

Taking the Pulse of "Obamacare"

Major Media Coverage of the Health Care Reform Debate

CMPA examined all stories about the Obama administration's role in the health care reform debate from Inauguration Day (Jan. 20, 2009) through the signing of the *Affordable Care Act* on March 23, 2010. The analysis included coverage on ABC "World News," CBS "Evening News," NBC "Nightly News," *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines and the front page of the *New York Times*. The analysis also included the first half of FOX News "Special Report with Bret Baier."

MAJOR FINDINGS:

- ◆ **The Good** — Network news coverage was positive by a 3 to 2 margin
- ◆ **The Bad** — Fox news coverage was negative by a 3 to 2 margin
- ◆ **And the Balanced** – New York Times coverage was balanced
- ◆ **Policies vs. Politics** — The administration's policies got better coverage than its political activities
- ◆ **Ups and Downs** – The coverage turned sour late in 2009 but brightened again in 2010
- ◆ **Who says?** — Nonpartisan sources were more critical than partisans
- ◆ **Second Time's the Charm** — "Obamacare" got more positive TV news coverage than "Clintoncare" did

Rating the Administration

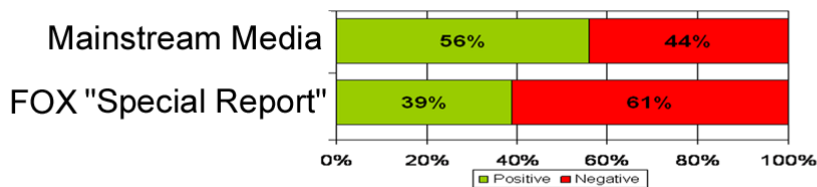
The Obama administration received more good press than bad press for its successful fourteen month-long effort to pass health care reform into law. CMPA tracked national media coverage of “Obamacare” from January 20, 2009, when President Obama took office, until he signed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act into law on March 23, 2010.

We coded every statement that expressed support for (“good press”) or criticism of (“bad press”) the administration’s health care policies, and its activities in the service of those policies, on the evening news shows of ABC, CBS, and NBC, in front page stories in the New York Times, and in news stories in Time and Newsweek.

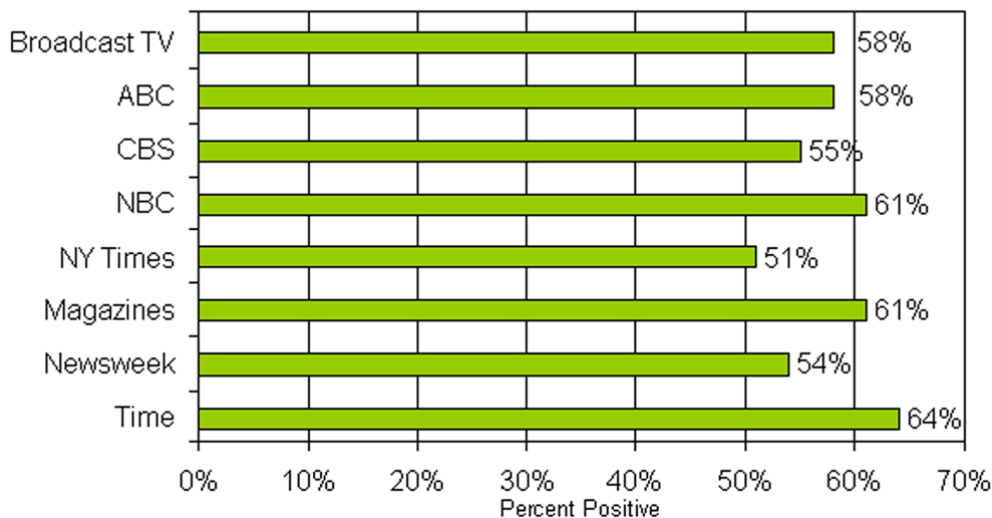
In addition to the “mainstream media” outlets, we separately tabulated statements of support or opposition in the evening news show (“Special Report”) on Fox News Channel, a network that President Obama singled out for criticism as “a wing of the Republican Party” rather than a legitimate news organization.

In the approximately 14 month period that we studied, the Obama administration’s efforts to reform the health care system generated a majority of supportive statements or “good press” on all of the national mainstream media (MSM) outlets that we analyzed. Among all mainstream media comments on what came to be called Obamacare, 56 percent were supportive or favorable and 44 percent were critical or unfavorable.

Rating the Administration: Mainstream Media vs. FOX



Mainstream Outlets Rating the Administration (% Positive)



There was little variation from one outlet to another among the mainstream media.

