

# Conservative Talk Radio and Its Impact on Heightened Partisanship

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“[Obama is] a veritable rookie whose only chance of winning [the 2008 election] is that he’s black.”

“If any race of people should not have guilt about slavery, it's Caucasians.”

“Women should not be allowed on juries where the accused is a stud.”<sup>1</sup>

Rush Limbaugh, the renowned conservative talk radio host, made the above statements. Appalled by these comments and other similar ones, some liberals posted similarly incendiary remarks on Twitter when Limbaugh died on February 17, 2021. Music producer Finneas wrote, “Feeling very sorry for the people of Hell who now have to deal with Rush Limbaugh for the rest of eternity.” “God has canceled Rush Limbaugh,” said Crooked Media host Erin Ryan. Comedian Paul F. Tompkins reacted with: “I’m glad Rush Limbaugh lived long enough to get cancer and die.”<sup>2</sup>

While liberals condemn Limbaugh, conservatives respect him as a conservative media pioneer and a lovable host whose shows they listened to every day. Former President Donald Trump even awarded Limbaugh the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award the President can bestow to recognize “an especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors.”<sup>3</sup> Trump announced the award in perhaps the most grandiose way: during the 2020

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Silverstein, “Rush Limbaugh now has a Presidential Medal of Freedom. Here are just 20 of the outrageous things he's said,” CBS News, last modified February 6, 2020, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rush-limbaugh-presidential-medal-of-freedom-state-of-the-union-outrageous-quotes/>.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph A. Wulfsohn, “Twitter liberals celebrate Rush Limbaugh's death: 'I'm glad' he lived long enough to 'get cancer and die,’” Fox News, last modified February 17, 2021, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/twitter-liberals-celebrate-rush-limbaugh-death>.

<sup>3</sup> “The Presidential Medal of Freedom,” The White House of President Barack Obama, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/campaign/medal-of-freedom>; Intramural Research Program, “Presidential Medal of Freedom,” National Institutes of Health, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://irp.nih.gov/about-us/honors/presidential-medal-of-freedom>.

State of the Union Address.<sup>4</sup> In Trump’s words, this award honors Limbaugh’s “decades of tireless devotion to our country” and “the millions of people a day that [he] speaks to and inspires.”<sup>5</sup> Even without presidential recognition, however, Rush Limbaugh cemented his legacy by reviving dying AM radio stations during the 1980s and amassed a large and loyal audience since. *Talkers Magazine* ranked *The Rush Limbaugh Show* as the most-listened-to talk radio show from 1987 to 2021, with an average of 15 million listeners per week.<sup>6</sup>

Liberals who felt relieved that Limbaugh “finally died” would not think he is worthy of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and his listeners would be angry at the tweets celebrating Limbaugh’s passing. This juxtaposition of opposite sentiments reflects Limbaugh’s and, more broadly, talk radio’s polarizing role in U.S. culture. As American politics became increasingly partisan in the last 70 years, this paper aims to analyze talk radio as a significant cause of such heightened partisanship and unravel talk radio’s history, by examining its pioneers, relevant regulations like the Fairness Doctrine, its rise to popularity in the 1990s, the genre’s internal radicalization, and its part in radicalizing politics.

When Father Charles Coughlin, an early talk radio pioneer in the 1930s, aired increasingly extreme content that bordered on supporting Nazi ideologies, the government stepped in and halted his show. Later, the Federal Communications Committee (FCC) codified the Fairness Doctrine in 1949 to require broadcasters to present both sides of controversial

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<sup>4</sup> Kaitlan Collins, “Rush Limbaugh awarded Medal of Freedom in surprise State of the Union move,” CNN, last modified February 4, 2020, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/04/politics/rush-limbaugh-donald-trump-medal-of-freedom/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> “Trump surprises Rush Limbaugh at State of the Union,” video, YouTube, posted by CNN, February 4, 2020, accessed January 13, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0p5devgqFIg&ab\\_channel=CNN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0p5devgqFIg&ab_channel=CNN).

<sup>6</sup> Joe Anderson, “Most Listened-To Radio Shows in US,” *Swingin West*, last modified March 6, 2021, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://swinginwest.com/commercial/shows/most-listened-to-radio-shows-in-us/>; Paul Farhi, “Rush Limbaugh is ailing. And so is the conservative talk-radio industry.,” *The Washington Post*, last modified February 9, 2021, accessed January 12, 2022, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/rush-limbaugh-conservative-talk-radio/2021/02/09/97e03fd0-6264-11eb-9061-07abcc1f9229\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/rush-limbaugh-conservative-talk-radio/2021/02/09/97e03fd0-6264-11eb-9061-07abcc1f9229_story.html).

issues. The Fairness Doctrine successfully promoted public discourse on some issues, such as the danger of smoking or nuclear plants, and the Supreme Court threw its support to the doctrine against First Amendment challenges. However, the doctrine suffered from criticisms of corrupt misuse and a “chilling effect” that swayed broadcasters from touching controversial issues at all; eventually, the FCC abolished it in 1987. While the Fairness Doctrine did deter many potentially divisive figures from entering talk radio, it was a weaker force than people expected. Joe Pyne, famous for his abrasive insults on air, thrived in the 1960s without facing a significant Fairness Doctrine complaint. The Fairness Doctrine rarely penalized broadcasters due to the FCC’s limited resources and later a leadership that believed in free-market. The FCC denied license renewal to only one radio station, Carl McIntire’s WXUR, in the Fairness Doctrine’s entire existence.

In the 1990s, Rush Limbaugh became a national sensation, thanks to the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, AM radio’s support after they lost the music market to FM radios, and conservatives’ longing for an alternative media to counteract the mainstream media’s alleged liberal bias. Successful talk radio hosts like Charles Coughlin, Joe Pyne, and Rush Limbaugh shared a few similarities: they were eloquent and opinionated, and their content often became increasingly extreme to attract larger audiences. Limbaugh originally made practical commentaries to mobilize his crowds and helped the GOP win the 1994 midterm election. However, Limbaugh and other talk radio hosts later supported radical primary challengers, some of whom lost the GOP elections. Prioritizing commercial success rather than political consequences, talk radio hosts capitalized on the shock value of extremist rhetoric and created an echo chamber that pushed the Republican agenda towards the far-right.

## America's Heightened Partisanship

Since the 1950s, American politics has grown more partisan. As they see the gridlock in Congress and growing divergence between identity groups, people perceive this trend as deleterious, a sentiment deeply rooted in American culture.<sup>7</sup> When the Founding Fathers first drafted the US Constitution in 1787, they never envisioned a government built upon parties. James Madison states in *Federalist No. 10* that parties, or what he calls factions, “may clog the administration” and “convulse the society.”<sup>8</sup> Madison’s design of a large, national republic, he argues, can control these negative effects by diversifying factions.<sup>9</sup> George Washington, in his Farewell Address, similarly claims that parties may enable “unprincipled men . . . to subvert the power of the people” and “[destroy] afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion.”<sup>10</sup>

However, against Madison and Washington’s wills, political parties formed soon after Washington’s presidency and persist to today. Their formation is not difficult to understand. Meticulously following politics is time-consuming and even boring for many people. Everyday citizens can engage in politics in a more accessible way by throwing their trust to a group of people who share a similar ideology and have the professional knowledge to transform that ideology into policies. Otherwise, citizens may ignore politics if they find the effort required to

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<sup>7</sup> Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2021), 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> James Madison, “The Federalist Number 10,” Founders Online, last modified November 22, 1787, accessed January 6, 2022, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0178>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> George Washington, “Washington’s Farewell Address to the People of the United States,” speech, September 17, 1796, Mount Vernon, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/quotes/article/however-political-parties-may-now-and-then-answer-popular-ends-they-are-likely-in-the-course-of-time-and-things-to-become-potent-engines-by-which-cunning-ambitious-and-unprincipled-men-will-be-enabled-to-subvert-the-power-of-the-people-and-to-usurp-for-th/>.

engage in politics too burdensome. In turn, having too much diversity of opinion within a party means that the party fails to serve its purpose to guide voters with a set of clear ideas.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, parties in the 1950s exactly fell under this critique: they were too ideologically diverse. The American Political Science Association (APSA) Committee on Political Parties, featuring prominent political scientists, published a 98-page paper titled *Towards a More Responsible Two-Party System*. This paper argued for a more polarized system and more ideologically pure parties. They claimed that “the US Congress included Democrats more conservative than many Republicans and Republicans as liberal as the most left-leaning Democrats.”<sup>12</sup> Voters had trouble choosing between the two parties. In turn, the elected candidates voted in an unpredictable manner that robbed voters of their representation. This system resulted in many people’s political indifference and did not seem more democratic than the current hyper-partisan system, which at least clearly guides voters. It did such a good job that voters started viewing the other side as enemies.

The American political landscape, in fact, became much more polarized over the next 70 years, just as the political scientists wished. For example, people’s opinions on certain heated issues become more indicative of their party affiliation. In 1994, 32 percent of Democrats and 30 percent of Republicans agreed that immigrants strengthened the country. However, by 2017, 84 percent of Democrats and only 42 percent of Republicans did.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, such sorting has been so severe that it has reached another extreme named “negative partisanship”: a phenomenon when people initiate political action because of the sheer hatred towards the opposing party

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<sup>11</sup> Klein, *Why We’re Polarized*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 2-4.

