

Media

Reaching American Voters

Strengthen Candidates' Traditional and New Media Approaches

Background

The number of American voters who will see a Presidential candidate in person during the 2008 campaign is miniscule compared with the tens of millions who will receive their information about candidates through media coverage and the Internet. For that reason, the media's focus on the "horse race" aspects of presidential campaigns—who's ahead, who's behind in the polls—rather than on candidates' positions on specific issues is worrisome.

Efforts by the 2008 Presidential candidates to define themselves to voters through the news media—and, after the election, efforts by the new President to announce and explain various actions and policies—will be complicated by major changes in the media and in public attitudes toward it.

Recommendations

Presidential candidates, as well as the next President, will need to explain policies and proposals to the voting public. Specific recommendations about how to do so effectively through the news media include:

- educate reporters about complex issues
- never lie and never cover up
- get off the defensive and go on the offensive
- put out the bad news yourself

Key Facts

- on a typical day, barely more than half the adult population—57 percent—watched some television news, only 40 percent read a newspaper, and 36 percent listened to news on the radio
- 70 percent of television journalists and 60 percent of newspaper and magazine journalists believe the growth of the Internet as a news source has increased the amount of misinformation reaching the public

- more than half of Americans, between the ages of 18 and 29 at least sometimes obtained election information from entertainment television—shows hosted by Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Jon Stewart, as well as MTV and *Saturday Night Live*

A full version of this proposal, as well as supporting background material, is available at www.opportunity08.org.

About the Author and the Project

Ron Nessen

Ron Nessen is Journalist in Residence at Brookings. He was Press Secretary to President Gerald R. Ford. A former journalist, Nessen was a writer and editor at United Press International and national correspondent for NBC News. He also served as vice president news at the Mutual Broadcasting System, a worldwide radio network.

Opportunity 08 aims to help 2008 presidential candidates and the public focus on critical issues facing the nation, presenting policy ideas on a wide array of domestic and foreign policy questions. The project is committed to providing both independent policy solutions and background material on issues of concern to voters.