Dial-In Democracy: Talk Radio and the 1994 Election

LOUIS BOLCE
GERALD DE MAIO
DOUGLAS MUZZIO

Detractors call them right wing nuts, apostles of hate, fomenters of violence. Fans hear them as inspirational, voices of reason, enlighteners of the public. Similarly, their audience is portrayed as maladjusted, intolerant, and dangerous—or as guardians of the republic, socially conscious, and public spirited. Talk radio, its hosts and listeners: Is it a "bedlam of conservative yakkers?" A forum for seditionists? An electronic version of New England town meetings? Is it all of the above, some, or none?[1]

Whether characterized as laboratories of demagogeury or of democracy, talk radio has become a staple of American political discussion, especially since the 1994 election—the political tsunami that uprooted scores of Democratic members of Congress, senators, governors, and state legislators. The election ended forty years of Democratic dominance of the House of Representatives, over sixty years of control of state houses and legislatures, and perhaps laid the groundwork for the sixth realignment of the American party system (or signaled continuing dealignment).[2] Republicans won 230 seats in the House of Representatives, picking off 52 formerly held by Democrats, with 52 percent of the national House vote. The Republicans also gained control of the Senate by capturing eight

[1] Walter Goodman, "4 Minutes A Week: A Liberal on NBC," *New York Times*, 9 March 1994; "Dumb and Dumber – Cyberdemocracy," CNN *Crossfire* Transcript #1229, Air Date: 1 March 1994; Anthony Lewis, "Words Matter," *New York Times*, 5 May 1995; Todd S. Purdum, "Clinton Assails the Preaching of the Militia," *New York Times*, 6 May 1995.

[2] Everett Carll Ladd, "The 1994 Congressional Elections: The Realignment Continues," *Political Science Quarterly* 100 (Spring 1995): 1–23.

LOUIS BOLCE and GERALD DE MAIO are associate professors of political science at Baruch College, City University of New York. DOUGLAS MUZZIO is a professor in the School of Public Affairs at Baruch College and director of the Baruch College Survey Unit.

Democratic seats. The GOP increased its majority to 54 to 46 when conservative Democrats Richard Shelby from Alabama and Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado switched allegiances. Republicans, by January 1996, had added to their House majority when five southern representatives crossed over from the Democratic to the Republican side of the aisle.

The transfer of political power at the state level was no less dramatic. The GOP attained control of both legislative chambers of nineteen states (Democrats now control eighteen), capturing eleven legislatures formerly held by Democrats. Republicans maintained or captured thirty state houses—inverting the partisan make-up that existed prior to the election and giving the GOP a majority of governors for the first time since 1970.

The Republican campaign to win the House and Senate, governorships, and state legislative chambers in the 1994 elections was "not just about ideas but technology, not just about crafting ideas but communicating them to the public." Indeed, House Speaker Newt Gingrich's 1994 electoral strategy was to funnel information around "the classic elite media" directly to the voters. Republican leaders have long held that the established mass media have a liberal bias. Gingrich believed that the "new media" gave the Republicans a decisive edge in 1994: "Without C-Span, without talk radio shows, without all the alternative media, I don't think we would have won."[3]

This article analyzes the talk radio phenomenon in the context of the 1994 House, Senate, and gubernatorial elections. While talk radio has piqued the interest of media commentators and some academic researchers, scant attention has been focused on the electoral behavior and political orientations of talk radio listeners and their potential as an emergent voting bloc and as a category for election analysis (analogous, for example, to evangelical Christians). We profile the political and policy views of "talk voters" and detail the association of these variables to their voting behavior in 1994. The causal relationships between listening to talk radio and specific attitudes and activities—and whether the medium's principal impact is amplification, mobilization, or conversion—is beyond the scope of this study. No panel study data are available to date to permit these types of analyses.

"Dial-In Democracy" examines whether talk radio is the "conservative precinct" portrayed by conservative commentator William Rusher, the "grievance network" heard by Democratic consultant Bob Shrum, or, worse still, an outlet of "testosterone-fueled meanness [and] name-calling."[4] Finally, it seeks to place talk radio, with its populistic impulses, in the renewed debate over the nature of American democracy.

[3] Steven Roberts, "Open Arms for Online Democracy," *U.S. News and World Report*, 16 January 1995, 10.

[4] William Rusher, "The Importance of Talk Radio," Newspaper Enterprise Association, 3 September 1994; Jon Weiner, "Looking for the Left's Limbaugh," *Dissent* 42 (Spring 1995): 161.

The Growth and Reach of Talk Radio

Talk radio has grown enormously over the past thirty-five years. In 1960, only two radio stations, KABC in Los Angeles and KMOX in St. Louis, had talk formats. By the spring of 1995, 1,130 (one of nine) radio stations devoted the bulk of their programming to news/talk. In the winter of 1994, news/talk was capturing 16.2 percent of the 12 years of age or older audience and 19.5 percent of men over 18. On the eve of the midterm elections, 20 million Americans a week were tuning in to conservative talk host, Rush Limbaugh, on 659 radio stations.[5]

In the late 1960s, AM radio began to turn more and more to talk shows because of FM's technical advantage in broadcasting music. But the real boom erupted in the 1980s, spurred by the advent of cheap satellite transmission technology. The number of all-talk or news/talk radio stations climbed from 200 to more than 800 in a decade.[6]

Several events in the late 1980s and early 1990s spurred the emerging political prominence of talk radio/TV—the founding of the National Association of Talk Show hosts in 1988, Congress's recission in 1989 of a pay raise for itself after a public clamor fomented by talk shows, Gennifer Flowers's intrusion into Bill Clinton's quest for the Democratic nomination in 1992, Ross Perot's quirky on again-off again campaign for the White House, the flap over gays in the military in early 1993, Zoe Baird's aborted nomination to be attorney general in 1993, Rush Limbaugh's rapid rise to national prominence, the Whitewater affair, the 1994 health care debate, and the Oklahoma City bombing.[7]

Previous Findings on Talk Radio Listeners

The few studies of talk radio listeners offer inconclusive and conflicting findings. Some analyses have suggested that listeners are more politically alienated and inefficacious, inattentive to public affairs, socially isolated, and cynical than nonlisteners. Talk listeners were found to have been more likely to take extreme sides on policy issues and to be more suspicious of elites than nonlisteners.[8] The

[5] Phyllis Stark, "Country Radio Levels Off; News/Talk Keeps Growing," *Billboard*, 18 June 1995, 89.

[6] "Everybody's Talkin' At Us," *Business Week*, 22 May 1995, 105; Kenneth Jost, "Talk Show Democracy," *The CQ Researcher*, 19 April 1995, 372, 375.

[7] Howard Fineman, "The Power of Talk," *Newsweek*, 8 February 1993, 24–28; Jost, "Talk Show Democracy," 368, 375, 376, 378; John Fund, "The Power of Talk," *Forbes Media Critic* 2 (Spring 1995): 54ff; Benjamin I. Page and Jason Tannenbaum, "Populistic Deliberation and Talk Radio," *Journal of Communication* 46 (Spring 1996): 33–54.