<sup>13</sup> Carroll Doherty, “Key takeaways on Americans’ growing partisan divide over political values,” Pew Research Center, last modified October 5, 2017, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/05/takeaways-on-americans-growing-partisan-divide-over-political-values/>.

instead of the pride towards their own.<sup>14</sup> When self-identified independents chose to vote for one party over the other, a 2016 Pew poll found that a majority made their decision based on negative motivations towards the other party. Only around 30 percent cited positive visions of the parties they supported as the reason.<sup>15</sup>

Politicians became more polarized as well. On the Voteview ideology spectrum, with -1 being very liberal and 1 being very conservative, the median score for Congressional Democrats moved from -0.24 in 1953 to -0.37 in 2021, while the median for Congressional Republicans moved from 0.28 to 0.51 concurrently.<sup>16</sup>

This phenomenon was due to both traditional politicians' ideological shifts and the emergence of new ideologically extreme candidates. For example, President Joe Biden, who has served in the Senate for almost 40 years, addressed in a 1974 interview that he “[didn’t] like the Supreme Court decision on abortion” in *Roe v. Wade*.<sup>17</sup> He voted for the Hyde Amendment that prohibits women from using Medicaid money for abortion in the 1980s but had to revoke his support under the competitive pressure in the much more liberal 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, more ideologically extreme candidates rose to political power because of primary elections. In 2009, the Tea Party movement roared onto the political scene, channeling

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<sup>14</sup> Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Pew Research Center, “Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016,” Pew Research Center, last modified June 22, 2016, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/06/22/partisanship-and-political-animosity-in-2016/>.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey B. Lewis and Keith T. Poole, “Congress at a Glance: Major Party Ideology,” Voteview, accessed January 6, 2022, <https://voteview.com/parties/all>.

<sup>17</sup> Kitty Kelly, “Death and the All-American Boy,” *Washingtonian*, last modified June 1, 1974, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.washingtonian.com/1974/06/01/joe-biden-kitty-kelley-1974-profile-death-and-the-all-american-boy/>.

<sup>18</sup> “Will Joe Biden’s political record come back to haunt him?,” *BBC News*, last modified March 18, 2020, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51803885>.

voters' anger about growing debt and focusing their campaign on fiscal responsibility and a free-market economy. In the 2010 midterm election, many Tea Party House candidates, running on more conservative fiscal policies than their establishment counterparts, won Republican primaries in safe districts, which shifted the House Republican Caucus to further right and won Republican the House's control.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, within the Democratic party, a few Democratic Socialists who pushed for robust welfare and progressive taxation policies, including presidential candidate Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, have risen to power in the Democratic Caucus. The primary election system explains these candidates' success. 83% of congressional districts are safe seats in the general election, so only the primaries matter. In primaries, the more heavily ideological the candidates are, the more likely voters make an effort to vote. Because primary voters only account for 10% of the voting population, the primary result usually reflects the will of a small fraction of the constituents, and more radical candidates gain an advantage.<sup>20</sup> To illustrate this phenomenon, Ocasio-Cortez won an upset primary election against the high-profile, centrist Democrat Joe Crowley for New York's 14<sup>th</sup> Congressional District in 2018, but only 11.8 percent of voters turned out for that election.<sup>21</sup>

As a result of the growing ideological gap between Republicans and Democrats, bipartisanship cooperation became less frequent. Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush signed legislation that raised taxes in the 1980s and 1990s, and Reagan

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<sup>19</sup> Maya Srikrishnan and Jared Pliner, "Which Tea Party Candidates Won?," ABC News, last modified September 24, 2010, accessed November 11, 2021, [https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/2010\\_Elections/vote-2010-elections-tea-party-winners-losers/story?id=12023076](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/2010_Elections/vote-2010-elections-tea-party-winners-losers/story?id=12023076); Tom Cohen, "5 years later, here's how the tea party changed politics," Cable News Network, last modified February 28, 2014, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/02/27/politics/tea-party-greatest-hits/index.html>.

<sup>20</sup> "The Primary Problem," Unite America, last modified March 2021, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.uniteamerica.org/reports/the-primary-problem#main>.

<sup>21</sup> Ben Brachfeld, "A Closer Look at Voter Turnout in 2018 New York Congressional Primaries," Gotham Gazette, last modified June 28, 2018, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.gothamgazette.com/state/7774-a-closer-look-at-voter-turnout-in-2018-new-york-congressional-primaries>.



supported an amnesty for illegal immigrants, both of which today's Republicans would strongly denounce.<sup>22</sup> In 1965, Medicare, the massive government-funded healthcare system, received 70 Republican votes in the House and thirteen in the Senate. However, a more recent effort at healthcare reform, Obamacare, built atop of Republican ideas implemented by Mitt Romney as the Governor of Massachusetts, received zero Republican votes in both chambers of Congress in 2010.<sup>23</sup>

One can find a myriad of causes of such a heightened trend of partisanship, including the rise of identity-group politics, geographical sorting, and increased money in politics. As the “fourth branch of government,” the media plays a heavy role in interpreting the political agenda for the public and shaping the voters' views. Talk radio, which this paper examines, is one such media format that does so arguably the most successfully by pushing more radicalized, “out-there” ideas into the mainstream.

### **Father Charles Coughlin, Talk Radio's Earliest Pioneer**

One of the earliest figures to use radio to spread controversial ideas was Father Charles Coughlin. Born in 1891 to a family of Irish Catholic immigrants, Coughlin was ordained to the priesthood in 1916 and, in 1926, wished to build and develop a new church in Royal Oak, Michigan. However, his journey to achieve this goal was full of hardships. Although it is twelve miles from downtown Detroit, Royal Oak was an unattractive neighborhood in a state of “urbanizing wilderness” “dotted with cheaply built, shingled homes of newly arriving

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<sup>22</sup> Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

automobile workers.” More importantly, seeing the encroachment of the community by industrialization and subsequent immigrants and Catholic workers, older residents turned to the Ku Klux Klan to resist these changes. Two weeks after the church Shrine of the Little Flower was constructed, Coughlin found the Klan’s burning cross on the front lawn.<sup>24</sup> After construction, Coughlin had to pay back his mortgage loan. He realized that the Catholic population in Royal Oak was too small for him to rely solely on Sunday collections, and the local anti-Catholic sentiment made it nearly impossible to expand his following. In the face of these struggles, the young priest decided to try radio, the new technology commercialized only six years earlier, and see if it could be a way to raise funds.<sup>25</sup>

Coughlin’s preaching on air turned out to be extremely successful. Starting on October 17, 1926, on the local radio station WJR, Coughlin gradually received more and more letters from interested listeners, and “within a year, overflow crowds were jamming Coughlin’s services, forcing him to add several extra masses each week.” As his popularity grew, the large number of smaller contributions from visitors and radio listeners solved his debt issues. In addition, with more Catholics attracted to the vibrant religious culture in Royal Oak, “the Ku Klux Klan could no longer terrorize the community.” Coughlin’s sudden popularity was primarily due to his charisma and eloquence. With “a commanding physical presence” and “a voice of such mellow richness, such manly, heart-warming, confidential intimacy, such emotional and ingratiating charm,” he first showed his public speaking talent in college doing impromptu performances and later utilized it to build this successful radio ministry. Four years later, he signed a contract to broadcast on CBS, reaching a national audience of up to 40 million

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<sup>24</sup> Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York, USA: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 89-90.

<sup>25</sup> Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 82.

people. While the show initially only targeted Catholics, it later attracted a larger audience consisting of Protestants, Jews, and other non-religious people.<sup>26</sup>

While Coughlin's first three years of radio sermons were uncontroversial and mostly religious, in 1930, he started to take on more provocative, political materials, such as criticizing communism, Prohibition, and other social issues. He eventually turned nearly all his airtime to such commentary. As the Great Depression hit and his ambition to reach a larger audience grew, he deemed his previous placid religious sermons irrelevant to this tumultuous society. Instead, he claimed that "speaking directly to the economic and social concerns ... was the only viable tactic for increasing his prominence."<sup>27</sup> In a confusing time, his narratives provided people mental support by simplifying multifaceted political issues, which, in many ways, violated the ethics of journalism.<sup>28</sup>

After 1930, Coughlin's commentary about political controversies started to fall under scrutiny for potential censorship. As his material routinely criticized the government's incompetence, CBS, as the network broadcasting Coughlin's sermons, was afraid of offending the government. Less than a year after Coughlin started his political commentary, CBS suggested he "tone down" the broadcast and eventually chose not to renew his contract in April 1931, attributing it to a new "policy" against selling air time to religious groups. At that time, because of his soaring popularity and reliable reputation, corporate disapproval did not hinder his career. He quickly arranged contacts with multiple private stations that covered almost the entire United

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 91-92.

<sup>27</sup> Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 94-96.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 93-106.

