



Volume XXIII Number 1: Winter 2009

Election Watch: Campaign 2008 Final

How TV News Covered the General Election Campaign

How did television news cover the 2008 general election campaign? This report examines election coverage from August 24 through November 3 on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows. In addition we examine election coverage on the Fox News Channel Special Report with Britt Hume. This study is based on CMPA's Election Watch project, which also tracks appearances by the candidates and jokes about them on the late-night TV talk shows.

MAJOR FINDINGS:

THE NETWORKS

- Why Not the Best?** Barack Obama got the best press CMPA has ever measured for a presidential nominee. *Page 3*
- Obamamania** Obama's press was 2 to 1 positive; John McCain's was 2 to 1 negative. *Page 3*
- Issue Debate I** Obama's policies also got better press than McCain's did. *Page 4*
- Veep Sweep** Sarah Palin's coverage was 2 to 1 negative; Joe Biden's was light but balanced. *Page 3*
- Money Mania** Economic issues got six times as much coverage as any other policy area. *Page 3*

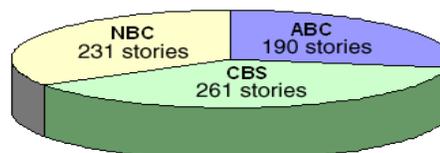
FOX NEWS

- Bad News** Fox's coverage was negative toward all four candidates. *Page 5*
- Issue Debate II** But Fox's coverage favored McCain's policies. *Page 6*
- Questions of Fairness** The number of voters who saw election coverage as unfair rode to new highs. *Page 8*

From the opening of the party nominating conventions (8/23) until Election Eve (11/3), the three broadcast networks aired 683 election stories with a combined airtime of 26 hours 46 minutes, an average of 9.4 stories and 22 minutes per day. CBS featured the most coverage and NBC the least in terms of both stories and airtime.

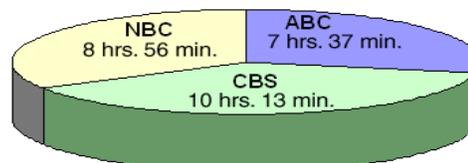
Amount of Coverage (8/23 - 11/3/08)

Number of Stories



Total = 682 stories

Air Time



Total air time = 26 hours 46 min.

Topics Discussed on Network News

	Number of Stories	Percent of Stories
1. Policy Debates	213	31%
2. Strategy/Tactics	210	31%
3. Horse Race	167	24%
4. Campaign Conduct	66	10%
5. GOP VP Choice	49	7%
5. Debates	49	7%
7. Personal Background	41	6%
8. Friends/Family	39	6%
9. Professional Background	29	4%
10. Election Process	23	3%

The financial crisis insured that this campaign would be issue-oriented, and the policy debate led all other topics by appearing in nearly one out of every three stories (31%). However, it was closely followed in prominence by those old reliables, campaign strategy and tactics (31%) and the candidates' standing in the horse race (24%), Sarah Palin's selection as the GOP's vice presidential candidate attracted as much discussion as the presidential and vice presidential debates.

Policy Issues Discussed on Network News

	Number of Discussions
1. Economic Issues (conditions 72) (bailout 44) (taxes 43)	174
2. Foreign Policy (Iraq 10)	28
3. Electoral Reform	17
4. Health Issues (health care reform 11)	16

Not surprisingly, the policy debate focused heavily on economic issues, which attracted six times as much coverage as the next most frequently discussed policy area. The largest single point of the economic debate was the condition of the economy, followed by the government bailout of failing industries and proposals to raise or lower taxes. The Iraq war attracted only 10 stories and health care reform only 11.

Our measure of good and bad press includes evaluations by reporters and nonpartisan sources of the candidates' positions, record in office, personality and character, and behavior along the campaign trail. This is intended to measure their desirability; and measure their viability (their success in the campaign "horserace") separately.