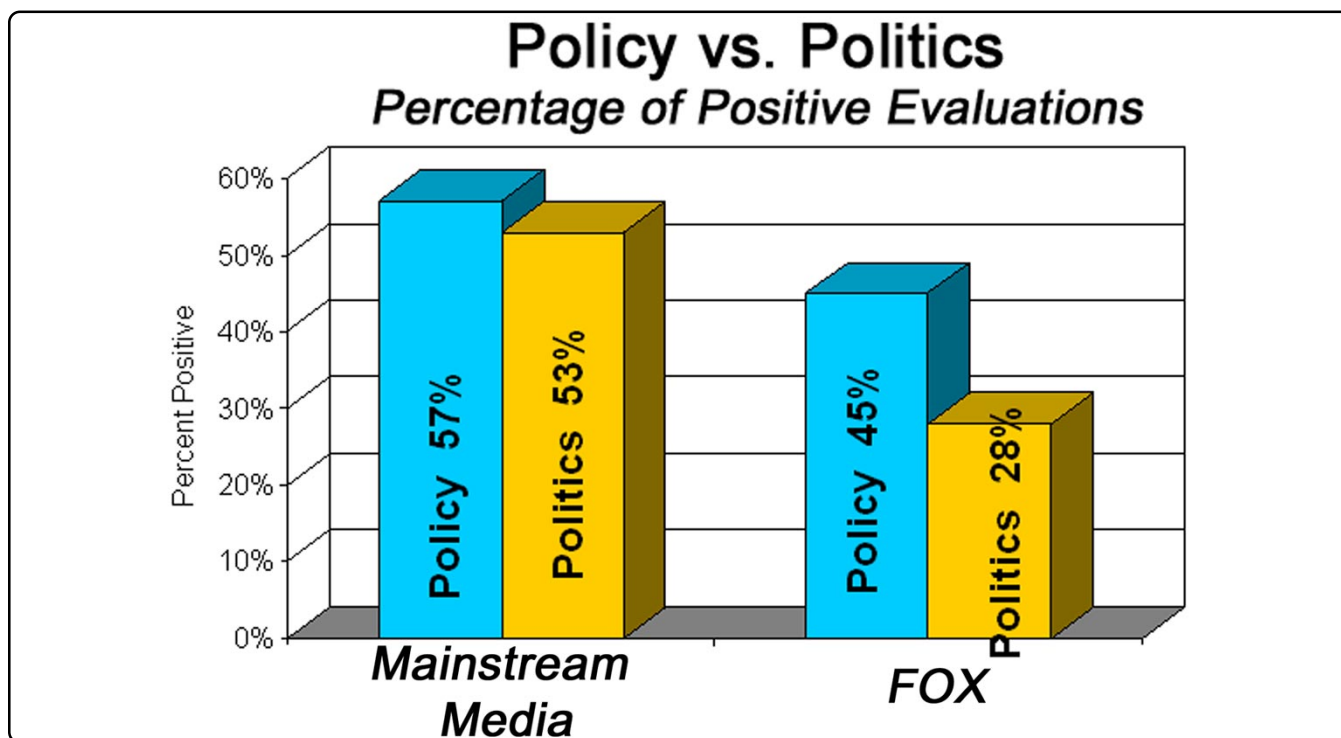
At the three broadcast networks, 58 percent of statements were supportive or favorable compared to 42 percent that were critical or unfavorable. The proportion of good press was greatest on NBC (61 percent favorable), followed by ABC (58 percent favorable) and CBS (55 percent favorable). At the news magazines, the coverage was 61 percent favorable, including 64 percent favorable at Time and 54 percent favorable at Newsweek. The coverage was less positive in the New York Times – 51 percent favorable and 49 percent unfavorable.

By contrast, on Fox News Channel’s “Special Report,” statements about Obamacare were only 39 percent favorable and 61 percent unfavorable. Thus Fox’s nightly news coverage was tilted slightly more heavily toward bad press than

the broadcast networks news shows were tilted toward good press. In contrast to both, coverage in the *New York Times* was almost evenly balanced.

Policy vs. Politics

Among the mainstream media, there was little difference in the tone of coverage of the policies associated with Obamacare and the political activities that the administration engaged in to bring them about. Fifty-seven percent of policy-oriented statements were supportive, as were 53 percent of statements directed at the administration’s political activities. By contrast, Fox was even tougher on the administration’s politics (only 28 percent supportive vs. 72 percent critical statements) than on its policies (45 percent supportive).