States. In the few cases when he had conflicts with the station owners, they would not react strongly because doing so would risk losing a popular and money-making radio figure.<sup>29</sup>

It was not until the late 1930s that censorship against his radio broadcasts made an impact. Over the years, Father Coughlin became increasingly frustrated with Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration and eventually publicly opposed the president, decrying the New Deal as dangerous and communistic. Such a move backfired heavily and caused him to lose many listeners. Coughlin quickly faded out of the mainstream. Only those most loyal followers remained, and they were, "by and large, less prosperous, less educated, less articulate than those who had deserted."<sup>30</sup> Since his decline in popularity in 1936, his content became increasingly radicalized, fiercely criticizing the current government and spewing anti-Semitism. Coughlin's magazine, *Social Justice*, appalled many with its "pure unadulterated Jew baiting." Coughlin also promoted the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which "allegedly exposed an ancient Jewish plot to impose financial slavery upon the world."<sup>31</sup> In 1938, he addressed the event of Kristallnacht, when Nazi mobs "burned down 267 synagogues, destroyed 7,000 Jewish-owned businesses and arrested 30,000 Jews" by accusing "Jews for their own prosecution" and claiming that Nazis were "lenient."<sup>32</sup> He turned generic insult into incitement for organized anti-government efforts when he urged his supporters to form "an army of peace" and march on Washington D.C. to protest against the president's efforts to enter the war.<sup>33</sup> As a result, Coughlin received criticism

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 100-101.

<sup>30</sup> Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 257-261.

<sup>31</sup> Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 266-268; Thomas Doherty, "The Deplatforming of Father Coughlin," *Slate*, last modified January 21, 2021, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://slate.com/technology/2021/01/father-coughlin-deplatforming-radio-social-media.html>.

<sup>32</sup> William Kovarik, "When Radio Stations Stopped a Public Figure From Spreading Dangerous Lies," *Smithsonian Magazine*, last modified January 19, 2021, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/time-private-us-media-companies-stepped-silence-falsehoods-and-incitements-major-public-figure-1938-180976771/>.

<sup>33</sup> Doherty, "The Deplatforming," *Slate*.

from prominent figures in the radio industry, including Neville Miller, the president of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), who characterized Coughlin's egregious comments as an "abuse of freedom of speech" that radio could not tolerate. Later in 1939, the NAB, with 428 member stations, revised its code of conduct to promote "fair and impartial presentation of both sides of controversial issues," specifically aiming to halt Coughlin's broadcasting. This resistance acted as a death blow to Coughlin's career because he no longer had the devoted audience that would support him despite companies' censorship. Eventually, he quit radio, returning to Royal Oak to serve as a parish pastor for the rest of his life.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Rise and Fall of the Fairness Doctrine**

Appalled by the profound impact figures like Charles Coughlin could make broadcasting their radicalized ideas on radio, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) formalized NAB's code of conduct into the Fairness Doctrine in 1949. The Fairness Doctrine required broadcasting programs, such as radio or television, to address politically controversial topics of great importance and grant time to present both sides of issues in an equitable and balanced manner.

Some proponents argued that Fairness Doctrine empowered everyday viewers, not solely the government, to monitor their radios by filing complaints once they felt unsatisfied.<sup>35</sup> Others believed that it could increase the diversity of coverage on controversial issues.<sup>36</sup> However, the

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<sup>34</sup> Kovarik, "When Radio," Smithsonian Magazine.

<sup>35</sup> Donella Meadows, "Bring Back the Fairness Doctrine," The Donella Meadows Project, last modified November 12, 1987, accessed November 19, 2021, <https://donellameadows.org/archives/bring-back-the-fairness-doctrine/>.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas W. Hazlett and David W. Sosa, "Was the Fairness Doctrine a 'Chilling Effect'? Evidence from the Postderegulation Radio Market," *The Journal of Legal Studies* 26, no. 1 (January 1997): 279-283, <https://doi.org/10.1086/467996>, 279.

most prominent reason for the Fairness Doctrine was that it served the public interest because radio frequencies existed across public space and were scarce. The Supreme Court also cited this rationale for its decision to unanimously uphold the Fairness Doctrine against First Amendment challenges in *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC*. Justice Bryon White delivered the opinion of the Court that it was “the right of the public to receive suitable access to social, political, esthetic, moral, and other ideas and experiences.” Furthermore, he addresses that “when there are substantially more individuals who want to broadcast than there are frequencies to allocate, it is idle to posit an unabridgeable First Amendment right to broadcast comparable to the right of every individual to speak, write, or publish.”<sup>37</sup>

Empirically, in some cases, the Fairness Doctrine did help to present a more comprehensive picture to the public. For example, through airtime gained from Fairness Doctrine complaints, the Syracuse Peace Council debunked a popular claim that Nine Mile II nuclear power plant was a “sound investment for New York’s future” by showing people that it had cost \$5.1 billion, far exceeding the \$400 million budget.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, anti-smoking interest groups used the Fairness Doctrine to counter cigarette commercials and broadcast anti-smoking public service messages; this campaign was so successful that it led to Congress prohibiting cigarette commercials in 1971.<sup>39</sup> Activist Ralph Nader argued that such issues would have had far less public coverage if the Fairness Doctrine did not exist.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Bryon Raymond White and Supreme Court of The United States, “Red Lion Broadcasting Co., Inc. v. FCC, 395 U.S. 367 (1969),” Justia, last modified June 9, 1969, accessed January 6, 2022, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/395/367/>.

<sup>38</sup> Meadows, “Bring Back,” The Donella Meadows Project.

<sup>39</sup> Peter J. Boyer, “Praise and Denunciation Greets Ruling by F.C.C.,” The New York Times, last modified August 5, 1987, accessed November 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/05/arts/praise-and-denunciation-greets-ruling-by-fcc.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Robert D. Hershey, Jr., “F.C.C. Votes Down Fairness Doctrine in a 4-0 Decision,” New York Times, last modified August 5, 1987, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/05/arts/fcc-votes-down-fairness-doctrine-in-a-4-0-decision.html>.

However, the Fairness Doctrine was also the subject of much criticism. The very premise that only limited airwave resources existed did not seem to hold water. The limited frequency spectrum did not limit the broadcasting industry's growth. In 1949 when the FCC first established the Fairness Doctrine, only 2,881 radio and 98 television stations existed, but by 1989, there were 10,000 radio stations and 1,400 television stations. These radio stations did not rob each other of the limited resources but rather engaged in healthy competition; such regulation to reserve resources only to the public-serving stations did not seem necessary in retrospect.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, the strong regulatory power granted by the Fairness Doctrine allowed malicious actors in governments of both parties to threaten to suppress dissenting voices for unfair political purposes. A Cato Institute report found that in the 1960s, the Fairness Doctrine was never used to "balance liberal programming with conservative voices" but to secure more than 1,700 free broadcasts on conservative-leaning radios for Lyndon Johnson to campaign against Barry Goldwater.<sup>42</sup> Later, Richard Nixon threatened the Washington Post with the Fairness Doctrine to drop its investigation of the Watergate scandal, despite a lack of success. A 1969 memorandum revealed that Nixon ordered his staff to take "specific action relating to ... unfair news coverage" through the FCC twenty-one times in a month.<sup>43</sup> The Kennedy administration used similar tactics to intimidate the donors for radio stations broadcasting conservative commentary. Bill Ruder, a Democratic campaign consultant and Assistant Secretary of Commerce in the Kennedy Administration, blatantly pointed out that their main strategy was

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<sup>41</sup> Adam Thierer, "Why the Fairness Doctrine Is Anything but Fair," The Heritage Foundation, last modified October 29, 1993, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/government-regulation/report/why-the-fairness-doctrine-anything-fair>.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Matzko, "The Fairness Doctrine Was Terrible for Broadcasting and It Would Be Terrible for the Internet," Cato Institute, last modified June 12, 2019, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.cato.org/blog/internet-regulation-fairness>.

<sup>43</sup> Craig R. Smith, "The Campaign to Repeal the Fairness Doctrine," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 488, accessed January 6, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41940183>.

to use the Fairness Doctrine to “challenge and harass right-wing broadcasters and hope the challenges would be so costly to them that they would be inhibited and decide it was too expensive to continue.”<sup>44</sup>

Such governmental intimidation and the public’s frequent complaints annoyed many broadcasters to the extent that they intentionally shied away from controversial issues. Many in the FCC and the broadcasting industry recognized this “chilling effect,” a result opposite of Fairness Doctrine’s initial vision. In *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC*, the Supreme Court warned the FCC of the potential “chilling effect,” despite eventually approving its constitutionality:

If political editorials or personal attacks will trigger an obligation in broadcasters to afford the opportunity for expression to speakers who need not pay for time and whose views are unpalatable to the licensees, then broadcasters will be irresistibly forced to self-censorship and their coverage of controversial public issues will be eliminated or at least rendered wholly ineffective. Such a result would indeed be a serious matter, for should licensees actually eliminate their coverage of controversial issues, the purposes of the doctrine would be stifled.<sup>45</sup>

In fact, during the height of anti-conservatism censorship in the 1960s, many radio station owners chose to drop the conservative programs altogether after receiving a Fairness Doctrine complaint instead of adding liberal perspectives.<sup>46</sup> After all, genuinely neutral stations were the minority, and those leaning toward one party or another understood that alternative

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<sup>44</sup> Smith, “The Campaign,” 488; James Gattuso, “Back to Muzak? Congress and the Un-Fairness Doctrine,” The Heritage Foundation, last modified May 23, 2007, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/government-regulation/report/back-muzak-congress-and-the-un-fairness-doctrine>.

