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Introduction

THE GREAT HIDDEN POLITICAL ASSET

Curiosity and excitement filled the air as Washington politicos gathered on March 1, 1984, to hear about a "great hidden political asset": cable television.[1] It was the first ever "Cable Television Political Workshop" and cable executives, operators, and lobbyists had a big message to sell to the officials, consultants, and congressional staffers they had invited that day: how broadcasting had failed democracy and how cable could save it.

Frustrated by the high cost of campaign advertisements on network television? Cable offered cheap, even free, options to have lengthy conversations with citizens. Unsatisfied with the boundaries of thirty seconds to make these television pitches? On cable, as Tom Wheeler, the president of the National Cable Television Association (NCTA), put it to the wide-eyed participants, "what you can do is only limited by your imagination." He stressed that successful candidates needed to "throw out all the old ideas about how you use television in political campaigns." Why? Because cable isn't just "more TV," he emphasized. "It is different television. It's a different medium and the key to using it is to open up your imagination and figure out new approaches."

The NCTA celebrated the political power of narrowcasting and targeting. Cable Americans, as market researchers called cable subscribers, consumed more goods than noncable households. They drank more wine, bought more items via mail orders, owned more video games, and used their American Express credit cards in higher volumes.[2] They were also more politically active. Compared to noncable subscribers, they were 28 percent more likely to vote, 50 percent more likely to work on a campaign, and 69 percent more likely to donate money to a candidate or a political cause. "The population of Cable America is politically active. They are literally hard wired into their communities," explained Richard Zackon, the vice president of the Cabletelevision Advertising Bureau (CAB). "The relationship between viewing and voting then is the answer to the question why is it politically important . . . to reach those people in Cable America." He encouraged candidates to customize their campaigns in the mold of successful cable networks, which had smaller, but more loyal and more vocal, audiences than the national broadcasting networks that still dominated television in the early 1980s.

For three and a half hours, cable businessmen—notably not one woman or person of color spoke—expressed the logic that other entrepreneurs had learned over the course of the twentieth century: consumer capitalism thrives on the perpetual pursuit of personal pleasure.[3] For decades, corporations had studied how to make psychological appeals to American consumers to encourage them to buy goods as a form of democratic empowerment.[4] Now, cable leaders were pushing politicians and their staffers to bring these principles to winning elections and governing. The economic stakes for the industry went beyond just tapping into hefty campaign advertising budgets. The workshop was also a way to generate goodwill, and then votes, for legislation to deregulate the cable industry.

It worked. The workshop was one of many events organized by the cable industry to teach Washington insiders how to use a technology that had long been an outsider in politics and television. It exposed the industry's most consequential lobbying strategy: highlighting the limits of broadcast television and lauding the civic possibilities of

cable television. Wheeler ended the workshop with a speech titled "How the Electorate Wins in the End."[5] The premise was simple: more choice, information, and access to direct conversations between candidates and the public would engage and inform voters like never before. The workshop was never about enhancing democracy, however. It was about making money and forging strategic partnerships between an industry and the elected politicians who wrote the rules in which that industry operated.

This book explores how cable television evolved into a multibillion-dollar industry by tapping into political frustrations with broadcast television and promising that choice on the television dial would fulfill the promise of American democracy. Cable television began in the late 1940s simply to bring existing broadcast signals to Americans in small rural towns and western mountain regions who were otherwise unable to get programming from the three broadcast networks that dominated the television landscape—National Broadcasting Company (NBC), Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), and American Broadcasting Company (ABC). Over the next four decades, a combination of political and business decisions enabled the cable industry to challenge the broadcasting oligopoly rather than just expand its reach. By the 1970s, cable operators and industry lobbyists promised the public and politicians that their medium would deliver a different form of news and entertainment—one that was more authentic, accessible, and adaptable to the needs of elected officials. Distinguishing cable from broadcast television became both a business and political strategy, with the public interest frequently invoked but seldom taken seriously.