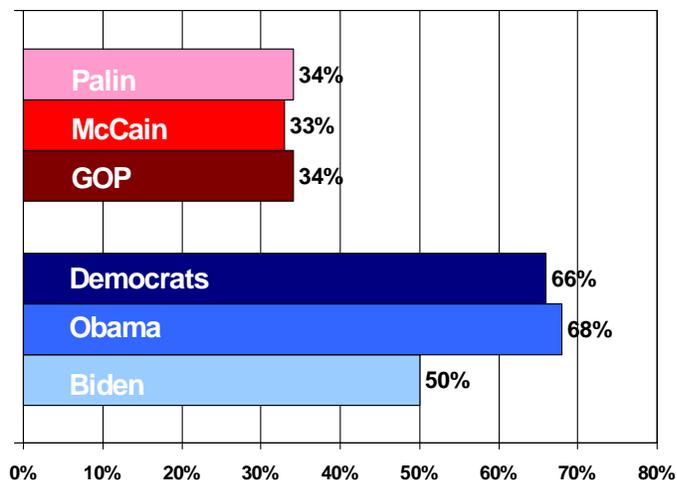
In 2008 the Democratic ticket won the race for good press even more handily than the election itself. Barak Obama garnered the most favorable coverage of any presidential candidate CMPA has tracked since 1988, with 68% positive evaluations by reporters and nonpartisan sources. His two to one

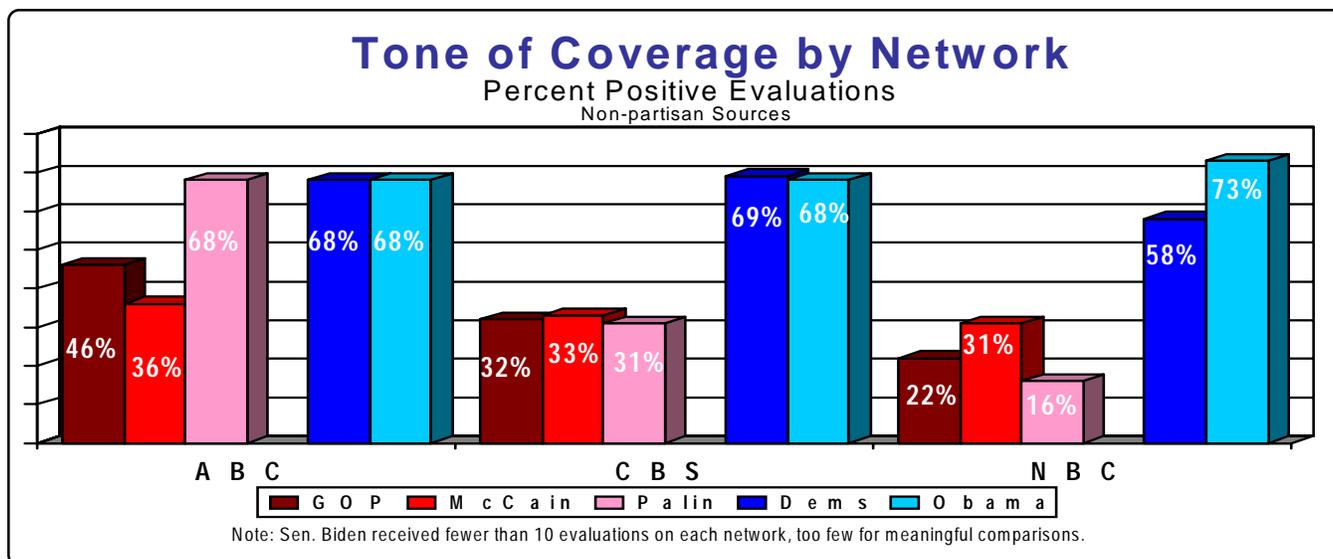
ratio of good to bad press was the reverse of John McCain's media portrait. McCain attracted only 33% positive evaluations, a two to one negative ratio.

For all the novelty of Sarah Palin's candidacy, her two to one negative ratio was almost identical to that of McCain. Her Democratic counterpart Joe Biden received very light but balanced coverage. Overall the Democratic ticket's coverage was twice as positive as that of the Republicans.

