The Public Agenda in the Information Age

When we turn on each other, bankers can run our economy for Wall Street, oil companies can fight off clean energy, and giant corporations can ship the last good jobs overseas.

When we turn on each other, rich guys . . . can push through more tax breaks for themselves and then we’ll never have enough money to support our schools, or rebuild our highways, or invest in our kids’ future.

When we turn on each other, we can’t unite to fight back against a rigged system.

—Senator Elizabeth Warren, speech to the Democratic National Convention, July 25, 2016

Understand, democracy does not require uniformity. Our founders argued. They quarreled. Eventually they compromised. They expected us to do the same. But they knew that democracy does require a basic sense of solidarity—the idea that for all our outward differences, we’re all in this together; that we rise or fall as one. . . .

For too many of us, it’s become safer to retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighborhoods or on college campuses, or places of worship, or especially our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. The rise of naked partisanship, and increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste—all this makes this great sorting seem natural, even inevitable.

—President Barack Obama, farewell address, January 10, 2017

The phrase American public seems downright archaic in the twenty-first century. We have become a nation of groups: African Americans, born-again Christians, working mothers, LGBTQ people, Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, low-wage workers, pro-lifers, anti-vaxxers, indebted college students, people with disabilities, environmentalists. As we have come to articulate and celebrate our diversity, ideas of the public
as a united, undifferentiated mass have come to seem oversimplistic, even disrespectful. And each group has its central cause: climate change, marriage equality, immigration reform, police-community relations, family values, college affordability, the right to life, equal access to public places, paid family leave, minimum wage reform.

The potent tradition of American two-party politics has encouraged many to see this transformation from undifferentiated public to a surfeit of interest groups as a feature of the increasing polarization of American politics. Yet polarization into two increasingly homogenous political parties is quite a different phenomenon from fragmentation into more and more interests, and it has different implications for political processes. In the United States, party polarization is essentially framed as “the government should do more” (liberals) or “the government should do less” (conservatives), although some might effectively argue that it amounts to government supporting individuals versus government supporting businesses. Polarization could result in gridlock—the absence of policy making—or in large swings in public policy resulting from any change in the composition of the government. U.S. immigration policy is an example of the former; the passage and attempted repeal of the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) are examples of the latter.

Fragmentation, on the other hand, suggests the kinds of outcomes that Senator Elizabeth Warren describes in her speech to the 2016 Democratic National Convention (quoted in the first epigraph). Although Warren is speaking out against the race-baiting rhetoric of Donald Trump, the pattern she describes has broader implications. Policy making may come to favor the few because no general public rises up to oppose it. When that policy making involves the expansion of rights to oppressed minorities, the lack of general public opposition may be of benefit in creating a more fair and equal society, but the pattern may extend beyond those cases. As Warren suggests, fragmentation may also clear the way for policies that favor the economically privileged and politically connected at the expense of everyone else because no widespread public opposition to it emerges. Our division from one another may have eroded the power of average people in democracy. Where once the sheer numbers of average people who recognized a shared problem might have counterbalanced the political influence of the wealthy or the connected, today the multiplicity of our concerns undermines our ability to, as Warren puts it, “fight back against a rigged system.”

In his farewell address (quoted in the second epigraph), President Barack Obama, too, recognizes the problems of a fragmented public. Acknowledging our diversity, he nevertheless recognizes the importance of
sharing common causes. Expressing concerns about unalloyed partisanship, he has as much to say about how people fragment into communities of interest, insulating themselves from those with different concerns and priorities. Obama expresses particular concern about how contemporary communication media foster those divisions, even to the point of undermining our shared understanding of social reality—of the facts.

Public fragmentation is not simply an aspect of partisan polarization, although each party has come to represent a coalition of causes. Thinking about American politics in terms of polarization continues to emphasize the role of political majorities, even as it recognizes the increasing distance between the two major groups. In contrast, thinking about American politics in terms of fragmentation reveals how the diversity of public priorities undermines the importance of majorities, potentially opening the door for adept interests to advance their causes at the expense of a general public that no longer recognizes its shared concerns.