[8] John Crittenden, "Democratic Functions of the Open Mike Radio Forum," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35 (Spring 1971): 200–210; Robert K. Avery and Donald G. Ellis, "Talk Radio as an Interpersonal Phenomenon" in Gary Gumpert and Robert Catheart, eds., *Inter/Media: Interpersonal Communications in a Media World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 108–115; Murray B. Levin, *Talk Radio and the American Dream* (Lexington, MA; Lexington Books, 1987); Jeffrey L. Katz, "The Power of Talk," *Governing* 4 (March 1991): 38–42.

talk radio listeners in these studies appear quite similar to the voters described in the early election studies—passive, inert followers with little knowledge of public affairs and, still worse, as the American Founders feared, apolitical clay "easily misled by the artful misrepresentations" of interested men of "perverted ambition."[9]

Richard Hofstetter and his colleagues' 1991 survey of San Diego talk radio listeners presented a different portrait. Listeners paid more attention to politics and participated more in political activities (including voting, campaign work, community action, and contacting public officials) than nonlisteners. Seeking information was the major reason given by San Diegans for listening to talk radio.[10]

The most extensive analysis of talk radio and TV listeners and viewers (and hosts) to date is *The Vocal Minority in American Politics* conducted by the Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press in May 1993.[11] This nationwide study examined listeners' motivations for tuning into talk radio and analyzed the political perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of the talk radio audience. The *Vocal Minority* found that "surveillance" reasons such as "keeping up on the issues of the day" (cited by 84 percent) and "learning about how different people feel about different issues" (named by 85 percent) were by far the most cited reasons for listening to talk radio. Nearly half of talk listeners reported that they were more interested when they were listening to people with an opposite point of view, more than double those who said they preferred to hear someone expressing a point of view similar to their own. Entertainment was also an important reason, mentioned by fully half.[12]

The Times Mirror found talk show audiences to be more conservative, more Republican, more anti-Congress, and more critical of President Bill Clinton than nonlisteners. *The Vocal Minority*, like the Hofstetter et al. study, showed the talk radio constituency to be attentive to politics—and more likely to participate in public meetings, to write letters to their officials, and to vote.

The Data

On 8 November 1994, the Voter News Service (VNS)—the consortium of ABC, the Associated Press (AP), CBS, CNN, and NBC—surveyed 10,210 voters na-

[9] Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), chap. 14; Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley, 1960); Jack L. Walker, "A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 60 (June 1966): 285–295. *The Federalist Papers*, intro. by Clinton Rossiter (New York: New American Library, 1961), 384, 34.

[10] C. Richard Hofstetter et al., "Political Talk Radio: A Stereotype Reconsidered," *Political Research Quarterly* 47 (June 1994): 473.

[11] Andrew Kohut, Cliff Zukin, and Carol Bowman, *The Vocal Minority in American Politics* (Washington, DC: Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, 1993).

[12] Ibid., 10–11.

tionwide as they exited the polls. Among the questions asked in the national exit poll and in twenty individual state polls was whether they "frequently listen[ed] to political call-in shows on radio."

Exit polls have several desirable qualities. Their large sample sizes permit more extensive subgroup analyses than most academic surveys, particularly in statewide races. Also, the immediacy of the survey to actual voting eliminates the "recall problem," in which respondents at some remove from election day inaccurately report their electoral behavior. Moreover, exit poll interviews are conducted immediately after the act of voting, when the salience of elements of the voter's decisional calculus such as candidate qualities and policy concerns are highest.[13]

The VNS poll results are supplemented by the 1992 American National Election Study (NES) conducted by the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies, the 1993 Times Mirror survey, and data from Luntz Research Companies. Unless otherwise noted, the data presented in this essay are from VNS.

Talk Radio and the 1994 Elections

Talk radio is thought to have wielded considerable political clout in the 1994 election, its influence pervading national, state, and local politics. Indeed, the 1994 election has been called the "first talk-radio election."[14] Talk radio listeners made up 21 percent of House voters nationally; similar percentages held for all the individual states and in all regions surveyed by VNS. In 1994, talk voters cast 64 percent of their votes for Republicans in House races and six in ten voted for Republican Senate candidates. These talk voters differed significantly from nonlistening voters, who cast 51 percent of their ballots for Democratic House and Senate candidates. (See Appendix at end of article.)

Differences in the voting behavior of talk radio listeners and nonlisteners also turned up in every individual state surveyed by VNS. Listeners were more likely, often substantially so, to support the Republican candidate. Nonlisteners, on the other hand, cast a majority or sizable plurality of their votes for Democratic candidates. Only the Senate race in Ohio and the gubernatorial contests in California, New York, and Ohio were exceptions.

The voting behavior of talk radio listeners in the key states of Texas, Pennsylvania, and New York suggests that talk listeners can be viewed as an emerging, potentially potent voting bloc and as a politically meaningful analytical category. For example, had talk radio listeners in the Lone Star state split their votes among the two major party candidates the same way nonlisteners had, Democrat Ann Richards, who lost to George Bush, Jr. 46 to 53 percent, would have remained in the governor's mansion. Nonlisteners (78 percent of the electorate) voted for

[13] Herbert Asher, *Polling and the Public*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1992), 101–102.

[14] Howard Kurtz quoted in Fund, "The Power of Talk," 54.

her by a 50 to 48 percent margin. If talk listeners in Texas had voted in like manner, Richards would have won by two percentage points. But talk voters overwhelmingly supported Bush, 69 to 31 percent—a margin sufficient to overcome Bush's deficit among the rest of Texas voters (See Table 1).

Similarly, Democrat Harris Wofford, who lost to challenger Rick Santorum 47 to 49 percent, would have been returned to the U.S. Senate from Pennsylvania by nonlisteners, who voted for him by a four point margin. The ballots cast by the one-fifth of the electorate who listened to talk radio, however, went decisively to Santorum.

The roller coaster governor's contest in the Empire State is particularly notable, since the outcome could have gone in either direction had talk listeners voted as nonlisteners had. According to VNS, the 81 percent of the New York electorate who did not listen to talk radio had divided their votes evenly between incumbent Democrat Mario Cuomo and Republican challenger George Pataki. But Cuomo lost overall, 45 to 49 percent as three-fifths of talk radio listeners voted for Pataki.[15]

The distinctiveness of talk voters was evident in other key races in large states. In New Jersey, talk radio listeners cast 57 percent of their votes for Republican Garabed "Chuck" Haytaian—19 percentage points more than for two-term Democratic Senator Frank Lautenberg. Lautenberg carried the nonlistener vote by 53 to 44 percent and won the race overall, 50 to 47 percent. And in the Senate race in Virginia, talk listeners also behaved differently from nonlisteners. Republican Oliver North was the clear favorite over incumbent Democrat Charles Robb among talk listeners—55 to 36 percent in a three-candidate race. But nonlisteners favored Robb over North by a nine point margin—large enough to keep Robb in the Senate.

Leaders or spokespersons of any group that strongly supports a winning candidate or party often claim (as many talk show hosts have done) that it was *their* followers' votes that were responsible for putting the candidate or party in office. If their group had voted differently, they argue, the election would have turned out differently. It is in the political interest of such persons to do so. Rewards ought to come, they say at least implicitly, from such loyalty.

This article does not claim that talk radio, and by extension, the talk vote determined the outcome of the 1994 elections generally or in any particular race. Rather, it maintains that talk voters appear to be an emerging political category worthy of empirical analyses comparable to the treatment political scientists have accorded other categories of citizens in the electorate—African Americans, Christian fundamentalists, union members, farmers, southerners, the poor, senior citizens, and so forth—who have historically evidenced distinct voting patterns.

[15] The aggregate statewide election returns for these "what if" scenarios were drawn from Michael Barone and Grant Ujifusa with Richard E. Cohen, *The Almanac of American Politics 1996* (Washington, DC: The National Journal, 1995). The statewide percentages of talk voters and non-talk voters are drawn from the VNS state exit polls.

