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Channels of Power, by Austin Ranney

Gary L. Rose

Sacred Heart University, rose@shu.edu

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GARY L. ROSE

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Austin Ranney, *Channels of Power*. New York: Basic Books, 1983. x + 207 pp. \$14.95.

Review by Gary L. Rose

Austin Ranney, a political scientist and resident scholar of the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, has presented a very timely and empirically documented thesis concerning American politics in the age of television. *Channels of Power* can be viewed within the context of an ever-growing body of literature which is generally critical of many of the sweeping political reforms and technological developments which have recently promoted a more open, visible, and decentralized political system. Among the reforms and developments generally criticized are the proliferation of state presidential primaries, the weakening of party organization, a more televised presidency, the opening of congressional proceedings to television and radio coverage, the emergence of media consultants in presidential campaigns, modifications in the seniority system of Congress, and the tendency toward more legislative subcommittees in the congressional decision-making process. The contributions of Everett Carll Ladd, Jr., Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Nelson Polsby, as well as the earlier works of Ranney, are representative of this particular scholarly critique.

Ranney, like others who share his perspective, believes that effective government is more likely to be achieved when those with years of political experience and expertise within governmental institutions are permitted to more privately engage in compromise, forge coalitions, and make critical and key public policy decisions. The declining ability of political professionals to build coalitions and effectively make decisions is largely attributed to television's growing political influence. In Ranney's most recent analysis, television is described as penetrating all facets of politics, including the presidential selection process, the performance of the presidency, and congressional decision-making. By its nature, television, Ranney claims, has also contributed to the movement of political amateurs into elective office, thereby displacing the experienced politician and denying the republic the virtues of experience and maturity. For those familiar with Ranney's orientation, it will come as no surprise that the growing influence of television on politics is presented as somewhat

of a deleterious force upon the governing process. To some extent, an inverse relationship is basically posited within this work: as television's influence has increased, the quality of American government has decreased. Needless to say, the theme is certainly a debatable one, although it does seem to explain much about the current state of American politics.

Ranney lays the foundation for his thesis with a short recollection of a recent tour he took with his son and his son's friend through the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.. Upon completion of the tour, the father asked the two boys which particular attraction they liked best. Their response was "the Enterprise," the spaceship which frequently appeared on the futuristic television series *Star Trek*. When Ranney, who was somewhat surprised at the response, pointed out that the Enterprise was only a representational model, and while the boys had viewed a number of very real spacecraft, his son replied: "Look, Dad, most of the things we've seen here we've already seen on t.v. We've both been watching *Star Trek* ever since we were little kids, and the Enterprise is just as real to us as all other things in this museum and more exciting" (p. 34).

This brief vignette is important, for it underscores not only the impact of television, but also poses the larger question of what television makes real to the viewer. Throughout the text, Ranney's central premise is clear and unambiguous: political reality, to an increasingly large number of Americans, is basically what is presented on television. A symbiotic relationship has developed between television and American politics with more and more Americans learning about, understanding, and evaluating politics through this particular medium. The internal functioning of governmental institutions also has been transformed by the presence of television and, in Ranney's view, the end result has not been very constructive. Chapter by chapter, the author details how television's integral relationship with American political institutions, politicians, and public policies has contributed to the systematic decline of trust in government, the disturbing and steady decline of voter turnout in presidential elections, the atrophy of party organizations, a less effective and more constrained presidency, as well as a more

decentralized, less efficient, and fragmented United States Congress. Many of the developments detailed by Ranney are difficult to dispute for he is able to buttress his descriptions with hard data and sound scholarship.

Ranney's perspective regarding the impact of television on the American presidency is of particular interest. The author strongly believes that the policy options available to modern presidents have been significantly reduced as a result of excessive television coverage and scrutiny. More specifically, with respect to foreign policy options, Ranney suggests that because of television American presidents will be less apt to engage in limited conventional warfare on foreign soil. Television's powerful influence in presenting the Vietnam War may very well dissuade post-Vietnam presidents from entering into future such controversial conventional conflicts in which correspondents and newscasters are able to interpret and criticize military events and administration objectives. Ranney feels that television's portrayal of the Vietnam conflict resulted in a restructuring of public opinion on the war which, in turn, severely constrained the Johnson presidency and, moreover, contributed to Johnson's political demise. Presidents, therefore, might be more hesitant to pursue the limited warfare option.

Ranney's perspective on foreign policy is clearly subject to dispute. Current American involvement in Central America, for example, may very well have been escalated by now had it not been for vivid memories of the political influence of television. Central American politics is certainly controversial and the opportunity for overt military involvement in this sensitive region has existed for several years. Yet we have witnessed a rather restrained posture here on the part of the White House. At the same time, however, a Marine contingent was inserted into Beirut regardless of massive television coverage. Television coverage clearly did not discourage the president from sending troops abroad in this instance and the later troop withdrawal was really a function of a foreign policy failure, rather than television's portrayal of the Lebanon mission.