<sup>45</sup> White and Supreme Court of The United States, “Red Lion,” Justia.

<sup>46</sup> Matzko, “The Fairness,” Cato Institute.



perspectives might push audience members to stop listening. After long internal battles, in 1987, FCC officials reported that the doctrine “had the net effect of reducing, rather than enhancing, the discussion of controversial [issues] of public importance” and decided to repeal the Fairness Doctrine by a 4-0 unanimous vote.<sup>47</sup>

### **Talk Radio during the Fairness Doctrine Era**

Partisan talk radio existed even when the Fairness Doctrine was in place. One of the most prominent hosts in the 1960s was Joe Pyne. After serving in the Marines, he became a disc jockey who played music and read commercials.<sup>48</sup> Bored by these simple tasks, Pyne would chat with callers who requested songs. Before the technology to put a phone line on air existed, Pyne paraphrased what the caller said to his listeners. Once, when a caller rambled on about the history of labor-management relations, Pyne “held the phone receiver to his microphone. Now the caller’s live on the air. And call-in radio was born.”<sup>49</sup>

Some of Pyne’s conversations turned political. These political comments irritated many station owners and resulted in frequent firings. However, Pyne did not shy away from voicing his opinions and believed that this style could attract an audience at a time when most radio stations stuck to music. Following this mind, Pyne created a talk show in 1951 called “It’s Your Nickel,”

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<sup>47</sup> Thierer, “Why the Fairness,” The Heritage Foundation; Hershey, “F.C.C. Votes,” New York Times.

<sup>48</sup> Donna L. Halper, *Icons of Talk: The Media Mouths That Changed America* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood P., 2009), 183.

<sup>49</sup> Kevin Cook, “Joe Pyne Was America’s First Shock Jock,” Smithsonian Magazine, last modified June 2017, accessed October 31, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/joe-pyne-first-shock-jock-180963237/>.

where he engaged callers in political debates. The show's name referred to the fact that calling from a payphone costed five cents in the early 1950s.<sup>50</sup>

Over the years, he built an abrasive, controversial, and confrontational personality, intentionally daring callers to disagree with him. With an intimidating presence and infamous insults like “Go gargle with razor blades,” he seemed to always come out of an argument on top. Pyne's ideology leaned conservative, but he argued with a variety of guests, including feminists, hippies, Blank Panthers, eugenicists, and UFO believers.<sup>51</sup> His show later became nationally syndicated by NBC and reached more than ten million viewers a week by 1968. An advertisement for Pyne's show explains the reason for his popularity: “You may agree or disagree with Joe Pyne. You may scream in rage at some of his remarks. BUT YOU WON'T TURN HIM OFF!” Yet his career abruptly ended when he was diagnosed with lung cancer in 1969 due to smoking and died in 1970 at 44 years old.<sup>52</sup> If Pyne didn't die early, he might have reached the status of talk radio icon that Rush Limbaugh later attained.

It was puzzling how Joe Pyne rose to fame for his abrasive diatribes, which seemed to violate the Fairness Doctrine. Legal skirmishes took place, such as when a chiropractor named J. Bernard Jensen sued him for slander or when the American Jewish Committee reported him to the FCC for putting Nazis and members of the Ku Klux Klan on air.<sup>53</sup> However, these incidents did not materialize into significant challenges to Pyne's career. While the reason for the lack of FCC action is unclear, a speculative theory is that his format at least presented the other side's views before he rebutted them, even though the bias towards Pyne's own arguments seemed

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<sup>50</sup> Halper, *Icons of Talk*, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Cook, “Joe Pyne,” *Smithsonian Magazine*.

<sup>52</sup> Halper, *Icons of Talk*, 186-188.

<sup>53</sup> Donna L. Halper, “Joe Pyne – Talk Radio Pioneer,” *The Broadcasters' Desktop Resource*, last modified June 2017, accessed November 19, 2021, <https://www.thebdr.net/joe-pyne-talk-radio-pioneer/>.

clear. Doing so might have satisfied the Fairness Doctrine in providing “reasonable opportunity for the presentation of contrasting viewpoints,” a vague standard that never meant strictly equal time for both sides. Pyne supported this theory himself. Responding to the Los Angeles Times’ accusation of him as “a rabble-rouser and a hate-monger,” he claimed that he was only trying to encourage “stimulating dialogues” and positively contributed to society by making people think.<sup>54</sup>

The bizarre scenario in which the FCC took little action against Pyne also reflected the FCC’s inability to enforce the Fairness Doctrine because of insufficient governmental resources. For context, in 1983, the FCC had 1,895 employees to monitor 8,807 commercial radio stations.<sup>55</sup> Because the limited personnel made it impossible to meticulously monitor broadcasts for possible violations, the Commission acted solely based on complaints of interested citizens. According to James McKinney, Chief of the FCC’s Mass Media Bureau, the Commission would only select a few among many complaints to investigate. In those cases, “penalties for non-compliance were not severe” because the doctrine did not establish clear standards to distinguish illegal from legal conduct.<sup>56</sup>

The FCC only denied license renewal to a single radio station, WXUR, for violations of the Fairness Doctrine.<sup>57</sup> A conservative, fundamentalist preacher Carl McIntire founded this

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Jae Song, “Historical and Estimated FTEs from FY 1983 - 2016,” Federal Communications Commission, last modified February 3, 2015, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.fcc.gov/document/historical-and-estimated-ftes-fy-1983-2016>; United States, “49th Annual Report / Fiscal Year 1983 Federal Communications Commission,” 1983, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112105054578&view=1up&seq=3&skin=2021>. Although the data presented here does not match the era when Joe Pyne was popular and the number of employees might be higher before Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan deregulated radio, it is the earliest possible online and reflects the consistent trend of lacking personnel and how that influences decision making inside the FCC.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas G. Krattenmaker and Lucas A. Powe, *Regulating Broadcast Programming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 253-256.

<sup>57</sup> Patrick Gordon Farabaugh, “Carl McIntire and his Crusade Against the Fairness Doctrine” (PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2010), 1, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/catalog/10479>.

Philadelphia-based station and aired an offensive show named “Freedom of Speech” in the 1960s. It consisted of hateful messages against Jews, African Americans, and liberals.<sup>58</sup> Reviewing complaints from local civic and religious organizations, FCC Hearing Examiner H. Gifford Irion concluded that the one-sided, controversial programming did not violate the Fairness Doctrine.<sup>59</sup> He reasoned that no other station in Philadelphia had WXUR’s unique “fundamentalist philosophy,” and silencing it would instead limit the diversity of ideas.<sup>60</sup> Six months later, the top FCC Commissioners unanimously decided to overturn Irion’s ruling, but upon petition, the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia then heard the case. The Court upheld the FCC’s denial of license renewal in a 2-1 decision. However, one of the two judges, Skelly Wright, supported the decision not because he found WXUR’s content to violate the Fairness Doctrine but because McIntire “misrepresented its program plans” to hide potential Fairness Doctrine breaches and “thus consciously deceived the Commission.”<sup>61</sup> For a case that led to the most severe penalty possible, the decision’s shaky grounds surprised many and further showcased how vague and difficult to enforce the Fairness Doctrine was.

Joe Pyne’s and Carl McIntire’s shows illustrated an already poor execution of penalties for the Fairness Doctrine in the 1960s, but such enforcement further weakened during Jimmy Carter’s and Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Jimmy Carter, known for his deregulation policies in the airline and railroad industries, also deregulated radio. He appointed Charles Ferris as the FCC Chairman in 1977, who relied less on initiating government regulation but rather on market competition as a natural, self-regulatory force and embraced an open entry of new

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<sup>58</sup> Krattenmaker and Powe, *Regulating Broadcast*, 266-267.

<sup>59</sup> Farabaugh, “Carl McIntire,” 110-111.

<sup>60</sup> Krattenmaker and Powe, *Regulating Broadcast*, 267.

<sup>61</sup> Farabaugh, “Carl McIntire,” 121.

communication technologies. Mark Fowler, the next chairman for Reagan's administration, followed similar principles.<sup>62</sup> Fowler relaxed the rules limiting the duration and frequency of commercials, handed out more broadcasting licenses, and fiercely opposed the Fairness Doctrine on First Amendment grounds.<sup>63</sup> Under Fowler, the FCC became more lenient in enforcing the Fairness Doctrine before repealing it in 1987.<sup>64</sup> Due to the difficulty of implementing clear standards under the Fairness Doctrine and the subsequent deregulatory effort, the Fairness Doctrine did not end the extremist political radio programs. Nevertheless, the "chilling effect" stopped many from entering talk radio in the first place. After all, only people like Joe Pyne, with sufficient confidence that they would succeed, would air their commentaries despite the Fairness Doctrine.

