



# Palin: a gift to journos who keeps giving

**Sally Jackson**

REPUBLICAN vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin has dramatically polarised voters since exploding on to the political world in September.

Yet journalists unanimously adore her. Not necessarily for her policies, though, but for sheer entertainment value.

US politics hasn't produced such a goldmine of entertaining copy since Bill Clinton, says BBC Sydney correspondent Nick Bryant, who was based in Washington during the Clinton term and is back there this week to help cover the vote (which takes place Wednesday morning, Australian time).

"Journalistically, Sarah Palin has been the gift that never stops giving," he says. "She has provided absolutely wonderful copy that has contributed an extraordinary narrative to this extraordinary, break-the-rules election."

Many argue the 2008 US election campaign is the most interesting since the 1968 race, which featured the shock withdrawal of Lyndon B. Johnson, the rise of George Wallace, the rebirth of Richard Nixon and the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr against a backdrop of race

riots and Vietnam War demonstrations.

"(This campaign) has certainly provided the best copy since then," says Bryant.

"It's had the first viable black candidate, the first viable female candidate and the first viable septuagenarian candidate. An African American president is something I never thought I'd see in my time. It's one of those Berlin Wall moments."

Without doubt, the campaign has captured the attention of Australians like no other in recent history, with even the vice-presidential debate, usually a news non-event, generating so much interest that live blogs run by newspapers and TV networks drew capacity audiences and had to lock out some would-be visitors. "The level of interest both in the public and in the media is really quite extraordinary," says Geoffrey Garrett, chief executive of the US Studies Centre at Sydney University. "And the level of sophistication in the analysis is high."

Garrett cites a survey released last week by the Centre that found only 5 per cent of Australian respondents believed (incorrectly) that Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama was a Muslim, compared to 18 per

cent of US respondents.

"Australians are paying attention," he says. "And they're paying close attention."

The reason for that can be found in the war in Iraq, the warming environment, the cooling domestic economy and the global financial meltdown, says Michael Fullilove, director of the Lowy Institute's global issues program, who is currently living in the US as a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution.

A survey conducted by the institute last month found two-thirds of respondents believed the election results would make a difference to the Australian national interest (it also found three-quarters favoured Obama).

"There are so many dimensions to the story," Fullilove says. "The scale of the challenges facing the next president are so intimidating. People are captured by the drama of the moment."

In the US, surveys by two leading non-partisan bodies have found Obama decisively winning the media race.

During the final phase of the campaign comments about Obama on network evening news shows were 65 per cent positive, compared to 42 per cent positive for Palin and 36 per cent positive

for McCain, according to the Centre for Media and Public Affairs (Democratic vice-presidential nominee Joe Biden received too few evaluations for meaningful analysis).

A study by the Pew Research Centre's Project for Excellence in Journalism, which examined 2412 campaign reports from 48 news outlets over six weeks, found 36 per cent of the stories were clearly positive towards Obama, 35 per cent neutral or mixed and 29 per cent negative. For McCain, 57 per cent of the stories were negative and 14 per cent were positive.

The candidates traced opposite trajectories, with coverage of Obama beginning in the negative and switching in line with the changing direction of the polls, while coverage of McCain began positively, but turned sharply negative with his reaction to the crisis in the financial markets.

Similar analysis of Australian media coverage is not available.

However, a rough survey of the 10 major metropolitan papers shows both sides at least receiving approximately equal space, with McCain being mentioned in

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**D DAY: HOW AUSSIE MEDIA WILL COVER WEDNESDAY'S US ELECTION**

**FREE TV**  
**ABC1:** US Election Special (5.30pm) with Tony Jones and guests including Bob Carr. Continued coverage on ABC News, The 7.30 Report and Lateline  
**ABC2:** Live coverage on ABC News: Breakfast (6am)  
**SBS:** World News Australia Special: America Decides (2.30-6.30pm); World News Australia bulletin, Dateline in America  
**Seven:** Live coverage from 11am  
**Nine:** News Special: Live coverage from 11am  
**Ten:** Covering developments as they arise

