theory on the role of the state. See Meeropol (1998, 90, Table 6) for administration spending proposals and congressional enactments in major means-tested social programs through 1984.
8. A number of other moves initiated or supported by the administration furthered neoliberal economic and social welfare policy goals. These included the continuation of tight monetary policy begun under Federal Reserve Board Chairman Paul Volcker in 1979 (D. Baker 2007, 73–74; Meeropol 1998, 70–78); the administration's confrontational stance toward unions, including Reagan's legal action against striking federal air-traffic controllers, which had major ripple effects in labor-management relations throughout the economy (D. Baker 2007, 68–71; *Dollars and Sense* 1981; Harvey 2005, 52–53); and the failure to raise the minimum wage to keep pace with inflation (D. Baker 2007, 73–74). The White House also scaled back business regulation outside the budget process, by requiring agencies to conduct cost-benefit analyses of new rules, creating the vice president's Task Force on Regulatory Relief, relaxing oversight through personnel appointments, and pursuing a strategy that environmental activists have termed "repeal by non-enforcement" Meeropol (1998, 82). These moves broke the trend of sharply increased industry regulation from 1970 through 1980 (Ferguson and Rogers 1986, 130–137; Harvey 2005, 52; Meeropol 1998, 81–86; Phillips 1990, 91–101).
9. The coding protocol for all media content analyses in this book is based closely on the procedure in Hayes and Guardino (2013) as adapted to the context of neoliberal economic and social welfare policy debates.
10. In both media coverage and congressional discourse, however, I did code statements about the budget plan that were made in the context of debate over the tax plan. As in the other analyses in this book, I did not code news headlines or include editorials and opinion essays in my dataset.
11. To gauge the reliability of key content measures, a second coder independently analyzed a random sample of 10 percent of newspaper reports and 10 percent of TV stories in the Reagan economic plan and welfare reform debates. Intercoder reliability statistics are reported as the findings are discussed.
12. I identified stories by searching the Vanderbilt Television News Archive (for TV reports) and the LexisNexis database (for newspaper stories) for all reports containing the words *tax* and *Reagan* in the period of analysis. Irrelevant news reports (such as those focused on cigarette taxes) were dropped. I then used a random-number generator to cull approximately one-third of the AP stories from the remaining population of relevant print reports.
13. A single primary topic was identified for each news report. Four out of 402 stories carried topics falling outside the five categories in Figure 3.1. These were coded as "other" and omitted from the graph. For story topic, Cohen's kappa (k), which adjusts for chance agreement between coders, was 0.701.
14. For news source category, Cohen's kappa (k) was 0.895.
15. Official sources were administration sources, Republican Party sources, Democratic Party sources, state/local government sources with no partisan identification, and sources from the federal bureaucracy. Non-official sources were conservative or progressive interest group/social movement organization sources, sources from research organizations or academia, and ordinary people. Figure 3.2 shows data for source categories that comprised at least 2 percent of the total.
16. This study was based on coding abstracts of TV news reports—rather than full stories—and analyses were conducted by dividing each summary into segments attributed to different sources rather than by coding individual statements in actual story texts. Moreover, Danielian and Page (1994) included many issues—such as civil rights and LGBT rights—for which the proportion of official sources is likely to be significantly lower than for economic, social

welfare, and foreign policy matters. For instance, their source distribution in tax policy stories showed an 83.1 percent share for elite voices, compared to just 11.1 percent for nongovernmental groups. Finally, the bulk of their data are from a period (the 1970s) that many analysts and scholars consider the modern high point for mainstream news skepticism of official authorities. For evidence that the largest and wealthiest nongovernmental organizations tend to dominate media coverage of interest groups and social movement organizations, see Thrall (2006).