TABLE 1

How Talk Radio Listeners and Nonlisteners Voted in Selected 1994 State Races

% of Talk listeners in state electorate		*Talk listeners*				*Nonlisteners*				*Total Sample*			
		Dem %	*Rep %*	*Other %*	*N*	*Dem %*	*Rep %*	*Other %*	*N*	*Dem %*	*Rep %*	*Other %*	*N*
22	Texas Governor	31	69	–	280	50	48	–	973	46	53	1	1253
22	PA Senate	32	60	8	343	50	46	4	1267	47	49	4	1610
19	NY Governor	37	59	4	263	47	47	6	1133	45	49	6	1396
23	NJ Senate	38	57	3	292	53	44	3	1042	50	47	3	1334
21	VA Senate	36	55	9	354	48	39	13	1311	45	43	12	1665

Source: 1994 Voter News Service statewide exit polls.

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding, votes for minor party candidates, and "omits."

Talk voters do not fit conceptually into traditional analytical categories used to define other groups or collectivities that have been of long-standing interest to social scientists—race/ethnicity, occupation, region, class, religion, generation, gender, type of community, or associational memberships. The most salient and theoretically meaningful characteristic of talk voters appears to be the medium and the type of programming they listen to. What binds these folks together is that they are "talk networked."

The 1994 Talk Voter

Who was the 1994 talk voter? Demographically, he was predominantly male and white. In 1994, there was a clear difference in the listening habits and voting behavior between men and women. Men were more likely to listen to talk radio. Twenty-three percent of men in the total sample checked off the talk radio box in the 1994 VNS exit poll compared to 18 percent of all women, thus making talk voters decidedly male—56 to 44 percent.

Men were also significantly more likely than women to vote Republican in House races—58 vs. 42 percent. Male talk listeners overall were 12 percentage points more likely to vote for GOP House candidates than female talk listeners, though substantial majorities of both supported Republicans. White men listeners were similarly more likely to vote Republican than white women listeners but both had even higher levels of support for Republican congressional candidates than nonlisteners. (See Appendix at end of article.)

The gender differences among talk listeners (and, to a lesser extent, among nonlisteners) are in accord with the literature on the gender gap—the partisan division of the voting behavior of men and women—which emerged during the 1980 presidential election as women appeared to be moving to the Democratic party. The emphasis of commentators on women and their Democratic leanings obscured, however, a politically more profound movement—a reverse gender gap of white men voting increasingly Republican.[16] These gender gaps held in the 1988 and 1992 presidential elections and the 1990 midterm elections. In 1994, the partisan rift between men and women was the widest ever since the Reagan-Carter election when the "gender gap" entered the political vocabulary.[17]

The 1994 Republican electoral successes have been credited to the "angry white male."[18] Indeed, over three-fifths of white males surveyed by VNS voted

[16] Louis Bolce, "The Role of Gender in Recent Presidential Elections: Reagan and the Reverse Gender Gap," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 15 (Spring 1985): 372–385; Daniel Wirls, "The Gender Gap in American Elections: Lingering Illusions and Political Realities" in Benjamin Ginsberg and Alan Stone, eds., *Do Elections Matter?* 2nd ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1991), 117–133.

[17] Karlyn H. Bowman, "The Gender Factor" in Everett Carll Ladd, ed., *America at the Polls: 1994* (Storrs, CT: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1995), 52–57.

[18] Susan Estrich, "The Last Victim," *New York Times Magazine* 18 December 1994, 54–55; Richard Berke, "Defections Among Men to G.O.P. Helped Insure Rout of Democrats," *New York Times*, 11 November 1995.

for Republican House candidates in 1994, up from the 52 percent in the 1992 National Election Survey. Nearly three-fifths supported Republicans for the Senate. White women in general less widely supported the GOP in both House and Senate races in 1994. (See Appendix.)

Male white talk voters were indeed anti-Democratic. Extraordinary majorities voted Republican for House and Senate candidates. Yet, white female talk voters were by no means pro-Democratic: nearly two-thirds of them also voted for GOP House and Senate candidates. White male and female support for Republicans among nonlisteners was substantially lower. GOP House candidates won 59 percent of the vote from nonlistening white males; GOP Senate candidates garnered 54 percent. Female nonlisteners distributed their votes equally between Democrats and Republicans for the House and the Senate.

While there was a gap in voting behavior between men and women, there was a chasm separating whites from blacks. Although the proportion of whites and blacks who listened to talk radio was quite similar—20 and 19 percent, respectively—their voting behaviors were quite different. As seen in the Appendix, whites cast 58 percent of their votes for Republican House candidates and 55 percent for GOP Senate candidates. And white talk radio listeners were even more Republican-voting than nonlisteners.

But listening to talk radio appears to have been unrelated to the voting behavior of African Americans. Blacks, whether they listened to talk radio or not, voted Democratic by at least 8-to-1 margins. This should not be surprising given the monolithic black support for Democrats since 1964, despite the growing economic diversity among blacks, their conservatism on some sociocultural issues, and appeals of prominent leaders of the GOP to be more inclusionary.[19] Since talk radio was not associated with the partisan voting behavior of African Americans, the remainder of this article reports data on *white* talk radio listeners and nonlisteners unless otherwise specified.

Differences in talk radio listening patterns and voting behavior were not as pronounced among other demographic or socioeconomic groupings such as marital status, religious affiliation, education (except for a moderate curvilinear pattern peaking among those completing four years of college), and income (except for a moderate disparity between the poorest and wealthiest categories) than they were with gender. None of these factors were nearly as important in differentiating the voting behavior of talk listeners from non-talk listeners as race in conjunction with gender.

[19] Michael Combs and Susan Welch, "Blacks, Whites and Attitudes Toward Abortion," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 46 (Winter 1982): 510–520; Richard Seltzer and Robert C. Smith, "Race and Ideology: A Research Note Measuring Liberalism and Conservatism in Black America," *Phylon* 46 (Summer 1985): 98–105; Louis Bolce, Gerald De Maio, and Douglas Muzzio, "Blacks and the Republican Party: The 20 Percent Solution," *Political Science Quarterly* 107 (Spring 1992): 63–79; Louis Bolce, Gerald De Maio, and Douglas Muzzio, "The 1992 Republican 'Tent': No Blacks Walked In," *Political Science Quarterly* 108 (Summer 1993): 255–270.

TABLE 2

Political Characteristics of the 1994 White Electorate, Talk Radio Listeners and Nonlisteners

	% of Total Electorate	% with Attribute Who Listen to Talk Radio	% of Talk Listeners	% of Nonlisteners	% of Electorate with Attribute Listening To Talk Radio
Ideology					
Conservative	39	29	54	35	11
Liberal	16	16	12	17	2
Moderate	39	16	35	47	7
(N)	(4550)	a	(943)	(3607)	(4550)
Party ID					
Republican	39	26	50	37	10
Democrat	31	12	19	34	4
Independent	27	12	29	26	6
Other	3	14	2	3	–
(N)	(4645)	a	(946)	(3619)	(4645)
1992 Vote					
Bush	41	26	52	39	11
Clinton	40	14	27	43	6
Perot	15	23	17	14	4
(N)	(4640)	a	(950)	(3690)	(4640)

a. The base Ns for column 2 are: conservatives, 1775; liberals, 728; independents, 2028; Republicans, 815; Democrats, 1440; other, 139; Bush voters, 1902; Clinton voters, 1856; Perot voters, 646.

