

Intro

Nick: Communication, the way that humans exchange ideas and opinions. When approached effectively, strong communicators are able to persuade their listeners and influence change. This is a fundamental to success in the political environment. Every day, politicians attempt to persuade potential followers that their ideas are the best. But as the way that people communicate has evolved, so is the way that political discourse takes place.

Gone are the days when politicians let their ideas speak for themselves. With the rise of digital and social media, sensationalism has become a key component in political communication. For example, you may scroll right past Donald Trump's proposal on how to cut taxes. But this?

Donald Trump: So you have to tell Kamala Harris that you've had enough, that you just can't take it anymore. We can't stand you. You're the worst vice president. Kamala, you're fired. Get the hell out of here. You're fired. Get out of here.

Nick: Yeah. That was pretty shocking. I bet my friend would find that funny. I'm going to send that to him.

While Donald Trump may be the best example of this, he sure isn't the only one.

Kamala Harris: Before I was elected vice president, I was elected attorney general of the state of California, and I was a courtroom prosecutor before then. In those roles, I took on perpetrators of all kinds, predators who abused women, fraudsters who ripped off consumers, cheaters who broke the rules for their own gain. So hear me when I say, I know Donald Trump's type.

Nick: Political discussions like this offer little insight. We learn nothing about what either candidate wishes to accomplish if they were to become president. We do learn that neither likes the other. As the November 5th election date nears, it's fair to wonder if political communication like this is truly advantageous to the public. A study by the Pew Research Institute found that over half of US adults get at least some of their news from social

media. Instead of civilized, policy driven discussion, most of these adults analyze political candidates based on the viral videos and clips that they see.

Is it a disservice to the US public that political communication has evolved in this way? I'm Nick Spinali, and welcome to today's episode of Pompous Politicians.

Introducing Professor Jeffrey Ladewig

Nick: Today, I'm joined by Jeffrey Ladewig, who is a professor of political science at the University of Connecticut. We'll be discussing how political communication has changed in recent years and what those changes mean for the public. Professor, if you could just begin by telling us a little bit about yourself.

Professor Ladewig: Sure. I am a professor of political science. I've been here at UConn since 2002. I specialize in American politics. I teach classes on American presidency, American Congress, a lot on congressional apportionment and redistricting as well as American political economy.

Most significant changes in political communication in last decade

Nick: Alright. So this first question, I'll just dive right into it. How would you describe the most significant changes in political communication over the last decade? The most significant over the last decade would I mean, it's a combination of cell phone and the Internet.

Professor Ladewig: You know, in a way, you can't really separate the two. Right? I mean, smartphones and all that. And it's completely changed the way that people communicate, of course. But because that has changed, it has also changed politics and the way that

politicians communicate. No longer do we have the big couple of newspapers that most of the country might read, or your local even your local paper.

That's just not the way people consume news for the most part anymore. And people are able to gravitate now to sources that are much more siloed to their interests, so communication becomes much harder in today's environment.

Social media and political communication

Nick: So, obviously, social media has risen, has become a very prevalent form of communication. How would you say that the rise of social media specifically, we have platforms like Twitter (now X), Facebook, and TikTok. How have they changed the way that politicians communicate with the public?

Professor Ladewig: I mean, it forces them to use it and do things in a format, a venue that, I mean, didn't even exist 10 years ago and is now, you know, perhaps at least for segments of society the only way to reach, some individuals. So you have to be more nimble. You got to be more creative, and it's more hit-or-miss. It's not easy.

Sensational political messages

Nick: So, moving on to the next question. We talked about how social media has risen. So with that, it seems to me that there's been an increase in shorter, more sensational, political messaging. How has that affected the way that political discourse takes place?

Professor Ladewig: I mean, that's exactly the point is if you want to reach maximum audience, right, you need to go viral, like I said. It's hard, like I said. But the best chance of that happening is by being sensational.

Being outrageous. In some ways, Trump is the perfect candidate in this era. His speech, what he says, how he says it, it is very clippable, and oftentimes extreme, and certainly, will get clicks. So, a more traditional politician may not even be able to survive against someone that purposefully or not skilled at the for this moment of time.

Algorithms and echo chambers

Nick: Moving on, we talked about social media and how people, especially with social media, kind of find themselves in an environment where they're surrounded by people with similar interests. So, kind of piggybacking off that, what role do you feel that algorithms and echo chambers that kind of group people who are like minded together, what role do those have in shaping political communication today?

