



How the News Media Helped to Nominate Trump

Julia R. Azari

To cite this article: Julia R. Azari (2016) How the News Media Helped to Nominate Trump, Political Communication, 33:4, 677-680, DOI: [10.1080/10584609.2016.1224417](https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2016.1224417)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2016.1224417>



Published online: 08 Sep 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4258



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 4 View citing articles [↗](#)

The Forum

How the News Media Helped to Nominate Trump

JULIA R. AZARI

Keywords nomination, Trump, presidency, political institutions

One of the themes of 2016 so far has been the challenges faced by political institutions. From Brexit to Bernie Sanders' potent critique of the Democratic Party, we've heard a lot about how voters in the United States and elsewhere are beginning to give up on foundational structures and institutions. Donald Trump's nomination as the Republican presidential candidate is perhaps the most striking example of this. Many observers, drawing on political science research, assumed that the crowded GOP field of aspirants would shrink down in 2015 as party elites converged on a single favorite. This didn't happen. None of the clear establishment favorites—Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, or Scott Walker—gained much traction in the polls. By mid-October, we were still wondering who the “establishment” front runner was, as Trump maintained his lead.

When we talk about political institutions, it can be difficult to tell where the news media fit in. Labels like “the fourth estate” invoke a monolith with its own norms and boundaries. Scholars of communication and political science have taken on the idea of the media as a political institution, noting its stake in the status quo (Sparrow, 1999) and its role in governance (Cook, 2006). But the story of the 2016 Republican nomination often pits the media against the institutional structure, suggesting that extensive media coverage (Boyle 2016; Confessore & Yourish, 2016) helped Trump amass supporters and defeat the Republican establishment. Here, I offer three perspectives about how news media work within, not against, the political institutions that shape nominations.

To think more systematically about the role of the media in presidential nominations, we need to think about coordination. Political parties perform many functions, but they were created in the United States to nominate presidential candidates. This meant creating ways to bring different factions and perspectives together in service of a common goal: choosing a presidential candidate who could win. The original mechanisms of this coordination included the much-reviled patronage system, where those who campaigned and delivered votes were rewarded with federal jobs. Party conventions also provided places where leaders could argue about the selection rules and then choose a nominee.

The replacement of the old system with direct voter input—primaries and caucuses—led to new methods of coordination. There are several schools of thought about how this

Julia R. Azari is Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Marquette University.

Address correspondence to Julia R. Azari, Department of Political Science, Marquette University, 540 N. 15th St., Milwaukee, WI 53233, USA. E-mail: julia.azari@marquette.edu

works: Some scholars take the view that party elites coordinate before voting ever takes place (Cohen, Karol, Noel, & Zaller, 2008), while others see the sequential process of primary voting as the main way that the field of candidates narrows (Haynes, Gurian, Crespín, & Zorn, 2004; Norrander, 2006; Steger, Dowdle, & Adkins, 2004), with a presumptive nominee usually chosen well before the primary process has concluded. Either way, communication is a big part of the coordination process; when rules no longer hold a party together, a shared message does.

As Noel (2012) explains, cohesive intellectual agendas—ideologies—precede the formation of new party coalitions. While Noel applies this idea to the conceptualization of parties as broad networks of actors, it also helps us understand the evolution of party politics as a new, reformed system that replaced contested, brokered conventions. Without the option of multiple ballots, horse-trading among elites, and the recruitment of new candidates when the first ones fail to garner enough votes, parties have to unite their coalitions through ideas about what the nominee stands for. We see this play out most clearly when the informal, rather than formal, rules decide the nomination—when the process is tied up well before all the delegates have been formally allocated. The nominations of Al Gore and George W. Bush are perhaps the most vivid examples of this: Informal party processes cleared their respective fields of most major competitors. Gore offered the possibility of continuing the Bill Clinton economy, alongside a more rigorous environmental agenda. Bush offered a blend of orthodox and “compassionate” conservatism. The messages used to bolster both candidacies blended appeals to the ideological wings (with varying degrees of success) and establishment centers within the parties.

Let’s acknowledge at the outset that Trump entered the 2016 election season as a deeply controversial candidate within his own party. Nevertheless, he won a plurality of the primary votes, led the field in the polls for nearly the entire primary season, and had some success in coalescing party elites, albeit reluctantly in many cases. Trump’s coordination of the party has been imperfect, but it’s at least partially happened. And it didn’t happen because Trump had a skilled campaign operation or organizational support. Neither of these was true. What he had was a widely disseminated message that appealed to enough voters in the party to win the nomination. In this regard, the news media—likely without trying—performed a core party function.

We can also think of some media as being part of the Republican Party network. In recent years, some political scientists have embraced a theory that parties are not confined to formal organizations but rather consist of interest groups and other organizations that share party goals (Bawn et al., 2012). It makes sense to consider whether conservative media (namely, Fox News) function in this institutional capacity. Trump’s feud with Fox anchor Megyn Kelly, which began after the first Republican debate on August 6, 2015, became a fixture of the primary season, culminating in a televised one-on-one meeting between Trump and Kelly. At the beginning of the primary season, there was a fairly widespread perception that Fox, particularly in debates, was going after Trump, acting in concert with the preferences of other party elites.