Note: 1. Percentages for columns 1, 3 and 4 may not add to 100% due to rounding, votes for minor party candidates, and "omits." Columns 2 and 5 do not add to 100% since they are subsets of the response category from which they are computed.

2. Column 2 should be read, for example, that 29% of conservatives listened to talk radio (and, thus, 71% did not); 26% of Republicans listened to talk radio (and, thus, 74% did not); 26% of Bush voters listened to talk radio (and, thus, 74% did not).

3. Column 5 is a product of columns 1 and 2. Thus, the 11% of the electorate who were conservative talk radio listeners is the product of the 39% of the electorate who called themselves conservatives multiplied by the 29% of conservatives who listened to talk radio. Likewise, the 10% of the electorate who were Republican talk radio listeners is the product of the 39% of the electorate who called themselves Republican multiplied by the 26% who listened to talk radio.

Source: Voter News Service 1994 national House exit poll.

Politics and Talk Radio

What most distinguished talk listeners from nonlisteners was their ideology, partisanship, and the way those in the "political middle" voted in 1992 and 1994. (See Tables 2 and 3.)

Conservative commentator William Rusher's observation that talk radio had become a "conservative precinct" was correct.[20] The data in Table 2 demonstrate this in several ways. First, self-described conservatives in the 1994 electorate were much more likely to have listened to talk radio than liberals—29 vs. 16 percent (column 2). This far greater tendency of conservatives to tune into talk radio, when combined with the fact that there were many more conservatives

[20] Rusher, "The Importance of Talk Radio."

TABLE 3

Talk Radio and the "Political Middle": The 1992 and 1994 House Vote Among White Talk Listeners (in percent)

	1992					
	Talk Listeners			*Nonlisteners*		
	Dem %	*Rep %*	*(N)*	*Dem %*	*Rep %*	*(N)*
Independents	56	44	(218)	59	41	(183)
Moderates	58	42	(154)	57	43	(122)
Perot Voters	49	51	(118)	58	42	(101)
	1994					
	Talk Listeners			*Nonlisteners*		
	Dem %	*Rep %*	*(N)*	*Dem %*	*Rep %*	*(N)*
Independents	34	66	(225)	39	56	(835)
Moderates	43	54	(303)	52	46	(1518)
Perot Voters	28	73	(141)	28	67	(461)

Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding, votes for minor party candidates, and "omits."

Source: The 1992 figures are drawn from the Center for Political Studies' National Election Study; the 1994 figures are from the 1994 Voter News Service national election exit poll.

in the total electorate than liberals—39 vs. 16 percent (column 1)—produced an electorate in which conservative talk radio listeners made up 11 percent of all 1994 House voters while talk radio-listening liberals made up only 2 percent (column 5). Simply, the profile of the 1994 national House electorate shows conservatives outnumbering liberals, and substantially more likely to have tuned into talk radio.

The conservative dominance of the talk radio medium is further illustrated by the ideological profile of the 1994 talk voter: 54 percent of 1994 white voters who tuned into talk radio were self-described conservatives, while only 12 percent characterized themselves as liberals—a better than 4 to 1 margin (column 3).

This decidedly conservative bent of the white talk radio audience in 1994 appears to offer little cheer for those who wish to present an effective counterbalance to conservative talk radio. The five to one edge of conservative to liberal talk listeners in the entire 1994 national electorate (column 5) suggests that liberal talk hosts such as Mario Cuomo, Jerry Brown, Gary Hart, and Jim Hightower face an uphill struggle to provide ideological balance to the medium.

More air time for talk radio programs hosted by liberals, it could be argued, might nonetheless lead more nonliberals as well as liberals to listen to liberal talk radio—"broadcast it and they will come." This appears problematic for a number of reasons. The available pool of white liberals in the 1994 white electorate was too small to provide an effective counterweight to conservative talk. Even if more progressive radio hosts could have *quadrupled* listenership among white liberals from 16 percent in 1994 to 64 percent, the liberal talk audience that would have been generated would still have not equalled the percentage of conser-

vative talk listeners who voted in the 1994 elections (The figures are derived from columns 1 and 2 in Table 2).

Why would conservatives and moderates tune into liberal talk radio? Because as the Times-Mirror *Vocal Minority* survey found, most listeners tune in for information, for "surveillance," for listening to different viewpoints, for "reconnaissance." Why might they, along with liberals, not stay tuned? The *Vocal Minority* also found that entertainment was a major reason for listening to talk radio. While hardly a scientifically tested proposition, liberal hosts appear to have been unsuccessful in challenging the dominance of conservative talk, at least in part, because, according to commentators such as Hightower, they have been "dull and stuck up."[21]

Indeed, conservative talk radio may have increased its edge over its liberal counterpart in the year after the midterm elections. Hightower, the most widely listened to liberal talk show host, seems to have fallen victim to insufficient ratings. His show was dropped by ABC in October 1995. In January 1995, San Francisco's leading talk station replaced liberal talk show hosts with conservatives.[22]

Talk radio was also a Republican precinct for white talk radio listeners in 1994. A majority checked off Republican in VNS's party identification question; a fifth selected Democrat, while independents accounted for nearly three-in-ten talk voters. A majority of 1994 white talk voters reported having cast a ballot for George Bush in 1992; nonlisteners gave a plurality of their votes to Clinton.

A postelection nationwide survey by Luntz Research provides additional evidence of the political relevance of talk radio. It shows a strong monotonic relationship between the amount of talk radio listening and the tendency to vote Republican. Voters who had no exposure to talk radio evenly split their votes between Democratic and GOP candidates. Those who listened for at least eleven hours weekly supported Republican candidates by 3-to-1. Citizens who listened between one and ten hours a week tended to have voted more Republican, the more they listened to talk radio.[23]

The utility of the talk/nontalk dichotomy as an analytical category is illustrated by how differently white voters, particularly white talk voters, in the "middle"—self-described moderates, independents, and those who had voted for Perot in 1992—cast their ballots in 1994 compared to two years earlier. Generally, talk radio listeners evidenced the most pronounced shift toward Republicans. (See Table 3.)

White moderate talk listeners in 1994 lopsidedly supported Republican House candidates, whereas nonlistening moderates preferred Democratic candidates.

[21] Quoted in Fund, "The Power of Talk," 58; see also, Fund, 56 and Weiner, "Looking to the Left's Limbaugh" for other examples of calls for liberal alternatives; see Kohut et al., *The Vocal Minority*, 11, on the entertainment value of talk radio.

[22] Edmund Andres, "ABC Pulls Plug on a Populist's Radio Show," *New York Times*, 9 October 1995; "Chopping at the Competition," *MEDIAWATCH*, November 1995, 6.

[23] Luntz Research, personal communication, 25 May 1995.

In 1992, things were different. Then, there was no variation between talk voters and nonlisteners; both supported Democratic House candidates with three-fifths of their votes.

Even more striking was the surge in votes for Republicans among white independents, especially among those who listened to talk radio. Support for GOP House candidates from independent talk radio listeners swelled by 22 percentage points from 1992 to 1994. Nonlisteners also shifted from the Democratic to the Republican column between 1992 and 1994; they gave Republican House candidates 56 percent of their votes in 1994, up 15 points from two years earlier. The voting behavior of listening vs. nonlistening political independents grew more distinct over the two elections; only three percentage points separated their support for GOP House candidates in 1992; by 1994 the gap had widened to ten points. Similarly, the gap that divided talk radio listening from nonlistening moderates also widened. It was one percentage point in 1992; it was eight points in 1994.