### **The Rise of Talk Radio and Rush Limbaugh**

The repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 opened the gate for an unprecedented wave of political talk radios. As a result, out of all types of radio on the AM regulated frequency spectrum, talk radio's market share drastically increased from 7.11 percent in 1987 to 27.6 percent in 1995, as illustrated by Figure 1. Researcher Jackson Witherill concludes that the data

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<sup>62</sup> Erwin Krasnow and Michael Botein, "Deregulation of Broadcasting in the United States: Quo Vadimus.," New York Law School Digital Commons, last modified 1986, accessed December 7, 2021, [https://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1733&context=fac\\_articles\\_chapters](https://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1733&context=fac_articles_chapters).

<sup>63</sup> Ernest Holsendolph, "Limits On Duration And Frequency Of Tv Commercials Are Dropped," The New York Times, last modified November 24, 1982, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/11/24/us/limits-on-duration-and-frequency-of-tv-commercials-are-dropped.html>; Peter J. Boyer, "FAIRNESS DOCTRINE; F.C.C. Struggled With Itself Six Years Before Reversing a Policy It Opposed," The New York Times, last modified August 6, 1987, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/06/arts/fairness-doctrine-fcc-struggled-with-itself-six-years-before-reversing-policy-it.html>; Jackson R. Witherill, "War of the Words: Political Talk Radio, the Fairness Doctrine, and Political Polarization in America" (undergraduate thesis, The University of Maine, 2012), 16-18, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors/89/>.

<sup>64</sup> Witherill, "War of the Words," 18.

shows a strong positive correlation between the removal of the Fairness Doctrine and an increase in the market share of informational AM radio.<sup>65</sup>

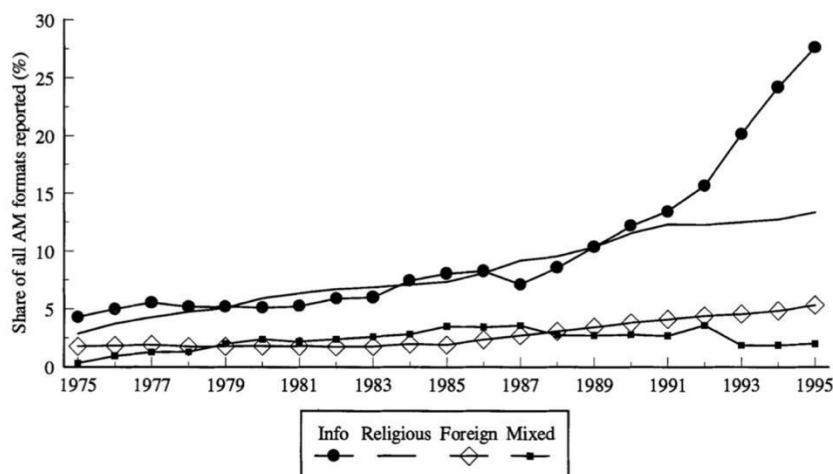


Figure 1. The market share of four categories of AM radios between 1975 and 1995, made by Thomas Hazlett and David Sosa.<sup>66</sup>

Besides the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, the biggest contributor to talk radio's popularity was perhaps the business strategy of AM radio stations in response to the emerging FM radio stations. Introduced in 1961, FM differs from AM in that FM modulates the carrier wave by varying the frequency while AM varies the amplitude. Thus, FM is less susceptible to slight changes in amplitude. It generates less atmospheric noise known as "static" and more stereo effects that make music sound better.<sup>67</sup> At a time when the majority of radio programming was musical, listeners migrated to these innovative FM music stations, which "drove down AM's share of the radio audience from 75 percent in 1972 to 25 percent in 1988." As advertising

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Hazlett and David Sosa, *Selected AM format categories (nationwide: 1975-95)*, 1997, in Thomas Hazlett and David Sosa, "Was the Fairness Doctrine a 'Chilling Effect'? Evidence from the Postderegulation Radio Market," *The Journal of Legal Studies*, 294.

<sup>67</sup> Brian Rosenwald, *Talk Radio's America: How an Industry Took over a Political Party That Took over the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 15; "A Science Odyssey: Radio Transmission: FM vs AM," PBS, accessed December 8, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aso/tryit/radio/radiorelayer.html>.

dollars followed the listeners, FM stations almost drove AM stations out of business. By 1987 three out of four big-city AM stations made no profit. Desperately trying to survive, AM stations found talk radio to be a good alternative because it did not need the high sound quality that music needed. Moreover, it was a sector that FM stations did not address. This pivot to a new business model succeeded. For example, the audience of the AM station WOL in Washington increased by 48 percent after it switched from music to talk in 1981. The increasing popularity of talk radio helped AM stations make a comeback.<sup>68</sup>

Talk radio also spoke to people's loneliness when society was becoming increasingly isolated in the 1980s. As more people started living in suburban areas, they spent more time alone in cars commuting to cities for work, and radio was their only entertainment on the road. People also spent more time staying at home instead of going out and socializing due to new entertainment methods like cable TV and VHS movies. Thanks to Joe Pyne's early development of the call-in format, talk radio was interactive. It provided people the intimacy they longed for in this isolating time. Historian Gil Troy concludes that "talk radio would create an illusion of a community and foster a surprisingly strong sense of identity" among the listeners, which contributed to its success.<sup>69</sup>

During the 1980s and 1990s, Rush Limbaugh emerged as a national sensation and came to define the talk radio genre. This success, however, was not guaranteed from the start. Limbaugh experienced a bumpy early radio career after dropping out of college in 1971. As with Joe Pyne, station owners frequently discharged Limbaugh for inserting commentary into factual news. To keep a clean record for possible future job-hunts, Limbaugh sometimes used

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<sup>68</sup> Rosenwald, *Talk Radio's America*, 15-16.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 17-19.

pseudonyms when on the air, including “Jeff Christy” or “Rusty Sharpe.” He even stopped broadcasting for five years to work on group sales.<sup>70</sup>

Only after 1983 did Limbaugh come back on the air with his real name. It was then that Bill McMahon, a consultant at Kansas City’s KMBZ, found Limbaugh’s eloquent speeches mesmerizing and offered him a time slot specifically for commentary. Despite the public’s mass criticism, Limbaugh built a small but loyal audience before the management at KMBZ eventually stopped his show due to complaints from its sponsors in the Mormon Church. The sponsors feared that Limbaugh’s edgy commentaries misaligned with their traditional religious beliefs and could result in Fairness Doctrine punishments.<sup>71</sup>

Pivotaly, in 1988, former ABC Radio President Ed McLaughlin looked into Limbaugh’s show. McLaughlin disapproved of Limbaugh at first, but listening to him while driving changed McLaughlin’s mind. He felt especially connected to Limbaugh and his “topical ideas, strong viewpoints, and show-biz [style].”<sup>72</sup> McLaughlin offered Limbaugh a two-hour nationally syndicated show, using a barter method that allowed smaller stations to freely air Limbaugh’s show in exchange for advertisement slots of McLaughlin’s choosing. This business model attracted many AM stations struggling to compete against FM, and Limbaugh’s show quickly became available in many stations.<sup>73</sup> McLaughlin’s support propelled Limbaugh onto the national stage. In 1988, his show aired on just short of a hundred stations, with 299,000 listeners, but by 1993, the number grew to 610 stations and 17 million listeners per week.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Paul D. Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story: Talent on Loan from God : an Unauthorized Biography*, St. Martin's Print. ed. (New York: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 1994), 60, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://archive.org/details/rushlimbaughstor00colfo/page/n9/mode/2up>

<sup>71</sup> Rosenwald, *Talk Radio's America*, 21-22.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 23-24.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 28.



McLaughlin only provided Limbaugh with a platform. Limbaugh's unique content was the biggest reason why he became a national sensation. No one had ever seen a similar show before: most talk radios avoided partisan comments entirely, and the few opinionated hosts, such as Dan Smoot and Clarence Manion, lectured about conservatism, spouting off facts and figures but providing no interactive features such as call-ins.<sup>75</sup> They barely received advertisements because their material was boring and polarizing, staying afloat only because of donations from a few millionaires who supported conservative propaganda. Other more successful talk radio hosts, like Joe Pyne or his disciple Bob Grant, attracted an audience through sensational insults to callers and guests. Listeners tuned in to see guests humiliated and did not care about the hosts' political views, whether liberal or conservative. Limbaugh, however, entertained through scripted, blunt, and humorous commentaries that promoted his conservative beliefs. He depended less on the call-in format than Pyne or Grant, but when he did take calls, he did not yell or shut off callers but engaged them in mostly civil discussions, in which he presented hurtful but humorous observations against the callers.<sup>76</sup> His political content, although mostly angry, contained light-hearted elements, like parodies, which would even provoke laughter from ideological opponents. For example, he frequently gave nicknames to politicians: Senator Alan Cranston was "The Cadaver" because of his appearance and robotic speeches. Through these techniques, he formed a unique style that combined "zany entertainment and political messaging" and appealed to a wide range of listeners who wanted entertainment and/or conservative perspectives.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Heather Hendershot, "Restoring the Fairness Doctrine can't prevent another Rush Limbaugh," The Washington Post, last modified February 19, 2021, accessed December 6, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/02/19/restoring-fairness-doctrine-cant-prevent-another-rush-limbaugh/>.

