DAY 2: THE ROLE OF MEDIA

Television and radio news — and mainstream print and online 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 information about the candidates, the issues and the election.

However, Americans have become increasingly disenchanted with traditional media and their 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 information resources, which may or may not be based on fact, and at times, can be misleading.

Over the last decade, blogs, e-mail campaigns, YouTube, Twitter and other social media 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 inexpensively to events as they happen.

RUNNING FOR COVERAGE

A presidential campaign is as much a battle for favorable media coverage 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 largest campaign war chests, as well as the most favorable ratings in public opinion polls.

While acceptance as a major candidate by the media is crucial, 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.

HOW TO FIND THE BEST ELECTION COVERAGE?

Recognize the pluses and minuses of the information from different types of media. Look for signs of the editorial point of view. If you don’t feel you’re getting enough information about the candidates and their positions on the issues, check out some alternatives — for example, by surfing the Internet for more detailed breakdowns of where the candidates stand.

BE AD SAVVY

As election season gets under way, ads will appear. If a radio or TV ad is paid for by a candidate’s organization, it must include a statement from the candidate such as, “My name is X and I approved this ad.” Make sure to listen until the end of the ad for the sponsor and if it’s not a candidate’s campaign, take a second look. For national elections, try www.flackcheck.org.

LEARN MORE

Decipher a Poll: Find a poll mentioned in The Seattle Times and try to determine:

- Who sponsored the poll? Special-interest groups often sponsor polls designed to influence voters.
- Who was surveyed? Was it all adults, just likely voters, or undecided voters? Such factors can dramatically impact poll results.
- How were the questions worded? Wording can skew the results.
- What is the margin of error? Typically a reputable poll has a margin of error of 5 percent or less. If the margin of error is 5 percent and one candidate is ahead by 5 percent, then it’s likely the race is a dead heat.

Browse the Sunday paper. Reading the news consistently helps builds your knowledge of what is going on in your community. You’ll find the more you know, the more confident you’ll feel when you vote. Dive in!

NEXT: DEBATE WATCHING 101

To learn more or register for Newspapers In Education, please email us at nie@seattletimes.com or call 206/652-6290.