17. For the ideological inflection of issue frames, Cohen's kappa (k) was 0.797.
18. The 2.1-percentage point difference on this indicator between the two cases is marginally statistically significant ($p < .10$).
19. Figure 3.4 graphs the proportion of total ideological issue frames in AP and network TV coverage across the period of analysis for those categories that comprised at least 7 percent of all messages.
20. This category does not appear in Figure 3.4.
21. This is because (1) payroll tax deductions are assessed at a flat rate: everyone who takes in "earned income" pays the same percentage, whether they are a minimum wage cashier at a fast food establishment or a corporate lawyer; (2) there is an annual income cap for the (larger) Social Security portion of these deductions (the cap was $29,700 in 1981, and $128,400 in 2018); and (3) only wages and salaries (not income from investments and interest) are subject to these taxes.
22. Indeed, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, from 1977 (when an early round of upper-bracket tax reductions began during the Carter administration) to the end of the Reagan presidency in 1988, only the top 5 percent of the income distribution (and especially the top 1 percent) saw any substantial reduction in *total* effective federal tax rates (Phillips 1990, 82–83).
23. For story favorability, Cohen's kappa (k) was 0.740.
24. Studies over many decades (e.g., Gitlin 1980) have concluded that TV's attraction to protest footage often leads to unsympathetic coverage that undermines movement ideas and goals. Thus, it is not clear how effective coverage of protests against the Reagan economic plan would have been in encouraging public opposition to neoliberal policy, if the major networks had indeed provided such coverage.
25. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities was founded in 1981 largely in response to the emergence of Reaganite policy, but I could locate no public record of its views on ERTA during debate over the legislation. Another high-profile left-leaning think tank focusing on economic and social welfare policy issues, the Center for Economic and Policy Research, was not launched until 1999, when neoliberalism was in high gear.
26. Silk was no leftist radical. According to his 1995 obituary in the *Times*, he never even fully embraced Keynesian theory, the leading economic policy philosophy of mainstream Democrats and many Republicans from the 1940s into the 1970s (Uchitelle 1995).
27. Similar patterns of Democratic elite discourse and voting were seen on the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, which instituted the bulk of the Reagan administration's redirection of spending away from social and business regulatory programs toward military and national security programs.
28. These periods comprised (for the House of Representatives) July 23 through 29, and July 28 through August 4, 1981, and (for the Senate) July 25 through 31, and August 1 through 4, 1981. The House-Senate conference report on ERTA was passed by each chamber on August 4. Appendix A contains additional information on coding procedures.
29. Narrowly elected at age 28 in the conservative GOP wave of 1980, Fields went on to chair the Subcommittee on Telecommunication and Finance of the House Commerce Committee after Republicans took control of the chamber in 1994. In that capacity, he was instrumental in passing the Telecommunications Act of 1996, a key neoliberal media policy discussed in the next chapter. Georgia Congressman Newt Gingrich also spoke frequently on ERTA, making five statements leading up to key votes on the measure. Elected in a precursor GOP surge in 1978, Gingrich became House Speaker under the "Republican Revolution" Congress that helped push through neoliberal welfare reform. He was also a major backer of the Telecommunications Act.

30. Because so few nongovernmental sources appeared in news coverage, the magnitude of the legislative refraction differential does not change significantly when these voices are removed from the analysis.
31. Respondents to this poll also had the option to "oppose some cuts but favor others," a choice that 16 percent made.