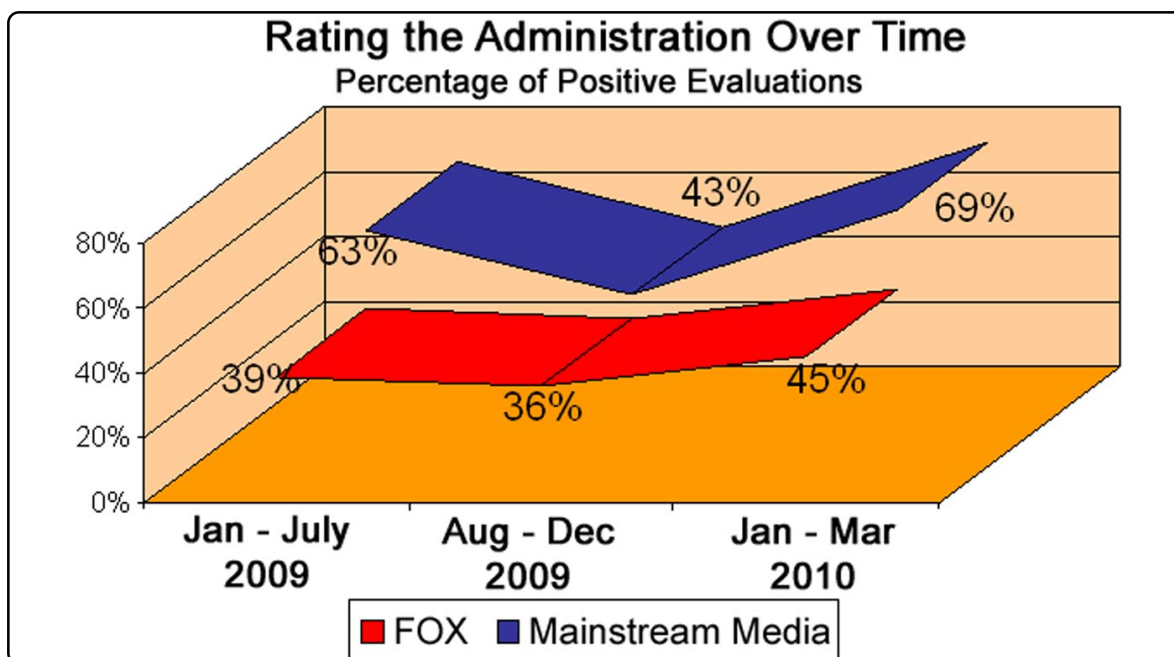


Changing Coverage Over Time

However, there was considerable variation in the tone of coverage over time. In the first several months of the President's campaign to reform health care, culminating with a Town Hall meeting that he hosted in Ohio (January through July 2009), his coverage was favorable by almost a two to one margin – 63 percent positive vs. 38 percent negative statements. In April a Washington Post-ABC News poll found that 57 percent of the public supported Obama's handling of health care reform.

originally supported by the president. Throughout this period (August through December 2009) Obamacare received a majority of bad press (43 percent supportive vs. 57 percent critical statements). By the beginning of 2010 a CBS News poll found that only 36 percent of Americans still supported Obama's handling of this issue.

However, the new year brought a new surge of good press for the administration's final push to pass a bill that reconciled differences between the versions approved by the House and Senate.



Beginning in August, however, the opposition began to assert itself. Protesters heckled legislators at town hall meetings, opponents organized a march in Washington DC, and an industry report predicted higher insurance premiums. The passage of any legislation began to seem doubtful. Late in the year the House and Senate both passed reform bills, but only after backing off the “public option” backed by liberals and