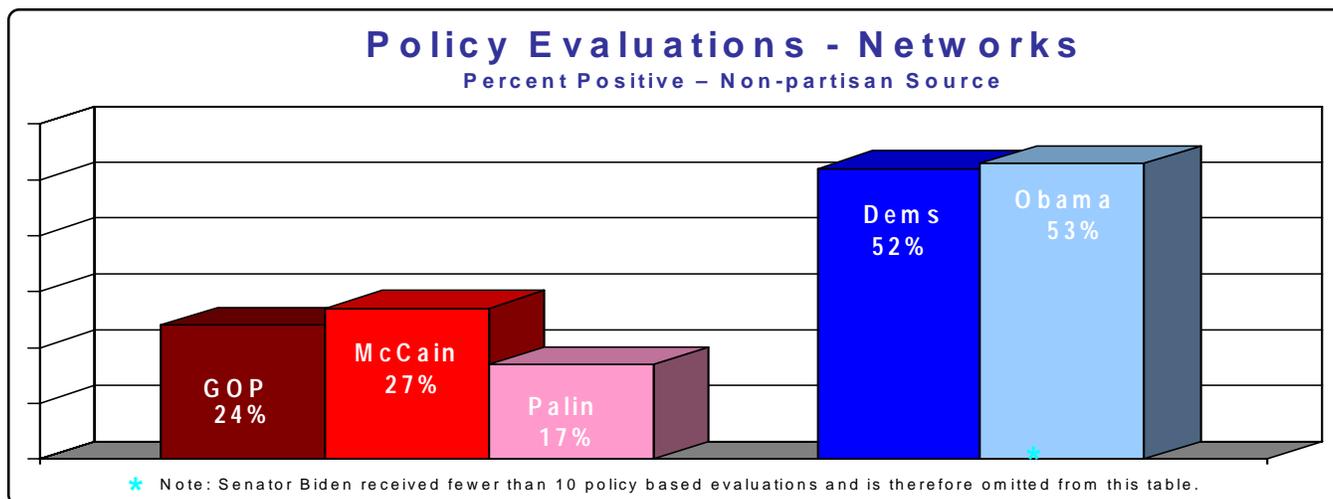
Tone of Network Coverage

Percent Positive Evaluations
Non-partisan Sources





The three networks were almost identical in the tone of their coverage of both McCain and Obama. The only notable difference was ABC's relatively positive portrayal of Palin. Obama's coverage suffered a brief downturn in early September, but he returned to his previous form after the onset of the financial crisis on September 22. McCain and Palin enjoyed a brief period of relatively positive press during the conventions, but their coverage was consistently negative after Labor Day.



The favorable tone of Obama's coverage was widely acknowledged, but some argued that this was simply an accurate reflection of the superior campaign that he ran. This cannot be the whole story, however, because evaluations of the candidates' policies and issue positions were twice as favorable toward Obama (and the combined Democratic ticket) as they were toward McCain (and the Republican ticket). In addition, as noted above, we analyzed coverage of candidates' success in the horse race separately. Not surprisingly, evaluations of the horse race were nearly three times as positive toward the Democratic ticket (91%) as they were toward the Republican ticket (31%).

THE FOX DIFFERENCE

Fox News Channel's election coverage was heavier than that of the broadcast networks in terms of both stories and airtime. "Special Report's" campaign news airtime of 860 minutes nearly doubled ABC "World News Tonight's" total of 457 minutes, and its 524 election stories represented more stories than any two of the broadcast networks combined.*

The topical focus and policy agenda of FOX's evening newscast were almost identical to those of the broadcast networks. As did the networks, FOX led with the policy debate, the horse race and the strategy and tactics of the two campaigns. One of the few differences was FOX's focus on the media's campaign coverage (seven percent of all stories), which garnered scant interest from any other network. Similarly, FOX's policy coverage was dominated by the economic crisis, with foreign policy a distant second.