This book examines how public interests have fractured over the course of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and the role the media have played in their fragmentation. Between 1975, when three major networks still dominated television and the vast majority of Americans received a daily paper, and 2014, when most Americans had a Facebook account and could receive nearly two hundred cable channels, both the content and the character of the public’s list of policy priorities, its issue agenda, have substantially changed. Today, even in moments of national crisis, the public agenda lacks the focus it had in the mass media era, and its fragmentation has implications for understanding media influence, political power, and, ultimately, how contemporary democracy works.

Fragmentation: The Public Agenda and the Public Forum

A lot of contemporary discussion about the state of American politics does not distinguish between fragmentation and polarization, but they are in fact conceptually distinct phenomena. Fragmentation involves a lack of consensus on issue priorities. Some people may see health care as the most important issue, while others see police-community relations as the most important issue. Where public concern is scattered across many issues, fragmentation has occurred. Polarization describes differently valued opinions about a particular issue. One might support or oppose a single-payer system for health care. Where two groups are diametrically opposed on an issue or on a series of issues, polarization has occurred. Polarization can be observed in the context of particular issues;
fragmentation becomes visible when observing the public agenda, the ordered list of public issue priorities. Although a public agenda always exists, that list may be long or short, and public concern may be spread relatively evenly over many issues or focused on just a few. A more fragmented public is concerned with many issues simultaneously, producing greater agenda diversity—longer lists with less focus.

As Obama observes in his farewell address, democracy does not require uniformity or agreement among the public, so differences of opinion on particular issues are not necessarily troubling. Democracy does, however, require some degree of “solidarity,” of common interests and a sense of shared fate, so what he calls the “splintering” of the public into “our own bubbles . . . surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook” is deeply problematic. More fundamental than disagreeing about what to do about a problem (polarization) is disagreement about how to prioritize problems or about whether a problem even exists (fragmentation). When there is no agreement about what problems or issues we face, substantive debate about an issue becomes impossible. Rather than arguing to find a solution for any particular problem, we argue about what to argue about. If we cannot agree on whether police-community relations is a problem worthy of discussion and decision making, we will not be able to debate policies to address it. Developing a shared agenda is crucial for arguing to resolution.

In a geographically vast and demographically diverse nation like the United States, developing a sense of shared priorities is no mean feat. Normative theories of democracy usually imply the need for some sort of public forum, a shared communicative space for the public to collectively consider the community’s issues, problems, and leadership. It is difficult to imagine a participatory democracy without such a space for identifying and prioritizing public issues and problems. A public forum also enables communication between leaders and citizens, for not only can citizens learn about the policy initiatives of leaders, leaders can learn about the concerns of citizens. Exactly how such a forum should function and whether a given forum functions well have been topics of scholarly debate, but those debates typically take for granted the necessity of the forum itself (e.g., Calhoun 1992).

Since the nineteenth century, the media have acted as a public forum, making people aware of incidents and circumstances beyond their immediate experience. A great deal of theory developed regarding the role of mass media, particularly mass circulation newspapers and broadcast television, in shaping the public agenda and the implications of their role for the ways that political power functioned in democracy. The vast audiences
and small number of media outlets made using media a communal experience, but many scholars worried that powerful political leaders would use the mass media to manipulate public opinion and thus undermine democracy. In the later years of the twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, the media system has been transformed with concomitant implications for the public forum, public priorities, and democracy. Now, scholars worried that the vastly varied media system, particularly cable television, would undermine democracy by dividing citizens who would no longer have media sources in common. A multitude of media outlets might either foster irreconcilable differences among people or enable people to opt out of even the most basic public affairs knowledge. As the media system changed, what became of the public agenda and, by extension, of the public itself? Did the media still serve as a public forum? And what were the implications for the way political power worked?