<sup>76</sup> Rosenwald, *Talk Radio's America*, 25-26.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 28-29.

Conservatives consistently dominated the talk radio genre: In 2007, 91 percent of the total weekday talk radio programming was conservative, and only nine percent was progressive.<sup>78</sup> Limbaugh believed that people “turn on the radio for three things: entertainment, entertainment, entertainment” and reasoned that conservatives could better entertain because liberals took politics too seriously to pull off similarly offensive humor.<sup>79</sup> However, much evidence proves this correlation between entertainment value and conservative ideologies false. The previous generation of conservative talk radio hosts like Dan Smoot was financially struggling exactly because their lectures were boring, and “boring hosts of all ideological stripes have flopped” during the 1980s.<sup>80</sup> Liberal talk radio hosts like Stephanie Miller, who began her career in 1983, fused stand-up comedy and liberal commentaries in a way similar to Limbaugh and found a large crowd on air, amassing 6 million listeners a week in 2017.<sup>81</sup> Stephanie Miller’s success on radio, along with many liberal comedians later emerging on TV and the Internet, including Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and John Oliver, showed that liberals could pull off the blunt, offensive style of humor that Limbaugh prided himself for.<sup>82</sup>

Limbaugh’s entertaining style set the stage for his success, but more importantly, he became popular because he fulfilled the conservatives’ need for an alternative media source with which they could resonate.<sup>83</sup> Limbaugh spoke to a shared frustration within conservatives with the progress liberals had made since the 1960s. Politically, the government supported the Great

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<sup>78</sup> John Halpin et al., “The Structural Imbalance of Political Talk Radio,” Center for American Progress, last modified June 20, 2007, accessed November 19, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-structural-imbalance-of-political-talk-radio/>.

<sup>79</sup> Rosenwald, *Talk Radio's America*, 31.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>81</sup> Bryan Smith, “From Her Los Feliz Basement, Stephanie Miller Is Rallying Millions Against Trump,” *LA Weekly*, last modified June 20, 2017, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www.laweekly.com/from-her-los-feliz-basement-stephanie-miller-is-rallying-millions-against-trump/>.

<sup>82</sup> Rosenwald, *Talk Radio's America*, 33.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

Society programs, the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, race-based affirmative action for college admissions, and women's right to abortion in *Roe v. Wade*. Socially, the Counterculture movement challenged traditional beliefs in Christianity, chastity before marriage, and fixed gender roles with men as breadwinners and women as housewives. While liberals viewed these movements as campaigns for equal rights, conservatives viewed them as advancements only for minorities but not for the "good, Christian, law-abiding Americans." These conservatives feared that America was no longer the version of America they grew up with and loved, and liberals had poisoned the country with the "ill of violence, sex, and drugs."<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, conservatives' belief in mainstream media's liberal bias further exacerbated their dissatisfaction, as they felt discriminated against in newspapers and broadcast media to voice their dissent. During much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the FCC's regulations obliged media to be objective, but conservatives claimed that the media's campaign for objectivity hid its liberal bias.<sup>85</sup> Some reasoned that media companies were often located in metropolises like New York or Washington D.C. to attract and retain liberal journalists. Others argued that the preference for recruiting journalists from elite colleges with liberal cultures added to this bias. These young journalists usually had a mission to "shine light in dark places:" to advocate for minority groups whose voices were too small for the public to hear and to reveal the secretive powers that corrupt the political order.<sup>86</sup> Both beliefs are traditionally liberal.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>85</sup> Nicole Hemmer, "The Conservative War on Liberal Media Has a Long History," *The Atlantic*, last modified January 17, 2014, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/the-conservative-war-on-liberal-media-has-a-long-history/283149/>.

<sup>86</sup> Erik Wemple, "Dear Mainstream Media: Why so liberal?," *The Washington Post*, last modified January 27, 2017, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2017/01/27/dear-mainstream-media-why-so-liberal/>.

These concerns long existed among conservatives but were first highlighted when conservatives attributed Barry Goldwater's unsuccessful presidential bid in 1964 to overwhelmingly negative media coverage.<sup>87</sup> Goldwater claimed that his position against the New Deal and communists was popular in polls but the media supposedly distorted his positions in news coverage so that many Americans did not thoroughly consider his agenda.<sup>88</sup> The Nixon Administration continued the campaign against alleged liberal bias in the media; Vice President Spiro Agnew, for example, characterized the newsrooms as a "closed fraternity of privileged men" "serving up liberal pap of the New York-Washington echo chamber."<sup>89</sup> Even during the Reagan Administration, when conservatism gained traction, a 1987 Pew poll concluded that 62 percent of Republicans believed in the media's liberal bias.<sup>90</sup> Beverly Shelton of the Traditional Values Coalition complained how television executives took program suggestions from small LGBTQ interest groups but ignored the massive religious coalition in America.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, groups like the Committee to Combat Bias in Broadcasting existed and dedicated themselves to active campaigns against alleged liberal bias.<sup>92</sup>

Some factual analyses supported this charge of liberal bias. For example, 22 percent of the national press self-identified as liberal in 1995, but by 2004, this number increased to 34 percent, with only 7 percent identifying as conservative.<sup>93</sup> A scientific study by Tim Groseclose of UCLA and Jeff Milyo of the University of Chicago quantified the media bias by comparing

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<sup>87</sup> Hemmer, "The Conservative," The Atlantic.

<sup>88</sup> Nicole Hemmer, "Attacking the press for liberal bias is a staple of Republican campaigns -- and it all began in 1964," CNN, last modified February 29, 2020, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/29/opinions/lyndon-johnson-barry-goldwater-liberal-media-bias-hemmer/index.html>.

<sup>89</sup> Hemmer, "The Conservative," The Atlantic.

<sup>90</sup> Rosenwald, *Talk Radio's America*, 13-14.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Hemmer, "The Conservative," The Atlantic.

<sup>93</sup> Wemple, "Dear Mainstream," The Washington Post.

the frequency of Congress members to cite 200 prominent think tanks to the frequency of media outlets to cite the same think tanks. The study concluded that media sources were “skewed substantially to the left of the typical member of Congress.” If the opinions of Congress members accurately reflect those of their constituents, one can infer that the average media source is more liberal than the average American.<sup>94</sup> Although some conservatives exaggerated the extent of the liberal bias, such claims are not unfounded.

Conservative talk radio opened up a media outlet for conservatives discontented with the perceived liberal media bias. In the politically correct culture, many feared that voicing their true opinions “at work or home or in some social settings” would offend others. Hearing talk radio hosts discuss controversial topics regarding race, religion, or sex and saying their beliefs out loud was gratifying. When liberals criticized the radio hosts for offensive commentaries, talk radio hosts would double down, and their “unwillingness to cave to the lords of political correctness reinforced hosts’ almost heroic stature in listeners’ eyes.”<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, the listeners could call into the programs, engage with their favorite hosts, and vent with virtual anonymity and no real-world consequences. Accordingly, talk shows built a strong coalition through the radio airwaves.<sup>96</sup>

In addition, women’s increasing social status during the 1960s and 1970s discomfited some men, who found confirmation of their beliefs in conservative talk radio. Two-thirds of Limbaugh’s audience was male, according to a 2004 Annenberg survey.<sup>97</sup> Most radio hosts were male, and they frequently objectified women and discredited feminist movements. Limbaugh

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<sup>94</sup> Robert J. Barro, “The Liberal Media: It’s No Myth,” OpenScholar@Harvard, last modified June 14, 2004, accessed January 18, 2022, [https://scholar.harvard.edu/barro/files/04\\_0614\\_liberalmedia\\_bw.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/barro/files/04_0614_liberalmedia_bw.pdf).

<sup>95</sup> Rosenwald, *Talk Radio’s America*, 31-33.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 35-36.

coined and popularized the pejorative term “feminazi” for feminists and believed that feminism allowed “unattractive ugly broads [to] have easy access to the mainstream of society.”<sup>98</sup> In 2012, Limbaugh called Sandra Fluke, a Georgetown University law student testifying for birth-control policies, a “slut” and “prostitute.” While many could not tolerate these vulgar comments, some men found that they resonated with their misogynistic beliefs and flocked to conservative talk radio.

Conservative talk radio also appealed to middle- and lower-class whites, who were particularly irritated by the Democratic Party’s response to the rapidly changing economy during the 1980s and 90s. From 1982 to 1994, real earnings for white men with only high school diplomas decreased by 9.1 percent, while those of white men with master’s degrees rose by 24.3 percent. Nonwhite men with low education suffered even higher earnings drops, but most college-educated liberals considered it the byproduct of systemic racial injustice and largely ignored the hardship of low-income white men. Economic deterioration and racial resentment drove working-class Whites to Limbaugh’s show, as they found Limbaugh to be one of them. A small-town, “Middle-American” college dropout, Limbaugh inspired many with his rags-to-riches success story simply by speaking up about the conservative, anti-establishment, or even white supremacist beliefs that they all shared.<sup>99</sup>

While the conservative audience found talk radio to be their only option for ideas they liked, liberals could choose from a myriad of mainstream newspapers, television, or radio programs that broadcasted their views. This difference explained the dominance of conservative voices in talk radio.

