



Volume XXIV Number 1: 1st Quarter 2010

White House Watch: Obama's First Year

Major Media Coverage of the 44th President

How have the major media covered the first year of the Obama Administration? How does coverage of the current administration compare to its predecessors? This report examines media coverage from Inauguration Day 2009 through January 20th, 2010 on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows, the front page of the *New York Times*, *Newsweek* and *Time*. In addition, we examined the coverage on the Fox News Channel's "Special Report with Bret Baier." Finally, based on previous CMPA studies, we compare the Obama Administration to those of George W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan.

MAJOR FINDINGS:

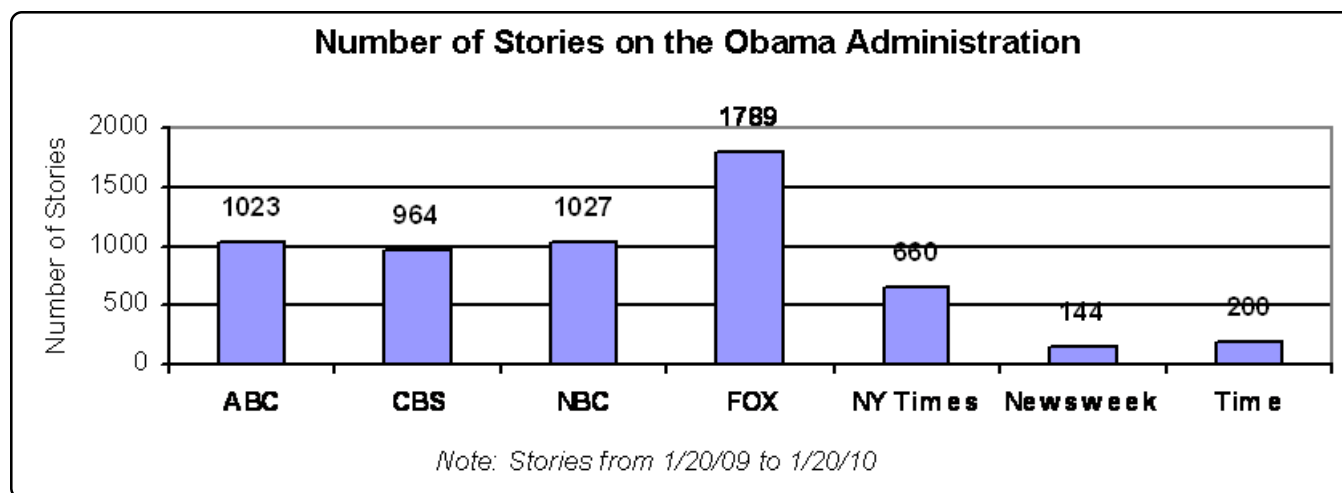
- ◆ **He's the One** — President Obama generated over 1800 mainstream media stories
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Amount of Coverage

Barack Obama's presidency has been a major news story throughout the year garnering over 3,000 network television stories. Among the networks, NBC led with 1,027 stories followed by ABC (1,023) and CBS (964). The first half of FOX "Special Report with Bret Baier" yielded 1,789 stories. (We examine the first 30 minutes of "Special Report," since it most closely resembles the network newscasts). The front page of the *New York Times* ran 660 stories about the Obama Administration during its first year.

