Overview: Thomas Jefferson famously wrote in 1787 that, given the choice between “a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” In this course students will explore the role that mass media has played in U.S. politics, focusing especially on newspapers. The students will conduct quantitative analyses using data and/or text extracted from on-line newspaper archives, with the goal of answering questions such as the following: (1) How biased are newspapers and in what ways are they biased? Do they exhibit ideological or partisan biases? Gender bias? Racial or ethnic bias? Corporate bias? Pro-incumbent bias? How have these changed over time? (2) Has news coverage of politics become increasingly focused on the national government, leaving less space and time for state and local politics? If so, does this negatively affect electoral selection or accountability, or the performance of state and local governments? (3) How did the introduction of radio and television affect newspapers? Were radio and television news broadcasts substitutes for newspapers, or complements, or neutral? (4) Has newspaper coverage become increasingly “soft” over time? How does this relate to the level of competition? (5) Has newspaper coverage become increasingly “personal” over time, with each newspaper focusing more on the individual politicians who represent the state and district(s) where the newspaper circulates? If so, does this help account for the rise of the incumbency advantage?

Requirements: While not necessary, it is desirable for students to have completed at least one course in statistics or econometrics and be comfortable using packages such as STATA or R.

Grading: The grade for the course will be based on two factors:

(1) Class Participation and Memos (1/3). Students will form groups during the first two class meetings, after class enrollment has been fixed (ideally each group will have three students). These groups will be conducting the research and writing the research papers. Each week two groups will write short memos documenting the progress made on their projects. The other groups will write memos summarizing key points from the weeks readings. These will
form the basis for the discussions, with the student groups taking the lead.

(2) A Final Paper (2/3). Each group must write a research paper, addressing one of the questions above, or one chosen by the students after consulting with me. The papers are due on December 8, 2021 (last day of reading period).

Readings: The readings consist mainly of journal articles and a few book chapters. These will all be available either on JSTOR or on the course website.

1. Theories of Media Coverage and Bias


2. Empirical Studies of Media Coverage and Bias


3. Impacts of the Media on Information, Beliefs, and Behavior