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<sup>98</sup> Talmon Joseph Smith, “Rush Limbaugh in His Own Words,” *The New York Times*, last modified February 17, 2021, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/sunday-review/rush-limbaugh-trump-medal.html>.

<sup>99</sup> Rosenwald, *Talk Radio's America*, 34-35.

### Talk Radio's Radicalization and Political Influence

Because Rush Limbaugh began his career with entertainment foremost in his mind, he did not envision how the angry, conservative audience he amassed could be such a major political force. Once he did, he felt “a newfound sense of duty” “to be honest, credible, believable, and to not do things that are perceived to be outrageous.”<sup>100</sup> While Limbaugh continued to entertain, he championed a pragmatic conservative agenda during the early 1990s and contributed to Republicans' victory in the 1994 midterm Congressional election.<sup>101</sup> Gaining 54 seats in the House and eight in the Senate, the Republican Party took control of both chambers for the first time since 1955.<sup>102</sup>

Limbaugh provided a platform for many prominent Republicans, including House Speaker Newt Gingrich, to speak directly with callers, who frequently vented on-air about President Bill Clinton. Many felt betrayed that Clinton posed as a centrist for the 1992 election but nominated liberal judges and pushed for liberal legislation. On Limbaugh's show, Gingrich rallied people around his Contract with America, a clear set of principles about fiscal accountability, smaller government, and tax cuts that local Republican candidates agreed to

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>101</sup> Brian Rosenwald, “The GOP is Rush Limbaugh's party. Trump only inherited it.,” *The Washington Post*, last modified February 19, 2021, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/02/19/rush-limbaugh-gop-rino-trump/>.

<sup>102</sup> Dan Cravens, “1994 election: How radio and the contract for America gave the GOP the House and Senate,” *Idaho State Journal*, last modified August 28, 2016, accessed January 13, 2022, [https://www.idahostatejournal.com/members/1994-election-how-radio-and-the-contract-for-america-gave-the-gop-the-house-and/article\\_60bf1aa4-9b71-5e78-b13b-b8d8ec210a6a.html](https://www.idahostatejournal.com/members/1994-election-how-radio-and-the-contract-for-america-gave-the-gop-the-house-and/article_60bf1aa4-9b71-5e78-b13b-b8d8ec210a6a.html).

implement once the GOP took the majority. It was the first time a major political party successfully nationalized local Congressional elections.<sup>103</sup>

Limbaugh also mobilized his listeners to turnout. He began shows with countdowns of the days since the Clinton economic plan went into effect, the days left in the Clinton Administration, and the days until the midterm elections.<sup>104</sup> Limbaugh even defended the moderate Republican Mitt Romney against criticism that Romney was not sufficiently conservative when he ran against Democrat Ted Kennedy for Massachusetts Senator in 1994.<sup>105</sup> Talk radio's listeners were more politically engaged than the average person. A 1994 Times Mirror poll found that 64 percent of talk radio listeners said they had thought about voting in the midterm election, while only 35 percent of the non-listeners had.<sup>106</sup> By acutely capturing his audience's dissatisfaction with the Clinton administration, Limbaugh propelled the Republican Party to its Congressional majority. The newly elected House Republicans recognized him as a "Majority Maker" and threw him an appreciation party.<sup>107</sup>

However, as the 2000s progressed, Limbaugh's politically pragmatic commentaries faded for two reasons. Limbaugh felt that pragmatic commentaries reduced his level of entertainment. After all, according to top Republican Representative Bob Walker, there was nothing "very entertaining about nuance," and Limbaugh entertained his audience through simple and

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Robin Toner, "THE 1994 CAMPAIGN: BROADCASTER; Election Jitters in Limbaughland," The New York Times, last modified November 3, 1994, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/03/us/the-1994-campaign-broadcaster-election-jitters-in-limbaughland.html>.

<sup>105</sup> Brian Rosenwald, "They Just Wanted to Entertain," The Atlantic, last modified August 21, 2019, accessed October 27, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/talk-radio-made-todays-republican-party/596380/>.

<sup>106</sup> Toner, "THE 1994," The New York Times.

<sup>107</sup> Kevin Merida, "Rush Limbaugh Saluted as a 'Majority Maker,'" The Washington Post, last modified December 11, 1994, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/12/11/rush-limbaugh-saluted-as-a-majority-maker/e4f879c5-a0d2-43b8-ae56-9e24eeb82b62/>.



unambiguous messages of ideological purity.<sup>108</sup> Talk radio hosts do not govern or depend on the Republican Party's governing success to prosper, as long as they can profit by attracting a large audience.<sup>109</sup> In fact, Vox journalist David Roberts points out that the “more the party establishment fails to deliver on the far-right's (wildly unrealistic) demands, the more the audience feels betrayed, and the angrier it gets. That means more clicks, more phone calls, more engagement.”<sup>110</sup> The sensation of hearing “out-there” ideas made listeners stay, but boring, serious commentaries drove listeners away. As a result, radio hosts, including Limbaugh, became inclined to air ideas untethered to political reality and capitalize on shock value.

Simultaneously, many other conservative radio hosts, inspired by Limbaugh, adopted similar or more confrontational styles and emerged as a competitive force. Listeners gravitated to more polarizing shows, and Limbaugh's content followed suit to retain his audience. Former Republican House Speaker John Boehner, ousted by more conservative members of his party in 2015, said the more radical host Mark Levin has “dragged” Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity “to the dark side.” He quipped: “When I went to Palm Beach I would always meet with Rush and we'd go play golf ... I used to talk to them all the time. And suddenly they're beating the living shit out of me.”<sup>111</sup> Rush Limbaugh called Boehner's announcement to cooperate with President Obama to halt the 2013 fiscal cliff a “seminar in surrender.”<sup>112</sup> As Limbaugh and other major

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<sup>108</sup> Rosenwald, “The GOP is Rush,” The Washington Post.

<sup>109</sup> Rosenwald, “They Just,” The Atlantic.

<sup>110</sup> David Roberts, “How conservative media helped the far-right take over the Republican Party,” Vox, last modified July 30, 2015, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/2015/7/30/9074761/conservative-media-republican-party>.

<sup>111</sup> Tim Alberta, “John Boehner Unchained,” Politico Magazine, last modified December 2017, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/10/29/john-boehner-trump-house-republican-party-retirement-profile-feature-215741/>.

<sup>112</sup> Rosenwald, “The GOP is Rush,” The Washington Post.

radio hosts adopted the radical ideologies of smaller hosts, the competition became a vicious cycle that pushed the whole genre to the far-right.

The accusations that some Republicans were RINOs (Republicans in Name Only) perfectly illustrate this shift. Once supportive of moderate Mitt Romney in 1994, Limbaugh declared in 2005 that “there’s no such thing as a moderate. A moderate is just a liberal disguise, and they are doing everything they can to derail the conservative agenda.”<sup>113</sup> As the political landscape polarized, fewer moderate politicians existed, and the definition of RINO expanded. For example, Sean Hannity characterized Senator John McCain and Lindsay Graham as RINOs, when others considered them as part of the conservative establishment.<sup>114</sup>

Some commentaries bordered on misinformation. Rush Limbaugh called the negative health impact of second-hand smoke “a myth” that “has been disproven at the World Health Organization and the report was suppressed.”<sup>115</sup> Such a claim directly contradicts many authoritative scientific studies. The Surgeon General’s Reports on Smoking and Tobacco Use, a series published over the last five decades and transcended beyond partisanship, constantly warned people of second-hand smoke.<sup>116</sup> The most recent report concluded that out of the 7,000+ chemicals it contains, hundreds are toxic and about seventy can cause cancer. People frequently exposed to second-hand smoke have a 20-30% higher risk of developing lung cancer and a 25-30% higher risk of developing heart disease.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, talk radio hosts frequently denounce

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<sup>113</sup> Rush Limbaugh, “Moderate RINOS Undermine the GOP,” The Rush Limbaugh Show, last modified November 11, 2005, accessed January 13, 2022, [https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2005/11/11/moderate\\_rinos\\_undermine\\_the\\_gop/](https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2005/11/11/moderate_rinos_undermine_the_gop/).

<sup>114</sup> Rosenwald, “They Just,” The Atlantic.

<sup>115</sup> Silverstein, “Rush Limbaugh,” CBS News.

<sup>116</sup> “Surgeon General's Reports on Smoking and Tobacco Use,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed January 15, 2022, [https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data\\_statistics/sgr/index.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/sgr/index.htm).

<sup>117</sup> “Health Effects of Secondhand Smoke,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed January 15, 2022, [https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data\\_statistics/fact\\_sheets/secondhand\\_smoke/health\\_effects/index.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/secondhand_smoke/health_effects/index.htm).

the severity of COVID-19 and oppose vaccination, despite the clear evidence that by January 2022, the pandemic has killed 850,000 Americans and at least five talk radio hosts themselves.<sup>118</sup> They disregard the scientific consensus on health and safety as long as doing so makes their shows more entertaining.