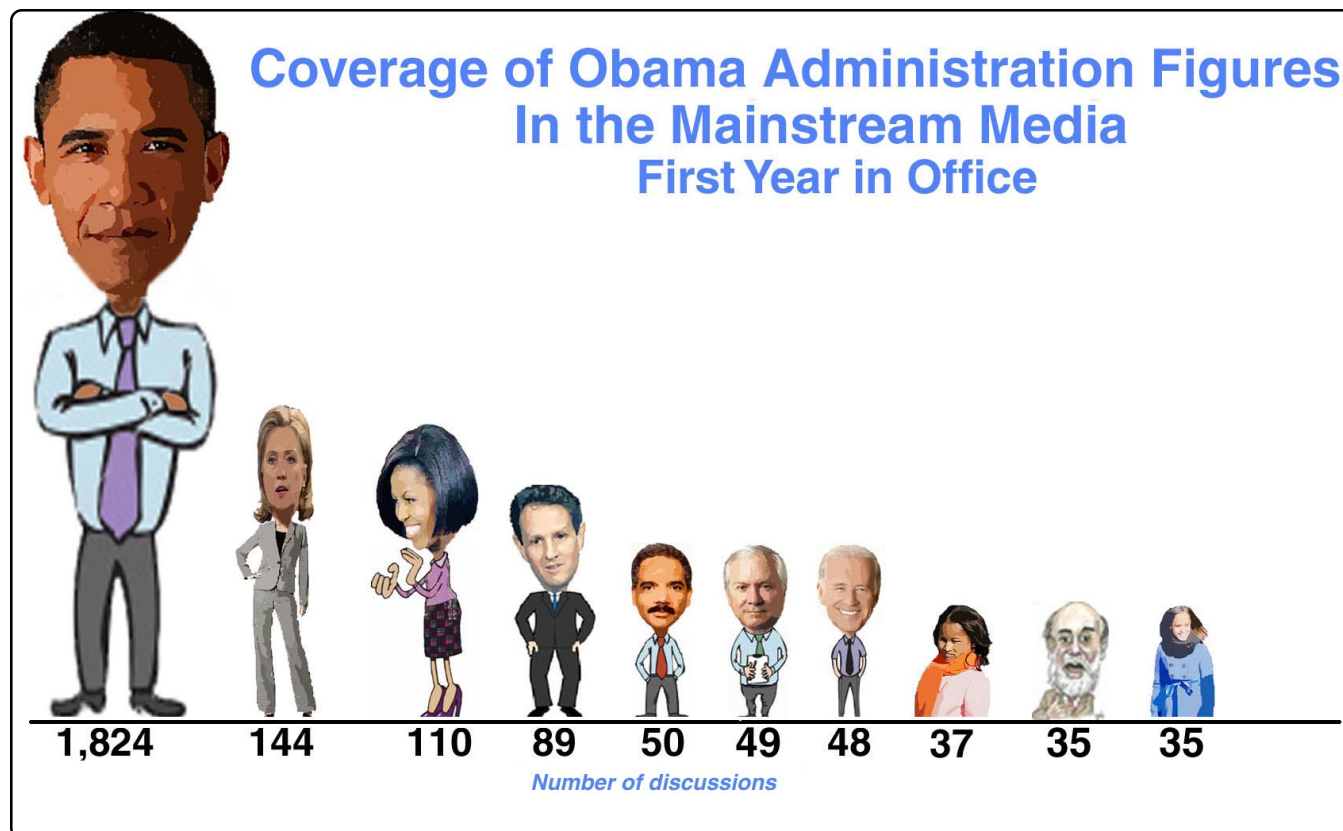
Who Made News

Mainstream media coverage of the Obama Administration has focused heavily on the president. Mr. Obama was discussed in 1,824 stories during his first year in office. (A discussion is defined as more than 20 seconds in a TV story and more than one paragraph in a print story.) Secretary of State Clinton had the second highest profile with 144 stories. The First Lady placed third with 110 stories. Treasury Secretary Geithner (89 stories) and Attorney General Holder (50 stories) round out the top five.



There were 144 administration stories in *Newsweek*, while *Time* magazine ran 200 stories. The lower number of news stories in *Newsweek* is a reflection of the increasing number of opinion columns that the magazine has run since its 2009 redesign.

Defense Secretary Gates (49) and Vice President Biden (48) were almost as visible as the Attorney General. Federal Reserve Chairman Bernanke placed ninth with 35 stories. First daughters Sasha (37) and Malia (35) also placed in the top ten figures in the news. In fact, Sasha and Malia had a higher media profile than 10 cabinet secretaries, the White House Chief of Staff and the Directors of the CIA, FBI, Office of Management and Budget and EPA.



Among the agencies and departments in the news, the Defense Department was the most prominent (300 stories). Defense was followed by unnamed or general references to the White House (224). US troops and commanders in the field garnered 176 discussions. The CDC (73) and the Treasury Department (70) round out the top five administration departments in the news.