**NEWSPAPERS**  
 Thursday's newspapers will carry extensive coverage of the result. *The Australian* is planning a US election special led by its three US-based correspondents. *The Sydney Morning Herald* has sent political editor Peter Hatcher and columnist Annabel Crabb to the US

**PAY-TV**  
**Sky News (Channel 601):** Live coverage from 10am anchored by David Speers in Washington. Features commentators including Charles Gibson and George Stephanopoulos  
**Sky News Business (Channel 602):** Live coverage from Sky News UK  
**CNN (Channel 605):** Special programming all day  
**BBC World News (Channel 606):** Live coverage of election night results  
**CNBC (Channel 652):** Special live edition of Your Money Your Vote  
**FOX News (Channel 604):** Continuous live coverage from 10am  
**Bloomberg (Channel 650):** Will track voting and focus on how the next US president will influence financial markets

**ONLINE**  
**ABC:** Dedicated US election minisite at abc.net.au/news/events/us-election News programs will be streamed from abc.net.au/news  
**SBS:** Minisite at sbs.com.au/uselections features two dedicated bloggers from the US, video, statistics, vote trackers, an election trivia quiz and an interactive map of the US showing live results  
**TheAustralian.news.com.au:** Features include an electoral map that will be updated live throughout the day, blogs, video and candidate timelines and profiles  
**News.com.au:** A live "virtual election party" will feature instant updates, blogging, stories, a live electoral map, historical timelines, a White House simulator and other interactive elements  
**NineMSN:** Will live stream Nine News coverage from 11am, as well as live blogs and video  
**Fairfax Digital:** Live coverage on newspaper websites such as SMH.com.au with Mark Coulton plus commentary by Bruce Wolpe and US correspondents Anne Davies and Ian Munro  
**Yahoo!7:** www.au.news.yahoo.com has a political dashboard showing the polling in each state, Seven News video clips, text stories, US election threads

**RADIO**  
**ABC Local Radio:** AM (8am) will broadcast live from Miami, Florida with Tony Eastley, The World Today and PM teams will provide hourly updates 12pm-8pm, in addition to regular programs  
**ABC NewsRadio:** Morning presenter John Barron reporting from the US plus live updates. Special election edition of All Things Considered from US National Public Radio at 11am  
**Commercial news/talk stations:** All will have live updates all day \*all times AEST



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# Palin keeps on giving

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about 1600 articles published over the past nine weeks and Obama about 1500. Palin featured in about 1000; Biden barely 300.

According to local media watchers, the Australian news treatment has mirrored that of the US, being generally more favourable to the Democrats, but not necessarily unfairly so.

“Sarah Palin got a pasting and I have seen a stronger anti-Republican side of reporting

than I might have expected,” says Peter van Onselen, associate professor of politics at Edith Cowan University. “But not because of bias. It was justifiable.” Fullilove believes the news treatment of the candidates has been “pretty even”.

“The enthusiasm of some commentators for Obama’s story and his eloquence and the historical significance of his candidacy has been balanced by caution and wariness on the part of other commentators who are concerned about his lack of

experience and thick personal connections with Australia,” he says. Former *Los Angeles Times* editor Michael Parks, in Australia as a visiting fellow at the US Studies Centre, describes the coverage he has seen as “fairly thorough”, although he says he has missed specific analysis of what the stakes are for Australia in the election outcome. “Perhaps it’s just widely understood how important the US is for Australia and the impact of policy changes on things here,” he says.

He suggests another interesting local angle, given our intense scrutiny of them, is to consider how much the candidates know about us.

“McCain has a knowledge of Australia. But Obama may have rather a different view of Australia because he lived in Indonesia,” Parks says. “And if you ask Sarah Palin where Australia is . . . well, I don’t want to mock Sarah Palin.”