Professor Ladewig: It seems to me, I'm not an expert in the algorithms behind any of these platforms. But the evidence at least suggests that it tends to reinforce people's beliefs already. So if you believe in X, Y, and Z, you're going to be surrounded by other people that believe in X, Y, and Z. And it'll make you feel as if the world agrees with X, Y, and Z and so it'll harden opinions, harden stances, which then creates greater polarization.

If you don't see the other side, you don't talk to people from the other side, from the other side, from the middle, from everywhere. And it's always been tough, but it's even harder today. Then there's less common ground, less bridging of interests, less bridging of people's perspectives, and it hardens polarization.

Disinformation, misinformation, and “fake news”

Nick: I feel like this question segways nicely into my next question, which has to do with disinformation and the spread of misinformation in today's environment. So what impact do you feel that disinformation, misinformation, and fake news may have on today's, political communication?

Professor Ladewig: Well, it can be huge. I mean, one of the toughest things about it is it's hard to test because what I might see is disinformation, if you believe it, it's not disinformation. It's information. And so how do I necessarily how do I figure out what you believe that is based on truth and what is based on disinformation.

It's extremely hard and it's pernicious. And the disinformation, the people that provide it are smart. So, it tends to be clickable, short, extreme. The very things that will get more attention.

The lie is the old saying, the old saw, right? That a lie will travel halfway around the earth before the truth can get his pants on. It seems entirely true and maybe even understates it, you know, the situation today.

The future of political communication

Nick: My next question is looking ahead to the future of communication. Do you anticipate that there will be new trends, trends that may emerge in political communication that can further disrupt or transform the way that politicians engage with the public?

Professor Ladewig: Absolutely. 100%. I mean, it's always changed. It's always changing, from the time of the Constitution when we had just a couple newspapers that are published, like monthly pamphlets. Journalism and the press starts to grow, and part of that gets used to expand the political parties into mass based political parties in the 18 thirties. Then later, you know, not you know, as we get the telegraph and the introduction of radio and yellow journalism as newspapers become cheap and mass produced. That changes politics in the way that the parties act. Introduce television, and that changes what politicians must do and how they must communicate with the public. Internet, smartphones, that changes it. Whether the next one is AI or something that we don't even imagine right now. Will it happen? Absolutely.

Closing remarks: the power lies with the people

Nick: My final question because we've hit on a few different subjects within politics, communication and how that takes place today: is there anything that we haven't discussed that you would like to touch upon?

Professor Ladewig: I mean, what I would say kind of in conclusion in a way is that there's a lot to be kind of discouraged about, about the way that current political communication happens. And I agree with a lot of that too. But it's also where people are.

This is the technology that they're using today, how people communicate with each other today. And politicians have to be able to address that. That's part of the representation.

And the change, the dynamic nature of that, as I kind of alluded to a second ago, is as American as anything else. And it's going to happen. It's going to continue to happen. It's going to be a challenge. And there's going to be good parts about it and bad parts about it. I mean, we have so much more information today on any issue you ever want than 20 years ago. All at my fingertips. It's crazy.

It all comes back to the voters, the citizens. Winston Churchill once said you get the democracy that you deserve. If you don't put much effort in, you don't think., you don't try to discover what might be disinformation or seek out different perspectives or more information on these topics -- it is available to us today -- we're going to get some shit outcomes. And so it's up to us as voters, as citizens, as consumers to be better and to demand better from ourselves and from our politicians. So, I'm pessimistic and optimistic at the same time.

Outro

Nick: Communication will continue to evolve. There's just no stopping it. But with easy access to videos and clips and the subsequent rise of sensational messaging that hopes to take advantage of the outreach of social media, the distinction between politics and personalities has become more blurred than ever. It seems that in order to know the true nature of a politician, one must dig deeper than what they see on TV, hear on the radio, or see on their device/

I guess you can say that what we see makes for a good show, but the leaders of our nation should be more than just entertainment. Instead, it feels like we're living in a never-ending sitcom. With election day just around the corner, American citizens will be faced with a tough decision. Perhaps we would have a more clear idea of which candidate is preferred if political discussion focused more on policy and not demeaning the other candidate. For now, that remains a huge "What if?".

I'm Nick Spinali, and thanks again for listening to today's episode of *Pompous Politicians*.