Chapter 4

1. In his 1995 State of the Union address, Clinton said he "had the honor" of helping President Reagan push through earlier rounds of welfare restrictions and work requirements. "We have to make welfare what it was meant to be—a second chance, not a way of life," Clinton added. During the 1992 campaign, "Clinton claimed that 17,000 Arkansas residents had been successfully moved off the AFDC and food stamp rolls under a state jobs program between 1989 and 1992, although the administrator of the program subsequently acknowledged that 'many people returned to welfare during that period' " (Piven and Cloward 1993, 398).
2. State-level electoral gains in 1994 boosted the neoliberal-New Right's long-term momentum. Besides taking control of the House for the first time since 1954, Republicans won the majority of governorships for the first time in 24 years. The GOP ended Election Night with control of 30 statehouses, including every large state except Florida; George W. Bush was elected Texas governor in 1994.
3. For instance, the Contract with America version of welfare reform offered state options to extend the ban on cash benefits to mothers between 18 and 21, prohibit benefits for babies born to women in that age range, and expand such bans to public housing benefits. Haskins (2006, 95–102) discusses how Republican congressional leaders—under the influence of New Right intellectuals such as former Reagan Education Secretary William Bennett and Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation—worked to keep strong federal requirements at a time when most governors wanted looser rules. This approach to devolution highlights the neoliberal state's role as a coercive guarantor of market norms and private-sector imperatives rather than a contemporary form of 19th-century laissez faire (Harvey 2005; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).
4. In fact, the Congressional Budget Office projected that federal savings from food stamp cutbacks ($23.3 billion over five years) would dwarf savings from the cash welfare provisions ($3.8 billion) (Haskins 2006, 376).
5. Local- and state-level administration and policy delivery was a key feature of cash welfare from its beginnings, when the FDR administration bowed to pressure from conservative Southern congressional leaders whose support was judged vital to passing the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program (later renamed AFDC). The program allowed a large measure of local leeway in benefit levels and eligibility standards that was often exploited to deny services to black women, inside and outside the South (Quadagno 1994, 119). Thus, devolution in 1996 significantly extended and elaborated a policy logic that had always been central to welfare.
6. For instance, recipients must sign ritualistic "Individual Responsibility Plans," and administrators' "meeting spaces are labeled with titles like 'The Excellence Room' and 'The Opportunity Room' " (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011, 49, 50).
7. New Democrats also argued that neoliberal paternalist reforms would remove stigmas of laziness and irresponsibility associated with welfare in American political culture and mass opinion. This prediction has not been borne out (Soss and Schram 2007). As Ingram (2007, 251) asserts, "The discourse associated with welfare reform fed into, rather than contradicted, widespread stereotypes of welfare recipients." See also Schram and Soss (2015).
8. The Fairness Doctrine's demise also created a favorable business and regulatory environment for the rise of conservative talk radio (Berry and Sobieraj 2011). Parallel to the effects of mainstream corporate news that I analyze, talk radio has played an important role in facilitating the broader neoliberal turn.
9. For the TV content, I searched the Vanderbilt archive's online abstracts for all stories including the terms *welfare* and *Clinton* in the time period under analysis. I used the same strategy in collecting *USA Today* articles from LexisNexis. Clearly irrelevant news reports

(such as those pertaining to "military welfare" programs) were dropped from the dataset. The full coding scheme and other methodological details are in Appendix A.