Rating the President

During the first full year of his administration, President Obama's mainstream media coverage was almost perfectly balanced – 48 percent positive vs. 52 percent negative evaluations by non-partisan sources* and reporters. For example, Fred Krupp of the Environmental

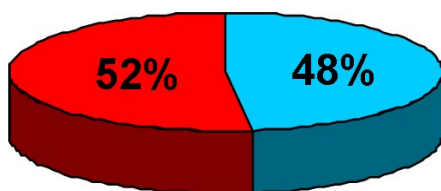
Defense Fund praised Obama's actions on global warming, "I think it's terrific that the President is going to Copenhagen; it signals to the world that he is serious and the US is serious . . ." (NBC 11/25/09). On the other hand, Tom Parker of Amnesty International criticized the president's stand on Guantanamo, "I don't think this really changes much, what he is doing is changing the venue but not really changing any policies." (NBC 12/15/09)

** Note: We report evaluations by nonpartisan sources, excluding comments by the administration and rival parties about each other, because research shows that non-partisan sources have the most influence on public opinion, and they are also more subject to the discretion of reporters.*

Rating the President

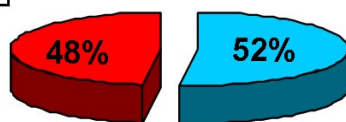
Non-partisan Opinions

Mainstream Media Overall



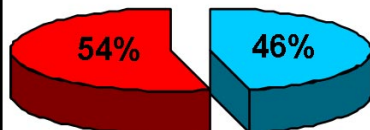
■ Positive ■ Negative

NY Times



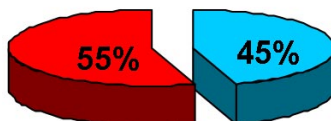
■ Positive ■ Negative

Magazines



■ Positive ■ Negative

Network TV



■ Positive ■ Negative

Note: Presidential ratings are based on non-partisan evaluations by sources and reporters.

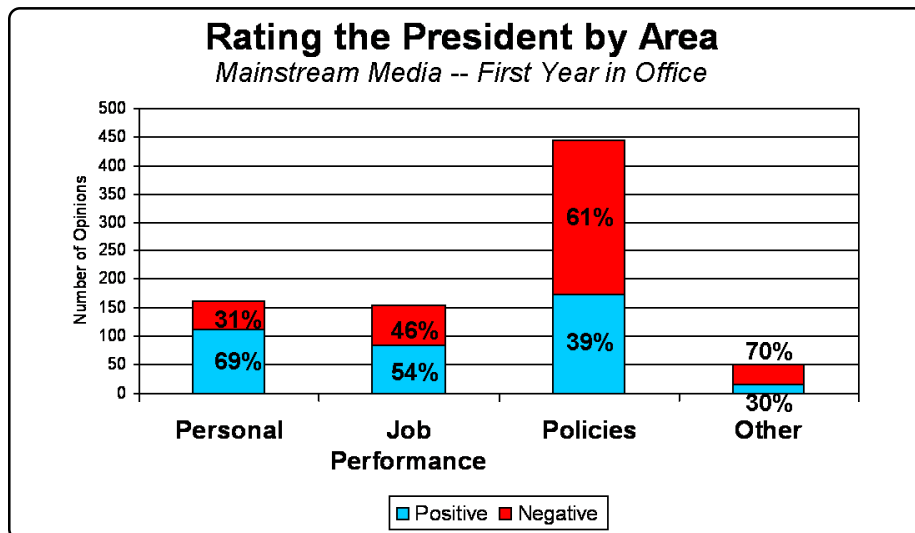
The president fared best on the front page of the *New York Times* (52% positive), followed by the news magazines (46% positive), and worst on the three broadcast networks (45% positive). Among the networks, CBS was the most negative (39% positive) while ABC was the only network with a majority of positive evaluations (51% positive). NBC fell in between at 45 percent positive. Non-partisan evaluations of the president in the pages of *Time* were evenly balanced (50% positive), while opinions were slightly more negative in *Newsweek* (44% positive).

President Obama's overall balance in good and bad press masks a sharp downturn after an early "honeymoon" period. Presidential evaluations from January through July were 53 percent positive (vs. 47% negative) among non-partisans, but they dropped to 38 percent positive from August through January 2010.

The *New York Times* offered the president his best press during the early days of the administration, but the front page of the *Times* turned more negative in the second half of the year. Good press dropped from 59 percent positive in the January to July period to 43 percent positive during the second half of the year. However, this was not the sharpest decline found in mainstream media. Coverage on CBS dropped from 51 percent positive in the first six months to only 26 percent positive in the last six months, a 25 percentage drop. Appraisals on ABC dropped 17 points (from 55% to 38% positive) during the same periods. Coverage on NBC was much

more consistent, dropping only from 47 percent positive in the first six months to 41 percent in the final six months. While coverage in *Time* magazine followed the general decline, dropping 15 percentage points (57% to 42%), coverage in *Newsweek* actually improved, rising from 36 percent to 50 percent positive.

