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War of the Words: Political Talk Radio, the Fairness Doctrine, and Political Polarization in America

Jackson R. Witherill

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WAR OF THE WORDS: POLITICAL TALK RADIO, THE FAIRNESS DOCTRINE, AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN AMERICA

by

Jackson R. Witherill

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors (Political Science)

The Honors College
University of Maine
May 2012

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ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at political talk radio in the United States before and after the removal of the Fairness Doctrine. It examines how, following the end of FCC enforcement of the Fairness Doctrine, the number of stations broadcasting political talk increased, as well as how and why there has been such dominance in the talk radio format by conservative hosts such as Rush Limbaugh. Finally, it examines the increasing trend of political polarization in the United States and what role ideologically charged talk radio may have in the increasing polarization of the American public. This examination is done with four parts that use data collected through polls, studies, surveys, books, and publications. Through presenting this information, this thesis will offer an explanation for, and commentary on, how political talk radio changed post-Fairness Doctrine and how these changes may have had a role in contributing to the current political polarization in the U.S.
DEDICATION

Thanks to all those friends, family, and fellow thesis writers who offered valued words of encouragement and advice during the writing process, it was much appreciated and has not been forgotten. Special thanks to Professor Mark Brewer who provided incorrigible support and guidance throughout the completion of this project and without whom there would not be a finished work.
"The way the way the Fairness Doctrine would work -- and it's being set up this way -- is professional complainers hear me... criticizing Harry Reid, Ted Kennedy. Within minutes the general managers of 600 radio stations would receive phone calls from MoveOn.org-type activists demanding that they get a chance to respond to what I said, and they might put 'em off for a while, but they'd keep calling and keep calling, and if the Fairness Doctrine were law, they would have to grant that, and then the station managers would say, "To hell with this! We can't run a business this way. This is ridiculous. We're turning over the programming, literally, to people who aren't broadcasters. We're a business," and so they just cancel all the, quote, unquote, controversial programming and they'd have to go back to, you know, doing things that nobody wanted to listen to, which is what happened when radio was regulated so much in the first place."

- Rush Limbaugh June 28, 2007
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PROLOGUE

Radio has been a source of entertainment and information for nearly a century. Over that period of time the medium has undergone changes in the content it broadcasts and the way that content affects the lives of American citizens. The research done within this thesis is meant to examine the history and relevancy of one of the more controversial pieces of radio regulation created by the FCC: The Fairness Doctrine. In doing this, the thesis will shed light on the relationship between the end of the Doctrine and the changes in political talk radio broadcasts, exemplified in things such as the number of stations over time, the consolidation of radio by large corporations, the partisan nature of content, and the overall number of listeners.

With the limitations of the Fairness Doctrine in the rearview mirror and more choices for informational and political talk on the air than ever before, the successful nature of opinionated broadcasting has been made apparent. In the time since the end of the Doctrine, radio has evolved (along with the other forms of informational media) creating a world of choices for the American public. As stated in a political journal, "Perhaps the growth of talk radio is contributing to a change in the operation of democracy in the U.S. Just as supermarkets (and now hypermarkets) replaced neighborhood corner markets, perhaps our "marketplace of ideas" now functions more like a supermarket of ideas," where ideas compete not so much on the basis of merit but on the basis of flashy advertising and window dressing. "(Hofstetter and Barker 1999)

While Rush Limbaugh may or may not agree that his ideas are drawing huge numbers of American listeners on the basis of being “flashy,” the underlying point remains: the nature of radio broadcasting has changed just as the nature of buying food has changed.
There are new rules in effect and the most successful hosts are the ones taking advantage of the broadcasting freedoms they have.

These freedoms have made the format of some opinionated political talk shows far different than other types of informational media because many of the radio hosts openly identify with a particular ideology. They pander towards their base of listeners and use inflammatory and insulting comments towards their opposition. It will be demonstrated in this thesis that there is a strong relationship between the partisan ideology of talk show listeners and the ideology of the host. Conservative hosts know they are speaking to a vast majority of conservative listeners and they take advantage of that fact to enforce positive and negative feelings towards different topics.

Interestingly, while one might expect the number of conservative, liberal, or ideologically neutral stations to accurately mirror the number of citizens who identify with those ideologies, it is immediately clear that this is not the case. Liberal Talk Radio has been an astounding failure when compared to the rampant success of its conservative counterpart. Some bemoan the lack of even opinion on the airwaves yet others marvel at the conservative course the free market has taken the format. This thesis aims to look at what makes conservative political talk radio so successful, how pundits such as Rush Limbaugh maintain their dominance of the airwaves, and how this might affect the millions of weekly listeners.

This thesis finally makes the postulation that ideologically polarized radio broadcasting is contributing towards more polarized partisan attitudes in their listeners. Polarizing feelings are described as an intensification of partisan attitudes by the media and American population towards either end of the spectrum resulting in unwillingness to
compromise and greater conflict. This thesis will show that it may be possible to connect
the increase in ideologically opinionated broadcasts, as allowed by the removal of the
Fairness Doctrine, to increases in polarizing partisanship in the American public.
PART I:

Introduction of Research and History of the Fairness Doctrine

The diverse, rapidly changing landscape of American politics makes for a challenging yet fascinating place to examine the effects of any mandate, regulation, or legislation. This thesis attempts to do just that and uses data compiled from sources including the Pew Research Center, Arbitron Ratings, and the Times Mirror Center to attempt to examine political talk radio and its changes before and after the end of the Fairness Doctrine, an FCC mandate designed to ensure a balance between competing ideologies on the radio airwaves.

The opening chapter focuses on the history of the Fairness Doctrine beginning with the reasons behind its creation and how it affected broadcasters throughout its life and enforcement. Details are given on the court cases challenging its constitutionality and finally the events within the FCC that contributed to its decision to eliminate Fairness Doctrine enforcement in 1987.

Part two begins by examining the ways in which radio changed in the period of time following the Fairness Doctrine's removal. Data are shown comparing the numbers of radio stations from the 1970s and 1990s to see observable trends. Further studies are included to see the increases in stations broadcasting informational and talk formats in the years immediately following the removal of the Fairness Doctrine. Finally, the cause and effects of the nationalization of the radio market are looked at.

The third part of this thesis examines what effect the removal of the Fairness Doctrine has had in the success and dominance of conservative talk radio. Data are used to support the argument that much of the conservative talk radio was made possible
through the removal of the Fairness Doctrine and the nationalization of broadcasting companies. It is made clear that much of what has made the genre of "conservative talk radio" so successful would not have been possible with the Fairness Doctrine in place.

Finally the fourth part of this thesis will attempt to describe the possible effects the changes in the radio broadcasting market have on listener political preference, and in contributing towards polarizing attitudes. This section is based purely on speculative reasoning and makes no claims or assertions of causality based on the data presented.

A Brief History of Radio Broadcasting, the FCC, and the Fairness Doctrine

Talk radio has long been influential as a form of electronic mass communication and entertainment. Pre-dating computers and television, talk show hosts have been transmitting their messages into the households of the masses for nearly a century. Over this period of time, American political and societal structures have seen dramatic changes that have in turn resulted in substantial transformations for the talk radio format and the regulations placed upon it.

Since radio's birth as a form of mass communication it has been under the protective arm of the federal government. The creation of its long-standing oversight committee, the Federal Communications Commission, and the enactment of legislation aimed at protecting the quality and availability of the content available, have significantly affected the context in which informational broadcasting, and particularly political talk radio, have been aired. Perhaps one of the most significant pieces of legislation aimed at regulating the use of the airwaves to distribute information, The Fairness Doctrine was created in the mid 20th Century and was intended to place limitations on the content of radio and television programs by ensuring all competing points of view were broadcast.
The period of time within which this doctrine was in effect and the period of time immediately following its removal mark a stark change in the informational/talk radio landscape. This thesis examines the changes to the structure of broadcasting talk radio, through regulations such as the establishment and removal of the Fairness Doctrine, and discusses some of the widespread and influential results for American voters.

Radio has had political uses since its establishment in the early 1920s. President Calvin Coolidge used radio as early as 1923 to give an address to Congress (Old Radio Shows 2008) and was followed by all presidents coming after him, each seeing clearly the importance of its use in addressing huge numbers of people over a large geographic area. As radio evolved past its beginning stages and competition for location and use of the limited space on the airwaves increased, it became clear that there needed to be governmental oversight and regulation of the medium. Communications, including radio, was determined to be an interstate good and thus could be regulated under the Commerce Clause by the federal government. In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Communications Act, a bill which created a regulatory committee entitled the Federal Communications Committee (FCC). The purpose behind the creation of this committee is written as follows,

For the purpose of regulating interstate and foreign commerce in communication by wire and radio so as to make available, so far as possible, to all the people of the United States a rapid, efficient, Nation-wide, and world-wide wire and radio communication service with adequate facilities at reasonable charges, for the purpose of the national defense. (United States. Cong. 1934)
Following its creation in 1934, the FCC replaced the previously established Federal Radio Commission and effectively became the regulatory arm behind all radio communications in the United States. It quickly ruled that the use of the airwaves was a special and limited good, and that it was entitled to monitor it accordingly. Early communications legislation established an American system for broadcasting, and through this system, individuals or corporations were able to purchase licenses to broadcast. Additionally, in order to get a license the broadcasting company had to comply with all FCC regulations, and without a license, broadcasting was illegal (Ruane 2009). The regulation was initially set up to minimize conflict and interference between competing stations and broadcasters. Congress quickly realized a potential flaw in the system, that the few people or companies who were given licenses had complete control over the content of the material broadcast to the vast majority of the American public. The FCC stated that the broadcast market was imperfect because in a market characterized by monopolistic competition, broadcasters will choose formats of "excessive sameness." (Hazlett and Sosa 1997) Following this, the FCC began to make their requirements increasingly stringent and grant licenses only in situations where the broadcasts served the public interest (Ruane 2009).