10. One out of 114 stories carried a topic falling outside the five categories in Figure 4.1. This was coded as "other" and omitted from the graph. For story topic, Cohen's kappa (k) was 0.867.
11. For news source category, Cohen's kappa (k) was 0.887.
12. These findings are consistent with those in Blank-Libra (2004) on the paucity of welfare recipient voices in newspaper treatments of the issue and Lawrence (2000a) on the virtual absence of such sources in national-level media coverage.
13. Haskins (2006, 89–91) credits much of the GOP's strategic media relations success to the work of aide Ari Fleischer. For example, Fleischer urged that congressional leaders repeat that the status quo was " 'a failed welfare system' that Republicans 'had a plan to fix' . . . and similar big ideas dressed up in simple language" (ibid., 90). "Ari was a master at using arguments and evidence to support any position Republicans wanted to adopt" (ibid., 91). Fleischer was a key neoliberal strategic communications figure during the 1990s and early 2000s, later serving as President George W. Bush's press secretary.
14. For the ideological tendency of issue frames, Cohen's kappa (k) was 0.700.
15. Figure 4.4 graphs the proportion of total ideological issue frames in *USA Today* and network TV coverage across the period of analysis for categories that comprised at least 2 percent of all messages.
16. Figure 4.6 depicts all ideologically charged Clinton administration issue frames that made up more than 2 percent of administration messages.
17. Information on how long welfare recipients stay in the program appeared in *USA Today* coverage just three times, all in 1995.
18. This reference came in a January 12, 1995, *ABC World News Tonight* piece, which also included the lone TV citation of welfare usage broken down by race and ethnicity.
19. For story favorability, Cohen's kappa (k) was 0.869. In Figure 4.7, I combine categories for "very favorable" and "somewhat favorable," and "very unfavorable" and "somewhat unfavorable," respectively.
20. Based on the initial reading of speeches, nongovernmental discourse, and academic treatments that informed my media coding scheme, I identified a possible issue frame category for "work ethic/dependency" messages with an explicit racial cast. Not only did I find no such messages in TV or *USA Today* coverage, but (aside from the rare statistical breakdowns of recipients) I found no direct references to race at all.
21. Many of these reports also included footage of welfare recipients of other races; I did not collect data on TV depictions of recipients categorized by race, and was unable to obtain photographs that accompanied *USA Today*'s welfare reform coverage.
22. I included speeches from before my period of media analysis because Clinton had publicly discussed welfare policy since the beginning of his term. I collected this sample of discourse on the expectation that journalists might use their knowledge of Clinton's publicly expressed welfare views from throughout his presidency to present administration issue frames in the news.
23. I collected from the GPO's "Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States" every presidential statement with the word *welfare* in the official title. These statements included two public letters to Congress. While I analyzed presidential remarks on welfare delivered at the beginning of news conferences, I chose not to code Clinton's responses to White House press corps questions. Because these answers were potentially affected by media imperatives (including the particular questions journalists chose to ask), they do not reflect the relatively "unmediated" political discourse I analyze in this section.
24. These periods comprised (for the House of Representatives) July 12 through 18, and July 25 through 31, 1996, and (for the Senate) July 17 through 23, and July 26 through August 1, 1996.
25. I coded 37.3 percent of House Democrats' statements and 29.1 percent of Senate Democrats' statements as neutral or ambivalent, compared to just 13.1 percent of House Republican and 22.8 percent of Senate Republican rhetoric.
26. Differences between the chambers on this measure are slight: 55.4 percent of statements on the Senate floor were in favor of neoliberal reform, compared to 59.6 percent in the House.

27. As in the Reagan economic plan debate in Chapter 3, these data include issue frames attached to noncongressional news sources. Again, the legislative refraction differential does not change significantly when these noncongressional sources are removed.
28. I include survey results from 1994 because of welfare policy's salience in the midterm congressional campaigns that year.
29. Reported public perceptions of the targets of government social provision have followed a similar pattern: the 1994 National Election Studies survey indicated a favorability rating of 79 percent for "poor people," compared to just 38 percent for "people on welfare." The latter result represented an 11-percentage point drop from the same survey in 1974 (Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1995, 612).
30. Consistent with this interpretation, polls show substantial increases from the 1970s and 1980s through the mid-1990s in public support for the ideas that the welfare system is not effective, that welfare discourages work, that lack of individual effort is the primary reason people are poor, that government should not do more to help needy people, and that too much is spent on welfare (Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1995).
31. Van Doorn (2015) provides evidence on racialized images in media coverage of welfare through 2010.