Perot voters, a closely scrutinized group whose support had been courted by both parties in 1992 and 1994 (and wooed by virtually all presidential aspirants for 1996) departed from their 1992 voting pattern and strongly supported Republican congressional candidates in 1994. The larger increase in Republican voting came from Perot voters who did not listen to talk radio—25 points vs. 22 points for listeners. But talk listeners who voted for Perot in 1992 supported 1994 Republican House candidates in greater numbers than their nonlistening counterparts—73 vs. 67 percent.

In contrast to self-classified moderates and independents, Perot voters, both listeners and nonlisteners, were more alike in their voting behavior in 1994 than they were two years earlier. One explanation is that the labels "moderate" and "independent" are vague, meaning different things to different people. Both categories include individuals with disparate and often contradictory views. Perot voters are, by definition, more concretely defined as a group, having voted for a candidate who articulated a specific policy agenda, many items of which were coopted in 1994 by the GOP in their "Contract With America" (for example, term limits, a balanced budget amendment, and reform of House rules).

The Democratic rout in 1994 can be attributed, in part, to their failure to retain moderates, independents, and Perot voters—three skeptical and pivotal (especially in this era of dealignment) overlapping segments of the electorate.[24]

Talk Voter Issues

VNS's 1994 exit poll asked respondents, "which one or two of these [issues] mattered most in your vote for Congress?" The nine issues were: foreign policy, health care, the federal budget deficit, Clinton's performance as president, crime,

[24] Drummond Ayers, Jr., "Republication Progress Fails to Impress Perot's Faithful," *New York Times*, 9 April 1995.

TABLE 4

Voting Issues for U.S. House: White Talk Radio Listeners and Nonlisteners (in percent)

	Talk Listeners			*Nonlisteners*		
	All %	*Rep %*	*Dem %*	*All %*	*Rep %*	*Dem %*
Taxes	28	34	15	5	7	4
Crime	25	25	27	12	13	9
Clinton's performance	22	29	9	11	16	7
Health	21	14	35	28	20	38
Economy/Jobs	20	16	26	3	2	4
Federal budget deficit	19	20	19	13	16	11
Time for a change	16	21	6	8	9	5
Candidate's experience	10	7	19	7	6	9
Foreign policy	5	4	8	4	4	5
No issue selected	6	4	9	9	7	8
	N = 959	622	267	3775	1837	1493

Note: Percentages add to more than 100% because multiple responses were accepted. The question asked: "Which 1 or 2 of these mattered most in your vote for Congress?"

Source: Voter News Service 1994 national House exit poll.

time for a change, candidate's experience, taxes, and the economy/jobs. Talk voters and nonlisteners differed substantially on the incidence of issue voting, the frequency and types of issues mentioned, and the salience of President Clinton's job performance in their vote decisions.

White talk listeners were one-third less likely to cast an issueless vote than nonlisteners and substantially more likely to mention issues as reason for their vote (1.7 issues cited compared to .91). They were also twice as likely to say that Clinton's job performance factored into their vote decision. While there was no significant difference in the mean frequencies of issues mentioned by white talk voters who voted for either Republican or Democratic congressional candidates, those who voted for Democrats were more than twice as likely not to have found any of the issues included in VNS's exit poll as a factor in the vote.

Health care was by far the most important issue cited by nonlisteners. (See Table 4.) Talk listeners were also concerned about health care; but taxes, crime, the state of the economy/jobs, as well as the Clinton presidency were important too.

There were significant differences in the salience of the types of the issues that "mattered most" to white talk voters depending on whether they supported Republicans or Democrats for the House (with the exception of crime and the deficit). Voters who went Democratic were two-and-a half times more concerned with health care and the experience of their congressional candidate, 10 points more inclined to cite the economy and jobs, and twice as likely to cast an issueless vote. To white talk voters who cast ballots for Republican House candidates, taxes, Clinton's job performance, and the need for change loomed large. These matters barely concerned their Democratic counterparts.

TABLE 5

Evaluations of Clinton, Congress, and Direction of Country: White Talk Radio Listeners and Nonlisteners (in percent)

	Total Sample %	*Talk Listeners* %	*Nonlisteners* %
Clinton Approval			
Approve	41	24	45
Disapprove	54	73	49
(N)	(4734)	(959)	(3775)
Congress Approval			
Approve	15	9	16
Disapprove	85	88	78
(N)	(4734)	(949)	(3775)
Vote Reason			
Support Clinton	14	10	16
Oppose Clinton	29	46	24
Clinton not factor	53	41	56
(N)	(4734)	(959)	(3775)
Direction of Country			
Right direction	37	27	40
Wrong track	57	69	54
(N)	(4734)	(959)	(3735)

Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding and "omits."
Source: Voter News Services 1994 national House exit poll.

The Clinton Factor

Bill Clinton's race for the presidency in 1992 to some commentators was the quintessential candidate-centered campaign, characterized by heavy emphasis on and mastery of modern communications technology. This "new style" of campaigning, akin to Franklin Roosevelt's use of the new radio medium of his era, aims to reach the multitude of potential voters on a personal level that is difficult to reach by traditional media and conventional means.[25] In 1992, white talk radio listeners favored Clinton over George Bush 42 to 37 percent (and Democratic House candidates over Republicans 55 to 45 percent), according to the National Election Study. Nonlisteners also supported Clinton over Bush, 43 to 38 percent (and Democratic House candidates 48 to 41 percent).

Two years later, the white electorate (both talk listeners and nonlisteners) disapproved of Clinton's job performance 54 to 41 percent. White talk listeners disapproved Clinton's presidential performance by a three to one margin, while nonlisteners were marginally negative in their assessment of Clinton's handling of the presidency. (See Table 5.)

[25] Robert Agranoff, "The New Style of Campaigning: The Decline of Party and the Rise of Candidate-Centered Technology" in Jeff Fishel, ed., *Parties and Elections in an Anti-Party Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 230–240; Stanley Milkis, "The New Deal, Party Politics, and the Administrative State" in Peter W. Scramm and Bradford P. Wilson, eds., *American Political Parties and Constitutional Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), 160.

TABLE 6

House Vote by Evaluations of Clinton, Congress, and Direction of Country: White Talk Radio Listeners and Nonlisteners (in percent)

	Total Sample %			*Talk Listeners* %			*Nonlisteners* %		
	Dem	*Rep*		*Dem*	*Rep*		*Dem*	*Rep*	
Clinton Approval									
Approve	76	22	(1758)	85	15	(228)	74	23	(1530)
Disapprove	15	83	(2364)	10	88	(654)	17	81	(1710)
Congress Approval									
Approve	67	31	(696)	62	38	(92)	68	30	(604)
Disapprove	36	62	(3423)	24	74	(790)	39	59	(2633)
Vote Reason									
Support Clinton	92	8	(630)	93	6	(91)	93	7	(604)
Oppose Clinton	5	95	(1300)	5	95	(419)	5	95	(872)
Clinton not factor	49	51	(2205)	43	57	(357)	50	50	(1830)
Direction of Country									
Right direction	61	37	(1651)	58	42	(250)	62	36	(1401)
Wrong track	27	71	(2428)	16	82	(622)	30	68	(1866)

Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding and "omits."
Source: Voter News Services 1994 national House exit poll.