The Supreme Court has noted that this clearly lay within the boundaries of FCC jurisdiction, as its ability to determine which groups they allow to broadcast through both television and radio. It developed two principle tools to affect the programming choices of broadcasters, one aimed at content regulation and the other at structural regulation.

Noting that prior to FCC involvement there was chaos between broadcasting stations and frequencies, the FCC went on to determine that the groups which presented
multiple, or most balanced, viewpoints in their programming were most in the public interest.

Furthermore, over time this preference evolved into a duty outlined in a report called, *Editorializing by Broadcast Licensees*. In this report the FCC outlined its beliefs on the duty of radio broadcast on the public airwaves. The report outlines the need for presentations of multiple viewpoints and justifies it by citing the public interest, saying, "If, as we believe to be the case, the public interest is best served in a democracy through the ability for the people to hear expositions of the various positions taken by responsible groups and individuals on particular topics and to choose between them, it is evident that broadcast licensees have an affirmative duty generally to encourage and implement the broadcast of all sides of their obligation to make available on demand opportunities for the expression of opposing views." (FCC 1949) To be clear, the document's intention was not to eliminate editorialized broadcasting, but rather to ensure that one-sided opinion did not receive higher ratings and come to dominate the radio. From this report, the Fairness Doctrine was born. The Fairness Doctrine of 1949 was also made to include two centrally important requirements for all broadcasters:

1) That every licensee devote a reasonable portion of broadcast time to the discussion and consideration of controversial issues of public importance; and

2) That in doing so, the broadcaster must be fair – that is, the broadcaster must affirmatively endeavor to make facilities available for the expression of contrasting viewpoints held by responsible elements with respect to the controversial issues presented. (FCC, 1949)

The implication for broadcasters was clear: if they did not tailor their programs to fit the outlines provided by the FCC in the Fairness Doctrine, they could lose their broadcasting
license. The Commission released an additional statement on their actions in 1949 saying:

It is axiomatic that one of the most vital questions of mass communication in a democracy is the development of an informed public opinion through the public dissemination of news and ideas concerning the vital issues of the day.... The Commission has consequently recognized the necessity for licensees to devote a reasonable percentage of their broadcast time to the presentation of news and programs devoted to the consideration and discussion of public issues of interest in the community served by the particular station. And we have recognized, with respect to such programs, the paramount right of the public in a free society to be informed and to have presented to it for acceptance or rejection the different attitudes and viewpoints concerning these vital and often controversial issues which are held by the various groups which make up the community. (F.C.C. 1249)(Hazlett and Sosa 1997)

The details of the Fairness Doctrine continued deeper than simply stating the broadcasts must be fair. One part, known as the personal attack rule, stated that “when personal attacks were made on individuals involved in public issues, the broadcaster had to, within one week of the broadcast, notify the person attacked, provide him with a copy of the broadcast (either script or tape), and allow him an opportunity to respond over the broadcaster’s facilities.”(Ruane 2009) There also existed a political editorial rule, which required a broadcaster who endorsed a particular candidate for office to allow his qualified opponents a chance to respond through the broadcasters facilities. (Ruane 2009) Even if the content of the programs run by certain broadcasters was not deemed to be in violation of the Fairness Doctrine, a challenge by one side could initiate a legal
examination which would result in court fees, lost time, and essentially fine the station without any violation being found.

All of these regulations, while well intentioned, were clearly burdensome to any station with shows that featured hosts engaging in any opinionated commentary. The result of this was that there were very few talk shows on the air. In 1980, radio was highly popular with Americans of all regions yet the number of informational or talk shows was only around 100 nationwide. (Anderson 2008) Opponents of the doctrine quickly became angry and vocal, calling it a violation of First Amendment rights and stating that the power held by the FCC was overwhelmingly influential in controlling the material broadcast and lent itself to the abuse by regulators pressured by different political actors. An unintended consequence of the Fairness Doctrine also began to work its way into the public spotlight: self-censorship by the broadcasters would result in less talking, or, a “chilling effect.” This meant hosts were leaving out large dialogs for fear of receiving a violation which clearly stemmed the flow of controversial, but free, speech. It is clear that the fairness doctrine had both a controversial role in influencing the restraint of broadcasters concerning the content of their programs as well as a potential conflict with the first amendment.

This conflict between the FCC, in support of the Fairness Doctrine, and lawmakers, broadcasters, and individuals against it, continued throughout the life of the Doctrine. The FCC created more ambiguity and reduced the frequency of required enforcement through emphasizing that broadcasters needed only to demonstrate that they acted "reasonably and in good faith to present a fair cross-section of opinion on the controversial issue." (Applicability of the Fairness Doctrine in the Handling of
Controversial Issues of Public Importance, 29 Fed. Reg. 10416(1964)) The Commission stated that harmless errors and honest mistakes were not actionable and that the actual merits of competing viewpoints were not reviewable by the agency. Things that were, however, reviewable include: "a nutritionist giving advice about diet and health, and programs describing socialist forms of government." (Ruane, 2009) The controversial issue eventually made its way to the Supreme Court several times.

The most significant case involving the Fairness Doctrine made its way before the Supreme Court in 1969. In Red Lion Broadcasting Co, Inc. v. FCC, the Supreme Court looked at two questions related to the constitutionality of the FCC’s actions and the Fairness Doctrine. The two specific questions reviewed were: Did the FCC have the authority to create and enforce the Fairness Doctrine? And following that, Did requiring broadcasters to cover issues of importance and to present opposing views on those issues fairly violate the broadcasters’ right to free speech through the First Amendment? Despite the highly controversial nature of the questions put to the Court, the decision was unanimous. The Supreme Court found that the FCC was acting on good authority in regards to the first question of creating and enforcing the Fairness Doctrine, citing reasons including the broadcasting spectrum scarcity which made the situation completely different from the right of each individual to speak and write unhindered and that the agency was merely implementing and enforcing a policy of Congress, not "embarking on a frolic of its own." (Red Lion 1969)

Upon examining the second question presented to them, the Supreme Court delivered an opinion saying:

Because of the scarcity of radio frequencies, the Government is permitted to put restraints on licensees in
favor of others whose views should be expressed on this unique medium. But the people as a whole retain their interest in free speech by radio and their collective right to have the medium function consistently with the ends and purposes of the First Amendment. It is the right of the viewers and listeners, not the right of the broadcasters, which is paramount. (Red Lion 1969)

The Courts decision was crucial as it effectively extended the life of the Fairness Doctrine. However, the Supreme Court made note and offered speculation on a potential problem that they labeled the "chilling effect." This effect, in theory, was created by the self-censorship of broadcasters due to the fact that each unit of informational programming they ran increased the probability that there would be a challenge filed under the Fairness Doctrine. The potential for fees, including those associated with a case found to be in compliance with the Fairness Doctrine, could have resulted in a steady lack of coverage surrounding controversial issues. The "chilling effect," if found to be occurring, would have clearly been an infringement of First Amendment rights and would have resulted in the end of Fairness Doctrine enforcement. While the Fairness Doctrine continued to be enforced for an additional 18 years, growing jurisprudence on the First Amendment following Red Lion continued to push for more broadcaster's rights.

By the 1980s the necessity of the Fairness Doctrine was again called into question. President Reagan's election ushered in an era of increased broadcaster support within the FCC, which included the appointment of Chairman Mark Fowler. Chairman Fowler was an attorney specializing in communications who had served on Ronald Reagan's campaign staff, and it was his initiative that lead the FCC to release a report in 1985 saying the doctrine was not serving the public interest as intended and violated free
speech rights guaranteed by the First Amendment. (Belmas and Overbeck, 2011) The Commission stated,

Because a decision by this Commission to deny the renewal of a broadcast license is "a sanction of tremendous potency" which can be triggered by a finding by this Commission that the licensee failed to comply with the Fairness Doctrine, a licensee has the incentive to avoid even the potential for such a determination. Therefore, in order to attenuate the possibility that opponents, in a renewal proceeding, will challenge the manner in which a licensee provides balance with respect to the controversial issues it chooses to cover, a broadcaster may be inhibited from presenting controversial issue programming in excess of the minimum required to satisfy the first prong of the Fairness Doctrine. (102 F.C.C. 2d 162)

While the Supreme Court had accepted the FCC’s assertion that nothing within the Fairness Doctrine was having a negative "chilling" effect on programming during the Red Lion v. FCC case of 1969, it left a decision to repeal the doctrine up to the findings of the commission. In 1987 FCC Chairman Dennis Patrick lead a vote in favor of abolishing the doctrine after the court case Syracuse Peace Council v. F.C.C. effectively ending the doctrine’s life. Chairman Patrick spoke on the abolishment saying, "the intrusion by government into the content of programming occasioned by the enforcement of the fairness doctrine restricts the journalistic freedom of broadcasters and actually inhibits the presentation of controversial issues of public concern to the detriment of the public and the degradation of the editorial prerogative of the broadcast journalist." (Shu 2009)

Congress pushed back against the FCC vote and tried to make the Fairness Doctrine law, however President Reagan vetoed the legislation. (Shu 2009) Congress went on to review a number of alternatives to the Fairness Doctrine ranging from
abandoning a case-by-case approach to enforcement, to doing away with the personal attack rule and other aspects of the doctrine. Each of these proposals was rejected for different reasons and finally, in 1987, the entire Fairness Doctrine was removed. (Ruane 2009)

The FCC, in order to serve the public interest and promote a diverse flow of ideas, established the Fairness Doctrine. It became clear in the mid 1980s that the Fairness Doctrine was creating the opposite of the desired effect and that governmental involvement in the regulation of broadcasters content hurt, rather than served, the openness and exchange of ideas on the air. The FCC recognized and fully supported the removal of Fairness Doctrine regulations in 1987, and while technically never repealed, for the last 25 years is has gone unenforced. This has allowed broadcasters to have free reign over the balance or bias in the content they broadcast and has prompted a shift in the radio industry and caused dramatic changes, which would have never been possible under the regulatory arm of the Fairness Doctrine.
PART II:

Political Talk Radio After the Fairness Doctrine

When political talk radio is mentioned, several names immediately spring to mind, most notably Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, and Sean Hannity. These hosts are all representative of the conservative talk radio stations that make up a disproportionate number of the percentage of talk broadcasters. Given the relatively even spread of political ideologies in the United States, conservative radio broadcasters remain vastly more popular than their "liberal" or "unbiased" counterparts. A 2008 poll of more than 30,000 Americans conducted by Gallup puts the current number of self-proclaimed Democrats at 36% and the number of Republicans at 28%.