Topics Discussed on FOX

	Stories	
1. Strategy/Tactics	113	22%
2. Policy Debate	109	21%
3. Horse Race	103	20%
4. Campaign Conduct	85	17%
5. Election Process	37	7%
6. Personal Background	34	7%
7. News Media	33	6%
7. Professional Backgrd	33	6%
9. GOP VP Choice	25	5%
10. Debates	23	5%

Policy Issues Discussed on FOX

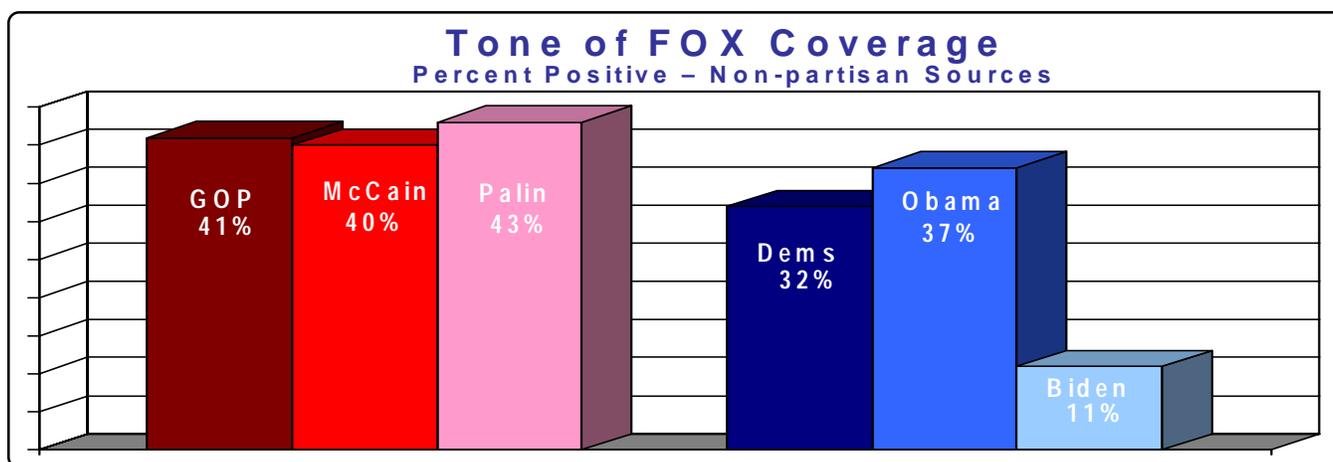
	Stories
1. Economy	100
(condition 44)	
(bailout 24)	
(taxes 22)	
2. Foreign Policy	25
(Iraq 6)	
3. Electoral Reform	21
4. Voter Fraud	12

Note: Based on stories on the first half hour of "Special Report with Brit Hume"

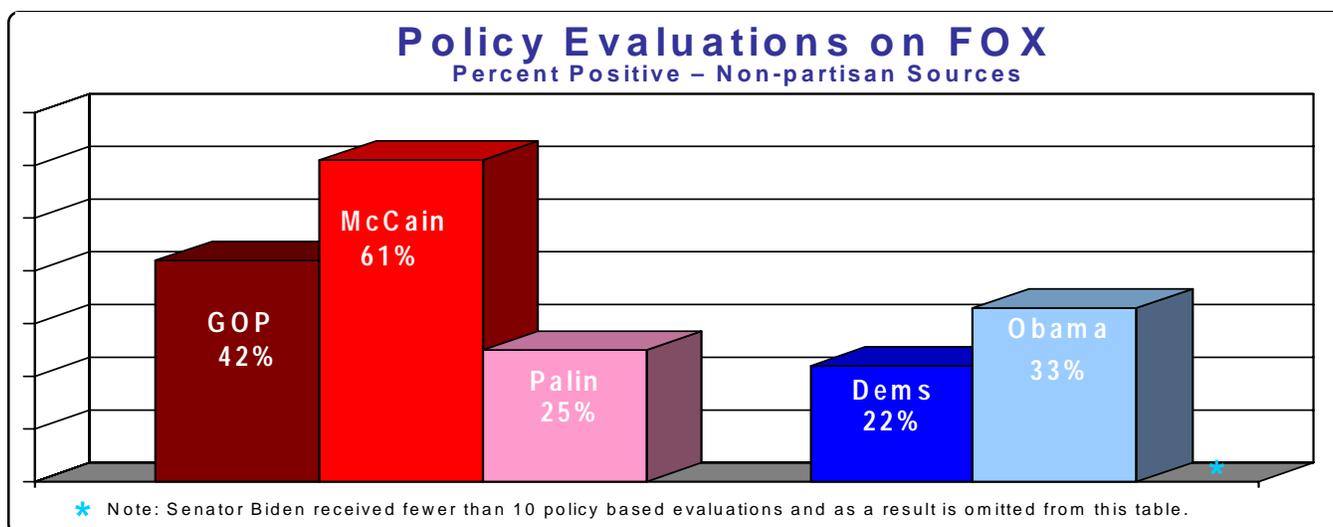
The "FOX difference" lay not in *what* they covered but in *how* they covered the campaign. It will come as no surprise to learn that FOX carried the most positive portrayal of McCain and Palin and the most negative portrayals of Obama and Biden. By the same token, however, the tone of FOX's coverage of the candidates was, if not the fairest, at least the most balanced of the four networks we monitored.