Mass Media, Mass Democracy, and the Public: The Rise and Fall of Mass Audiences

In the twentieth century, the role of the mass media as a public forum for mass democracy seemed obvious. Indeed, U.S. mass democracy and U.S. mass media grew up together. As voting rights expanded, so did the mass media. In 1833, the *New York Sun* ushered in the era of the penny press as the first mass circulation newspaper, so cheap nearly anyone could afford it. By 1850, virtually every white man in the country could vote. In 1920, the first commercially licensed radio station signed on the air (Douglas 2001), and the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote. In 1963, coverage of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination marked television’s ascension as a primary news source for Americans (Zelizer 1992), and, in 1965, the Voting Rights Act restored voting rights to African Americans. During this parallel development of mass media and mass democracy in the twentieth century, theories about the media’s role as a public forum in democracy described and critiqued that role, articulating theories of media power that presumed the characteristics of mass media: a large, undifferentiated audience that received messages from a small number of outlets.

The idea of mass media as a national living room for political ceremony and spectacle emerged from ritual models of communication (Carey 1989; Katz and Dayan 1988; Peters 1995), but the idea of media as a public forum for establishing shared priorities was most clearly articulated in agenda-setting theory. In its earliest incarnation, the oft-quoted central tenet of news media agenda setting was that “the press may not be
successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen 1963, 13). In other words, the news media were thought to focus public attention and concern on a limited set of public priorities, to set the public agenda. Media scholars Max McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) demonstrated the news media’s agenda-setting effects in the late 1960s. Although it was difficult to find evidence that campaign communication altered vote choice (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954), study after study would demonstrate that if news paid attention to an issue or a person, people thought the issue or person was important (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948; McCombs and Shaw 1972). Evidence of a consensus-building effect also emerged: members of disparate groups who paid more attention to news had more similar issue priorities than did those who did not (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, and McCombs 1998; Shaw and Martin 1992). Although the effects were pronounced, scholars distinguished between the news media agenda and the public agenda, in part because agenda-setting effects were not necessarily the same across issues (Neuman 1990). They also distinguished the media and public agendas from the policy agenda pursued by Congress and the president, who commonly sought to influence the media agenda and, through it, the public agenda.

Some scholars offered eloquent tributes to the role of the mass media in establishing a public forum. Elihu Katz says, “If one were designing a participatory democracy, one would make provision for a central space in which all citizens could gather together and . . . ideally the agenda would be agreed upon in the central space. . . . In the era of mass society and mass communication, these spaces would be served, even cloned, by generalized media devoted to the polity as a whole” (1996, 23). However, many recognized that the mass media’s public forum manifested types of political power incompatible with normative theories of participatory democracy.

The idea of agenda setting as a form of political power emerged in roughly the same decade mass media agenda-setting effects were first documented. In the early 1960s, political theorists Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962) made the case that pluralism offered an inadequate explanation of political power. Pluralist analyses focused on decision-making processes and thus on open political conflict between opposing groups: Democrats arguing with Republicans, farmers arguing with ranchers, environmentalists arguing with developers. The decisions made illuminated the power structure. Bachrach and Baratz argued managing or controlling which decisions got made—that is, setting the political agenda—represented an even more fundamental form of political power.
If one could manage the agenda of decisions, one could limit the range of choices to those that did not threaten one’s power and status. In this representation of power, overt political conflict was a kind of fig leaf. Relatively unimportant choices were vociferously argued, while the more fundamental issues that threatened existing power structures never came to the fore. In other words, Bachrach and Baratz distinguished between polarized debate on particular issues and crafting an agenda in which certain public problems were never debated at all.