*Party Identification Yearly Averages, Gallup Polls, 1988-2008*

![Graph showing party identification yearly averages from 1988 to 2006.](image)

Figure 1. Gallup, 2009

Judging by this statistic alone, one might assume that radio programs with a liberal ideology would be, if anything, more popular than their conservative counterparts. This is far from the truth however. The number of weekly listeners for only the top two
conservative hosts, Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, were around 29 million combined in 2010, more than the weekly average listeners for all of NPR (Pew, 2012). The overall number of radio stations airing any form of talk radio, in an age when people can plug in and tune out through music on the web and on mp3 players, remains strong.

Why, when the radio industry is facing sweeping changes and the threat of increasing irrelevance at the hands of digital information, is political talk radio of the conservative ideology, still thriving? How has the number of stations airing talk programs changed in the last 30 years? Why are the overwhelming majority of talk radio broadcasters of the conservative ideology? These are all relevant questions to understanding the rise of political talk radio and the relationship between the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine and the changes that took place in the years following. Through looking at the multitude of influential factors, the reasons behind the rise of political talk radio and the relationship between the Fairness Doctrine and said rise will become clearer. The first step in examining the overall effect of the removal of the Fairness Doctrine is to examine the trends in general radio broadcasting before and after its removal.

Changes Occurring Post-Fairness Doctrine

Coinciding with the end of the enforcement of the Fairness Doctrine, several major changes took place in the world of radio broadcasting that would prove to have an effect on the broadcast radio market, ultimately leading to an increase in the number of radio stations in the United States. This increase in the number of terrestrial radio stations
following the end of the Fairness Doctrine, across both the FM and AM format, is well documented and is examined in the following section of this thesis.

One of the likely reasons for the loosening of FCC regulations was a more pro-
First Amendment and pro-broadcasting freedom FCC chairman ushered in by the Reagan administration. As mentioned in chapter 1, Chairman Mark Fowler pursued things such as a more lenient public policy by the FCC, through which the FCC gave out more broadcasting licenses, as well as a greater market demand for radio stations (Hazlett and Sosa 1997). The Museum of Broadcast Communication marked the period of Fowler’s time with the FCC as one of significant deregulation of media stating, “Ensuing years saw removal of many long-standing rules resulting in an overall reduction in FCC oversight of station and network operations” (Sterling).

The period of time from the late 1970s, through the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine, and continuing to the mid 1990s, included a number of changes to FCC policy that greatly reduced the number of requirements the FCC placed on broadcasters. Requirements that were done away with include: Non-entertainment Program Regulation (guidelines for how much informational programming to include in broadcasts,) ascertainment (formal documentation of community needs,) commercials (limitations on amount of commercial airtime allowed,) balance in opinionated content (Fairness Doctrine,) and finally, limits on the number of stations a corporation could own. (Changed by the Telecommunications act of 1996) (Hazlett and Sosa 1997). The FCC’s decrease in regulations across the board stemmed from a change in view of the role government should play in regulating media and the use of the airwaves as a limited public resource. Furthermore the Commission reached the conclusion that open market
competition was a more efficient and reliable source of regulation than the bureaucratic policies put forth by the government (Hazlett and Sosa 1997). The most controversial change implemented, as discussed in the first part of this analysis, was the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, which is the focus of this thesis.

All of the aforementioned changes had a clear impact on the total number of music, informational talk, and religious stations across the genres. In order to illustrate some of the changes in the number of radio stations over the year period from 1975 to 1995, Figure 2 is presented below.

![AM Radio Station Format Summary: 1975 and 1995](image)

Figure 2. Hazlett and Sosa, Broadcasting and Cable Yearbook 1997

As shown by the table above, the number of stations within 19 of 28 total genres, and all of the 4 genres of talk/informational, increased between the years of 1975 and
1995. In addition, 8 genres within each category were created within the time period representing a move towards increasing diversity in station formatting.

In the three figures below, there is a clear upward trend in the number of information/talk radio stations within the AM and FM categories during the same time parameters. Particularly striking is the rapid increase in the number of informational stations in the AM (as well as FM to a lesser extent) category between the years of 1987 and 1995. Within the AM category the informational market share rose from 7.11 percent in 1987 to 27.6 percent in 1995.

![Graph showing the trend of AM radio stations from 1975 to 1995]

Figure 3. *Selected AM source categories nationwide.* Hazlett and Sosa. 1997
Another striking feature of Figure 5 lies with its steady increase of stations over that 20-year period.

Figure 4. *Selected FM source categories nation wide*. Hazlett and Sosa, 1997

Figure 5. *Total number of AM and FM stations 1975-1995*. Hazlett and Sosa, 1997
Combining the data from all of these graphs, it is made abundantly clear that between the years of 1975 and 1995 there is an increase in the number of both AM and FM "Info" stations broadcasting in the United States. The number of AM stations has a mild increase from year to year up to the late 1980s at which point the number rises sharply. The number of FM stations increased steadily until around 1990 at which point the market share of "Info" dramatically increased. While exact causality is unclear, it should be noted that this occurred within the period of the before mentioned policy changes towards deregulation by the FCC. The data show a strong positive correlation between the removal of regulatory burdens, including the Fairness Doctrine, and an increase in the market share of Info. This is not to say there a causal relationship between deregulation of radio broadcasting and an increase in programming across several genres, but the statistics are nevertheless relevant.

A study conducted by the ARAnet Online library of Public Radio Research tracked the numbers of public radio listeners from 1970 to 1992. Over this period of time, public radio saw a significant increase in listenership. The study divided the data into three different time periods: 1970-80, 1980-83, and 1983-92, and looked at the two factors they cite as driving the growth in listeners. These factors are, availability (the ability of a potential audience to receive public stations’ signals,) and accessibility, the extent to which programming encourages listening, thereby turning a potential audience into an actual audience (Giovanioni 1992). Accessibility improved dramatically in the 1980s with the number people reachable by a public signal increasing from 7 in 10 in 1980 to 9 in 10 in the early 1990s. This increase has been attributed to the increasing upgrades of existing facilities and the expansion of existing licensees who already had a
public radio operation (Giovannoni, 1992). The graph compiling the listener’s data is presented below in figure 6.

![Public Radio’s National Audience Growth](image)

Figure 6. *Public Radio’s National Audience Growth*. Giovannoni, 1992

The data presented marks another interesting correlation between the years of noted deregulation by the FCC under Chairman Fowler and an overall increase in the number of listeners. While the various specific reasons causing this are not clear, they may include availability and accessibility, as well as a growing base of listeners interested in the talk format presented on Public Radio. The documentation showing the corresponding deregulation of broadcasters (including the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine) and the increasing number of listeners to the format over time is in line with the overarching growth of the talk/informational radio format.
In the years following the publication of the Public Radio Audience report, the medium of terrestrial radio continued to grow. The Project for Excellence in Journalism survey conducted in the State of the Media report in 2004, the numbers show a clear increase in licensed broadcasting stations between the years 1990 and 2003. The data are compiled and shown in Figure 7 below.

### Number Of Licensed Broadcast Radio Stations, 1990 to 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Stations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>10770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>10989</td>
</tr>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>11275</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>12717</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>13012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>13296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>13450</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7. *Number of Licensed Broadcast Radio Stations, 1990 to 2003.* The State of the News Media 2004

The increasing number of stations shown on the table continues the trend depicted in previous figures. This continues to highlight the expansion of radio as a form of media following the deregulatory measures of the FCC in the ’70s and ’80s.

Through looking at the evidence presented in these numbers and graphs, one is able to support the idea that the removal of the Fairness Doctrine, as part of the larger
theme of deregulation pursued by the FCC in the 1970s and 1980s, affected the growth of the broadcasting industry. "The data suggest that even in the absence of free entry, informational programming increased with the lifting of regulatory burdens. This is evidence that the old rules indeed provided a disincentive to broadcasting informational programs." (Hazlett and Sosa 1997). If the Supreme Court had access to this data in their review of the Red Lion case, there would have been substantial evidence towards the view that the Fairness Doctrine indeed had a "chilling effect" on the broadcasting market as exposed by the rapid increase in the number of stations operating without fear of license revocation due to fairness infringement.

