

MASS MEDIA PLAY IMPORTANT ROLE IN U.S. ELECTIONS

WASHINGTON, AUGUST 22 -- It would be hard to overestimate the importance of mass media in the U.S. electoral process. National television networks reach 99 percent of all American homes, making contact across the entire socioeconomic spectrum. Cable news stations, radio and television talk shows, newspapers, news magazines and Internet sites all provide voters with information about the candidates. The content and emphasis of their coverage are among the most powerful factors in determining how voters perceive the candidates and the issues.

Studies have shown that broadcast media devote most of their coverage to the competition between the candidates rather than providing an explanation of issues and the candidates' stances on them. Eager to attract viewers, broadcasters focus on dramatic moments that highlight candidates' mistakes, attacks on opponents and suggestions of scandal or problems.

Even when the media do provide campaign coverage, the candidates may not get much direct airtime. In an academic study of major network coverage of the 2000 elections, it was found that the news reporters talked for 74 percent of the time; only 12 percent of the time did viewers hear the actual candidates' voices and, when they did, the sound bite averaged only 7.8 seconds.

As a way of communicating more directly with voters, candidates buy television and radio advertising time. In the 2000 presidential election, the two major-party candidates spent \$285 million, with about 60 percent of it going to advertising. The high cost of reaching voters requires the campaigns to concentrate their ad buys in areas where they believe they have a chance of affecting undecided voters' opinions -- resulting in the residents of some media regions being bombarded with political ads and others having little exposure to them.

The 2004 election was the first in which the Internet played a significant role as a medium for campaigning and for raising money. Former presidential hopeful Howard Dean, governor of the small state of Vermont, used his Web site to form a network of thousands of enthusiastic volunteers. Before dropping out of the race, Dean raised more money than his opponents in the Democratic primaries and received favorable media coverage for demonstrating the political power of the Internet.

The other candidates in the race followed Dean's lead and made good use of the Internet. President Bush and Senator John Kerry had elaborate Web sites, where they promoted their agendas and attempted to refute their opponents' campaign messages.

Candidates also try to make news that they hope the media will cover. This might be the announcement of a new plan on an issue of interest to voters or an appearance at a symbolic location. An incumbent president has an advantage here, because what the president does always makes news -- whether it is a ceremonial bill signing, a meeting with a foreign head of state or a visit to an area where a natural disaster has occurred.

Academic studies indicate that most voters tend to seek out and believe information that reinforces beliefs that they already hold. They tune in to broadcasters who present a political viewpoint similar to their own. Two-thirds of the electorate -- a figure that coincides with the number of voters who identify with a particular party -- says that they have made up their minds before campaigning even begins.

The relatively small percentage of so-called swing voters whose minds are not made up are the ones on whom media coverage and campaign ads have the most effect. Campaign media strategies, however, are not entirely designed with swing voters in mind. It is also important for parties to maintain strong support among their traditional supporters, known as their base, and pursue a national media campaign as well those tailored for regional audiences.

In recent years, a controversy has developed around the media's use of "exit polling," the media's practice of asking voters as they depart a polling place how they voted and then using this information, often based on very small percentages, to predict a winner. While the exit polling results, generally, have proven to be fairly accurate, states on the West Coast, where voting places close hours after those on the East Coast, complain that early predictions influence those who have not yet cast their ballots.

Finally, in 2004 another medium not usually associated with political campaigns entered the fray: motion pictures. A documentary-style, feature-length film released in June 2004 criticized the Bush administration's actions in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. In September 2004, another motion picture meant to counter its claims appeared in U.S. movie theaters. Whether such films will be around in future election years remains to be seen, but in 2004, at least, they were clearly part of the media mix.

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