The invasion of Grenada also raises questions regarding Ranney's perspective on presidential options. In this particular case, American troops engaged in limited, brief, conventional warfare, while television

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coverage of the invasion was actually banned by the president. Again, what does the Grenada experience portend for the future? The examples of Grenada, Lebanon, and Central America suggest no clear pattern of an American presidency severely constrained by television's potential political influence; a wide variety of foreign policy options still seem to be available to the Commander-in-Chief.

One aspect of Ranney's work which is particularly enriching, and which fills a void in the literature concerning media and politics, is the exceptional chapter regarding bias in television reporting. All too often one hears accusations about an ideological media or press corps. Some critics exclaim the media is liberal, while others detect a more conservative bias. After reviewing the ideological controversy, Ranney then expands on the work of Paul Weaver ("Is Television News Biased?," *Public Interest* [Winter 1972]) and explains, in substantial detail, how bias in television is actually more "structural" than "ideological." Structural bias includes a host of characteristics inherent to the medium of television which naturally foster and promote an adversarial relationship between itself and government. It both includes, while it goes beyond, the vocabulary and reality by which we conventionally define the "adversarial relationship" between presidential administrations and the press. The desire to make a profit, attract large audiences, develop controversial and interesting stories, as well as time constraints, laws which require networks to serve the public interest, and the careerist and "progressive" orientation of those who enter the field of political reporting are among the structural forces Ranney describes. Approaching television's presentations of American politics from this perspective serves to clarify misconceptions regarding bias in newscasting and, at the same time, the incorporation of structural bias into Ranney's analysis tends to make sense of the rather disturbing trends in American public opinion regarding trust and confidence in governmental institutions. Perhaps the analysis of structural bias is the real strength of the work, although Ranney does fall short with respect to offering constructive options for reducing unnecessary tension and adversity. His recommendation for the networks not only to report objectively developments in government, but also within their own organizations, is a good one, although somewhat idealistic.

Apart from the specific components of Ranney's thesis, which

are exceptionally informative and thought-provoking, there are two broader and more theoretical questions raised by *Channels of Power*. First, should we really worry about the political trends Ranney depicts as dysfunctional for effective government; and, secondly, to what extent can such trends and developments really be attributed to the rise of television?

With respect to the first issue, the degree of concern with these trends is basically a reflection of one's orientation regarding the requisites of good government. Some political scientists view the decline of trust in government, the atrophy of party organization, the constraints placed on the presidency, and decentralization in congressional decision-making as extremely dysfunctional, while other members of the profession view such developments as healthy and beneficial to the republic; there is no real consensus on this issue. Low levels of trust, for example, can contribute to a more skeptical, yet less vulnerable electorate. The decline of party organizations potentially can open the nomination process to rank and file voters and improve the abysmally low sense of political efficacy found among the public. A constrained presidency can contribute to prudent leadership and perhaps a more personal sense of linkage between people and the Chief Executive, while a decentralized American Congress in which seniority does not dictate the distribution of power may serve to foster more responsive concepts in legislation. In all fairness to Ranney's orientation, however, it does appear that a supportive and trusting political culture is conducive to effective government and it does seem logical that experienced politicians in major public policy-making institutions should be permitted to wield considerable influence in political decision-making. One should recall that some of America's greatest and most effective presidents, such as Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Harry S. Truman, were unencumbered by many of the constraints facing modern American presidents. Regardless of one's perspective, however, the fact that questions involving criteria for good government are raised is in itself an important feature of this text.

The second theoretical question concerns the extent to which such trends and developments can be attributed to the rise of

television. Although Ranney does caution his reader that television alone does not explain such developments, the thrust of his thesis is that television has significantly contributed to a substantial modification of the American political system and process. Ranney's analysis cannot be taken lightly, for the impact of the medium and the partiality of television's impact are undeniable. Nevertheless, this particular text could profit from further elaboration which would permit the reader to observe and evaluate television's influence in conjunction with or in relation to other transforming political forces. Ranney's conclusion tends to leave the reader with a narrow perspective, and perhaps political change should be explained within the context of historical, legal, and international forces as well — forces which have affected American government independent of, or prior to, the emergence of television.

Certainly television has been a powerful transforming force, but Ranney's thesis requires more symmetry. For example, the Progressive movement in American politics brought about major and long-lasting reforms in party politics and American government long before the appearance of television. Moreover, the only impeachment of an American president occurred in the nineteenth century, and substantial changes in the power of entrenched congressional leaders, particularly the reaction to the extremely powerful House Speaker Joseph Cannon, occurred in the early years of the twentieth century. The point is simply that political constraints, fragmentations, and the general "opening" of the American political system have occurred prior to the techno-political age. In short, a broader overview of change and perhaps further discussion of the cyclical nature of political change, would serve to enhance the reader's understanding of American political dynamics.

Generally speaking, however, Ranney's latest work is an exceptional source for any student of the American political scene. The topic is extremely relevant, for television has permeated all dimensions of American politics and a systematic treatment involving description and explanation is long overdue. The work is quite readable, devoid of arcane jargon, nicely organized, and at all times very sensible. *Channels of Power* is at once a significant and scholarly contribution by this most respected senior member of the political science profession.