Insights about agenda setting from political science and communication were blended to generate important theories about how political power worked in mass democracy. To the extent one could manage or control mass-mediated depictions of social reality, one could manage or control political outcomes. Control the issue agenda in a political campaign so it focuses on issues your party is perceived as handling better, and you win the election (Petrocik 1995). Manage the decision-making environment represented in the media, and you limit the range of choices to ones that do not threaten your power and status (Bennett 1990; Entman 1989; Hallin 1986). Manage the representation of the social world, and you manage public perception of something as a social or political problem in the first place (Lukes 1974; Spector and Kitsuse 2001). Pitch your policy directly to the masses via mass media’s public forum, and you can avoid having to negotiate with your political opposition (Kernell 2007). Distract the public from your mistakes, and you escape accountability (Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston, 2007; Entman 1991). The more effectively one controlled the public agenda, via the mass media’s public forum, the more political power one had.

From the perspective of normative democratic theory, the concern was that the public would be convinced to focus on the wrong issues, trivial issues, or worse. Instead of debating regulatory reform of the financial industry to protect investors, the public could be distracted to debate criminal justice: How long should a particular con artist spend in jail for bilking his investors? The commercial incentives of the U.S. mass media just made the problems worse, for a commercially funded public forum was likely to give the public what it wanted rather than what it needed with regard to public affairs information. Many might prefer sensation and entertainment to the drudgery of policy discussion (Prior 2007), and commercially driven media that did not give it to them might risk financial failure (Uscinski 2014). Moreover, a medium without an audience would not be a public forum.

In the later part of the twentieth century, scholars found evidence that the public forum could be manipulated not only in terms of topics, or
issues, but also in which aspects of the issues were most publicly prominent (McCombs 2004). This possibility seemed even scarier, for here debate might never materialize. The right answer to a policy problem or issue would seem obvious to a public presented a selective view of it. If the media consistently depicted public aid recipients as irresponsible cheats, cutting welfare benefits seemed unproblematic (Gilens 1999). Thus, any political actor who could effectively manage the aspect agenda could sway public policy with little meaningful public contestation. In light of this, for many of the scholars who developed these theories, the idea of an elite-managed, unified public agenda was at best antidemocratic and at worst terrifying. Perhaps it brought to mind a technologically and culturally advanced nation persuaded to support a dictator who influenced its citizens to assist in, tolerate, or ignore industrialized genocide. Echoes of such persuasion might be perceived in media coverage of the U.S. downing of an Iranian passenger jet (Entman 1991) or of prisoner torture at Abu Ghraib (Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007). Where such research engaged in critical advocacy, breaking the hold of political and social elites over mass media, and thus over public opinion, was the goal. Could the public agenda be liberated from the control of political and social elites?

Theories of political power grounded in the agenda-setting tradition all suggested that if the media system changed, political power would work differently. While the psychological mechanisms underlying agenda-setting effects might not change, both the power of elites to influence and the nature of the public agenda would be transformed in the absence of mass audiences. By the late twentieth century, it was apparent that changes in the media landscape were reshaping the mass audiences that had developed over the previous 150 years, as the analog era of mass media gave way to the digital revolution and the information age.

Some scholars saw important benefits to the new media environment that was being created, first by cable, with its virtually unlimited number of channels, and subsequently by the internet, with its even larger capacity for unique content. The perspectives and problems of groups whose concerns were not typically reported in national media could find an outlet in the more fragmented and user-driven communication environment that was emerging (Chaffee and Metzger 2001). Scholars who argued that the objective style of news presentation, which began to develop in mid-

---

1. This phenomenon is distinct from framing, which relies on narrative (Edy and Meirick 2007) and argument (Druckman 2004) to move public opinion about a policy issue.
nineteenth-century mass media, offered little fodder for public discussion (e.g., Carey 1987) might see hopeful prospects in the politically partisan news the expanding media environment made viable (Chaffee and Metzger 2001). Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini (2011) argued that the evolving system undermined the traditional media’s control over information presented to the public, putting issues that might previously have been ignored onto the public agenda. This might trivialize public debate in some cases but could also liberate it from elite control. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar (2008) suggested the type of self-selection possible in the expanded media environment had resulted in a new era of minimal media effects. Opinions would be reinforced rather than changed by media exposure, which in turn might suggest that the ability of political elites to shape public opinion had deteriorated. Those who worried about the potential for tyranny and demagoguery inherent in a unified national forum largely managed by political elites might applaud advances in communications technology that undermined their control. Hitlers and Stalins should be impossible in a media system that allowed users to elude the influence of a univocal media.

