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Honors Colloquium Project Prospectus

For centuries, political theorists have placed significant emphasis on the role of public opinion in the democratic process. Liberal notions of democracy maintain that public opinion must be a driving force in the determination of public policy and that elected representatives must follow the collective will of the people if legitimacy is to be maintained. In keeping with this notion of public opinion as the great engine of democracy, researchers in the field of political science have devoted considerable effort to surveying the opinions of citizens and evaluating the amount of correspondence between citizen's views and policy outputs. This was never more true than during the rise of scientific polling techniques in the 1960s. Inherent in much of this research is the assumption that public opinion is an independent autonomous variable acting upon and directing public policy. However, a considerable body of research has developed in recent decades that seeks to understand public opinion as a dependent measure. Such research examines the policy making process and determines the various ways in which elite opinion leaders and institutional forces can direct and alter public opinion.

My research will follow this latter conception of public opinion and examine how it is influenced by one particular institution, the television news media. More specifically, through systematic observation, I will examine the role of daily television newscasts in altering and shaping individuals' opinions. I hypothesize that to a

significant degree television newscasts are instrumental in not only setting the political agenda for American viewers but also in substantially changing those opinions as well. To carry out this examination, I will analyze the content of the nightly national news shows for each of the major television networks over a period of weeks and develop several independent measures corresponding to them such as issues addressed, significance given to each issue, and type of stories done. I will then compare these measures with public opinion polls during the same period in order to find significant correlations between the variables. Independent measures will come from my content analysis of the newscasts. Dependent measures will be obtained through Public Opinion Online, a database produced by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, which includes surveys conducted by the major U.S. polling firms and the media. This database will allow me to access public opinion poll results both by issue and by date of release.

I believe there are significant potential implications from such research. First it will shed light on the power of the televised media and examine how one of our most pervasive tools of influence can be used to alter or direct the opinions of citizens. Second, by placing my results within the context of existing theoretical frameworks existing in the areas of political communication and mass opinion change, I will be able to further clarify the influences which act upon public opinion and its true place in the policy determination process.