The Candidates in the Eye of the Media

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In the US, the media play a major role in national elections. Here is how they helped Americans to choose their president

In its 161-year history, The Chicago Tribune had never endorsed a Democratic Party candidate for the US presidency. But this time around it did. It endorsed Barack Obama. It had reasons for doing so. The Chicago Tribune had argued that the success of Obama at the polls would dramatically advance America’s slow progress towards “equality and inclusion.” The respected publication had argued that it took Abraham Lincoln’s extraordinary courage in the civil war to get the Americans to the level they were in racial integration and harmony; while it also took an epic battle to secure women the right to vote. It also noted that it took the perseverance of the Civil Rights movement to bring the country to the level it is today in racial integration. The publication also highlighted the poor state of the country’s economy, and argued that it had not been easy to lose sight of the history in the making as the Americans were concerned on the greatest threat to the world economic system in 80 years. The Chicago Tribune, noted for its enduring support for the Republicans over the years gave the Grand Old Party, GOP, a big knock saying the party had lost its direction. “The government ran a $237 billion surplus in 2000, the year before Bush took office - and recorded a $455 billion deficit in 2008. The Republicans lost control of the US House and Senate in 2006 because, as we said at the time, they gave the nation rampant spending and Capitol Hill corruption. They abandoned their principles. They paid the price... It is, though, hard to figure John McCain these days. He argued that President Bush’s tax-cuts were fiscally irresponsible, but he now supports them. He promises a balanced budget by the end of his first term, but his tax-cut plan would add an estimated $4.2 trillion in debt over 10 years. He has responded to the economic crisis with an angry, populist message and a misguided $300 billion proposal to buy up bad mortgages.” Others like The Stockton Record, a California paper that had not endorsed a Democrat since Franklin Roosevelt 72 years ago; and Esquire, which had also not supported a Democrat in its 75-year history also endorsed Obama. Their support underscored the popularity of the Obama presidential quest which eventually materialised on November 4. The Los Angeles Times, for example, had advocated the need for a leader who demonstrates thoughtful calm and grace under pressure, not one “prone to volatile gesture or capricious pronouncement.” It said a leader like Obama who was well-grounded in the intellectual and legal foundations of American freedom that also possesses the spark and passion to inspire the best within the people with qualities like creativity, generousity and a fierce defence of justice and liberty, was the one required. The Standard, in throwing its weight behind Obama had asked if the world was safer under George Bush, the cause the out-going president claimed he was championing. In providing the answer, it said Bush’s eight-year-reign ended in domestic failure epitomised in economic meltdown that is threatening to subsume world economies, whose damages will take years to fix. The Standard therefore hailed Obama as the ultimate choice for representing “the best of America and its values.” John McCain equally enjoyed support from a section of the American press. Some of the notable publications that endorsed the American war hero were New York Times, Baltimore Sun, and San Antonio Express. Baltimore Sun said the veteran Arizona senator whose political obituary had been all but written, had risen like a phoenix to pre-eminent status. It added that McCain “has stood his grounds on tough issues such as immigration reform, campaign finance and torture, and we praised him for it. He is principled and has been willing to compromise.” The New York Times, while supporting McCain, criticised Obama’s policy of spreading “the wealth around.” It said that would be tantamount to the African-American stopping rewarding merit. As a result, it stuck to the Republican candidate for his commitment towards encouraging hardwork and sustaining the ideals of capitalism. During the campaigns, the American media relegated other serious issues like the Iraq war to the background while Sarah Palin-related stories took the front stage in the media. A study by the Pew Study Centre revealed that Iraq war was at the bottom of the list of the top 10 stories that dominated the election issues. The economy received the greatest media coverage, about 18.5 percent. While the presidential debates received 17 percent of the coverage in the American media, Palin-related stories sparked by her $150,000 wardrobe received 14 percent of the media attention, three times more than her Democratic opponent, Joe Biden. The war in Iraq and related issues received only one percent of the media coverage. The media, especially the electronic, were more interested in the candidates’ temperament, body language and personal encounters which received more coverage than other serious issues. Peter Hart, a media analyst complained that searching for stories of substance on the election would require a lot of investigation. The Republican party came out of the elections complaining. It accused the “liberal press” of favouring Obama and his team. The critics said Obama appeared more on magazine covers and newspapers and that more of the publications endorsed him. They said the television reporters had turned themselves into “Barack Obama’s media groups.” Many of the McCain’s supporters blamed the media for influencing the outcome of the elections. The non-partisan Centre for Media and Public Affairs confirmed this when it argued in its analysis that McCain received far more negative news coverage than his rival during the campaign. The Pew Research Centre also detected a slightly more positive coverage for Obama in the past six weeks before the convention and the last presidential debate. The centre scored 36 percent positive to 29 percent negative for Obama, while McCain “was substantially negative” with 51 percent unfavourable reports and just 14 percent positive. The internet also played a prominent role in the election. Reports carried online about the candidates went a long way in shaping the outcome of the election. The most visited website during the election was that of the New York Times which received 10 million visitors monthly, while ABC News Digital followed with eight million visitors. USA Today recorded an average of 7.5 million visitors, the Fox News 5.8 million and

Washington Post 5.5 million monthly. One issue that also featured prominently in the media during the campaign is the videotaped comments made by Jeremiah Wright, Obama’s pastor at the Trinity Church of Christ in Chicago, in which he appeared to have supported the September 11 terrorists’ attack on the US. The press devoted significant time to raise questions about Obama’s associations and connections with various public figures, and that was something the press was far less interested in doing with McCain. McCain political favours for a lobbyist Vicki Iseman was given a footnote treatment. Media endorsement for Obama significantly helped in swinging the votes in his favour. The electronic media usually plays the more dominant roles in American elections. They did not disappoint this time. All the major networks-CNN, NBC, ABC and MSNBC ensured effective coverage of the elections right from the primaries to the national election. Wolf Blitzer of CNN summed up the coverage of the TV when he said, “after 18 months of unrestricted projection, speculation and analyses about how America would vote in 2008 presidential election, TV was stuck last night with the actual information. It did the best it could.” The CNN, in particular, ran a countdown clock until the end of the polls. The Gallup Opinion Polls were carried from the beginning of the campaign to the end, this time with greater accuracy. These polls that were maligned in 2004, when they prematurely inaugurated John Kerry were quite careful this time around. Since opinion polls have become a valuable talking point to be abandoned, most networks still used them but with a warning label.