Other scholars saw cause for concern in the expansion of media choice and the fragmentation of media audiences. Katz mourned, “Yet, from the point of participatory democracy, television is dead, almost everywhere. It no longer serves as the central civic space . . . and the here-and-now of current affairs is being minimized, ghettoized and overwhelmed by entertainment” (1996, 24). In this early critique, he blended the two central concerns that have shaped research on how the public forum has been transformed, perhaps eliminated, by the growth in media choice. His concerns about the temptations of entertainment television overpowering the appeal of public affairs information were well founded (Prior 2007). Although some people are news junkies and took advantage of increased media choice to acquire even more public affairs information, more people used the expansion of choice to abandon news in favor of entertainment programming. Katz’s implied norm of watching current affairs programming together—of knowing that one’s neighbors watch and thus of feeling social pressure to watch oneself—has clearly faded. A second aspect of his elegy about watching together involves the fragmentation of audiences by political ideology. Where once citizens shared a common public forum, they can now choose sources of public affairs information they find ideologically congenial. There was evidence that they would do so if given the choice (e.g., Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Iyengar and Hahn 2009) and that people who used different media had different issue priorities (Stroud 2011). Moreover, people surrounded by others who share
their opinions tend to become more politically extreme and make riskier decisions (Sunstein 2009).

Still other scholars suggested the change was not as dramatic as many had argued, that the media continued to generate and address what were functionally mass audiences (Leccese 2009; Neuman 1991; Pew Research Center 2010; Uscinski 2014; Webster 2014).

The Public Agenda in the Information Age

As the mass audience fragmented, most scholars investigated the impacts of the evolving media system on individuals, divining its implications for the public by aggregating individual behaviors. Yet changing the nature of the public forum had consequences for the public as well. How might the absence of shared media sources affect public priorities? By what mechanism or mechanisms might the character of the public agenda be affected by the changing media ecosystem? And with what consequences for democratic governance?

Theories of media agenda setting and media choice at the individual level suggest two paths by which a shared sense of public priorities might be eroded by media that could be personalized to reflect individual preferences. To the extent that people avoid news and public affairs information, geographic and demographic differences in personal experiences might reassert themselves. Problems beyond the scope of one’s immediate experience might become invisible, and the issue concerns of different communities could compete for priority on the agenda of a public that lacks a sense of shared concerns. African Americans might worry about crime, while LGBTQ Americans worry about civil rights and working class white Americans worry about jobs. In the absence of media cues to hold it together, the public agenda would fall apart. A second possibility emerges from the tendency of audiences to no longer watch news together but rather select news to match their interests. News media might promote different issue priorities that would in turn fragment the public agenda. Audiences for one news organization would come to have different issue concerns than audiences for another news organization, and the public agenda would be driven apart by media cueing. That is, differences in news content would lead to greater diversity in the public agenda.

Dwindling public consensus on which issues are the most important has consequences for democratic governance, too, and theories of political power distinguish its impact from that of polarization on a particular issue or issues. Polarization may undermine traditional sources of political power by making it hard to offer a one-sided perspective on an issue but
generate uncivil and acrimonious public debate. Exposure to partisan news may lead different segments of the public to perceive a particular public problem differently. Those repeatedly reminded that large numbers of undocumented immigrants enter the country each year might view immigration reform very differently from those repeatedly reminded of how slow-moving and capricious the current immigration process is. People who see an issue in fundamentally different ways may be unwilling or unable to find a middle ground and compromise, and the result may be dysfunctional stalemate. This may seem an apt description of contemporary American politics, but there is another dimension beyond the pluralist political strife.