The end of Fairness Doctrine enforcement has become one of the most common arguments towards the reasons behind the rise of ideologically opinionated radio hosts. The idea seems valid, at first glance, as the repeal of the doctrine allowed for the station owners to broadcast ideological, opinionated, and controversial material (that became staples of the talk show format) without worry of having to and devote time and resources to a response. Talk show hosts that took advantage of the newfound freedom of speech over the airwaves in the late 1980s and early 1990s would come to define the genre.

While the correlation between the end of Fairness Doctrine and the subsequent rise in the general number of licensed broadcasting stations is close, there are relevant data that suggest that the removal of the Fairness Doctrine also contributed to the specific rise and long-term growth and success of the political talk radio format. As is shown by data collected on Pew Research Center, the number of News/Talk/Information Stations closely followed the total number of stations for the period of 1999 to 2003.
Number of News/Talk/Information Stations Vs. Total Stations
1999 - 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Stations</th>
<th>News/Talk/Information Stations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>12876</td>
<td>1682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>13307</td>
<td>1724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>13511</td>
<td>1838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>13685</td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>13898</td>
<td>2076</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8. State of the News Media 2005.

A larger period of time, from 1998 to 2009, is examined in the Arbitron study illustrated in Figure 9.

The Success of Talk Radio

Over that eleven-year period the number of stations more than doubled. The deregulation of the radio market by the FCC likely contributed, yet there are other causes responsible for the long-term growth and success of the format. One of the most enigmatic trends of within radio is that during the past ten years the number of talk radio listeners has remained constant even while the overall number of radio listeners has gone down. The stable ratings for talk radio and the reasons talk radio has been able to maintain its strong success (and grow), even while other genres of radio have failed due to various changes in the market, are looked at in the following paragraphs.

One theory is that the strong success of the Informational and Talk radio genres are the effect of the consolidation of radio stations by industry giants, such as Clear Channel Communications. In the wake of the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine, one of the most significant changes to take place was the spread of national broadcasting companies. The major consolidation of radio stations began with the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Prior to this act, ownership of multiple stations was restricted due to barriers in place to limit the amount of ownership within a specific radio market area as well as across the nation. In 1996 these strict regulations were lifted and the number of stations any one company could own dramatically increased. There are now no restrictions on the number of stations a company can own nationally and as the market size decreases the number of stations a company can own decreases on a scale. (Berry and Sobieraj 2011) The State of the News Media 2004 published numbers of the number of stations owned by the top radio broadcasting companies from 1999 - 2003 which can be seen in figure 10 below.
Change in Stations Owned by the Top Companies
1999 - 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clear Channel</th>
<th>Cumulus</th>
<th>Citadel</th>
<th>Infinity</th>
<th>Entercom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1157</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1211</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>1211</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1207</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10. Source: Journalism.org The State of the News Media 2004

Clearly there is an upward trend for the number of stations owned by the top companies during that five year period.

The results of this widespread amalgamation have been dramatic for the radio industry and the trend in figure 10 is only a snapshot of the larger picture. Throughout the mid 1990s and 2000s the radio market has seen a decrease of small, locally owned and operated "mom and pop" stations, and the widespread corporatization of the radio market (Berry and Sobieraj 2011). A look at the top five broadcasting companies and their revenues (in millions of dollars) over the period of time from 1995 to 2003 show the steady and significant growth of the companies during that time period.
Revenues from News Stations for Top Companies
1995 - 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Clear Channel</th>
<th>Cumulus</th>
<th>Citadel</th>
<th>Infinity Broadcasting</th>
<th>Entercom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>251.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>209.8</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>268.6</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>215.2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>306.6</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>231.8</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>60.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>255.4</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>390.5</td>
<td>67.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>441.8</td>
<td>68.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>269.6</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>66.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>287.1</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>412.6</td>
<td>73.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11. The State of the News Media, 2005.

Clear Channel Communications is now the current market leader owning more than 850 radio stations, programs including the Rush Limbaugh Show, the Sean Hannity Show and Glenn Beck, and taking in $6.2 billion of revenue in 2011. Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj of Tufts University interviewed a number of radio executives in 2011 and they found common ground on the sentiment that "the surge in talk radio programming was supply driven, not demand driven" (Berry and Sobieraj 2011). This means that as individual stations within national corporations became unprofitable, switching to talk radio programming was an attempt to stay in business through producing inexpensive and nationally broadcast programs.

The rise in the number of talk radio stations has meant that syndicated programs, which have become increasingly common, have gained a higher level of exposure through the creation of more stations airing the same material in new locations. This increased exposure results in higher ratings for the show. Additionally, in a poll done by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in 2008, it was found that regular
audiences of nationally run programs such as The Rush Limbaugh Show and NPR had a higher interest in national news than the average American. Eighty percent of Rush Limbaugh's audience and seventy-eight percent of NPR listeners described themselves as having a strong interest in national news, compared to the national average of 55%. (Pew Research Center 2008) It is certainly possible that due to exposure to national broadcasts, often at the expense of local broadcasts, the interest in national news is higher for those who tune in to syndicated broadcasts through stations owned by large companies.

With all of these changes, the overall percentage of listeners out of the entire market share has remained relatively steady. Over the period of time from 1995 to 2001 the percentage has hovered at around 16% despite the many other changes taking place within radio. Using data taken from a 2001 Arbitron study the table showing the percentage of talk radio listeners over time has been compared to the percentage of country listeners.

### Percent of Radio Listening Audience 1995-2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News/Talk</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Audience Ratings and Their Impact on Revenue. Figure 12. Arbitron Data, 2001*

This corporatization has allowed the profits to remain relatively steady for the terrestrial radio industry throughout the advent of digital music, Internet radio, and satellite radio. The table above by Arbitron shows this steady trend over the last decade.
There is little question that talk radio is currently one of the most successful parts of the broadcast radio industry. The number of talk radio stations has increased from 500 to almost 3500 in the last 20 years (State of the News Media 2011). The simple and attractive format of a talk radio station format contrasts sharply with the mass of pop music stations struggling to compete with mp3 players and Internet radio stations such as Pandora. In the talk radio format, one or two hosts will bring up and discuss current events, divisive political issues, and anything they see fit and say provocative and sometimes outrageous things about them before taking calls from listeners. The routine is refreshed everyday, changing with the current events of the time. Additionally, the current events and rapidly changing conversation style of talk radio prevents the digital, Internet, and satellite methods of listening from stealing their audience (Berry and Sobieraj 2011). This listening format also offers several things traditional musical radio does not and is partially responsible for the genre's success in the last 20 years. The addition of digital music players, Internet radio stations, and Sirius/XM satellite radio, all contribute to the downfall of the financial viability of the traditional music stations. As fewer listeners tune in to music stations the loss of ad revenue makes it increasingly difficult for stations to try and branch out try unique formats, or engage in other practices to increase listenership.

The talk radio format has been able to sustain long-term advertising revenue while traditional music stations have not. This is due to the audience of talk radio being more attractive to advertisers (Radio Advertising Bureau, 2009). Arbitron released an article on audience ratings and their impact on revenue in which they stated, "Because ratings are the currency by which radio time is bought and sold, ratings are a likely indicator of
revenues. An increase in a station’s share of listeners will generally translate into more dollars. And a station’s share of revenue increases more substantially the higher its share of the audience” (Arbitron 2001). It stands to reason that the audience of a talk show is somewhat educated and reasonably affluent, with enough income to have a stake in current events outside their immediate geographical area. The talk radio audience is also believed to be more attentive to the broadcast than the audience for music. The nature of the content broadcast ensures that they are actively listening and thinking about what is being said rather than simply listening to music in the background.

A study published by Political Research Quarterly, is examined in an article entitled Political Talk Radio: A Stereotype Reconsidered. The article looks at the effects listening to political talk radio has on listeners and discusses the reasons listeners cite for tuning in to political talk shows. They concluded that there is indeed a strong association between political involvement or activity and listening to talk radio. In addition, "Frequent listeners to political talk radio are more interested in politics, pay more attention to politics in the mass media, vote more, and participate more than others in a variety of political activities." (Hofstetter and Donovan, 1994).

Furthermore, the number of people who tune into talk radio to get their campaign news has continued to rise. While television is still the clear leader according to the Pew post-election survey published in 2005, radio as an election source has increased from 12% in 1992 to 22% in 2004 indicating its increasing relevance to vote conscious listeners.
When asked about the general motivation behind listening to talk radio, people reported "information seeking" as the most important in their reasoning, with it being the dominant motivation 48.6% of the time. "Entertainment" was cited second most important reason at 19.3%, then "personal interest" at 11.9% and finally 10.7% answered, "to pass time." (Hofstetter and Donovan 1994).

Based upon the findings of this study, advertisers have a large group of recurrent listeners actively seeking information and potentially eagerly awaiting any messages the advertisers put out. It is easy to see the draw of talk radio to advertisers based on these statistics, as it is far more likely to reach a consumer actively listening than to win the attention of someone passively listening to music in the background.