* We analyzed the first half of the Fox News Channel's hour-long evening news show, "Special Report with Brit Hume," which most closely approximates the content and format of the broadcast networks' evening news shows.

While the broadcast networks all featured a large gap between Obama's mostly good press and McCain's and Palin's mostly bad press, FOX's coverage was mainly negative toward all the candidates. Thus, McCain bested Obama only slightly in the race for good press, by 40% to 37% positive evaluations. When Palin's and Biden's coverage is factored in, the gap grew to 41% positive for the GOP ticket to 32% positive for the Democrats. But this difference of nine percentage points is far less than any of the broadcast networks featured in the opposite direction. The two Democrats bested their Republican counterparts by margins of 37 percentage points on CBS, 36 on NBC, and 22 on ABC.



The tone of FOX's coverage favored the GOP more clearly on evaluations that were directed at the candidates' policies and issue positions (see chart below). On this dimension McCain's coverage was 61% positive compared to only 33% positive for Obama. Taken together, evaluations of the Republican ticket were 42% positive on FOX, nearly double the 22% positive judgments of the Democratic candidates' policies. However, this 20 point spread was still less than the 28 percentage point difference between Democratic policies (52% positive) and Republican policies (24% positive) in the broadcast networks' coverage.



Examples of Candidate Evaluations

Obama

[As a community organizer] Obama worked to open a jobs center. He also helped residents fight to rid their housing projects of asbestos. [People] in this community say Barack Obama's work inspires them to this day. – Kevin Tibbles, NBC, 10/2

I think [Obama] brings a freshness to Washington. – Voter, CBS, 10/14

His message of change is something that I, for one, am looking for...— Voter, CBS, 9/28

While Obama denounces cozy Washington relationships triggering financial chaos, he was one of the top Senate recipients of campaign contributions from Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac... — Major Garret, FOX, 9/17

Obama's dollar deluge is possible because he broke a promise to accept public funding. – John Berman, ABC, 10/19

Biden

Joe Biden is experienced and talkative. Critics say too talkative. – Andrea Mitchell, CBS, 10/1

McCain

McCain has shown that he can work on both sides of the table to help this country. – Voter, ABC, 10/10

In this week's advertising, McCain went relentlessly negative, in some cases resorting to falsehood. — Wyatt Andrews, CBS, 9/12

When deregulation was the wave in Washington, he surfed that wave. Now it's not and the populist inside John McCain is out. — George Will, ABC, 9/17

Even McCain's own focus group didn't buy [his tax policy]. – Andrea Mitchell, NBC, 10/16