Theories of power that move beyond pluralism suggest that if fragmented publics are exposed to different issue agendas or to no issue agendas, debates on public issues may lack meaningful clash, since there would be little agreement on which issues the political system should address. Under these sorts of circumstances, instead of a stalemate in which nothing happens, there is a vacuum in which anything could happen. Well-intentioned political leaders seeking to represent the public would receive little public guidance about where to direct the limited resources of a legislature in addressing issues. Moreover, if people could no longer come together to make concerted policy demands on leaders with the threat of electoral punishment for failure (“Fix this problem or you’re out of a job!”), the power of average voters, which depends on their numbers, could wane.

In the mass media era, managing the public agenda was a source of political power. In the information age, the increasingly fragmented audience could diversify the public agenda, resulting in political power derived from the ability of leaders to pick and choose among issues to address. Leaders could act on their own priorities with impunity, knowing a critical mass of public concern about another issue would never coalesce. Well-organized interests, recognized as more influential than the general public in the mass media era (Schattschneider 1975), could become even more powerful in a fragmented media environment, where the masses fail to come together.

**Studying the Public Agenda**

The analysis that follows reveals how the content and character of the public’s issue agenda have transformed as the media environment evolved from the mass mediated world of the late 1960s to the personalized media world of 2014. Since 1935, Gallup has been measuring the public agenda by asking people, “What do you think is the most important problem
facing this country today?” Compiling the answers generates a public agenda, a rank-ordered list of the problems most commonly named by individual respondents. It is a public agenda in the sense that it is not reducible to a person’s priorities—it makes sense only as a measure of the public’s concerns. There are unique benefits to using this measure of the public agenda. The Gallup measure has been in use the longest (Smith 1980, 1985) and it is the most consistently coded (McCombs and Zhu 1995). Moreover, it is an open-ended question—respondents can answer anything they want. Scholars have pointed out the subtle and not-so-subtle ways the perspectives of the political and media elite can shape questions on public opinion polls (e.g., Ginsberg 1986; Jacobs and Shapiro 1995). Under those circumstances, public opinion is confounded and limited by the mind-set of the pollsters. The “most important problem” question, however, allows respondents to nominate any issue that concerns them. If a person said “Martian invasion,” the interviewer would write it down.

Although the Gallup measure of the public agenda has numerous advantages, it is not flawless and must be assessed with some subtlety. First, our analysis is focused on the public’s issue agenda, but sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between issues and aspects of issues in the Gallup data. For example, are jobs an aspect of the economy in general, or are jobs and the economy each separate issues? Where it is difficult to distinguish between issues and aspects of issues, it can be difficult to distinguish between fragmentation (a difference in issue priorities) and polarization (a difference in issue positions). Second, because Gallup’s question constructs an agenda of “problems,” connecting the news agenda to the public agenda can be tricky. Although similar measures are commonly used in studies of news agendas, agenda setting involves the transfer of salience, or awareness, between the media and the public. An issue’s salience and the extent to which it is perceived as problematic are not quite the same thing (Wlezien 2005). For example, political campaigns dominate the news every four years and can be highly salient for the public but may not be perceived as a “problem.” Moving through the analysis, we describe how the limitations of this measure of the public agenda were addressed to take advantage of the rich and unique insights it provides.

After documenting how the public issue agenda changed, we consider to what extent it has fallen apart as the public has paid less attention to news and to what extent it has been driven apart by changes in the issue agendas of news. We also consider how political representation in democratic institutions has changed as the public’s issue agenda has become
more diverse. Our goal is not to generate predictive theory or a formal model but rather to document and understand what happened as the public’s sense of shared priorities deteriorated.