Challenging the broadcasting industry was no small feat, and the consequences of cable television's triumph reverberate in the twenty-first century. Broadcasting—on radio and then television—had created a shared entertainment culture that erased many regional and economic divides and helped citizens to see themselves as consumers.[6] Such a national identity privileged the perspective of straight, white men and became a tool to further buttress a political establishment growing more media savvy.[7] Network broadcasting executives searched for programs that appealed to the masses—which they understood

to be white, middle class, and heterosexual—and built newsrooms that relied on elite men to shape conversations about public affairs. This shared culture created by broadcasting was powerful but also ideologically exclusionary and built on racial, ethnic, and gendered stereotypes, which it then perpetuated.[8]

Cable television thrived by promising to bring diversity and new perspectives into American politics and culture and to tear down the gatekeepers of network broadcasting with market forces. Even as cable companies became more consolidated, programming on the medium remained decentralized compared to the film and broadcast industries, ultimately emerging as a vehicle for anti-establishment political forces. Cable news programs called out the elitism of network news and eagerly challenged and disrupted mainstream institutions and journalistic practices. Eschewing the half-hour evening news program narrated by the likes of Walter Cronkite, cable networks like C-SPAN offered an unfiltered view of the House of Representatives, whose empty chamber was used by figures like Newt Gingrich (R-GA) and Robert Walker (R-PA) to build a small but outspoken conservative audience. Lengthy cable talk shows allowed presidential candidates to evade the Washington press corps and talk directly to narrow segments of the population about the very issues polls showed audiences cared about, whether specific policies or music interests.

Such programs took on a feeling of authenticity because they differed so dramatically from the curated network news programs. And yet, they simply introduced a different political filter, one that often entertained rather than informed viewers and overwhelmingly did so by stressing divisions rather than finding common ground.[9]

Cable promised to empower people, politicians, and perspectives not included in network broadcasting. And it did. It seduced political leaders, who saw television as central to winning elections and governing and wanted more media access than network television would provide. It mobilized a public willing to pay for newer and better television. It encouraged a different approach to television that made citizens and politicians rely on the marketplace to interact

with one another, ultimately making political success dependent on generating good ratings, not necessarily crafting effective policy.

The history of cable television *does* reveal how a more accessible and expansive medium can bring new voices to political conversations and stimulate civic engagement. That's certainly what happened in 1972 as ordinary citizens creatively produced their own election night coverage of local city council races on public access channels using "roving reporters" donning portapaks to interview candidates and analyze voting patterns.[10] Two decades later, MTV lauded how its "Choose or Lose" initiative registered thousands of young voters. But such efforts were always about advancing the bottom line of a highly regulated industry looking to demonstrate to elected officials why they should encourage, rather than limit, the growth of cable television.[11]

The development of cable television—from its political awakening in the 1960s to its dominance in the 1990s—exposes the ways in which American political institutions and values are deeply intertwined with media industries. This has always been the case.[12] During the early republic, concerns about the circulation of misinformation through pamphlets and the printing press proliferated, even motivating legislators to pass the Sedition Act of 1798, which prohibited "false, scandalous and malicious writing or writings against the government of the United States."[13] The law exposed the deep concern about public opinion, which the founding generation saw as playing an important, but perpetually flawed, role in American government.[14] Elected officials needed to communicate with their constituents and represent their interests, but what tools should they use to do those jobs?

Twentieth-century technological developments—notably motion pictures, radio, and then television—brought new opportunities for political leaders to sell ideas to voters and build national constituencies.[15] Yet, access to this audience involved establishing and sustaining a particular corporate structure upheld by federal government regulations to serve the public interest. Over the course of four decades, cable television fundamentally challenged

and changed this arrangement. As cable knocked down the hierarchies and rules embedded in the broadcasting era, it helped to create a privatized public sphere where notions of "efficiency" and "consumer choice" reigned supreme, and earlier expectations that corporations had a civic responsibility increasingly faded. Regulators, elected officials, and millions of Americans became convinced that a deregulated media marketplace could advance democracy, and as the CAB understood with the slogan that it promoted during the 1984 workshop "E = MC2," effectiveness equaled more cable.[16]

As a result, the politicians who once looked down on the industry during the 1960s had their media consultants studying it during the 1980s, and over the next decade, they eagerly accepted invitations to appear on new cable channels like CNN, C-SPAN, Comedy Central, and even Nickelodeon. Ignoring criticism that MTV News contributed to the "junkification" of American life, Bill Clinton used the cable channel's new foray into presidential politics to talk about student loan policies on the campaign trail in 1992, and yes, even his underwear choice during a presidential town hall two years later.[17] Others bought advertisements on ESPN, invited C-SPAN cameras to their congressional offices for interviews, and held electronic town halls.

