

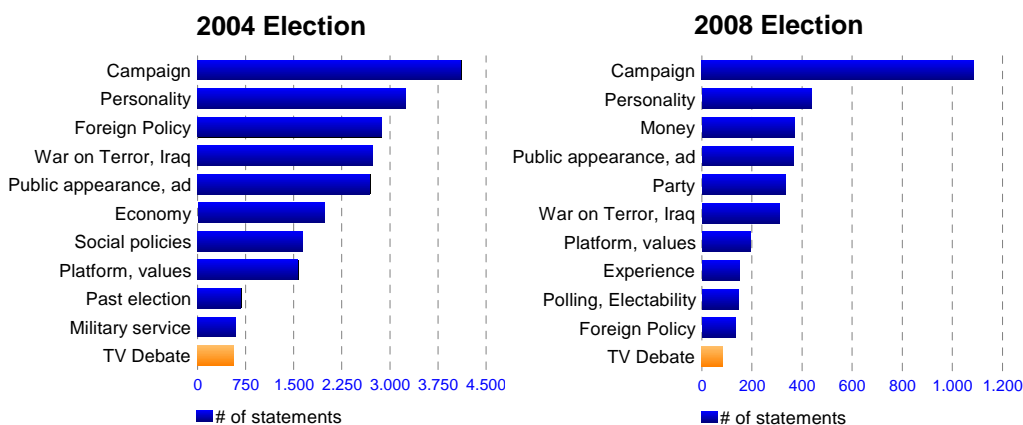
"Nine Sundays"

Presenter: Sacha Evans (Media Tenor, former assistant to Marvin Kalb)

Media Tenor's analysis of the coverage of U.S. presidential campaigns shows that TV debates are an influential topic. In both the '04 and '08 elections TV Debates have ranked among the top 15 most-reported issues (**Chart 1**).

In 1991 Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy published a paper that identified shortcomings in the structure these TV debates. Authored by Marvin Kalb and John Ellis, the "Nine Sundays" plan proposed an expanded debate schedule - devoting each of the nine Sundays from Labor Day to Election Day to a 90-minute program focused on an individual policy issue.

Chart 1: Top issues in coverage of presidential candidates



Basis: 23,232 (Chart 1); 3,783 (Chart 2) Statements on U.S. presidential candidates, 8/2004-12/2004 (Chart 1), 7/3-9/20/2007 (Chart 2) in Time, Newsweek, ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News and the Wall Street Journal (US).

Since 1991, the American media landscape has obviously changed. But many of Kalb and Ellis's criticisms remain relevant. In the current system, three 90-minute presidential debates (and one vice presidential debate) are carried live by all the major TV networks in the two months before Election Day. Candidates are given two minutes to respond to individual questions and 90 seconds to rebut responses from the other candidate. . This format often lends itself to sound bites and superficiality.

Kalb called on American journalists to reconsider “Nine Sundays” in a New York Times op-ed published May 2007. In his updated plan the following nine media outlets would air at least one program related to the presidential race on the following dates:

“Nine Sundays” 2007 schedule

Sept. Oct.

Sunday	Sunday
26	30 5: V.P. debate - foreign, domestic, CNN
2 1: Pres. debate - military, ABC	7 6:(D) candidate domestic policy, Fox News
9 Grandparent's Day 2: Pres. debate - healthcare, social security CBS	14 7:(R) candidate - domestic policy MSNBC
16 3: (D) candidate foreign policy, NBC	21 8: Pres. debate - Economy, Education, NPR
23 4:(R) candidate - foreign policy Fox	28 9: Pres. address to nation, foreign policy, PBS

Each program would be presented at 9pm EST without interruption. A sponsor would be tastefully acknowledged at the beginning.

This approach, Ellis wrote, is designed to “institutionalize a more substantive discussion of political issues in a way that does not penalize the networks financially, inhibit the candidate's campaign flexibility or diminish the concerns of voters and reporters.”

In his op-ed Kalb concluded, “The candidates may once again sidestep the challenge of “Nine Sundays” by arguing that it is at best an untested concept and at worst a waste of their time. But is it? After 9/11, with America's role in the world more uncertain than ever, would it not make more sense to provide the voters with regular, predictable, serious access to their next president? The networks have this power. The candidates have this opportunity. But do they have the guts?”

Kalb has since held a press conference with former U.S. House speaker Newt Gingrich at the National Press Club to promote “Nine Sundays.” The next step is to convince presidential candidates to publicly commit to “Nine Sundays.”