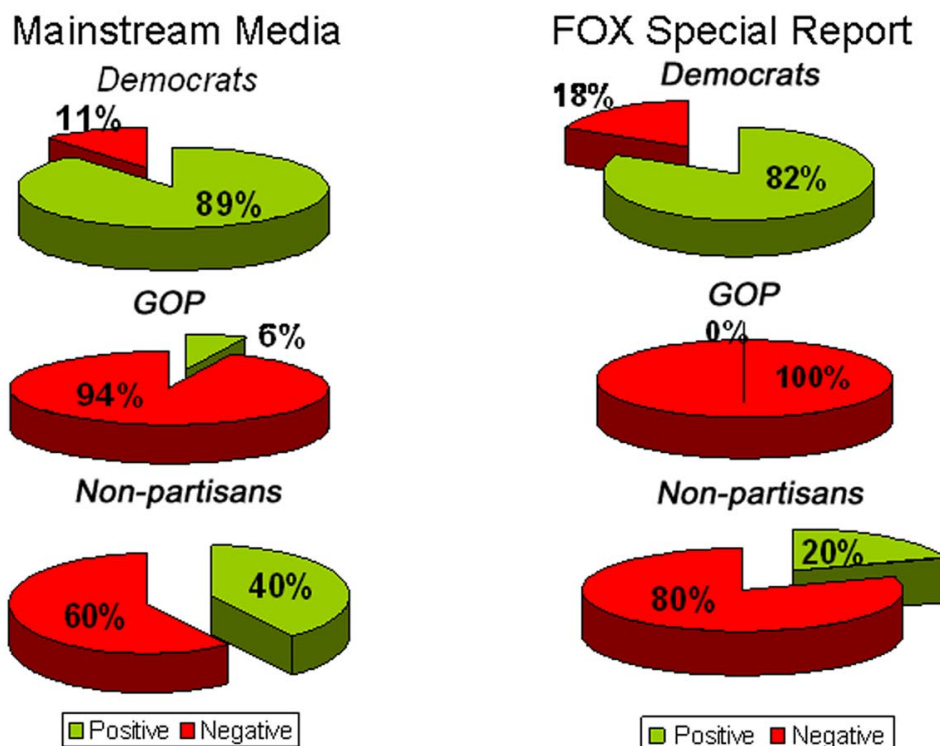
During the first three months of 2010, the president's good press on this issue outweighed bad press by over two to one. Favorable comments accounted for 69 percent of all evaluative statements, compared to only 31 percent unfavorable comments. Despite his improved mainstream media image on this issue, however, a CBS News poll in late March found that the proportion of the public who supported

his handling of health care reform had dropped to only 34 percent.

At least part of the reason for the president's decline in support may be the drubbing he took from conservative media sources. We found that Fox News Channel's coverage of the administration's health care reform efforts was consistently negative throughout the debate. From January through July 2009, only 39 percent of evaluative comments on Fox "Special Report" supported the Obama administration, while 61 percent of comments were critical. From August through December, the proportion of good press dropped even lower, to 36 percent. As we found for the mainstream media, the level of supportive comments on Fox rose during 2010, but only to 45 percent.

The amount of good press the Obama administration received on mainstream media outlets reflects its relative success in getting its message out. Among all evaluative comments, 45 percent came from Democrats (including the administration) and only 20 percent from Republicans. The remainder came from journalists and the non-partisan sources (i.e., sources not affiliated with either political party) they quoted or cited. About nine out of ten evaluations from Democratic sources (89 percent) supported the administration, while a similar proportion of Republican sources (94 percent) offered only criticism. On the other side of the ledger, the administration lost the battle for good press among non-partisan sources – only 40 percent of their comments favored the administration, while 60 percent were unfavorable.

Rating the Administration by Source Type



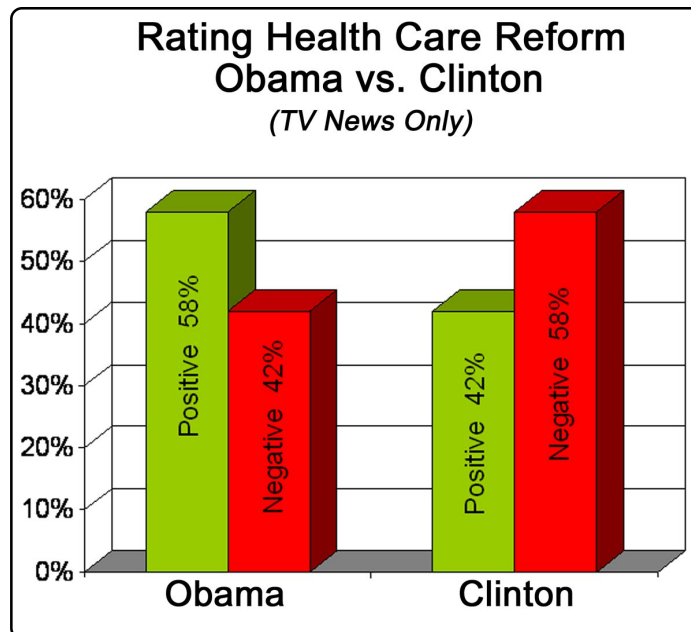
Note: Percentage of Explicit Evaluations

The distribution of sources was not that different on Fox – 39 percent Democrats, 25 percent Republicans, and 36 percent non-partisan. But sources from all three groups were more critical of the administration than similar sources whose opinions were cited in the mainstream media. On “Special Report” 82 percent of Democratic comments supported the administration, while 100 percent of Republican comments were critical. Most importantly, among non-partisan sources on FOX, only one evaluation in five (20 percent) was favorable toward Obamacare — half the level of support the administration received from non-partisan sources in the mainstream media.

