

Has Mass Media Reduced Our Esteem for Politicians?

Respect for politicians of either party continues to decline with each passing month. Of course, their performances on cable news and talk radio shows don't help, for we see them in real time, their flaws and foibles continuously on display.

In a [1975 interview on *Firing Line*](#), British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge speculated that if the highly esteemed British prime ministers of the past had been around in an age of television programs, they might not be esteemed quite as highly as they are.

"I often wonder, people like to think that figures like Gladstone and Disraeli were majestic figures, and the rulers of our time have been unmajestic," Muggeridge said. "But I wonder how for instance those two would have fared in the studios."

Or, as *Firing Line* host William F. Buckley summarized Muggeridge's point: "The intrusion of television... punctured the mystique of the ruling class."

Muggeridge and Buckley speculated that Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli would have fared fairly well had television been competing with newspapers during his two terms as prime minister, firstly in 1868 and again from 1874 to 1880. The two journalists had nothing to say about Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone's ability or inability to handle the television press during his four terms spanning from 1868 to 1894.

However, a given politician's ability to handle television or internet media sources is perhaps of less importance regarding the public's disdain for him than the mere fact that he has appeared on television at all.

In 2007, [Rasmussen conducted a poll](#) on how Americans viewed each of their country's presidents. Results showed 14 presidents were viewed unfavorably by more than 25 percent of respondents. Half of these poorly regarded presidents occupied the Oval Office after the widespread introduction of television to the American public in the 1950s, with the earliest of these seven (Lyndon B. Johnson) serving in the 1960s when *colortelevision* was first introduced. George W. Bush and Richard Nixon had the worst *net* favorability ratings of all presidents at -18 and -28 percent respectively.

Excluding Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, neither of whom had been elected as of Rasmussen's 2007 polling, of the 11 post-1950 presidents, only four escaped the ire of at least a quarter of respondents. These included the martyred John F. Kennedy, World War II leaders Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Ronald Reagan, who ushered in an unprecedented level of economic growth and the end of the decades long Cold War.

So it would appear that barring some extraordinary circumstance, in these cases victoriously ending a major conflict or being killed in office, American presidents of the past 60 or 70 years have a far greater chance of being viewed negatively by the American public than their predecessors. Presidents that less than ten percent of Americans viewed unfavorably included John Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, James Madison, John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington. Of these, only Roosevelt served in the last 150 years.

Television, and to some extent radio before it, brought politicians into Americans' homes like never before. As families crowded around the TV, they were able to regularly hear and see their president from the comfort of their sitting rooms. As the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt, and television and other mass media surely appear to have reduced the level of respect Americans have for their leaders.

The mass amount of [free media coverage](#) that Trump's presidency received has been [much maligned](#) since he swept into office. Some estimates valued the coverage at just under [\\$5 billion](#) worth of earned media.

But with all of this coverage, which far outstripped his 2016 competitors, Trump has also been on the receiving end of a previously unimaginable level of derision for a president in the last four years. Between the free television coverage and his unfortunate tweeting habit, Americans have had a level of access to Trump that is unmatched in the history of the presidency. Every offhand remark and political thought has been on display for everyday Americans to see as it happens. Gone are the days when political news took days or weeks to get to Americans hundreds of miles from Washington D.C.

Americans well remember the protests and riots that followed the 2016 elections, and now younger Americans are experiencing a new wave of riots, riots unlike anything these younger generations have ever seen. Is it possible that access to politicians, provided by mass media, has stoked the flames of 2020's unrest?

—

Image Credit:

Flickr-DonkeyHotey, CC BY 2.0