The differences between a traditional music radio station and one dedicated to talk radio do not stop with advertiser interest. One of the more significant variances lies in the

---

Figure 13. Post-election surveys of voters, Pew Research Center 2005
ability for listeners to call in and be featured on the air. Potential for the talk radio
listeners to attempt to voice their own opinions is a feature new to radio broadcasting
since the end of the Fairness Doctrine and it is used to additionally entice listeners. Even
if they choose not to call, they are engaged in the on-air discussion and have the illusion
of being included in the discussion. The study published by the Political Research
Quarterly and mentioned earlier in this section also looks at reasons people cite for
calling in to voice their opinions. When asked an open ended question of the reason for
their call to a political talk program, 58% reported the reason was to "express themselves"
on a current topic. Callers claimed they called to “express disagreement with a guest or
the host” 24% of the time. The third highest percentage of callers wanted to “seek
specific information” and finally 4.9 percent of callers wanted to “express agreement
with a guest or host” (Hofstetter and Donovan 1994). These numbers show clearly that
the most significant number of callers (when the general expression, agreement, and
disagreement, are all combined) are of the conservative political ideology and are calling
to engage in the conversation and make their opinion heard. Of the percentage of frequent
talk radio listeners polled by Times Mirror (which would become part of the Pew
Research Center) Eleven percent report they have attempted to call into a radio program
and six percent report success in getting on the air to make their views on issues known.
Three percent of the respondents report succeeded in doing so in the past 12 months. (The
Vocal Minority)

The talk radio retention rate is strong and the frequent listeners place their trust in
the personalities hosting the radio show. This makes an endorsement of a product by a
talk show personality particularly attractive to advertisers and listeners alike. If an on-air
personality such as Glenn Beck says on his show that something is a good product or that some company is a good investment, the audience will feel as though he is giving trustworthy advice even if he was paid to say it.

The data presented in this chapter show a strong trend towards the increase in both the overall number of stations and the increased relevancy of informational/talk radio. The decrease of regulation afforded by the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine marked the beginning of a time of growth and consolidation for radio broadcasting and a rise of the talk radio format within the United States.
PART III: Conservative Ideology in Political Talk Radio

While the total number of radio stations has seen a dramatic increase over the last 20 years, and the presence and success of political talk radio have followed suit, the expansion of talk radio has not resulted in increased ideological diversity. At first glance this trend seems counterintuitive. Why, when the number of successful talk radio stations is blooming, is there not an even distribution between liberal and conservative ideologies on the air? In 1993 talk radio was described in a study done by the Times Mirror Center for People and the Press as being "a place where liberal, moderate, and conservative hosts shared the air." (Times Mirror Center, 1993) Yet nearly 20 years later, political talk radio has shifted and is now overwhelmingly conservative in host ideology. That dominance has raised the question of what political effects (if any) repeatedly listening to these hosts have on listeners. The concern over the use of public airwaves to broadcast a single point of view has been reignited and there have been whispers of restoring pieces of the fairness doctrine by some members of Congress. The rise of conservatism in political talk radio is believed to have been caused by several factors and regardless of if one looks at the overall number of stations, the total number of hours broadcast, the popularity of individual stations, or the total number of talk programs, conservatism is the dominant ideology on the airwaves.

To address the question of how conservative talk radio came into dominance, one must look to the end of the Fairness Doctrine and the period of deregulation in radio at the beginning of the 1990s. The Persian Gulf War and the 1992 election of Bill Clinton dominated the political landscape. At that time, political talk radio was a format just
beginning to catch on, and there existed a balance between conservative and liberal talk show hosts that has long since disappeared. The American public that tuned into political talk radio was growing, yet it was ideologically imbalanced from the beginning. A snapshot of the American public in 1993 is presented in *A Vocal Minority in American Politics*, which looked at sample of people and compiled data on their listening habits and political ideology.

The report began by looking at the listeners; specifically who the people were that listened to talk radio. In one sense, the audience for talk radio looked very much like the nation as a whole. The study found that the sampling of the American public was fairly close to being an accurate depiction of the different demographics in the United States. The sample's average age, race, education and income did not deviate far from the national averages. However the distinguishing factor, in the respondents who claimed to listen to talk radio, was that they were considerably more likely to be male, to be registered in the Republican Party and to hold conservative political views.

Of the people sampled, the study found:

The largest group differences in listening to talk radio are clearly by political orientation. Republicans (26%) are twice as likely as Democrats (12%) to report regularly listening to talk radio. Overall, 50% of Republicans say they listen to talk radio either regularly or sometimes, compared to 35% of Democrats and 41% of Independents... Half of all conservatives say they listen either regularly or sometimes, compared to 37% of liberals and 40% of those in between. Conservatives are also more likely than liberals both to call in and to actually give voice to their opinions over the airwaves. Nine percent of conservatives versus four percent of liberals say they have talked on the air. (Times Mirror Center *The Vocal Minority in American Politics, 1993 pg7*)

The table below, from the same study, breaks down the percentages into different categories to allow for a better snapshot of how listeners broke down.
This table details the significant deviation from the national percentages of people's political ideologies even before the rise of the conservative talk show hosts that would come to dominate the airwaves. Before Rush Limbaugh, and others, came to dominate the spotlight and garner tremendous popularity, the talk radio landscape was a much different place than it currently is.

Figure 14. *The Vocal Minority in American Politics.* Times Mirror Center 1993
That finding has only become more pronounced as the format of talk radio has expanded since the 1993 survey.

In an attempt to decipher the reasons behind listening habits, the study by The Times Mirror Center reported that when asked to identify the most important reason why they listen to talk radio, 36% claimed that it was to keep up on the current events and issues of the day. Slightly less than that number said that it was in order to hear how different people were feeling in regards to these issues. Remarkably, only 1 percent of those questioned answered that it was because they liked the host of a particular program. (Times Mirror Center, 1993) Listeners claimed to tune in to talk radio for varied reasons but it seems as though once they made an ideologically driven choice of program, they stuck with it and did not pursue multiple view points. As stated in the recent book *Niche News*, "only 3 percent of those naming any partisan program identified that they listened to bipartisan radio hosts and programs.” (Stroud 51)

Finally, the 1993 study went on to examine the self stated ideology of the talk radio hosts at the time. This information allows us to examine and speculate on how much conservative political talk radio was created by the broadcasters versus how much influence the listeners had in creating the conservatively dominated medium it is today. In order to get a picture of what the views of political talk radio hosts were, the Times Mirror Center interviewed 112 hosts evenly distributed between the top 25 largest markets in the country, and other smaller markets. Of the 112 hosts sampled, the majority claimed to be politically independent and of moderate ideology. When asked to choose a partisan leaning, the hosts again split relatively evenly as shown on the table below.
The talk show hosts were generally very well educated with 60% holding at least a bachelors degree as well as very affluent with less than 27% earning below $50,000 annually. In contrast to the balanced ideologies of the hosts, the listeners identify themselves as being a much higher percentage conservative than liberal.

All of this information on the talk show hosts and listeners in 1993 allows us to compare the talk radio landscape to more recent studies, which paint a very different picture. Spending any amount of time listening in to the different political talk radio stations around the country today will make it clear that the ideologies of the hosts have shifted dramatically in the direction of conservatism. A study conducted in 2007 by the Center for American Progress and The Free Press examines the current state within the world of political talk radio. Fourteen years following the study conducted by the Times Mirror Center, traditional radio manages to hold its own as one of the most widely used media formats in the United States, and talk/informational radio is at the top of the list for the total number of stations per format. Of all the news/talk stations in the top 10 radio

![PARTISAN AND IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HOSTS AND THEIR AUDIENCES](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PUBLIC</th>
<th>CONSERVATIVE %</th>
<th>LEAN CONSERVATIVE %</th>
<th>LIBERAL %</th>
<th>LEAN LIBERAL %</th>
<th>NO INCLIN. %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listeners</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talkers</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HOSTS

21 25 22 21 10

Figure 15. Times Mirror Center, 1993
markets in the country, 76 percent of the programming is conservative and only 24 percent is progressive. (Center for American Progress, 2007) In addition it is estimated that in terms of minutes spent on the air, there is ten times more conservative talk than there is progressive talk. (Center for American Progress, 2007)

Talk radio features a larger draw for partisan selectivity as hosts openly and vehemently declare their opinions. According to data published in 2008 by the Pew Research Center in its Biennial News Consumption Survey, those who regularly listen to Rush Limbaugh, the long-standing leader in ratings, identify themselves as 80 percent conservative, 7% moderate, and 10 percent liberal. (Pew Research Center, 2008) This is a colossal difference from the ideological percentages of the general public, which were reported in the same survey as being divided 35 percent conservative, 35 percent moderate, and 20 percent liberal. Additionally, 28 percent of conservative Republicans listen to talk shows that invite listeners to call in and discuss current events and politics, compared to 17 percent of the general public. (Pew Research Center, 2008)

These statistics clearly show that throughout the life of the talk radio format, the audience has been steadily more conservative than the general American population. The high popularity among conservative listeners likely played a role in the success of the conservative hosts who were able to take advantage of the deregulation of the broadcasting market and, played a role in making the genre of conservative talk radio the dominant and influential force it is today.

However, the predictive measures and success of the conservative talk radio genre does not necessarily reflect the general sentiment of how the American public prefers its news. The Pew Research Center reported in 2012 that the percentage of Americans who
believe there is "a great deal" of political bias in news coverage is at the highest number in decades, at 37 percent up from 25 percent in 1989. (Pew Research Center, 2012)

Furthermore, 68 percent of Americans prefer news sources that "Have no point of view"(Pew Research Center, 2012.) This data manifests itself in the chart created by The General Social Survey and published by the Pew Research center in a 2005 report.

Figure 16 Pew Research Center and General Social Survey data. 2005

The public levels of confidence in the press were on a downward trend from the early 1970s with a steep drop occurring in the late 1980s, lining up with the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine. This discrepancy between the percentage of ideologically opinionated info/talk radio and the percentage of people may indicate other factors contributing to the imbalance in broadcasting station ideology. It should be noted however that this downward trend in confidence in the press does not mean people are
becoming less politically active. In fact, the opposite is happening and, as stated by Natalie Stroud in *Niche News*, "when people perceive media bias and use media in accordance with their partisanship, they develop more polarized political attitudes, participate more, and focus more on issues on which their candidate performs better."

