



Add a Little Sunshine To Election 2008

From the coalition that brings you Sunshine Week each March, new efforts to make open government a campaign issue.

My first memories of television conjure up two completely different images: Howdy Doody and the Republican National Convention. When my family purchased our first television set, those instantly became my two favorite programs.

Being a Howdy Doody fan was not unusual. Like most kids in those years, I loved Buffalo Bob and the way he opened the show: "What time is it? It's Howdy Doody time!"

But becoming enamored with the Republican show was rather strange for a young child. It happened while my grandfather, a Taft conservative from Ohio, was visiting our home in Texas that summer. He was riveted by the televised battle for the nomination between his home state hero Sen. Robert Taft and Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower.

I adored my grandfather so I sat right next to him in front of the set. I didn't understand what was going on but it looked pretty exciting and was certainly a big deal for my grandfather, who was crushed when Ike beat Taft. I also didn't realize I was witnessing a technological revolution. Television had come to presidential politics and things would never be the same.

That early experience left its mark on me. I continued to be fascinated by politics, but as an observer, not a participant. Later on, when I chose journalism as a career, politics was my specialty and I loved election years. The thrill of attending conventions never wore off, even though modern day conventions



can hardly match those earlier ones for drama.

Now another technology is changing politics and journalists need to keep pace. As Deborah Potter reports in this month's cover story, candidates are going online and so are news organizations. Because of the digital revolution, Election 2008 will be unlike any other. For news organizations wanting to ramp up interactivity and engage citizen journalists, election coverage offers a great opportunity. You can learn how others are using their digital platforms to extend, enrich and deepen their political coverage. If you are innovating online with your election coverage, let RTNDA know about it, because we will be tracking this trend all through the year.

RTNDA has another election-related project for 2008, a project called Sunshine Campaign. The idea comes from the organizers of Sunshine Week, a national effort to raise public awareness of the importance of open gov-

ernment. RTNDA and many of our members have participated in Sunshine Week for the past three years with on air and online stories, interviews and public service announcements. We're planning a similar effort for Sunshine Week next year, March 16-22.

But rather than limiting our efforts to one week, the Sunshine Week coalition sees the election year as an opportunity to make issues of open government, secrecy and access part of the campaign debate. News organizations go to great lengths to get candidates on the record about all kinds of issues, from health insurance to immigration to national security policy. Why not find out where candidates stand on open government? And then, once they have taken a stand, why not collect those views for the public to see and evaluate? What better way to raise public awareness of open government than to explore those issues during an election campaign?

To answer these questions, the Sunshine Week coalition is compiling a Web database that will include the open government positions of candidates running for president and Congress. Coalition leaders say the aim "is a one-of-a-kind repository that will inform voters on where candidates stand, and will serve as a touchstone for measuring the winning candidates' performance in office."

RTNDA members and other journalists are in the perfect position to help with this project. Over the next 12 months, many of you will have the chance to grill candidates in interviews, debates and town-hall meetings. These are golden opportunities to ask what could be some of the most important questions of the campaign.

The Sunshine Week coalition has drafted some suggested questions, including:

1. What is your philosophy of government openness? How important is it to American democracy?
2. According to a recent survey, two-thirds of the American people believe that the federal government is some-

what or very secretive. Do you agree or disagree? How would you try to change the situation?

3. Do you support a federal reporter's privilege of the type proposed in the Free Flow of Information Act? If not, what are your objections?

4. Citizens can see and hear the actions of Congress and the Executive Branch through television and radio coverage. Do you think the federal judiciary should also be open to the public through television and radio?

5. Should citizens be able to see and hear the actions of the Supreme Court through live television and radio coverage?

You can think of many more questions along these lines. If and when you get the answers, you can e-mail clips or transcripts to president@rtnda.org and

we will share them with Sunshine Campaign, where they will be displayed in a searchable database.

You can also take the same approach for candidates in state or local races, where openness is as big an issue as it is at the federal level. You can devise a simple grid for your website and make the answers available to your community. You can also invite the community to ask questions about access and secrecy, and post the responses they get.

Journalists have always approached election campaigns as neutral observers, reporting on campaign issues but never taking sides. So it may seem unusual to ask questions about issues in which journalists have a stake.

But open government is not a partisan issue. The key bills in Congress—the OPEN Government Act to reform

the Freedom of Information Act, the Free Flow of Information Act to create a federal reporter's privilege and the Sunshine in the Courtroom Act to allow federal judges open their courts to cameras and microphones—all have bipartisan support.

There's one more important reason for the Sunshine Campaign: It's not just journalists who should care about these issues. This is really all about the public's right to information about what the government and government officials are doing. Without a free flow of information to the public, government accountability is lost and democracy is stifled.

As we say in our Sunshine Week public service announcements, "It's your right to know." That's a slogan that can stand up all year round.—Barbara Cochran may be reached at president@rtnda.org.

GOLDSMITH AWARDS

Joan Shorenstein Center
PRESS • POLITICS



▪ **PUBLIC POLICY** ▪

Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government

\$ 25,000 Prize for Investigative Reporting

Materials must be postmarked by
January 2, 2008

For more information, please contact:

Goldsmith Awards Program
Joan Shorenstein Center
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University
Cambridge, MA 02138
617-495-1329

www.shorensteincenter.org

Park Place Studio

SET DESIGN AND SPACE PLANNING FOR BROADCAST NEWS

When NASA Goddard Space Flight Center wanted a cutting edge multipurpose HDTV studio environment, they chose Park Place Studio over the competition. Our winning design concept created a compelling, functional and unique studio environment to serve all of their broadcast needs, from news releases to press conferences, educational programming and interviews.



- Assignment Area Design*
- Lighting Direction*
- Project Management*
- Fabrication and Delivery*



- HDTV News Set Design*
- HDTV Transition Planning*
- Facility Consultation*
- Newsroom Design*



420 E Main Street
Carnegie, PA 15106
412.276.4030
www.parkplace.tv