Taken together, these two institutional perspectives form a striking paradox. The diverse and decentralized national media were able to perform a coordination role by disseminating Trump’s message. Conservative news media, on the other hand, were part of a failed organizational effort to stop the insurgent entertainer from winning the nomination. It goes without saying that the lesson of 2016 may well have been that 2016 was an exceptional year in which the normal rules did not apply. But what we see here suggests that party coordination may be less about a group of actors sharing motivation and more about consistency of message.

A third institutional role played by the news media is more subtle but nonetheless part of the Trump story. We've also heard a great deal about how Trump's behavior is best characterized as "unpresidential"—much has been made of how Trump's statements have violated various social norms, from his advocacy of violence to his insults directed at women and minorities. But an alternative hypothesis is worth considering: Coverage of Trump, perhaps unwittingly, places him squarely within our expectations of the presidency. Nyhan (2015) put this nicely when he wrote, "(Trump) has also exploited our vulnerability to pleasing fictions about presidential power." These fictions, Nyhan explains, are that the presidency has unlimited power to shape policies and outcomes. Reporting that amplifies Trump's claims about what he would do as president—even if coupled with questions and criticism—has likely fed into this impression of presidential power.

In other words, the media not only performed institutional functions in 2016. It also reinforced the values and impressions associated with the institution in question—the presidency. It's further worth noting that these media tropes present a false picture of the presidency—presidents can rarely shape policy alone (Edwards, 1989; Neustadt, 1990) and must instead depend on others. And these portrayals distract from the ways in which presidential power has expanded (Skowronek, 2009).

What we can't tell in this case is whether the news media's repetition and amplification of Trump's core message would have been able to drown out an elite effort to coordinate around a single candidate. But what we can take from this, as material for future hypotheses, is that the media's main institutional role comes from repeating, rather than challenging, promises, frameworks, and narratives.

If this is true beyond the 2016 case, then this represents a sobering reality about the way media works in the 21st century. The implications are similar to what Hartnett and Mercieca (2007) observe when they argue that presidential rhetoric has come to resemble "white noise." Presidential rhetoric, they argue, no longer informs nor invites meaningful citizen participation.

What sort of research agenda might emerge from these observations? For scholars inclined toward empirical approaches, some of the claims about media messaging could be tested through lab and even field experiments. The experimental approach, as well as observational analysis of speeches and other media artifacts, could also begin to address how different values are associated with the presidency when compared to other political positions. Finally, a rich vein of ideological analysis remains. We could potentially learn a great deal about how messages unify parties if we turned scholarly attention to the crafting of messages that appeal to different factions within parties—including, but not limited to, the ideological wings and the center of each party coalition.

Conventional understanding of the media's role in nomination politics is that it facilitates and engages in direct communication with voters, taking institutions and the power they concentrate out of the equation. But scrutiny of the media's potential impact on the 2016 race offers a very different picture. News media writ large are perfectly positioned to help spread candidate messages, now a key aspect of party coordination. They can also help to reinforce existing understandings of how institutions work, and it seems that this has happened at the expense of questions about power and those who seek it.

References

- Bawn, K., Cohen, M., Karol, D., Masket, S., Noel, H., & Zaller, J. (2012). A theory of political parties: Groups, nominations, and policy demands in American politics. *Perspectives on Politics*, 10(3), 571–597.

- Boyle, E. (2016, 30 March). Yes, the media bears some responsibility for Donald Trump—Here's proof. Medium.com. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@evboyle/yes-the-media-bears-responsibility-for-the-rise-of-donald-trump-here-s-proof-61d0c8282e5a#.vp5sdck4i>
- Cohen, M., Karol, D., Noel, H., & Zaller, J. (2008). *The party decides: Presidential nominations before and after reform*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Confessore, N., & Yourish, K. (2016, March 15). \$2 billion worth of free media for Trump. *The New York Times, The Upshot*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/16/upshot/measuring-donald-trumps-mammoth-advantage-in-free-media.html>
- Cook, T. E. (2006). The new media as a political institution: Looking backward and looking forward. *Political Communication*, 25(2), 159–171.
- Edwards, G. C., III. (1989). *At the margins: Presidential leadership of Congress*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hartnett, S., & Mercieca, J. (2007). A discovered dissembler can achieve nothing great: Or four theses on the death of rhetoric. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 37(4), 599–621.
- Haynes, A. A., Gurian, P.-H., Crespin, M. H., & Zorn, C. (2004). The calculus of concession: Media coverage and the dynamics of winnowing in presidential nominations. *American Politics Research*, 32(3), 310–337.
- Neustadt, R. E. (1990). *Presidential power and the modern presidents: The politics of leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Noel, H. (2012). The coalition merchants: The ideological roots of the civil rights realignment. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(1), 156–173.
- Norrander, B. (2006). The attrition game: Initial resources, initial contests, and the exit of candidates during the U.S. presidential primary season. *British Journal of Political Science*, 36(3), 487–507.
- Nyhan, B. (2015, August 25). Donald Trump, the Green Lantern candidate. *The New York Times, The Upshot*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/26/upshot/donald-trump-the-green-lantern-candidate.html?_r=0
- Skowronek, S. (2009). The conservative insurgency and presidential power: A developmental perspective on the unitary executive. *Harvard Law Review*, 122(8), 2070–2103.
- Sparrow, B. (1999). *Uncertain guardians: The news media as a political institution*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Steger, W. P., Dowdle, A. J., & Adkins, R. E. 2004. The New Hampshire effect in presidential nominations. *Political Research Quarterly*, 57(3), 375–390.