Chapter 5

1. Ironically, Bush lost New Hampshire to Senator John McCain, who positioned himself as a moderate on tax policy. In an earlier political incarnation, Forbes was a key conservative Southern Democrat who helped get the 1981 Reagan economic plan through Congress.
2. In addition to the tax plans, the Bush administration implemented a Medicare prescription benefit program that relied heavily on the private sector and was a boon to the pharmaceutical industry, as well as large subsidies for oil companies, cuts in environmental regulation, and rules that weakened protections for organized labor. Bush's bid for one of the greatest neoliberal prizes fell short when his plan to partially privatize Social Security died in 2005.
3. For example, the share of national income going to the top 1 percent of the population increased from 16.5 percent in 2000 to 18.3 percent in 2007, while the share going to the top 5 percent went from 31.5 percent to 33.8 percent, and the share going to the top 10 percent increased from 43.1 percent to 45.7 percent. At the same time, average hourly wages for production workers declined (Gordon n.d.).
4. To identify these stories, I used the NewsBank online archive to search for all stories in the paper containing the keywords *Bush* and *tax*, then eliminated stories that were not relevant to the debate. As with the other media content analyses in the book, I did not code headlines, editorials, or opinion essays. This procedure produced a dataset of 69 stories. Full coding information is provided in Appendix A.
5. As in previous chapters, the data in Figure 5.2 combine "very favorable" and "somewhat favorable," and "very unfavorable" and "somewhat unfavorable" categories, respectively.
6. These results are depicted in Figure A.1 in Appendix A.
7. Details on sample recruitment are in Appendix B1.
8. Whites who did not identify as Hispanic or Latino were also overrepresented in my sample (U.S. Census Bureau n.d.). However, annual household income tracked the overall population fairly closely. Median income among study participants was in the $45,000–$54,999 category. Median income in the United States in 2015 was $56,516 (Proctor, Semega, and Kollar 2016).
9. The post-test portion of the survey also included three manipulation checks, two of which tested basic news story comprehension and one that gauged awareness of treatments' ideological slants. Responses indicate that a large majority of study participants paid sufficient attention to the stories to be affected by ideological issue framing in their content. Details of these manipulation checks are in Appendix B2.
10. Supplementary analyses (not reported here) show that all effects discussed in this chapter are statistically and substantively significant among participants exposed to both formats.
11. I tested for differences across experimental conditions in race, gender, educational level, income, party and ideological identification, political knowledge, and socioeconomic egalitarianism. Small differences in race, party, and ideology appeared in those assigned to some

specific conditions (for example, whites were significantly over-represented in the left-leaning television treatment as compared to the mixed television treatment). Details on randomization checks are in Appendix B1.

12. In raw numbers, the breakdown of issue frames in print stories was eight to four for the right- and left-leaning treatments, and six to six for the mixed treatment. For TV reports, the numbers were four to two for the left- and right-leaning treatments, and two to two for the mixed treatment. These differences between print and TV were necessary to maintain fidelity to the form and content of real news coverage. Left-leaning and right-leaning print stories were 568 words each (including headline and byline), the mixed story was 570 words, and the control story was 518 words. Left- and right-leaning television stories were each just under three minutes long, the mixed story was just over two minutes, and the control story was approximately two minutes long. Texts and transcripts of treatment and control materials are available from the author.
13. In order to model the typical TV news-watching experience, study participants were unable to pause or rewind clips. While technology making this possible is increasingly widespread, it is probably not commonly used for news programs, especially by those segments of the population whose policy opinions I am most interested in exploring. Some online news sites allow one to pause or rewind videos, while others do not. In any case, enabling this option in the experiment would have introduced extraneous factors that are difficult to measure or account for.
14. Details on construction of the egalitarianism scale are in Appendix B1. The scale is also discussed later in this chapter. I pre-tested the egalitarianism scale on a pilot sample of 100 MTurk participants. In the final study, Cronbach's alpha calculated its reliability at 0.770.
15. For ease of presentation, I collapse participants who favored the plan "very strongly," "strongly," and "somewhat strongly" into a single category, and those who opposed the plan "very strongly," "strongly," and "somewhat strongly" into another category. Outside the control conditions, very few participants (1.5 percent to 3.4 percent) answered "don't know." I group those responses with the "neutral" category, at the midpoint of the opinion scale.
16. These results are depicted in Figure B2.1 in Appendix B2.
17. Presidential job approval rating was highly correlated with party identification ($r = .707$). In all regression models estimated for this study, there was no substantive difference in any media treatment effects when substituting presidential approval rating for party ID. Therefore, in all models reported in the chapter, I control for party ID rather than presidential approval.
18. A model with left-leaning treatments as the comparison category showed that exposure to right-leaning news coverage boosted the odds of supporting the neoliberal corporate tax plan, although this effect did not reach stringent levels of statistical significance ($p = .082$). Full results and specifications of these models are in Tables B2.1, B2.2, and B2.3 in Appendix B2.
19. Included in this figure are all participants who labeled themselves independents (whether "pure" or leaning), weakly attached partisans, or ideological moderates. Many moderates simultaneously identified themselves as independents or weak partisans. Of course, each participant was counted once.
20. For full results and specifications of these logistic regression models, see Tables B2.4 and B2.5 in Appendix B2.
21. These data are from the ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior, available online at http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/gd-index.htm.
22. I defined income groups this way in order to reflect as closely as possible the distribution in the U.S. population. Under my categorization, low- and middle-income people comprise 62.7 percent of the MTurk sample.
23. For these results, see Figure B2.2 in Appendix B2.
24. Overall results among high-income participants are shown in Figure B2.3 in Appendix B2.
25. Full results and specifications of these logistic regression models are in Tables B2.6, B2.7, and B2.8 in Appendix B2.
26. For these results, see Figure B2.4 in Appendix B2.
27. Overall results among less-egalitarian participants are shown in Figure B2.5 in Appendix B2.
28. Full results and specifications of these models are in Tables B2.9, B2.10, and B2.11 in Appendix B2.