Not only did cable television furnish the tools to build new types of electronic coalitions, its expansion also built faith in and loyalty to the idea of the free market itself.[18] Cable operators promised to deliver programming that would educate and empower individuals by expanding media choice. They did, but such programs prioritized keeping viewers' attention rather than informing citizens. In the end, more Americans became engrossed in watching sports and movies and ignored politics altogether, ultimately affording an outsized role for more extreme voices to shape the political process.[19]

Donald Trump's divisive presidency was a culmination of the shifting media culture propelled by cable television and a consequence of this bipartisan embrace of the marketplace as the arbitrator of democracy.[20] Trump launched his political career by appearing on Fox News and using his celebrity status created on a reality television program, a programming style that the cable dial

first revealed could be profitable.[21] His obsession with ratings and his disregard for democratic institutions has exposed a fundamental conflict at the heart of modern American politics.[22] The information age has ushered in a decentralized and open public sphere, but one driven by performative politics and the constant search to exploit new media to gain personal power. How the latter impulses were baked into the former is the story of this book.

In the twenty-first century, it is easy to lament how this multichannel medium has contributed to corporate consolidation, partisan polarization, voter apathy, and media excess.[23] But this was not preordained. As John M. Culkin, a colleague of famed media scholar Marshall McLuhan, once observed about new media technology, "We shape our tools and, thereafter, they shape us."[24] For decades, federal regulators, elected officials, and entrepreneurs engaged in a debate over how to structure television as a political institution. Our current political and media landscapes reflect their experimentations, compromises, and ultimate adherence to a belief that consumer choice could fuel democracy, ignoring the ways in which it could also sow the seeds for its upheaval.[25]

The rise of Cable America is also a legislative story full of strange bedfellows and unanticipated consequences. When a young Democratic representative from Colorado, Timothy Wirth, came to Congress in 1974 on the heels of Watergate, he certainly didn't envision working with the conservative senator from Arizona, Barry Goldwater, to deliver cable legislation that would put him at odds with his fellow "New Democrat" from Tennessee, Albert Gore Jr. Wirth even sided with President George H. W. Bush on the issue in the fall of 1992—as he helped to run the Clinton-Gore campaign. When Democratic Chief Deputy Whip William Alexander launched a congressional experiment to connect to local news outlets through C-SPAN, he did not anticipate that members on the conservative fringe of the Republican Party would use these same tactics to undermine the credibility of Democratic Speaker of the House Thomas "Tip" O'Neill. Such instances show the limits of seeing ideological battles between liberalism and conservatism as driving changes in recent American political history.[26] For elected officials, constituent pressures

and self-interest frequently determined their legislative decisions, particularly when it came down to how to structure media institutions that they increasingly saw as central to political power.

That's why Richard Nixon—a man obsessed with media politics—played such a central role in shaping the trajectory of cable television. The 37th president viewed the medium as a political weapon to undermine the political, economic, and social authority of television networks he felt were biased and out to get him. Cable could also provide embattled political leaders like himself more control over media messaging. Even as he retreated to Southern California in disgrace, such ideas resonated with politicians across the political aisle, something savvy cable operators recognized as they worked to ingratiate the industry into operations of government and campaigns. For the next two decades, the industry celebrated narrowcasting, targeting, and the ability of the market to deliver civic goods and services, and politicians and the public alike bought into that promise. Cable television's political triumph by the end of the twentieth century deepened the connection between democracy and the marketplace, ultimately creating the segmented, sensationalized, and privatized public sphere that exists today.

In 1958, prominent newscaster Edward R. Murrow famously feared a future in which public affairs became shaped by "an incompatible combination of show business, advertising and news."[27] Less than four decades later, cable television made that world a reality. Cable pioneers didn't set out to transform American democracy. But they did, unleashing a media-driven battle for ratings that has now overtaken the political process. This is the story of how citizens learned to vote with their remote, with stark consequences for American politics.

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