



## Many Sources of News

Americans get their election campaign news from broadcast news programs, television comedy shows, websites and many other sources besides their local daily newspaper.

“You still look at your morning paper,” said Larry Parnell, a professor at George Washington University in Washington, “but for thoughtful analysis, not for breaking news. You’ve already gotten that on your smart phone.”

Parnell may be exaggerating a little (one study says 27 percent of Americans get news from their mobile phones or other mobile devices). But his comment points to changes in communications media and the role they play in politics.

### Freedom of the Press

America’s founders established freedom of the press as a basic right when they adopted the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Thomas Jefferson famously said, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

At their best, in recent decades the news media have represented the public interest in the political system, informing citizens about government and politics and exposing wrongdoing.

But in America’s early years, newspapers were often openly, even savagely partisan. Over the 19th century the ideal of balanced, objective reporting gradually took hold. Some newspapers published the texts of hours-long campaign speeches of presidential candidates such as Abraham Lincoln and people eagerly read them.

### Radio and Television

The birth of radio broadcasts in the 1920s gave audiences more immediate news of politics. The advent of television after World War II allowed Americans to watch political developments unfold from the comfort of their living rooms.

By 1952, the once-every-four-years national conventions, where the Democratic and Republican political parties choose their presidential candidates, were broadcast live nationwide by the handful of major television networks.

For decades now, established major print and broadcast news media have assigned some of their most talented reporters and cameramen to tag along with major presidential candidates during more than a year of campaigning.

Politicians court the media, and almost every campaign event is chosen to get maximum media coverage. Citizens face an explosion of news sources: 24-hour television news networks, local broadcast news operations, talk shows on television and radio, news websites and citizen journalists’ blogs.



Top: Reporters scribble notes as former President Theodore Roosevelt speaks in New York in 1911. Above: Reporters cover Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney aboard his campaign plane in 2012.



**Online Coverage**

News sites that exist only or mostly online, such as the Huffington Post, the Daily Beast and Politico, attract millions of readers with original reporting. Huffington Post has a platform called OfftheBus just for citizen journalists filing reports of local stories about the 2012 elections.

Retreating to the ways of the early republic, some journalists now make no pretense of aiming for objective reporting. Broadcast news organizations and online news sites that pointedly slant their coverage to a more conservative viewpoint, such as Fox News, or a more liberal viewpoint, such as MSNBC, have taken audience share away from more traditional competitors.

To provide quick insights and some analysis, a few major newspapers have added blogs, such as The Caucus in the New York Times and The Fix in the Washington Post. But former newspaper reporter Jodi Enda, writing in American Journalism Review, said her colleagues are torn by the need to file bits of information so quickly and so often.

“They bemoan the loss of time,” Enda said, “to unearth the insightful gems that really tell us something instructive, something fundamentally important, about the men and women who would be president.”

Some voters, especially younger ones, now get their political news mostly from daily televised satire programs such as *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart and *The Colbert Report* with Stephen Colbert. Others learn about candidates from the jokes of late-night television talk show hosts such as Jay Leno and David Letterman.

**News as Entertainment**

So candidates are going where the voters are. During his 1992 campaign for president, Democratic candidate Bill Clinton famously appeared on the late-night *Arsenio Hall Show* playing the song “Heartbreak Hotel” on saxophone. Politicians have been appearing as guests on talk shows ever since, a calculated part of their campaigns.

Technology has changed the system where only a few sources provided news. Howard Fineman, editorial director at the HuffingtonPost, wrote that major news organization reporters had become insulated when they simply hopped on and off a candidate’s campaign bus or airplane to cover a blur of scheduled events.

They missed a lot of the real story that way, he advised prospective citizen journalists. “Arguably,” Fineman said, “no one can see America better than the people who never get on the vehicle in the first place—in other words, all of you.”



Top: Joseph P. Kennedy III faces reporters as he runs for Congress in 2012. Above, from top to bottom: Mitt Romney takes questions from a talk radio host; citizen bloggers snap photos of ex-President Bill Clinton; President Obama appears with Tonight Show host Jay Leno.