29. Full results and specifications of this regression model are in Table B2.12 in Appendix B2.

Chapter 6

1. This assumes there will be no large-scale move toward a paid subscription—and thus, away from an ad-supported—model of popular hard news and political information provision online. Absent public subsidies, there has been little evidence that such a redirection could be financially viable (McChesney 2013; McChesney and Nichols 2010).
2. I applied a similar content selection protocol and coding scheme as in Chapters 3 through 5. Methodological details are in Appendix A.
3. These analyses cover debate over the American Health Care Act (the House version of the Obamacare repeal bill) from March 7 through May 3, 2017. They indicate that official voices accounted for 79.3 percent of total sources on television, while 71.9 percent of stories focused on political strategy and tactics or internal governmental procedure.

Chapter 7

1. This is certainly not to say that such deliberate attempts—including attempts by corporate media interest groups to get favorable government policies (McChesney 2004; Nichols and McChesney 2013)—do not occur. Rather, it is to say that news coverage and other media content favorable to corporate and wealthy interests can be generated routinely, aside from any focused, deliberate efforts by economic elites to have that content produced.
2. Structural and institutional dimensions of the media's intersection with political power may partially explain Smith's (2000) perhaps counterintuitive finding that business interests tend to be most successful in the policy process when they unite over core issues such as taxes, government social spending, and economic regulation, and work to shape public opinion in their favor.

Appendix A

1. Because only issue frames attached to sources were analyzed, some sentences were not coded. These were mainly unattributed statements of information (e.g., "a key Senate committee today approved the president's tax plan") or, occasionally, journalists' own interjections ("President Clinton faces an uphill climb in getting House Democrats to support his plan for welfare reform.").
2. "Clinton Tells GOP: Help Fix Welfare," *USA Today*, April 19, 1995.
3. "Health Care Battle Builds—White House Presses Its Case Ahead of Budget Estimate," *USA Today*, March 13, 2017.

