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How Talk Radio Helped The Gop's Resurgence

December 21, 1994 | By Peter Dreier and William J. Middleton. and Peter Dreier is director of the public policy program at Occidental College. William J. Middleton is a Los Angeles attorney and teaches politics at Occidental College and Cal State-Los Angeles.

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While political analysts debate the meaning of the November elections, in at least one respect this campaign season was unprecedented. It marked the coming of age of talk radio as a major force in national politics.

As the role of political parties has declined in the electoral process over the last century, the media have stepped in to fill the void. The impact of the electronic mass media was first recognized during the Depression by Father Charles Coughlin, the "radio priest" who used the new medium as a political soapbox, and by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose "fireside chats" helped bind the American people to his New Deal agenda. The Nixon-Kennedy debates, broadcast on live TV during the 1960 campaign, turned the tide for JFK. The broadcast media's role reached another milestone when Ross Perot announced his 1992 candidacy for president on the "Larry King Live" TV show.

Talk radio, however, represents a major change in the media's role in politics. Unlike FDR's fireside chats, candidates' paid TV spots or candidate forums sponsored by the League of Women Voters, talk radio is a two-way medium.

Average voters can actively participate in the discourse by calling the host and voicing his or her views, anger and frustrations with government. These callers communicate directly with other average citizens without intervention or editing by reporters or editors.

Of course, there are limits to the free exchange of ideas over the radio airwaves. What passes for political debate on many talk shows is often a cacophony of inflammatory rhetoric and half-truths.

The number of radio talk shows has mushroomed from about 250 to 1000 in 10 years. But this powerful medium of political communication, unmatched in electoral politics, is hardly neutral. About three-quarters of all talk show hosts are ideologically conservative and 80 percent are white males. Rush Limbaugh, the most influential radio talkmeister, is heard by 20 million listeners over 660 radio and 220 television stations.

Radio talk shows play two important roles in our political culture. First, they preach to the

converted and reinforce their existing views-which is why more talk show listeners today are conservatives than liberals. Second, they help sway middle-of-the road, fence-sitting listeners, a growing segment of our voting public.

The key to the Republicans' recent victories was the voters who identify themselves as independents. About 93 percent of self-identified Republicans voted for Republican candidates and 90 percent of Democrats voted for Democrats. Independents sided with Republicans 56 percent to 44 percent, a reversal of the Independents' vote two years ago, which favored the Democrats 54 percent to 46 percent.

Perhaps the most important swing voters in the recent elections were white males, 64 percent of whom voted for Republicans. In some ways, the nation's talk radio system served as a consciousness-raising group for white males, made anxious and fearful by economic decline, changing sex roles and racial tensions.

The last two years of Democratic party dominance of the Congress and the White House provided ideal targets for conservative talk show hosts, who railed against affirmative action, welfare, immigration and gay rights and virtually ignored the Democrats' achievements. For these spokesmen for middle-class anger, it was easy to fulminate against a liberal Congress and president.

But the new conservative Republican grip on Congress poses a dilemma for these radio talk show hosts. What will these right-wing radio raconteurs do now that Newt Gingrich, Bob Dole, the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation are setting the nation's agenda?

They'll still have President Clinton to kick around, of course, but will they also aim their outrage at the Republicans in Congress?

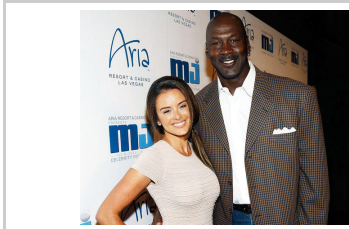
It's unlikely that the talk show audience will stay tuned to two years of cheerleading for the Republican team.

Talk shows thrive on controversy, which drives up ratings. As their ratings slip, what will become of these conservative talk shows?

Radio stations will no doubt drop some of these paleo-pundits from the air. Other conservative radio talkmeisters might try to moderate their views and even attack the Republican leadership in order to stay in business. But it remains to be seen whether audiences will accept this political change-of-heart.

Wouldn't it be fascinating to have a real marketplace of ideas on the nation's radio airwaves? Democracy would be well-served if voices like Limbaugh and G. Gordon Liddy were balanced by the views of people like consumer activist Ralph Nader, recently defeated governors Ann Richards and Mario Cuomo or Faye Wattleton, former head of Planned Parenthood?

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