Talk radio listeners devoutly buy into such misinformation. Because of the perceived liberal bias of mainstream media, most listeners choose to only trust talk radio and, thus, lock themselves in a closed information circle filled with “pseudo-facts and pretend information.”<sup>119</sup> These listeners do not know the information they hear is false because they choose not to verify it with other sources. The Pew Center found that the most conservative Americans almost exclusively consume conservative media, while other Americans generally trust sources with a variety of ideologies.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, the tight communities built around radio hosts make the listeners feel like an insider “awakened to a hidden truth about the real way the world works while the rest of the American ‘sheep’ slumber.”<sup>121</sup> This echo chamber reinforces conservatives’ existing beliefs, whether truthful or not, and antagonizes liberals.

Conservative talk radio has significantly influenced the Republican electoral agenda. First, hosts do so by backing far-right, usually inexperienced, primary challengers against moderate incumbents. Since turnout in primaries is low and consists of the most ideologically

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<sup>118</sup> “Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count,” The New York Times, last modified January 15, 2022, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html>; Timothy Bella, “Conservative radio host who spurned vaccines, mocked AIDS patients dies of covid-19,” The Washington Post, last modified September 14, 2021, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/09/14/bob-enyart-conservative-radio-covid/>.

<sup>119</sup> Jackie Calmes, “They Don’t Give a Damn about Governing’ Conservative Media’s Influence on the Republican Party,” Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, last modified July 27, 2015, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://shorensteincenter.org/conservative-media-influence-on-republican-party-jackie-calmes/>.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. This Pew Center study analyzes conservative media in general, including talk radio, Fox News, and other news sources, but it serves as a good proxy to prove the paper’s point on talk radio’s closed information loop.

<sup>121</sup> Paul Matzko, “Talk Radio Is Turning Millions of Americans Into Conservatives,” The New York Times, last modified October 9, 2020, accessed January 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/09/opinion/talk-radio-conservatives-trumpism.html>.

passionate voters, these challengers have an edge. In 2014, talk radio hosts Laura Ingraham and Mark Levin publicly supported ousting Republican House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, inviting his rival David Brat to their shows and convincing listeners of his qualifications, despite him having no prior governing experience.<sup>122</sup> Brat's inexperience even appealed to voters who wanted an outsider ready to end the corrupt political order. Brat's primary challenge succeeded, making Cantor the first House Majority Leader evicted by his own party.<sup>123</sup> Talk radio hosts can provide tremendous assistance for these insurgent challengers: hosts can either give these candidates airtime or personally vouch and fundraise for them. In the 2010 Delaware Senate primary, little-known Christine O'Donnell surprisingly won against high-profile Mike Castle, who previously served as a Representative and Governor. In the 24 hours following her victory, Rush Limbaugh raised more than a million dollars for her general election campaign.<sup>124</sup>

These far-right candidates sometimes sabotaged the GOP in elections. When the congressional general elections lack competition, these radical challengers successfully enter the Congress. In other cases, however, their unpopularity to moderate voters frequently causes them to lose the general elections. For example, Christine O'Donnell lost the Delaware race to Democrat Chris Coons by a large margin of 17 points.<sup>125</sup> Similarly, in 2012, the successful primary challenger to incumbent Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana lost the general election.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Brian Rosenwald, "The Talk Radio Effect," *POLITICO Magazine*, last modified June 17, 2014, accessed January 14, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/the-talk-radio-effect-107942/>.

<sup>123</sup> Eric Linton, "House Majority Leader Eric Cantor Defeated By Tea Party Challenger David Brat In Virginia GOP Primary," *International Business Times*, last modified June 10, 2014, accessed January 14, 2022, <https://www.ibtimes.com/house-majority-leader-eric-cantor-defeated-tea-party-challenger-david-brat-virginia-gop-1597736>.

<sup>124</sup> Rosenwald, "The Talk Radio Effect," *POLITICO Magazine*.

<sup>125</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, "How Christine O'Donnell Went from Tea Party Favorite to Outcast," *The Atlantic*, last modified August 31, 2011, accessed January 14, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/08/how-christine-odonnell-went-from-tea-party-favorite-to-outcast/244359/>.

<sup>126</sup> Rosenwald, "They Just," *The Atlantic*.

Second, talk radio influences elections by igniting anti-government outrage and mobilizing their loyal audience to turn out and vote. Limbaugh's role in the 1994 midterm election illustrates this theory. However, political journalist Steven Kornacki warned Republicans that such success was often short-lived, as some only supported the GOP as a protest vehicle rather than supporting its right-wing legislation. In 1996, the people reelected Clinton when the economy became stronger, and Gingrich's Congressional plans became unpopular.<sup>127</sup> While talk radio listeners are unlikely to vote for Democrats, their enthusiasm to turn out usually follows their disapproval of first-term presidents. This pattern appeared again when talk radio propelled the Tea Party movement to the national stage in 2010, calling for lower taxes and fiscal responsibility as a response to President Obama's spending plans.<sup>128</sup> However, the once sensational Tea Party now is dead when people no longer felt concerned about deficits.<sup>129</sup>

Most recently, talk radio played an important role in Donald Trump's presidency. Trump has mimicked both talk radio hosts' ranting style and talking points, pulling "out-there" ideas into the mainstream.<sup>130</sup> When Limbaugh first heard of Trump's presidential bid in 2015, he acutely observed that "this is gonna resonate with a lot of people, I guarantee you."<sup>131</sup> Limbaugh

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<sup>127</sup> Steve Kornacki, "Does Rush Limbaugh remember 1994?," Salon, last modified march 9, 2010, accessed January 14, 2022, [https://www.salon.com/2010/03/09/limbaugh\\_hardball/](https://www.salon.com/2010/03/09/limbaugh_hardball/).

<sup>128</sup> Kenneth P. Vogel, "The tea party radio network," POLITICO, last modified April 20, 2014, accessed January 14, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/04/tea-party-radio-network-105774>.

<sup>129</sup> Jack Hunter, "Rand Paul Declares Tea Party dead, and He's Absolutely Right," Washington Examiner, last modified July 31, 2019, accessed October 13, 2021, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/rand-paul-declares-tea-party-dead-and-hes-absolutely-right>.

<sup>130</sup> Paul Matzko, "Talk Radio Is Turning Millions of Americans Into Conservatives," The New York Times, last modified October 9, 2020, accessed January 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/09/opinion/talk-radio-conservatives-trumpism.html>.

<sup>131</sup> Brian Rosenwald, "Trump sounds just like a right-wing talk-radio host," The Washington Post, last modified December 12, 2019, accessed January 14, 2022, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/trump-sounds-just-like-a-right-wing-talk-radio-host/2019/12/12/f8e4e024-1c65-11ea-b4c1-fd0d91b60d9e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/trump-sounds-just-like-a-right-wing-talk-radio-host/2019/12/12/f8e4e024-1c65-11ea-b4c1-fd0d91b60d9e_story.html).

knew that Trump would be successful because Trump borrowed many of Limbaugh's popular commentaries that he had aired for more than a decade. Trump's claim that Mexico was sending "rapists" and "drug dealers" into America almost copied verbatim Limbaugh's attack on "violent criminals" that "countries like Mexico" were "unwilling to take back."<sup>132</sup> Just like radio hosts, Trump bluntly called the House impeachment "The Greatest Witch Hunt In American History!" and coronavirus "Chinese virus."<sup>133</sup> Trump took advantage of the talk radio listeners' closed information circle and quickly absorbed them into his loyal voter base, many of whom still support him after he left office in 2021.<sup>134</sup>

### **Conclusion**

With or without Trump as the president, conservative talk radio continues to radicalize the GOP and remains a force that one should not overlook. To analyze the status quo, this paper traced the history of talk radio back to the birth of public broadcasting in the 1910s. Starting as a preacher, Father Charles Coughlin popularized talk radio in the 1930s but was censored as his commentaries became political and supportive of Nazi ideologies. In the 1960s, Joe Pyne started as a music disc jockey but later built a reputation in talk radio for blunt insults, arguably in violation of the Fairness Doctrine. However, Pyne's lung cancer, not governmental regulation, cut his career short, as the Fairness Doctrine remained weakly enforced and suffered from First Amendment-related criticisms. Unlike his two predecessors, Rush Limbaugh left the talk radio

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Susan Page and Sarah Elbeshbishi, "Exclusive: Defeated and impeached, Trump still commands the loyalty of the GOP's voters," USA Today, last modified February 21, 2021, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/02/21/exclusive-trump-party-he-still-holds-loyalty-gop-voters/6765406002/>.

genre a long legacy. Supported by dying AM radio stations after the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, he developed a unique style that combined politics and entertainment and captured the dissatisfaction of conservatives towards progressive advancements and an alleged liberal mainstream media. Limbaugh propelled the genre to its current importance and put forth more radicalized ideologies to better entertain and stay competitive with more radical hosts. Heavily contributing to the 1994 midterm victory, the 2010's Tea Party movement, and Trump's presidency, Limbaugh, talk radio, and their far-right audience became indispensable to the GOP's political influence.

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