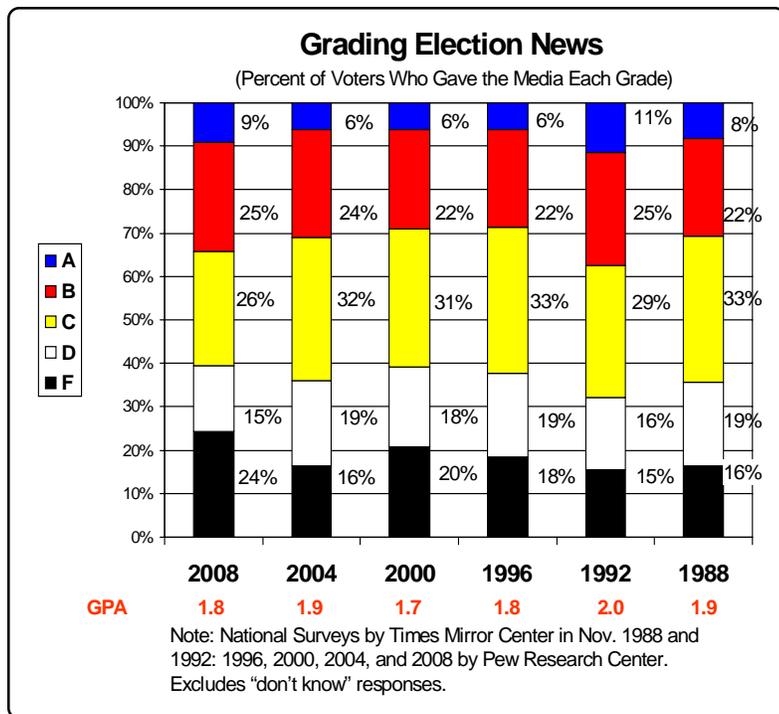
Palin

This is the Sarah Palin that I think voters wanted to see... who is strong on policy, very compassionate, talking about issues that are not political but affect their families every day. – Blogger, FOX, 10/24

Even some conservatives say that Palin is not ready for prime time. – Andrea Mitchell, NBC, 10/1

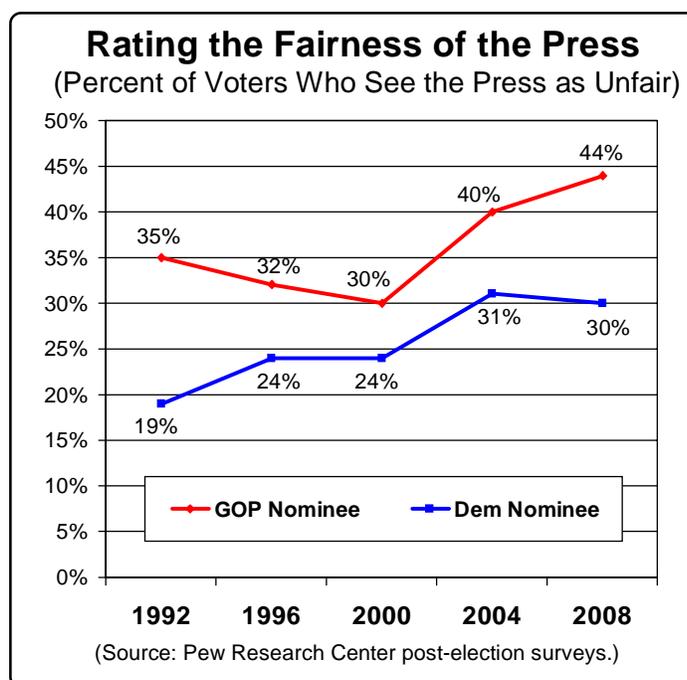
Palin's carefully cultivated Joe Sixpack image is now bumping up against a six-figure wardrobe. – Nancy Cordes, CBS, 10/22

But you were for it [the bridge from nowhere], before you were against it. You were solidly for it... until Congress pulled the plug. — Charles Gibson interview, ABC, 9/12



Voters' evaluations of election news have been remarkably consistent over the past 20 years, according to the Pew Research Centers post-election surveys, which ask respondents to "grade" the media's performance on a scale from A to F. In 2008 the media's "grade point average" was 1.8, down from 1.9 in 2004. Only 9 percent give the media a grade of "A," while 24% gave them an "F," the highest proportion of failing grades across the last six elections.

While voters' overall ratings of the media have remained constant, their perceptions of media fairness have changed over the years. In 2008 44% of all voters rated John McCain's coverage as unfair, up from 40% who saw George W. Bush's coverage as unfair in 2004, the highest proportion recorded for any candidate by the pew surveys. Barack Obama's coverage was seen as unfair by 30%, down one percentage point from evaluations of John Kerry's coverage in 2004.



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