The president continues to receive his best marks on the personal front and his worst marks on the issues. Evaluations of the president's likeability and other general sentiments ran 69 percent positive among non-partisans. One New Jersey voter remembered her excitement



during the 2008 election and voting for Obama, "It's all anyone could talk about for weeks. We were all so excited. We couldn't wait to go to the voting booth." Ratings of the president's performance on the job were 54 percent positive. For example, Bryan Walsh wrote in *Time*, "The President promised change, and on this score he has delivered." (10/5/09) But Mr. Obama's policy proposals were praised just 39 percent of the time. As one CBS analyst put it, "The more he talks about these hard issues the less people are buying it." (11/23/09) All other evaluations of the president ran 30 percent positive.

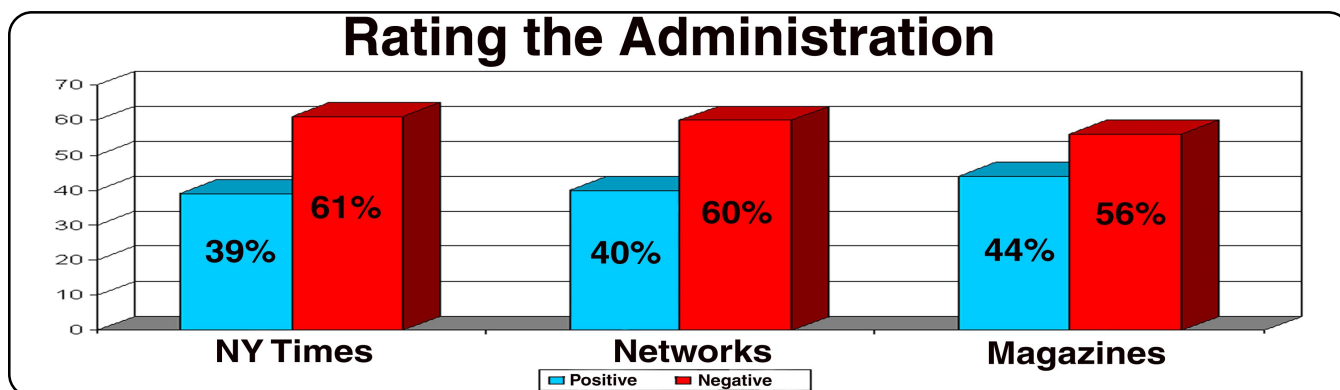
The president's decline in media ratings in the

second half of the year occurred across all areas of evaluation. His personal evaluations dropped from 79 percent positive during the January through July period to 51 percent in the second half of the year. Similarly, job performance ratings dropped from 61 percent positive to 46 percent positive over the course of the year. Appraisals of the president's policies shifted from 42 percent positive in the opening months of

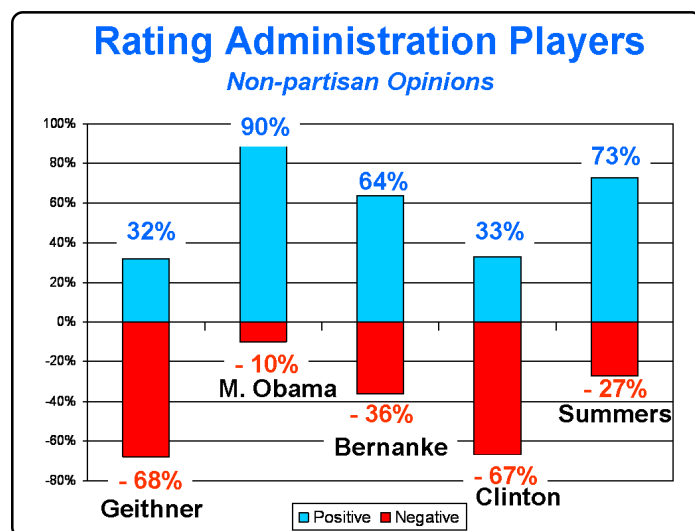
the new administration to 34 percent positive as the year drew to a close.

Rating the Administration

While President Obama enjoyed an early period of good press, the same was not true for the rest of his administration. Mainstream media coverage of the administration, apart for the president, was only 40 percent positive among non-partisan sources. The administration fared best in the newsmagazines (44% positive) and worst on the front page of the *New York Times* (39% positive). The broadcast networks were almost as harsh at 40 percent positive.