Appendix B1

1. This compensation is considerably higher than that for many social science studies fielded through MTurk. However, because the tasks that participants completed were cognitively demanding, I wanted to encourage proper care and attention to answering the survey questions and engaging with the media content. Payment at this level also reflects my concerns about potential economic exploitation of MTurk participants, and of "digital laborers" more generally (Schneider 2015).
2. Gender, age, race, education, and income statistics are from the Census Bureau (U.S. Census Bureau n.d.; Proctor, Semega, and Kollar 2016). Partisan and ideological identification statistics are from Gallup polls (Jones 2016; Saad 2016).
3. U.S. educational statistics are calculated as percentages of all residents 25 years or older, based on estimates from 2011 through 2015.
4. Party ID statistics categorize as partisans those self-described independents who say they lean toward one of the parties.

5. In the survey as reproduced here, the less egalitarian response appears first in questions 10, 12, 14–15, and 17, and second in question 13. Responses for questions 11 and 16 range from most to least egalitarian. As noted in the survey, however, during the study the order or direction of options for these questions were randomly varied to eliminate possible response-order effects.
6. Question numbers are included here for convenience but were not listed on the survey that participants completed.

Appendix B2

1. The other possible responses to this question were: "75 percent," "20 percent," "10 percent," and "I did not see a story about corporate taxes."
2. The other possible responses to this question were: "Raise the top corporate tax rate"; "Keep the top corporate tax rate the same"; and "I did not see a story about corporate taxes."
3. Dependent variable is support for a corporate tax cut. Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Effects are compared to participants exposed to ideologically mixed news coverage. Data are from an online survey-experiment conducted in July and August 2016. ** p<.05; * p<.10, one-tailed.
4. Dependent variable is support for a corporate tax cut. Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Effects are compared to participants exposed to nonpolitical news coverage. Data are from an online survey-experiment conducted in July and August 2016. ** p<.05; * p<.10, one-tailed.
5. Dependent variable is support for a corporate tax cut. Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Effects are compared to participants exposed to left-leaning news coverage. Data are from an online survey-experiment conducted in July and August 2016. ** p<.05; * p<.10, one-tailed.
6. Dependent variable is support for a corporate tax cut. Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Effects are compared to participants exposed to ideologically mixed news coverage. Data are from an online survey-experiment conducted in July and August 2016. ** p<.05; * p<.10, one-tailed.
7. Dependent variable is support for a corporate tax cut. Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Effects are compared to participants exposed to ideologically mixed news coverage. Data are from an online survey-experiment conducted in July and August 2016. ** p<.05; * p<.10, one-tailed.
8. Dependent variable is support for a corporate tax cut. Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Effects are compared to participants exposed to ideologically mixed news coverage. Data are from an online survey-experiment conducted in July and August 2016. ** p<.05; * p<.10, one-tailed.
9. Dependent variable is support for a corporate tax cut. Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Effects are compared to participants exposed to left-leaning news coverage. Data are from an online survey-experiment conducted in July and August 2016. ** p<.05; * p<.10, one-tailed.
10. Dependent variable is support for a corporate tax cut. Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Effects are compared to participants exposed to nonpolitical news coverage. Data are from an online survey-experiment conducted in July and August 2016. ** p<.05; * p<.10, one-tailed.
11. Dependent variable is support for a corporate tax cut. Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Effects are compared to participants exposed to ideologically mixed news coverage. Data are from an online survey-experiment conducted in July and August 2016. ** p<.05; * p<.10, one-tailed.
12. Dependent variable is support for a corporate tax cut. Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Effects are compared to participants exposed to left-leaning news coverage. Data are from an online survey-experiment conducted in July and August 2016. ** p<.05; * p<.10, one-tailed.
13. Dependent variable is support for a corporate tax cut. Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Effects are compared to participants exposed

to nonpolitical news coverage. Data are from an online survey-experiment conducted in July and August 2016. ** $p<.05$; * $p<.10$, one-tailed.

14. Dependent variable is support for a corporate tax cut. Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Effects are compared to high-knowledge participants exposed to ideologically mixed news coverage. Data are from an online survey-experiment conducted in July and August 2016. ** $p<.05$; * $p<.10$, one-tailed.

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