Reform: Obama vs Clinton

To provide a broader context for evaluating the coverage of Obamacare, we compared it to our earlier study of media coverage of “Clintoncare” – the Clinton administration’s health reform plan that was rejected by Congress after a heated debate in 1993 and 1994. In that study we examined the tone of network evening news coverage of President Clinton’s proposed Health Security Act.

The study period began September 1, 1993, the month President Clinton kicked off his campaign for health care reform with a major health care speech to Congress, and continued through March 31, 1994, by which time the plan’s prospects and the media’s attention toward it had both faded. During these six months the three broadcast networks aired 247 stories on health care reform.

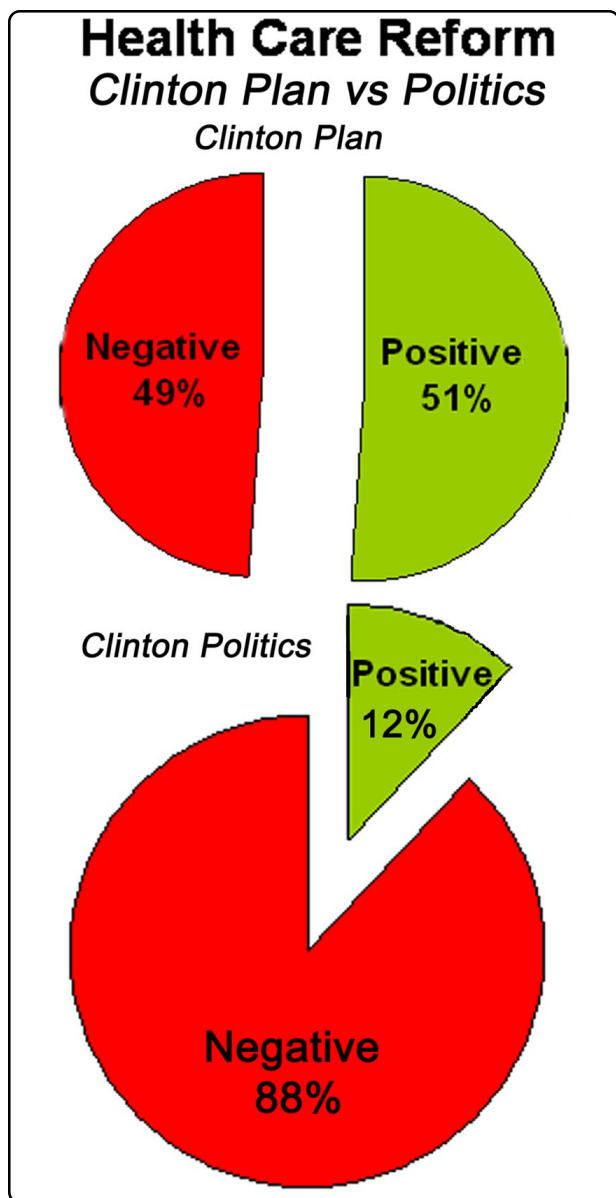


Our analysis of Clintoncare coverage included all evaluations of the plan itself as well as the administration’s efforts to promote it, since the plan under consideration was the product of a task force chaired by First Lady Hillary Clinton and was closely identified with the administration. (By contrast, there was no single plan associated with the Obama administration.)

Overall, broadcast network news coverage of Clintoncare was unfavorable by almost a three to two margin – 42 percent supportive vs. 58 percent critical statements. That is precisely the reverse of Obamacare’s 58 percent supportive coverage on the broadcast network news programs.

However, coverage of the Clinton plan itself was balanced – 51 percent favorable vs. 49 percent unfavorable. The really negative coverage concerned the Clinton administration’s handling of this issue, such as the secret deliberations of the health care task force headed by First Lady Hillary Clinton. The administration’s coverage apart from the policy debate was 88 percent critical (i.e. only 12 percent supportive).

Finally, the distribution of opinion among types of sources was very similar for Obamacare and Clintoncare. In 1993-94, 86 percent of evaluations by Democrats were favorable, 100 percent of evaluations by Republicans were unfavorable, and only 30 percent of non-partisan sources were favorable. All three totals are within a few percentage points of the opinion breakdown on Obamacare in 2009-2010. The preponderance of bad press from non-partisans, who have higher source credibility than partisans, may have made network news coverage seem more critical of health care reform than it actually was.





**White House Watch:
Health Care Reform News**

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Coverage of the Obama Administration and Health Care Reform