A negative assessment of Clinton's handling of the presidency was related to voting for GOP House candidates. This was especially the case among white talk voters. Half of all whites who voted for Republican House candidates said that their vote was cast to express opposition to the president. (VNS question read: "Was one of the reasons for your vote for U.S. House today: 1. to express support for Bill Clinton; 2. to express opposition to Bill Clinton; 3. Bill Clinton wasn't a factor in your vote.") Voters' use of their ballots to send an anti-Clinton message increased to 64 percent among white talk listeners who voted Republican, while 45 percent of their nonlistening counterparts cast oppositional ballots. Looked at another way, white talk voters who disapproved of Clinton supported Republican House candidates with nearly nine of ten of their votes. (See Table 6.)

The Clinton factor is further seen in voters' responses to VNS's item, "which one or two issues mattered most" in their vote. Those white voters (talk listeners and nonlisteners) who cited localistic factors, such as the "experience" of the congressional candidate, chose Democrats, 56 to 44 percent. But whites who cited "Clinton's job performance" as among the top one or two reasons for their vote decision went for Republicans, 75 to 25 percent. Among white voters who listened to talk radio who cited the president's job performance as a key element in their vote, nearly nine of ten (88 to 12 percent) went for Republican House candidates. (The data above are derived from the indicators presented in Table 4.) These data lend support to a view that has lost favor in recent years—that national factors, including the popularity of the incumbent president, the administration's performance, and the state of the economy can be at least as important

as local factors (such as the qualities of the congressional candidates, incumbency, and so forth) in deciding off-year elections.[26]

Overall, the emergence of Clinton as an issue in the 1994 elections appears to have hurt Democratic House candidates. Listening to talk radio was related to heightened concern with Clinton and this, in turn, was coupled with significantly higher levels of support for Republican House candidates.

A Grievance Network?

Talk radio has been criticized as "catering to and built up by people who used to sit on bar stools and complain to each other"—a higher tech, albeit more impersonal grievance forum.[27] While this characterization is unfair, the frustrations voiced over the airwaves did turn up in talk voters' evaluations of governmental institutions, political leaders, the direction of the nation, and in the reasons these citizens cited why they voted the way they did.

White talk voters, irrespective of partisanship and ideology, were more negative/oppositional than nonlistening voters as seen in Table 5. Talk voters did not particularly like how Congress was handling its job, they were not happy with Clinton's job performance, nor did they like the direction that the president and Congress were taking the country. Overwhelming majorities of both talk voters and nontalk voters disapproved of Congress. Approval of Congress among white talk radio listeners was in single digits. Also, nearly five times as many white talk listeners—46 to 10 percent—voted in House elections to oppose President Clinton than to support him. Moreover, large majorities of both talk and nontalk voters felt that the country was "seriously off on the wrong track" rather than "generally moving in the right direction," with talk listeners more likely than those who didn't tune in to express this view (69 vs. 54 percent). Finally, talk listeners were twice as likely as nonlisteners to have cited "time for a change" as an issue that had figured prominently in their voting calculus. (See Table 4.)

Other VNS data (not presented here) demonstrate conservatives were far more pessimistic than moderates and liberals; conservative talk radio listeners were the most pessimistic of all political groupings. Republican and independent talk voters were more likely to believe that the country was headed down the wrong track than their nonlistening counterparts. Talk voters who identified themselves as Democrats more widely believed than Republicans and independents that the country was going in the right direction, but still one-third were pessimistic about the future of the country.

[26] Compare Edward R. Tufte, "Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections," *American Political Science Review* 69 (September 1975): 812–826; with Morris Fiorina, "An Era of Divided Government," *Political Science Quarterly* 107 (Fall 1992): 395; and Norman Luttbeg and Michael M. Gant, *American Electoral Behavior, 1952–1992*, 2nd ed. (Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock, 1995), chap. 5.

[27] Timothy Egan quoted in Fund, "The Power of Talk," 55ff.

Overall, on the four "grievance" indicators, talk voters accounted for about twice as large a proportion of the electorate who took opposition/critical positions than those who expressed supportive views.

Talk Radio and Retrospective Voting

How did these citizens, disgruntled about their government's performance, manifest their dissatisfaction on 8 November 1994? They voted against the governing party and for the opposition. Voters, particularly talk voters, appear to have voted retrospectively in 1994. Retrospective, or backward looking voting, occurs when citizens base their vote decision on the past performance (competence) of the party in power, that is, rewarding the incumbent administration when it is viewed as managing the nation's affairs satisfactorily and punishing those in power when conditions are perceived as deteriorating. It is probably the most common form of issue voting.[28]

Each of VNS's items concerning the direction the country was heading, attitudes on Congress, and the Clinton factor tap into various aspects of retrospective judgments. Voter responses to each of these items demonstrate that the 1994 election can be viewed largely as a white repudiation of the national Democratic party's competence in handling the affairs of the nation, with dissatisfaction most pronounced, again, among talk voters.

Citizens who thought the country was on the right track presumably would be more likely to vote for Democrats; those who saw the country headed down the wrong track would, if they voted retrospectively, presumably vote Republican. Both white talk and nontalk voters can be seen to have voted retrospectively in 1994 but there were again differences. (See Table 6.) Talk listeners who evaluated the state of the nation positively gave House Democratic candidates 58 percent of their votes; nonlisteners holding this view were somewhat more supportive of Democrats. The relationship between believing that the country was heading down the wrong track and voting Republican was in the expected direction, but again it was much more pronounced among talk radio listeners. Two-thirds of such nonlisteners supported Republican House candidates; over four-fifths of talk listeners who thought the country was heading in the wrong direction voted Republican. Virtually the identical pattern turned up in the voting behavior of talk and nontalk listeners in Senate races.

That citizens dissatisfied with a Congress dominated by one party for roughly half a century would be inclined to vote against candidates of that party is not difficult to understand. Talk voters who disapproved of Congress supported Republicans 74 to 24 percent; they were 15 points more likely to support GOP candidates than nonlisteners dissatisfied with Congress. The opposite tendency among those who evaluated Congress positively is also easy to apprehend. Citi-

[28] Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

zens who approved of Congress voted overwhelmingly for Democratic candidates, 67 to 31 percent. Yet four of ten white talk voters who *approved* of Congress voted Republican.

Talk listeners' use of the vote as a mechanism to register discontent with governmental leaders and institutions, their greater issue focus, and the shift in congressional voting from Democrats in 1992 to Republicans in 1994 among Perot voters, independents, and moderates suggests that they voted rationally. Their voting behavior was in accord with their beliefs about governmental institutions and leaders, and the correctives they thought were needed to remedy their grievances (suggested by their citing "time for a change" as the reason for their vote). The relationship between the perceptions and electoral behavior of these VNS respondents is consistent with V.O. Key's argument that "voters are not fools. . . .[T]he electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of the alternatives presented to it and the character of the information available to it."[29] Talk voters can be said to have voted responsibly when they employed their votes to signal opposition and dissatisfaction and bring a change in control of Congress—not as "uncontrolled two year olds throwing a temper tantrum," as ABC's Peter Jennings charged.[30]

Talk Radio Listeners: Involved or Indifferent?

The early studies of talk radio listeners as well as commentary by some journalists have portrayed talk radio listeners as socially isolated and politically alienated. The 1994 talk voter appears different from this portrayal: they were more opinionated, less apt to cast an issueless vote, and more concerned with public policy matters than with personal qualities of candidates.

These Voter News Service data are in accord with the 1992 NES data and the 1993 Times Mirror poll, which present a positive picture of talk voters—with their greater interest in politics and higher political participation rates. The 1992 National Election Study, for example, found talk voters to be substantially more likely to watch news every day, to be "very much" interested in and to pay a "great deal" of attention to news about campaigns, and to engage in political discussion. (See Table 7.)