(171)

The pundits leading the charge for conservative talk radio have become synonymous with the genre. Of the top ten radio hosts based solely on the weekly number of listeners they draw, eight label themselves as conservative, one labels himself a financial advisor, and one as a moderate. Only one of the top ten talk show hosts is female (Laura Ingraham). The clear leader, based on the number of weekly listeners he has drawn for nearly 10 years, is Rush Limbaugh, with Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck rounding out the top three. As the table below indicates the top three hosts have been steadily gaining in the numbers of listeners over the past decade.

### Top Talk Radio Hosts, Millions of Listeners (Weekly)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Host</th>
<th>Political Leaning</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rush Limbaugh</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean Hannity</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>11.75</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenn Beck</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Savage</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Levin</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave Ramsey</td>
<td>Financial Advice</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neal Boortz</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Ingraham</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Bohannon</td>
<td>Ind./Moderate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerry Doyle</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 17. Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, The State of the News Media 2010
The gap between conservative and progressive talk has been blamed on a number of different factors. The easiest factors to blame for the conservative standing include, the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, which allowed broadcasters to cater to the larger listening percentage of conservatives, and the relaxation of FCC regulations catering to large corporations. The most likely scenario is that the answer is some combination of those factors.

Speculation on the cause of the conservative tilt includes the theory of increasing political polarization among the American radio listeners. The information from the radio executives mentioned earlier in this thesis highlighted the supply side of the equation, the demand side cannot be ignored either. The higher percentage of conservative listeners likely caused the better ratings for the syndicated conservative shows and resulted in more advertising revenue. While there is no hard statistical evidence to support these claims, it can be suggested that as corporations took over and consolidated radio ownership, they focused and expanded the shows that brought in the most advertising revenue. Logically, these shows were the ones that catered to the larger percentage of listeners (which were of the conservative ideology) and as they increased programming for those listeners, the listeners received support, which hardened their views. This potentially contributed towards a vicious cycle of promoting the conservative shows and drawing an increasingly polarized audience, all while alienating the listeners supportive of liberal ideology.

A lack of ownership diversity, has been brought on by the consolidation of the radio format and dominance of companies such as Clear Channel Communications. Using data compiled from the report by the Center for American Progress and Freepress,
The table presented below clearly shows the imbalance between the hours spent broadcasting conservative and liberal talk within the stations owned by the top 5 largest broadcasting companies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 5 Broadcasting Companies--May 2007</th>
<th>Conservative Hours Broadcast</th>
<th>Liberal Hours Broadcast</th>
<th>Total Number of Stations Featuring Information/Talk</th>
<th>Total Number of Hours Per Month</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear Channel</td>
<td>1,387.5</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>1616.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salem</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulus</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citadel</td>
<td>270.25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>271.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>92.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals:</strong></td>
<td><strong>2570.25</strong></td>
<td><strong>254</strong></td>
<td><strong>257</strong></td>
<td><strong>92.5</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 18 Center for American Progress, 2007

This practice likely stemmed from the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine and deregulation of Radio ownership by the FCC through the 1996 Telecommunications Act. This occurrence is directly relevant to the gap between liberal and conservative radio, because, as examined in studies on station ownership by *The Center for American Progress* and *The Freepress*, stations featuring local ownership, ownership by minorities, and ownership by women, all correlated with a lower percentage of conservative political talk shows. As shown in the graph below, single-station owners broadcast a significantly higher percentage of progressive hosts than multiple-station owners.
This makes sense with the argument that local stations are able to be more receptive to the needs of their communities and air a more balanced array of shows to please their audiences. The report concludes, "increasing ownership diversity, both in terms of the race/ethnicity and gender of owners, as well as the number of independent local owners, will lead to more diverse programming, more choices for listeners, and more owners who are responsive to their local communities." (Center for American Progress 2007)

While conservative talk radio is undeniably the dominant form, it would be erroneous to postulate that liberal talk radio is entirely absent from the airwaves.

Contrasting with the hugely popular and profitable national conservative hosts, liberal, or
progressive, show hosts are more common on locally owned stations. They tend to
populate radio markets including large urban areas as well as areas with a significant
minority population. Calculations of listeners to liberal talk radio neglect to include the
myriad of stations hosted by minorities, which draw large percentages of the liberal,
democratic minority population. In addition, National Public Radio (NPR) continues to
have very high listener ratings and is considered by unbiased observers to be neutral in
political persuasion. While not technically classified as liberal talk radio, the majority of
NPR's programming appeal much more heavily to liberally and moderately minded
audiences. These factors along with the economically driven issue of profitability result
in true liberal talk shows, such as Air America Radio, difficulties surviving. Indeed,
despite including well-known personalities such as Al Franken and Janeane Garofalo, the
liberal movement drew a miniscule audience and failed to generate significant advertising
revenue, ultimately collapsing. This characterizes the much of the genre of liberal talk
radio and demonstrates why it cannot compete with conservative media.
PART IV:

Political Talk Radio, Public Opinion, and Political Polarization

Observing the changes happening in and around political talk radio over the last twenty years is reasonably straightforward. The data show a steady percentage of listeners for the informational or talk format of radio over the years and clear trends toward higher levels of conservative ideology in the hosts and in frequent listeners. A bigger challenge comes from trying to observe the effects listening to political talk broadcasting have on listeners.

Identifying the role media plays in shaping people's personal decisions is neither easy nor conclusive, and looking at the impact of this conservatively dominated broadcasting trend and its effect on the attitude formation of listeners is extremely difficult. As mentioned in Part 3, the Times Mirror Center survey reported that when asked to identify the most important reason why they listen to talk radio, around 36% claim that it was to become more informed on public events. But, are listeners of talk radio becoming more informed or more ideologically polarized than non-listeners? Are they simply reaffirming and strengthening the beliefs they already held? In an attempt to make a statistically informed speculation on the overarching effect removal of the Fairness Doctrine has had on polarizing citizens through their potential exposure to ideologically charged radio, data from several studies are examined. Proving causality in this instance is extremely difficult and is not intention of this thesis. The following information will not be able to show that Rush Limbaugh (an opinionated result of the removal of the Fairness Doctrine,) is changing the minds of the American public. Rather, this thesis is suggesting that through more openly partisan news choices, including
political talk radio since the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine, American listeners are being affected and are becoming more polarized in their partisanship. Part Four of this thesis will look at the information presented and highlight the emergence of any trends that could suggest an increase in polarization due to the removal of the Fairness Doctrine.

The topic of American news selection is one of great complexity. With more options for news than ever before, the relevant question surrounding opinionated talk radio is: what makes listeners choose one host over another? One theory, that listeners make news choices based on their own ideology, is important to the topic of increasing polarization. This theory is referred to as the “partisan selectivity bias.” (Stroud 2011) The phenomenon of consumers making news choices based on their own ideological stances has had a long history and has particular importance when dealing with political talk radio, compared to other news sources, because many talk show hosts openly profess their political leaning. This makes talk radio a prime subject to see if people make their show selection in line with their own beliefs. To gauge if listeners tune in to certain hosts based on their political viewpoints one can turn to the book, Niche News by Natalie Stroud in which Stroud examines data collected by the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES). What Stroud discovered was that talk radio listeners tuned in to radio programs and hosts that were in line with their political beliefs. Statistics published by NAES show, "Republicans have a .25 probability of listening to conservative talk radio and a .03 probability of listening to liberal talk radio. Strong liberal Democrats have a .01 probability of listening to conservative talk radio and a .13 probability of listening to liberal talk radio." (Stroud, 52).
While partisan selectivity has been highlighted to show the limited effect media can have in influencing people to change their point of view, it has recently been shown to have a strong influence on enforcing and polarizing existing views. Stroud makes the case that, “Partisan selective exposure produces more polarized attitudes, higher levels of political participation, and differences in which issues are judged to be most important.” (Stroud, 172). In one of the most persuasive studies connecting polarized attitudes to listening to partisan news, Stroud presents findings surrounding the topic in *Niche News*. Stroud conducted a study to assess how partisan selective exposure relates to polarization by looking at how favorably or unfavorably people felt about George Bush or John Kerry surrounding the 2004 election. What she found was, "Even after taking into account demographic differences in political interest and knowledge, and differences in news media use, partisan media use significantly influences political polarization... Put simply, likeminded news media audiences hold more polarized political views." (133) People who engage in partisan selective exposure are increasingly likely, based on the number of perceived partisan sources, to view the world in terms of their own partisanship. Their views are increasingly less challenged and more enforced. This growing number of people is making decisions surrounding all aspects of political choice and participation based on their partisan beliefs. (Stroud 2011)

Party affiliation and political ideology are not statistical factors that change significantly over time, either for individuals or constituencies. For example, "In 2008, over 95 percent of those who intended to vote for Republican nominee John McCain or Democratic nominee Barack Obama before election day later reported that the actually did so." (Stroud, 64) Polarization does not refer to increasing numbers of people joining
opposing parties. Rather, it refers to the increasing number of people within their own parties agreeing on important issues, the decreasing number of issues political parties can compromise on, and the increasing amount of outspoken ideological preferences by people in political parties. An example of this is the idea that Rush Limbaugh does not have significant success persuading liberals to view the world more conservatively, he may have success convincing conservatives to act in a more one-sided and partisan manner. The preferences of partisan talk radio listeners result in an overall shift away from the ideological center of American Politics. In The Disappearing Center, the effects of polarization are described as, "a substantial increase in party line voting and a substantial decrease in ticket splitting." (Abramowitz, 7) Alan Abramowitz goes on to say, “Voters today are much more likely to defect from their party in presidential or congressional elections than in the past because their partisan and ideological orientations are more consistent than in the past.” (Abramowitz, 7) All of these effects may have a correlation with the changes in talk radio since the end of the Fairness Doctrine.