Essentially, there are two ways to think about the analysis. In one sense, it presents a history of the public agenda. None of the data come from laboratory experiments on individual or collective attitudes or behavior. Instead, the data document what actually happened as the United States transitioned from a mass-mediated communication environment, dominated by three broadcast television networks, to a fragmented, networked communication environment. In another sense, the analysis is an explanation of how the public agenda has evolved. Existing theory and research about the evolving media environment’s impact on the public and political processes suggest several potential explanations for an increasingly fragmented American public as well as a number of potential political consequences. Statistical relationships between the public agenda and public attention to the news media, news content, social reality, and government performance show us which factors seem to play bigger and smaller roles in shaping the public agenda and how the relationships among media, public, and government have changed as the public communication environment has changed. Like DNA tests, they help us identify culprits and clear suspects in explaining what happened to the public as the media environment was transformed. In this analysis, the statistics help us sort out whether the public’s issue agenda has fallen apart as public attention to news media declined or been driven apart by the changing nature of the news environment and the news agenda itself, or some combination of the two. They also help us see what the consequences have been for democratic representation, particularly how political institutions have responded to an eroding consensus on issue priorities.

Like most scholarly analyses, this one simplifies the vast complexities of real life to generate useful insights. The focus is on the role of the media in shaping the public agenda and the relationship between the public agenda and political representation as they unfold over the course of forty years, but history rarely offers airtight evidence to explain its meandering. It would be a mistake to attribute everything that has happened to the public agenda in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to changes in the structure and content of media. The end of the Cold War, the September 11 terrorist attacks, the rise of global trade, and the transformation of civil rights, along with dozens of other important historical events and trends, changed the content of the public agenda and might have played a role in changing its character. The relationships between media, public, and leadership have been altered by structural changes.
such as the increasingly rationalized redrawing of congressional districts that reduces electoral competitiveness and the growing influence of money in elections at all levels. Since the 1960s, the political system has also been altered to give determined individuals and organized interest groups greater ability to influence policy outcomes (Schudson 2015). These factors are not, and in many cases cannot be, accounted for statistically, but we remain open to them as we evaluate and contextualize our findings. Further, the concept of a public forum vastly oversimplifies what is known about the interactions between political leaders, the news media, and the public. There is no straightforward pathway between the public agenda and electoral or policy outcomes. However, public attention is an important component of many processes in participatory democracy, and the concepts of the public forum and the public agenda offer leverage for understanding how relationships between the news media and the public, and thus some key aspects of political power, have evolved.

Ultimately, the data reveal that public consensus on issue priorities has eroded over the course of the past four decades. Although there is support for both the driven apart and the fallen apart models suggested by individual-level theories of media use and media influence, neither works in quite the ways existing theory suggests. Instead, a subtle dance emerges between the news agenda’s tendency to drive diversity in the public’s issue agenda and the tendency of the public agenda to fall apart as the public pays less attention to news. Since there is virtually no difference between the issue agendas of the various news outlets, it is not disparate news agendas that account for public agenda diversity. Instead, changes in the overall news agenda result in more coverage of issues that tend to make the public’s issue agenda more diverse. In this sense, media cueing drives the diversity of the public agenda. However, the moments when the news agenda tends to be most diverse are also the moments in which the fewest people are paying attention. Since the public pays more attention to news in moments of crisis, when news coverage tends to be more focused, the potential of everyday news coverage to de-focus the public agenda is not realized. Although there is evidence that the public agenda grows more diverse in the absence of news cues, the evidence also suggests that were the public more attentive to media outside moments of national crisis, there would be even less agreement on issue priorities.

Regardless of the mechanisms by which public consensus on issue priorities breaks down, a less focused public agenda undermines democratic representation. Political leaders pay less attention to a more diverse public agenda. This may be because the public sends less clear signals to its representatives about which issues it finds most concerning, but it occurs
regardless of an institution’s capacity to take up the public’s issue concerns. Today’s political leaders may be able to avoid those issues that are difficult or threaten their hold on power to a greater extent than representatives from earlier eras, even as the contemporary media system has undermined their ability to shape public opinion.

