Democracy at Work: Pressure and Propaganda in Portugal and Brazil

Addresses democracy both as an institutional value system and as a practice. How are the media exerting their mediation role? How are the media re-(a)representing the political world to society? Are different media voices offering diversified and complementary perspectives on politics? How is propaganda perceived within different democratic and economic contexts? Is political trust and mistrust shaping the strategy of propaganda? These questions are addressed in theoretical and empirical chapters in a book that addresses problems which are in need of urgent discussion, as their impact and consequences are deeply transforming politics and the way politics is communicated, lived, and understood by its main actors.

Within this framework, Political Communication Studies has a major role in identifying and urging new diagnosis of, and insights into, the political and the media systems, and, above all, how both the people and political institutions can both survive crisis and improve democracy in the Lusophone world. This book aims at making a contribution to that acknowledgment.

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CHAPTER 1
MEDIA AND THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY: THE DIFFERENT IMPACTS OF THE MEDIA ON REGIME SUPPORT IN BRAZIL

Nuno Coimbra Mesquita

Introduction

With Brazilian democracy having already surpassed the milestone of its 20 years - considering its new democratic constitution and the first direct presidential elections after military rule - support for the regime reaches its highest rates. In 1989 only 44% of Brazilians believed democracy as the best form of government. In 2006 that number reached 71% (Moisés 2008). Political support is fundamental to the understanding of the quality of democracy. After democracy spread to most countries of the world, scholarly attention has turned more to this aspect than to the analysis of the transitions themselves (Diamond and Morlino 2004).

Some of the perspectives concerning media impact on democracy point to a growing cynicism of the press in dealing with public issues, leading to the belittlement of politics and politicians in general (Patterson 1998,
Cappella and Jamieson 1997). On the other hand, studies based on surveys indicate that news media exposure is associated with more democratic attitudes and trust in the regime (Norris 2000, Newton 1999). Regardless of the perspective adopted on the subject, the information about institutions in the media is an element available to citizens to form their opinions, beyond the concrete experiences they may have. Therefore, what can be said about the role played by the media in the quality of democracy? More specifically, how is public support for the democratic regime affected by media exposure?

We argue that there are two sets of multidimensionality of the phenomenon. On the one hand, public support for democracy comprises different dimensions. People can be deferential to democracy per se, but distrust their institutions; adhere to the political community, but be dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy as it presents itself, or even evaluate critically its institutions. On the other hand, media also presents itself as multidimensional. The information contained - and audience reach - are not the same in a quality newspaper or in a newscast. Television broadcasts entertainment programs with different characteristics, each with the potential to affect differently the understanding that individuals have about the affairs of the State.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the interrelationships between these different dimensions. The main objective of this study is to evaluate how different mass media are relevant for citizens’ orientations toward the political system. Is this exposure beneficial or detrimental to a democratic political culture? We argue that the media present a plural role in democratic attitudes, depending both on the specific media and on the dimension of political support taken into account. This paper focuses its analysis on five media variables: exposure to news on newspapers, TV, radio and Internet, and total TV exposure. We want to know if these media variables are associated positively or negatively with political support. The chosen methodological approach to the problem was statistical analyses of national public opinion surveys. Using regression models for prediction purposes, it is possible to evaluate what set of variables (media exposure) affect dependent variables (citizens’ attitudes toward the political system). We use data from the survey ‘Citizens’ Distrust in Democratic Institutions’ (2006), and from the ‘Latin American Public Opinion Project’ (2008).