Despite the common view that political polarization is a negative thing, it is worth noting the positively influential aspects the political talk radio can have on listeners. Talk radio programs generally focus on serious national issues and allow for a form of civic engagement to occur. Listeners are exposed to information and are given opportunities for involvement in the discussion regardless of their socio-economic status, geographic location, and level of education. They also spend time on the radio when they would have been listening to music, thinking instead about real world issues such as wars, elections, and politicians. Some exposure to information about these topics, even if it is heavily biased and unevenly discussed, is more beneficial to the political process than widespread
ignorance. Data has shown that listening to opinionated talk radio is not correlated with ignorance and being uninformed. (Hofstetter and Barker 1999).

While it is clear that hateful and controversial statements make by talk show hosts are not beneficial to the listening public's knowledge of political candidates, the daily programming provided by a number of hosts is labeled as being informational. The extent of the accuracy of this statement is tested in an article written by C. Richard Hofstetter and David Barker, entitled *Information, Misinformation, and Political Talk Radio*. This publication highlights the differences between a lack of information (simple ignorance), and a belief in incorrect information (misinformation) and attempts to identify the role political talk radio plays in contributing towards either. The sample size was 882 randomly selected adults polled in a 1997 telephone survey. The participants were gauged based on their exposure to political talk radio through various questions, as well as their experience in political talk activity such as actively participating in discussions by calling in, talking, and taking action. The findings paint a fascinating picture.

The results of the survey include a high association between political talk radio activity and political information. This is not an overly surprising result. However, based on the responses of those "moderately exposed" to political talk radio, there is a significant negative correlation between exposure to conservative talk radio and political information. This indicates that "although conservative talk radio listeners are more interested in politics, read the newspaper more often, and are more likely to vote, they are less likely to hold accurate beliefs even regarding non-ideological facts when other items such as political talk activity are controlled."

(363) Interestingly, while listening to conservative talk shows was correlated with misinformation, there was a positive
correlation found between listening to moderate political talk shows (such as NPR) and political information.

Also stated in the article, "Misinformation, or erroneous understanding, differs dramatically from simple ignorance, or the lack of understanding. The misinformed hold their incorrect beliefs with confidence. Hence, the difference between the uninformed and the misinformed may be akin to the difference between staying home on Election Day versus holding a placard at a rally." (Hofstetter and Barker, 1999) Assuming the findings in this article are accurate on a scale represented by the sample, a large percentage of the electorate is listening to political talk radio and potentially acting and voting in a way reflective of the misinformation they received. In effect, political talk radio may influence the electoral outcomes through selectively giving or leaving out information from their broadcasts.

Furthermore it is clear that regardless of the information they hold, listeners to political talk shows, such as the Rush Limbaugh Show, are generally politically engaged and consistent in their views. As stated by Abramowitz, "this increase in consistency and polarization has been concentrated among the most politically engaged citizens" and further, that "these engaged citizens are not a small fringe group-- they constitute a substantial proportion of the public and an even larger proportion of the actual electorate." (37) This increase in engaged citizens may very well lead to the success of conservative talk shows which in turn promote more polarizing political attitudes.

The question then becomes, in what ways does political talk radio really affect the general public's understanding and opinion towards complex issues? And is this, taking note of the ideologies of the top broadcasters, a potential contributor towards more
partisan ideology? Despite the positive aspects noted in the previous paragraph, it is widely known that the talk show hosts with the largest listenership are not afraid to make comments that are racist, homophobic, or sexist. Rush Limbaugh has, on the air, called both President Obama and Justice Sotomayor racist and Michael Savage has called the Koran a "book of hate." Jay Severin went even further and was suspended for referring to Mexican immigrants as, "primitives," "leeches," and "women with mustaches and VD." (Berry, Sobieraj. 2011) The idea of talk show hosts affecting public opinion was looked at in the Times Mirror Center *The Vocal Minority*, which concluded, "Most hosts feel they play a significant role in shaping public opinion and have an impact on public policy and politics. While a significant number acknowledge the entertainment value of their programs, more see their job as informing the public." (4)

With the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 and the broadcasting world more open to stations offering opinionated programs than ever before, the conservative talk show made its debut in American politics. The Times Mirror Center published the results of a study conducted by in 1994 in a report titled, *The People, the Press and Politics: The New Political Landscape*. This report focuses on documenting the changes in American opinion of the media, over time. This study is particularly useful for this thesis, the seven-year span in which data was collected through the study begins in 1987, the year of the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine and ends in 1994, six years after Rush Limbaugh (and others) began broadcasting opinionated commentaries without the need to offer a chance for rebuttal. In the interest of comparing answers on the survey below and the overall trend for party identification during the same time period, table 20 is shown here. It should be noted that there are no significant changes toward either party.
The data presented in Table 21 (below) has been compiled and formatted to make apparent the clear trend in media listener's opinions over the seven-year period shown. The information above, while by no means conclusive evidence of conservative talk radio's effect on American listeners, paints a fascinating, if not compelling, picture. The numbers generally change over time in the direction of the general public being more in line with the traditional and conservative ideals presented by Rush Limbaugh and other conservative talk radio broadcasts. Increased agreement with anti-government sentiment, and the drastic 14% drop, from 71% in 1987 to 57% in 1994 in the number of people who thought "It is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can't take care of themselves" are particularly notable statistics in relation to the views presented by Limbaugh and other conservative hosts. Additionally, later on within the study it is reported that 26 percent of those polled, "regularly" or "sometimes" listen to Rush

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current (July 1994)</th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Independent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These trends are based on telephone surveys conducted by the Times Mirror Center. Data for 1987-1989 based on surveys conducted by Gallup for Newsweek.

Table 20. Times Mirror Center, The New Political Landscape. 1994
### Changing Political Values and Attitudes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generally speaking, elected officials in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most elected officials care what people like me think</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government is really run for the benefit of all the people</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Increases in Outsiderism**

| It is time for Washington politicians to step aside and make room for new leaders | 62   | 68   | 61   | 84   | 79   |
| We need new people in Washington even if they are not effective as experienced politicians | 44   | 51   | 47   | 56   | 60   |

**Increases in Anti-Government Sentiment**

| The federal government controls too much of our daily lives | 58   | 61   | 62   | 64   | 69   |
| Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good | 55   | 57   | 58   | 61   | 63   |

**Voting and Interest in Politics**

| I feel it’s my duty as a citizen to always vote | 85   | 88   | 85   | 91   | 93   |
| I'm interested in keeping up with national affairs | 85   | 88   | 85   | 91   | 93   |

**Welfarism**

| It is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can't take care of themselves | 71   | 74   | 67   | 69   | 57   |
| The government should help more needy people even if it means going deeper in debt | 53   | 52   | 51   | 53   | 41   |

*Numbers indicated represent the percentage of people who "Agree" with the statement given

Limbaugh's radio show and that 46 percent "regularly" or "sometimes" listen to a "call in radio show featuring current issues and politics." (Times Mirror Center 2004).

Also of interest for this thesis are the increasing trends in the categories of "political alienation" as well as "voting and interest in politics." While one would expect, based on the assumption of political alienation leading to political apathy, these two categories to have a negative correlation, the data suggest that Americans are increasingly frustrated and angry (perhaps by what they heard on the radio), yet still inclined to be politically active. In support of these numbers, Alan Abramowitz addresses the issue of a polarizing electorate in *The Disappearing Center* stating, "Contrary to the claim that ordinary Americans have been losing interest in government and politics as a result of growing partisan animosity and ideological polarization... Americans today are more interested in politics, better informed about public affairs, and more politically active than at any time during the past half century." (19)

The increasing anger shown in American public by Figure 21 may be tied to the anger in conservative talk shows, which is well documented and can be described by the term "outrage." (Sobieraj and Berry 2011). This term references a particular form of political discourse which involves, "efforts to provoke visceral responses (e.g., anger righteousness, fear, moral indignation) from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and partial truths about opponents, who may be individuals, organizations, or entire communities of interest (e.g., progressives or conservatives) or circumstance (e.g., immigrants) (Sobieraj and Berry 2011). In a study on the prevalence
of outrage in different forms of media, talk radio programs contained outrage 98.8 percent of the time. (Sobieraj and Berry 2011). Furthermore, Rush Limbaugh ranked third in the average amount of outrage per program, with Mark Levin and Michael Savage utilizing outrage on their programs, "at a rate of more than one instance per minute." (Sobieraj and Berry 2011).

The fact that the data set begins during the year of the removal of the Fairness Doctrine (before stations begin to alter the shape of their talk and informational content based on the decrease in regulation) and continues for six years, allows one to speculate on the potential for a connection between the elimination of the Doctrine, the increase in opinionated conservative broadcasting, and the shift in attitudes of the American public.