Nonlisteners were significantly more likely to express no interest in campaigns, never to watch news programs, to pay no attention to the presidential campaign, and not to discuss politics with others. The greater political involvement of talk radio listeners is further suggested by a December 1995 survey conducted by the *Washington Post*, the Kennedy School of Government, and the Kaiser Family Foundation. The study found that regular listeners to Rush Limbaugh's radio talk show had much higher participation rates and information

[29] V.O. Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Voting, 1936–1960* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968 [1966]), 7.

[30] Quoted in Terry Eastland, "The New Congress & the Old Media," *Forbes Media Critic* 2 (Spring 1995): 42.

TABLE 7

Political Involvement: White Talk Radio Listeners and Nonlisteners, 1992 (in percent)

	% of Talk Listeners	% of Nonlisteners
Interest in political campaigns		
Very much interested	59	42
Not much interested	7	15
N	(942)	(827)
Watched TV news programs		
Every day	57	36
Never	7	17
N	(1032)	(917)
Number of programs watched about politics on TV		
A good many	43	28
Just a few/none	16	25
N	(876)	(704)
Attentive to news about presidential campaign		
A great deal	27	13
Not at all	10	18
N	(954)	(757)
Talked to others about campaign		
Yes	45	33
No	55	67
N	(948)	(826)

Note: Percentages for the first of our variables do not add to 100% because only the polar responses are shown. The Ns include all response categories for the variable.

Source: 1992 Center for Political Studies National Election Survey.

levels than "most politically engaged voters." Summarizing the research, the *Post* noted: "with voter registration topping 80 percent, more than half of dittoheads [Limbaugh's listeners] say they are very interested in politics, compared to only a quarter of non-dittoheads."[31]

If normative theorists are correct in maintaining that democratic systems presuppose political involvement, "vigilance," and the "practice of discussion" among its citizens, then talk radio voters arguably meet this requirement.[32]

Implications of Talk Radio for American Democracy

It has been widely assumed by talk radio listeners, callers, and hosts, by journalists and commentators, by the Speaker of the House and the president of the United States that talk radio had an effect on the 1994 election and that this new use of an old medium and the development of new interactive media will have important political consequences in the future.

The 1994 Voter News Service national election exit poll data permit the analysis of the political orientations and voting behavior of talk radio listeners in the 1994 midterm elections. What emerges from the 1994 national House,

[31] Mario S. Brossard, "Audience Participation in Radio Land," *Washington Post*, 29 January 1996.

[32] See Bernard Berelson et al., *Voting*, chap. 14; and Angus Campbell et al., *The American Voter*.

Senate, and gubernatorial exit poll data from VNS (as well as the 1993 Times Mirror and the 1992 National Election Study data) is that talk radio listeners are more conservative and Republican, more negative toward government, and more participatory than nonlisteners. The data paint a portrait of an opinionated, reasonably well educated, and socially integrated segment of the electorate.

The VNS data do not permit a causal analysis of the impact of talk radio; that is, the data cannot make the case that talk radio's effect on its listeners had a causal impact on their electoral behavior and led, at least in part, to the 1994 Republican congressional victories. Surely, many talk radio listeners would have both turned out on election day and cast their ballots the same way had they not tuned in to talk radio. But there were others who voted in 1994 the way they did because talk radio so amplified their interests and concerns that they turned out to vote where they would not have otherwise. And there were undoubtedly still other voters who were converted or persuaded in some way to change their vote because of their talk radio listening.

Journalistic observers and academic analysts offer widely divergent views of the effects of talk radio on American politics and its party system. Some believe that talk radio and other alternative media may exacerbate citizen disaffection toward government, political leaders, and the two major parties, aggravating electoral instability and societal strain. Thus, talk radio hosts and listeners pose a danger to American constitutional government—to the point of advocating insurrection. An *Economist* headline: "1-800-MOB-RULE" epitomizes this view.[33] Other commentators see talk radio and new communications technologies as a plus for democracy by expanding the country's political conversation and discussion, and the citizen's sense of empowerment, considered by some theories the essence of democratic practice.[34]

The press talks of "cyberdemocracy," "electronic town halls," and computer-TV interactive voting. One fear is that these new media formats are ushering in an era of "hyperdemocracy"—an inherently unstable form of direct democracy. Talk radio thus presents a "specter of government by feverish plebiscite," a process that erodes the essence of "representative democracy" by making it "harder and harder for Congress to exercise considered judgment."[35] James Madison's warning of a phalanx of unbridled popular passions is raised in *Time* cover stories and on the editorial and op-ed pages of major American newspapers and in journals of opinion.

The classic American statement on the need for representative government has been Madison's "filtering" imagery in the *Federalist Papers*: "to refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens" whose wisdom, prudence, and temperance would mitigate the popular

[33] "1-800-MOB-RULE," *Economist*, 18 August 1993, 22.

[34] Berelson et al., *Voting*, chap. 14; Bernard Hennessy, *Public Opinion*, 5th ed. (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1985), chap. 2.

[35] Robert Wright, "Hyper-Democracy," *Time*, 23 January 1995, 15–21; Fineman, "The Power of Talk," 25; Roberts, "Open Arms," 10.

excesses of democracy. The Framers of the Constitution, fearing impassioned majorities and their tendency to destroy and tyrannize, rejected plebiscitary or "pure" or "direct" democracy. "Representative democracy" was a defense against the "temporary errors and delusions" of the people.[36]

Madison's chief bulwark for the mischief of faction—the extended republic—is now easily breached in an age of global, instantaneous communication in its many emerging forms. The advantage of a large country in 1787, as Madison argued in *The Federalist*, No. 10 was the check it placed on faction. When people are geographically dispersed, even if a majority has a "common motive," the distance among them will make it hard for them "to discover their own strength and to act in unison with each other."[37] In Madison's view, the majority having such coexistent passion or interest, must be rendered, by their number and local situation, unable to concert and carry into effect schemes of oppression.

Talk radio can create instantaneous communities of coexistent interest and passion over continental distances. And the filters—the chosen body of representatives—can be clogged with the telephone calls, faxes, and e-mail messages of an increasingly active citizenry and can be all too willing to act impulsively on behalf of these impassioned, fractious segments of the populace.

The growing prominence of talk radio and the emergence of new communications media over the last twenty years may have exacerbated the extended period of dealignment that has come to characterize American electoral politics. Talk radio allows voters to bypass both political parties and the established news media for political information and voting cues, thus further weakening the two-party system and destabilizing the political process.

Those who consider talk radio to have a salutary effect on American politics and government see the medium as a "forum for discussion and dissent"—the modern equivalent of the soapbox, committees of correspondence, the bully pulpit, the village square, and the town hall.[38] Talk radio, for other defenders, is a mediating institution that gives people a sense of connection in politics, "fulfilling some of the functions that traditional political institutions—parties, unions, or civic groups used to perform."[39] This and the other "new media" provide novel ways for officials and constituents to engage in two-way conversations; they are a modern means by which citizens can petition and instruct their elected representatives. Talk radio and TV shows "inasmuch as they improve both substance and relevance of information can contribute to democracy via a clearer picture of electoral alternatives," for the level of information helps determine how well the public can control government.[40]

Among other cited benefits of talk radio is that the medium diminishes political and social alienation and increases self-efficacy and participation by creating a

[36] *The Federalist Papers*, 82, 384.

[37] Ibid., 83.

[38] CNN, "Late Edition," 16 April 1995, transcript #81.