Non-partisan appraisals of the administration have been consistent across the first year in office. Evaluations from January to July ran 41 percent positive before dropping slightly to 39 percent positive from August to January 2010.



Only a handful of individuals in the administration were evaluated more than 10 times over the course of the year. The most frequently evaluated figure was Tim Geithner, whose 38 evaluations ran 32 percent positive. Michelle Obama placed second with 30 evaluations, which were 90 percent positive. Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke was evaluated 28 times, and opinions ran 64 percent positive. One-third (33%) of Hillary Clinton's 27 evaluations were positive. Larry Summers was the only other administration figure to garner more than 10 evaluations (11), and they ran 73 percent positive.

What Made News

While many issues faced the Obama administration during its first year, none received more attention than the state of the economy. The economy was extensively discussed in 291 stories about the administration. Not far behind

were concerns about terrorism (270 stories), including the continuing debate over terrorist trials and the Christmastime "underwear bomber." The controversial bailouts of Wall Street and the auto industry were extensively discussed in 250 stories. Defense issues, apart from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, were the subject of 226 stories. The President's economic stimulus plan rounded out the top five issues with 225 discussions.

While health care reform was a major news story throughout the year, much of that coverage revolved around Congressional action and was not part of the administration's coverage. As a result, health care reform placed sixth with 199 discussions, the same number directed toward the war in Afghanistan. A collection of gaffes, scandals and unethical behaviors that affected administration appointees were discussed in 173 stories. The war in Iraq (92) and the budget battle (79) round out the top ten extensively discussed issues.



Past vs. Present

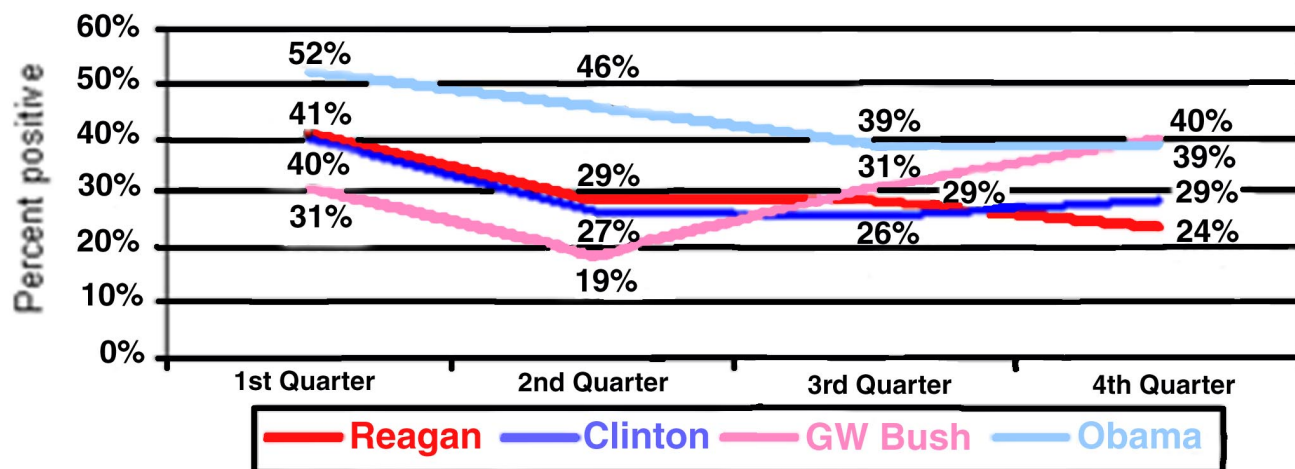
While President Obama's media image has grown tarnished, CMPA studies have found that other recent presidents fared more poorly in the media during their first year in office. While President Obama enjoyed a 45 percent positive rating among non-partisan opinions on the television networks, George W. Bush received only 38 percent positive evaluations from inauguration day through the end of 2001.* Bill Clinton had 37 percent positive evaluations during the same period in 1993; and Ronald Reagan had 35 percent positive evaluations in 1981.

Similarly, in a CMPA study of front page coverage in the *New York Times*, first-year evaluations of Bush were 32 percent positive, Clinton's evaluations were 38 percent positive, and Reagan's were 32 percent positive. Thus, Obama's balanced coverage in the *Times* in 2009 was 20 points better than Presidents Bush and Reagan and 14 points better than his democratic predecessor.

