

The Seattle Times Newspapers In Education presents

# Electing the President: A Guide to the Election Process

Learn how our president is elected and why voting counts. Articles appear every Wednesday through June 4 and again in the fall. In partnership with the League of Women Voters at [www.lwvwa.org](http://www.lwvwa.org).

## Unit Five The Role of Media in an Election

Broadcast television, radio news and mainstream newspapers and newsmagazines have enormous influence on the presidential election process. These pillars of traditional media are still the sources from which the majority of Americans get most of their news and information about the candidates, the issues and the election.

In recent years, however, Americans have become increasingly disenchanted with traditional media and its dominant role in American politics. The public's distrust of traditional institutions — together with the advent of new technologies — has opened the door to new ways for voters to get their election information. Radio talk shows, the Internet and 24-hour cable news channels offer a growing assortment of election information resources.

Over the last several years, blogs, viral marketing, e-mail outreach and other vehicles for sharing online information have virtually changed the definition of "media" by democratizing the process and allowing everyday citizens to shape the making of the news. Increasingly, candidates, supporters, voters and media from all over the world are able to respond instantly and cheaply to events as they happen. In the case of viral marketing, what begins as a small idea may generate a great deal of attention very quickly through social network channels.

### Running for Coverage: The Candidates and the Media

Despite the burgeoning competition, traditional media channels are still enormously important. Newspapers and network television still reach the largest audiences in the United States. A modern presidential campaign is as much a battle for favorable coverage in mainstream news media as it is a battle for votes.

Some believe major newspapers and network news programs can virtually create a presidential front-runner by giving a candidate valuable exposure or simply by identifying the candidacy as the one to beat. Most news outlets give the greatest coverage to candidates who have the most money (their own money plus

campaign contributions), as well as the most favorable ratings in public opinion polls.

While acceptance as a *major candidate* by mainstream media is a crucial asset, a candidate can attract media attention and buzz by performing unexpectedly well. The unexpected rise of a little-known candidate, with innovative tactics and appeal, attracts ratings and readers.

There are plenty of well-known ways to draw favorable media attention. For instance, stage events with "good visuals" for the television cameras and news photographers. A dramatic backdrop that highlights some of the issues the candidate is talking about — a pristine lake if the topic is the environment, a factory if the candidate is addressing economic issues, a family living room or local coffee shop may convey the message that this is someone who cares about real people.

### How Do You Find the Best Election Coverage?

Recognize the pluses and minuses of the information you receive from all the different types of media. If you don't feel you're getting enough information about the candidates and their positions on the issues from the mainstream press, check out some of the alternatives — for example, by surfing the Internet for more detailed breakdowns of where the candidates stand.

Don't be fooled by ads from other sources. If a radio or TV ad is paid for by a candidate's organization, it must include this statement, "My name is X and I approved this ad," (or something similar).

## Learn More

- **Comparing Media:** Follow an issue that is being reported in the newspaper, on TV and online. Compare and contrast the coverage between these news sources. Which provides the most in-depth, accurate information? Do they report on the same issues or events differently? Do they focus on different slices of an issue or event?
- Write a short text message telling what you like about one of the presidential candidates. Imagine that you sent your message to 25 friends on your cell phone contact list, and that they each sent it to 25 of their friends — and then those people each sent it to 25 of their friends. How many people in all would you reach with your message through this "viral marketing" strategy? (Hint: it's a big number; you may need a calculator.)

## Washington State Voters Important summer 2008 dates:

**June 6:** Last day for candidates to file for office

**June 12:** Referendum petitions must be submitted by 1 a.m.

**July 3:** Petition signatures for initiatives to the people must be filed

**July 19:** Mail-in and online voter registrations and transfers must be in the elections office for those wishing to participate in the August primary

**July 30:** First day absentee ballots will be available for the August 19 primary

**August 4:** Last day voters who have not registered by mail-in deadline and who are not currently registered in Washington may present themselves in person at the elections office to be eligible to participate in the primary

**August 19:** PRIMARY

For Washington state voter information, visit: Secretary of State Web site at [www.secstate.wa.gov](http://www.secstate.wa.gov) and League of Women Voters Web site at [www.washingtonvoter.org](http://www.washingtonvoter.org)

Your County Auditor and Election Department Web sites will provide further local voter information.

League of Women Voters of Seattle publishes *They Represent You, A Directory of Elected Officials* annually. This publication contains general information on voting and registration and provides contact information for national, state and local King County elected officials. See the 2008 directory at [www.seattletlwv.org](http://www.seattletlwv.org), or pick one up at a public library. For areas outside King County, visit [www.lwvwa.org](http://www.lwvwa.org) to find a local league with a directory for your area.



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