



# FRAMING INEQUALITY



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

**MATT GUARDINO**

# Framing Inequality

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Framing Inequality: News Media, Public Opinion, and the Neoliberal Turn in U.S. Public Policy  
*Matt Guardino*

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



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# Framing Inequality



# Introduction

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

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

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

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

## Argument and Evidence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Plan of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Neoliberal-New Right Ideological Production

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Media and Public Opinion in the Conservative Turn

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Political Importance and Analytic Value of the Case Studies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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