[39] Robin Toner, "Election Jitters in Limbaughland," *New York Times*, 3 November 1994; John Fund, "The Power of Talk," 52–59.

[40] Christine F. Ridout, "News Coverage and Talk Shows in the 1992 Presidential Campaign," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 26 (December 1993): 712–715; Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, *The*

sense of connectedness with like-minded citizens and by tapping "new wells of opinion and reviv[ing] confidence in the political process."[41] Democratic party activist Ann Lewis notes the more participatory mode promoted by the new media: "The old media acted as gatekeepers, deciding what the people should know. The new media involves the 'democratization' of political knowledge. Ordinary people are taking over some of that power, and often in a more honest way."[42] As Madison put it in his *National Gazette* essays in 1791, when he was an opposition leader in the House, access to multiple information outlets mitigates the influence of the dominant opinion molders by enabling "every good citizen to be a centinel" of the republic.[43]

The new/alternative media with their democratization of knowledge force a rethinking of our conceptions of direct and representative democracy. The former may no longer be adequately captured by Thomas Jefferson's ward republics, Alexis de Tocqueville's description of the town meeting, or Norman Rockwell's classic "Freedom of Speech" painting. Nor can representative democracy in the United States today be equated with Madison's "chosen body of citizens whose wisdom may discern the true interest of their country" or Joseph Schumpeter's depiction of the democratic method as an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions" in which political leaders "acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."[44] The new interactive modes of communication and participation, including talk radio, foster the continued evolution and blending of what Martin Diamond called the two "species"—direct and representative democracy—of the "genus" popular government, perhaps drawing inspiration from the anti-Federalist tradition of American politics, which has looked favorably upon processes and institutions that approximate an assembly of the people directly governing themselves.[45] Tocqueville's celebration of the town meeting is an example of this sentiment as are the initiative, referendum, and recall of the Populists and progressives at the turn of the twentieth century and calls for "participatory democracy" by the New Left in the 1960s.[46]

Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[41] Hofstetter et al., "Political Talk Radio," 469; Steven Roberts, "Open Arms for Online Democracy."

[42] Quoted in Fund, "The Power of Talk," 55; see also Page and Tannenbaum, "Populistic Deliberation", 49–52.

[43] Lance Banning, *Jefferson and Madison: Three Conversations from the Founding* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1995), 203; Richard K, Matthews, *If Men Were Angels: James Madison and the Heartless Empire of Reason* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 158, 214–215.

[44] *Federalist Papers*, 82; Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1950), 269.

[45] Martin Diamond, "Democracy and *The Federalist*: A Reconsideration of the Framers' Intent," *American Political Science Review* 53 (March 1959): 54; Herbert J. Storing, *What the Anti-Federalists Were For* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 17–18.

[46] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, George Lawrence, trans., J. P. Mayer, ed., (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 68–70; Donald Lutz, *Popular Consent and Popular Control* (Baton Rogue: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), chap. 8; John F. Manley and Kenneth Dolbeare, eds., *The Case Against the Constitution: From the Antifederalists to the Present* (Armonk, NY: M.E.

While talk radio is not direct democracy in the classic sense, or even the teledemocracy of participatory visionaries, it is an expression of a *vox populi*—a street-level public opinion—which must be factored into the American representative system. Today, representative institutions have entered an era in which their responsiveness to the popular will can be monitored not only by professional government watchers (journalists, social scientists) but also a growing attentive and suspicious public who need only a radio, telephone, and perhaps access to a computer or fax machine to become informed and communicate their views.

If democratic ideology is about "opposition as it is about governance," then the new communications technologies and new uses for older technologies such as talk radio can "provide citizens with alternative perspectives and force the critical exposure and scrutiny of elites." The effect can be to render elite control more tenuous and "undermine existing constellations of power."[47]

Talk radio is one of many forms of interactive telecommunications that have begun to comprise what Lawrence Grossman has dubbed the "electronic republic." These media appear to be transforming American democracy into a more participatory regime.

> Interactive telecommunications technology makes it possible to revive, in a sophisticated modern form, some of the essential characteristics of the ancient world's first democratic polities. Instead of a show of hands, we have electronic polls. Instead of a single meeting place, we have far-flung, interactive telecommunications networks that extend for thousands of miles. In place of personal discussion and deliberation, we have call-ins, talk shows. . . . [48]

The new styles of political participation characterized here are evolving. Many observers see these interactive media eventually becoming the "nation's dominant means of communication."[49] Supporters of the participatory potential of the electronic republic, many of whom echo fears concerning the excesses of democracy, advocate civic education to produce a more enlightened and temperate citizenry. Yet the "electronic public sphere," incarnated in Grossman's Federal Elections Commission on Citizenship, or Ross Perot's electronic town halls, or James Fishkin's National Issues Convention, appears utopian.[50]

The recent study and commentary on participatory democracy combined with the research reported here suggest a more plausible scenario: the American political system will need to accommodate an active and opinionated citizenry who can be mobilized by interactive communications and who can instantaneously transmit their views directly (and often in concert) to decision makers. The

---

Sharpe, 1987); Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 274.

[47] Eric Schickler, "Democraticizing Technology: Hierarchy and Innovation in Public Life," *Polity* 27 (Winter 1994): 175–199.

[48] Lawrence K. Grossman, *The Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age* (New York: Viking, 1995), 48.

[49] Jost, "Talk Democracy," 364.

[50] James S. Fishkin, *Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

electorate in the electronic republic might come to resemble talk radio listeners as they have thus appeared—informed, although perhaps too partially; opinionated, but perhaps too passionately; and politically active, but perhaps too impetuously. But whether the talk radio phenomenon factionalizes or unifies, skews politics to the left, right, or center, whether its audiences are engaged citizens or divisive malcontents—talk radio listeners may signal the emergence of a new political type.*

Appendix

Talk Radio Listeners and Nonlisteners Among Voters in the 1994 Elections

% of voters for House & Senate candidates who listen to talk radio		*Total Sample*			*Talk Listeners*			*Nonlisteners*		
		Dem%	*Rep%*	*N*	*Dem%*	*Rep%*	*N*	*Dem%*	*Rep%*	*N*
	All Voters									
21	House	48	52	(4923)	36	64	(1023)	51	49	(3900)
21	Senate	48	49	(3602)	38	59	(774)	51	46	(2828)
	Men									
23	House	42	58	(2399)	29	71	(558)	45	55	(1828)
24	Senate	42	55	(2058)	32	66	(493)	46	51	(1565)
	Women									
18	House	54	46	(2524)	41	59	(465)	56	44	(2051)
18	Senate	51	47	(2196)	43	56	(390)	53	45	(1806)
	Whites									
21	House	42	58	(4221)	29	71	(887)	45	55	(3334)
22	Senate	43	55	(2826)	30	68	(612)	46	52	(2214)
	White Men									
23	House	37	63	(2075)	23	77	(473)	41	59	(1602)
24	Senate	39	59	(1363)	25	73	(331)	43	54	(1032)
	White Women									
19	House	47	53	(2121)	35	65	(410)	50	50	(1711)
19	Senate	46	52	(1442)	35	63	(277)	49	49	(1165)

Note: Senate percentages may not add to 100% due to votes for minor party candidates, "omits," or rounding.

Source: Voter News Service 1994 national exit poll.

* The authors would like to thank Jeffrey Alderman, the director of polling at ABC News, and Gary Langer, senior polling analyst at ABC, for access to the VNS data and for their insights on the 1994 election, and Luntz Research Companies for providing data from their postelection survey on talk radio. They also thank Thomas Halper for his comments and suggestions.