Overview of the Chapters

Chapter 2 presents a history of the public agenda from 1975 through 2014, a task not undertaken since Tom Smith (1980, 1985) published histories of the public agenda in the 1980s. The chapter examines the ups and downs of public concerns regarding twenty issue categories and what makes people care about them, providing context for the more abstract statistical analyses that follow. For some issues, historical events are the main driver, while others show signs that public concerns are propelled by political actors, particularly the president. Some are chronic sources of worry, some never raise much concern, some have risen and fallen over time, and some have grown more prominent through the years.

Chapter 3 employs statistical analysis to document changes in the character of the public agenda over time. Three key characteristics can help us see how the public agenda has changed: capacity (the number of issues on the agenda), diversity (how evenly concern is spread over issues), and volatility (how quickly issues cycle on and off the agenda). The results show the public agenda has become more diverse over time. They also suggest that although public attention is surely limited, previous assumptions about the capacity of the public agenda may be wrong: public concern could be much more thinly spread than previously believed.

Chapter 4 examines the relationship between traditional broadcast network news and the public agenda. It tracks the strength of the agenda-setting relationship between broadcast news and the public from 1968 through 2010. Far fewer people watched broadcast news by the twenty-first century, but the agenda-setting relationship between news and the public has not faded. This agenda-setting influence, however, does not generate consensus about public priorities. Instead, the news agenda has changed since the end of the Cold War, and attention to news increases awareness of issues beyond personal experience, expanding the public agenda.

Chapter 5 considers the impact of cable news on the public agenda. First, it explores how the expansion in the range of media options and the increasing public attention to cable news have influenced the character of the public agenda. Then it examines the uniqueness of cable news
Chapter 1

channels’ agendas compared to that of broadcast news. Public attention to broadcast and cable news does not have straightforward effects on the public agenda. Although there is some evidence that attention to Fox News increases the diversity of the public agenda, attention to MSNBC tends to focus it, and CNN’s relationship with the public agenda changes depending on the time frame. The agendas of cable news are not especially different from those of broadcast news and are less diverse than the broadcast news agenda. Thus, cable news does not appear to be the main driver of public agenda diversity.

Chapter 6 explores whether it is still possible to focus the public agenda and which social entities might have the power to do so. Attention and news agendas often move together: in moments when the public pays more attention to news, news agendas tend to be more similar across networks. Yet a test of what has been referred to as the “burglar alarm” model of news reveals that while a highly consistent news agenda can provoke a more focused public agenda, conditions have to be relatively extreme to make it likely. Then it turns to whether social reality and political leadership can shape public priorities. Changes in the media environment have not significantly altered the relative power of news media to shape public concerns compared to social reality. When the public has direct experience of a social condition (like unemployment or inflation), the news is less influential. If the public is less likely to have direct experience (violent crime), the news is more influential. Recent research on presidential leadership suggests presidents confronted with a fragmented public tend to lean into it by giving targeted speeches to specific groups rather than attempting to influence the public as a whole through major addresses. All of this suggests there is little hope of reconciling the fragmented public.

Chapter 7 makes an effort to assess some of the effects of public fragmentation on the political process. Presidents make fewer major public addresses responding to public concerns than they once did, not because such addresses are less successful than they once were but because public concerns rarely rise to such a level that presidents feel obligated to respond. Even the U.S. House of Representatives, the governing body with the greatest institutional capacity to address a long list of public concerns, becomes less responsive to the public agenda as the public agenda becomes more diverse. Consequently, a fragmented public agenda interferes with the processes of democratic representation.

Chapter 8 describes the implications of our analysis of media power, political power, and democratic processes. The fragmentation of the public agenda marks a transformation from “the public” to a multitude of “publics” that coincides with a decline in the importance of majority public
opinion in American politics. The fragmented public agenda enables leaders to selectively address public concerns, potentially favoring those of their supporters or of wealthy donors. In such a climate, the power of organized interest groups further expands, while public dissatisfaction with a government that does not appear to do anything to address its concerns grows.