Further data on the feelings of American public during the time period represented in the data by the Times Mirror Center are presented in a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in January of 2012 which compiled people's answer to the question, "How have you been getting most of your news about the presidential election campaign?" In a sample of more than 1,500 voters, polled at different points in 1992, the number voters who got most of their news from radio ranged from 12 - 18%. (Political Communications and Methods Study, 2012) Based on this number, it is safe to assume that the number of people who got at least "some" of their election data from the radio is higher, and the number of people who regularly tuned into informational or talk radio broadcasts would be higher still.

In a 1999 article by David C. Barker titled, *Rushed Decisions: Political Talk Radio and Vote Choice, 1994- 1996*, the relationship between listening to conservative talk radio, such as The Rush Limbaugh show, and voter choice during the 1994 and 1996
congressional and presidential elections is examined on a micro level. Based on this Barker attempts to determine if listening to the daily *Rush Limbaugh Show* leads to Republican voting. The largest problem facing the study is the self-selection bias, which may confound the data because people choosing to listen to the show may tune in to reinforce previously held attitudes and beliefs. However, Barker notes that a large percentage of listeners (45%) are not Republicans. These listeners must only have an open mind towards the host's messages for the arguments to potentially affect their attitudes. Even within Republican listeners, there is a wide range of feeling towards such topics as President Clinton. The following table shows a rating of public feeling towards Clinton. The respondents were all Republicans and ranked their feelings towards phrases used to describe Clinton from 1- "not at all well" to 4- "extremely well." (Barker, 531, 1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling thermometer—Clinton (0–100)</th>
<th>Mean Scores for Nonlisteners</th>
<th>Mean Scores for Occasional Listeners</th>
<th>Mean Scores for Frequent Listeners</th>
<th>Mean Scores for Entire Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clinton: Complimentary (4 = very)?</td>
<td>57.26</td>
<td>36.51</td>
<td>30.87</td>
<td>50.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton: Moral (4 = very)?</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>2.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton: Inspiring (4 = very)?</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton: Strong Leader (4 = very)?</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton: Cares (4 = very)?</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton: Knowledgeable (4 = very)?</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 22 *Attitudes Towards President Clinton.*
The Vocal Minority in American Politics. 2012
The differences across the board between non-listeners and frequent listeners, demonstrates the higher level of negative feelings towards Clinton. The general "Feeling thermometer" on which participants rank their overall feelings toward President Clinton provides the clearest picture. For non-listeners, the feeling was a medium-warm 57. For occasional listeners, the score dropped to a cold 36 and for frequent listeners it went even lower, to about 30. In looking at the data, Barker states, "Listening to Limbaugh appears to give rise to considerable anti-Clinton sentiment, even among those who identify themselves as conservatives. Thus, even if listening is largely a function of self-selection, signs suggest that listening may induce even more negativity toward Clinton than would be expected given a conservative worldview." (Barker, 531) It can be further inferred from that information, that if someone can change from having lukewarm feelings towards a political representative to having cold feelings towards them, simply by frequently tuning in the Rush Limbaugh's program, they can also be swayed to change their vote to one against a particular candidate or party for the same reasons as the relationship between candidate evaluations and voter choice is generally strong. (Barker, 536)

The study went on to determine that in the 1994 gubernatorial elections there was little evidence for any sort of relationship between listening to Limbaugh and voting for a Republican governor. As Limbaugh's show was nationally aired without much focus on individual state governor races, this made sense. Furthermore, there was a significant relationship between one's choice in the 1994 House and Senate race and listening to The Rush Limbaugh Show. The results for the 1996 race followed the same trend, with a 29%
increase in voting Republican when one listens to Rush Limbaugh at least several times a week, when all other variables are neutral. (Barker 1999)

In a separate report published a year later on the influence listening to talk radio can have on public opinion, David Barker and Kathleen Knight built upon the previous study. They again examined the way listening to political talk radio can shape public opinion. While regular and frequent listening to Rush Limbaugh has a high percentage chance of influencing a change in one's attitude, based on the study in 1994 and 1996, the influences of Limbaugh's message are effective only when the message is negative. Positive messages from Rush do not have the same effect on listener opinion. There was no substantial independent relationship between listening to Limbaugh's show regularly and positive feelings towards any person or topic. The study also shows that Limbaugh must work hard to affect listener opinion positively. There is a strong correlation between the amount of time Limbaugh spends discussing a topic and a trend towards more conservative views by listeners (Barker and Knight 2000). Notably, "regular listening not only correlates with attitudes that reflect Limbaugh's message; listening also relates to opinion change toward greater conservatism and antipathy toward Limbaugh's favorite targets." (Barker, Knight 2000 pg 168) If one considers Limbaugh's ability to create significant hostility towards people and topics, the idea of him and other talk show hosts contributing towards the current state of political polarization is not unreasonable. Regardless of one's view on Limbaugh and other conservative talk show hosts, the effect they have on listener opinion is significant in their role as partisan press and their ability to affect the political playing field.
In March 2012, *The Rush Limbaugh Show* appeared to cross one line too many when he went on a multi-day attack on Georgetown Law student Sandra Fluke.

Limbaugh attacked Fluke for defending widespread access to prescription birth control and insurance coverage at religious institutions, calling her among other things, a "slut," "prostitute," and "feminazi," and telling her that "If we are going to pay for your contraceptives, and thus pay for you to have sex, we want something for it. We want you post the videos online so we can all watch." The result has been unprecedented and may even spell the beginning of the end for Rush Limbaugh. Despite issuing several apologies, advertisers have left the show in droves (with some reports giving numbers as high as 100 companies desiring to pull their ads), leaving one of the highest paid hosts on the air without the revenue to keep the show afloat. Only time will tell if the unprecedented withdrawal of sponsorship surrounding the controversy of conservative talk radio will result in profound changes for the genre.

There is little question that listening to political talk radio on a regular basis can promote an increase in, or reinforce already established, feelings of the conservative nature. One of the most worrisome aspects to proponents of balanced and unbiased news sources is that the success of controversial talk show programs may persuade formerly reputable sources to tailor their information to be presented in a more "entertaining" but biased format. In the article *Understanding the Rise of Talk Radio*, Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj state, "The talk radio business model is worrisome because it represents the growth of an industry that makes profits in large part by peddling political outrage and fueling the fires of polarization. America has always had such businesses (think yellow journalism) but never on the scale of what is available
today." (Berry and Sobieraj, 2007, pg 767) The article goes on to suggest that while having a strong First Amendment protecting the right of free speech is essential for our nation, there is still cause for concern based upon the popularity of entertaining and inflammatory commentary designed to draw the attention of listeners and support of advertisers.

Political talk radio is neither a clearly positive force in promoting the democratic system and best-suited leaders nor is it an overwhelmingly negative aspect of the American political system, promoting hate and alienation. Based on the studies examined in this chapter it has the potential to be either. What's clear is that political talk radio may have direct implications on the American citizens' information about ideological issues, citizens' impression of candidates, and most importantly, the overarching increase of partisan polarization within the American public. The influence political talk radio exudes on American politics and on the polarization of American citizens towards more conservatively Republican and liberally Democratic ideals may affect political commentary and elections long after Rush Limbaugh has gone off the air for the last time.
PART V:

Conclusion

The Fairness Doctrine remains a polarizing issue in the American political arena more than twenty years after its demise. Proponents and detractors point to evidence to its necessity and unconstitutionality, and argue over what affect its enforcement and repeal have had on the radio broadcasting industry. Through looking at the successful nature of informational/talk radio, the information compounded by this thesis establishes several factors and it has considered the role the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine has played in the conservative trends for talk hosts and listeners.

The data compiled and presented within this thesis can be focused into one central idea: The Fairness Doctrine and its removal have had, and continue to have, lasting effects on the radio content broadcast and the opinions and feelings of the American public.

The data presented in Part 1 identified the causes for the creation of the Fairness Doctrine to ensure balanced discourse over the limited airwaves and the pro-first-amendment driven actions of FCC Chairman Fowler. Following this, Part 2 began with a look at the trends in the radio broadcasting market as a whole and of the talk/information radio segment enable the assertion of ties between the decrease in Fairness Doctrine regulation and the changes that took place following its removal. Part 3 dove deeper into the cause and of the conservative ideological tilt within talk radio and explores possible reasons for its success. Finally, Part 4 offers speculation on trends within conservative political talk radio as a possible cause of the increasingly polarized media consumption
habits and opinions of the American population that have become apparent over the last twenty years.

All together, the value of this thesis lies in its broad investigative approach to connecting the removal of the Fairness Doctrine to changes in American radio listener's opinion in part due to exposure to conservative talk radio. Because of the difficult nature of ascribing causality in the realm of political and sociological studies, this thesis is unable to draw causal conclusions towards this end from the surveys and data collected, but this thesis has been able to use information from American voters and listeners to show the possible ways in which the Fairness Doctrine has impacted talk radio, and how talk radio has, in turn, influenced listener opinion and partisan polarization in the American political system.
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AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Jackson Witherill was born in Augusta, Maine and grew up in small but beautiful town of Readfield. He graduated from Maranacook Community High School in 2008 and pursued academic study in the fields of Political Science and International Affairs at the University of Maine. Jackson's college career was greatly influenced by a semester of study abroad in Brussels, Belgium and through an internship with Senator Susan Collins in Washington D.C. During his time at the University, Jackson was an involved member of the Maine Outing Club, the International Affairs Club, Student Senate, Order of Omega, Pi Sigma Alpha, Phi Beta Kappa, and was a founding father of the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity at UMaine. Jackson also worked as a student tutor, and as a study abroad peer-advisor in the Office of International Programs.

Following graduation, Jackson plans to teach English abroad in China and eventually return to pursue further academic studies in the field of law.