Every president we have studied has seen a drop in media ratings over the course of his first year in office. A look at network TV coverage of four presidents shows the pattern only varies in the size of the decline. The only exception was George W. Bush when the 9/11 attacks dramatically changed his media coverage. Prior to 9/11, President Bush was experiencing a drop on par with that seen during Ronald Reagan's first year. President Reagan suffered the biggest drop – from 41 percent positive in the first quarter to 24 percent positive in the last. President Bush experienced a 12 point drop in the months leading up to 9/11. President Clinton dropped from 40 percent in the first quarter to 29 percent in the final quarter. President Obama dropped from 52 percent in the first quarter to 39 percent in the final quarter.

** Our previous study included coverage of presidents from inauguration day through the end of their first calendar year. Our ongoing tracking of the Obama administration covers his entire first year in office.*

Rating the Presidents During Their First Year

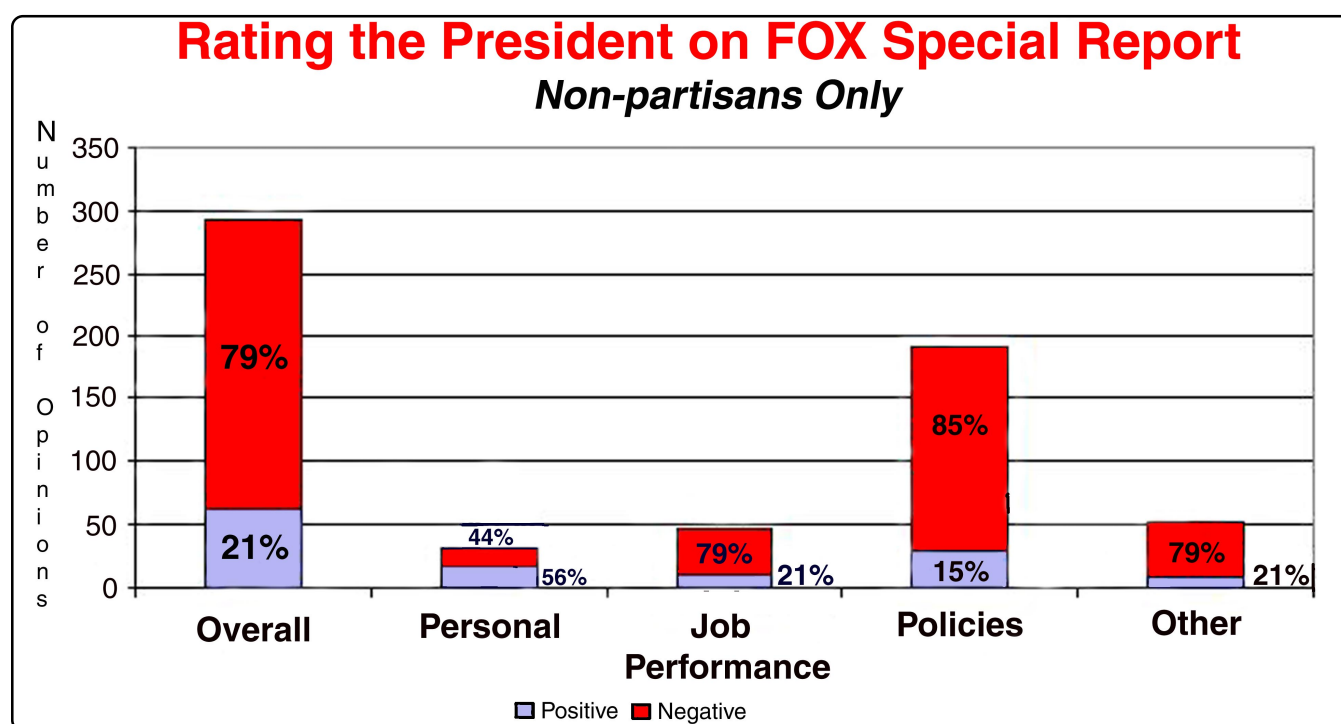


Note: Percentage of positive evaluations on the broadcast network evening news shows

Outside the Mainstream

FOX News “Special Report with Bret Baier” provided a distinctly different view of the Obama administration. Overall, only one in five (21%) non-partisan sources on “Special Report” gave the president a thumbs-up.

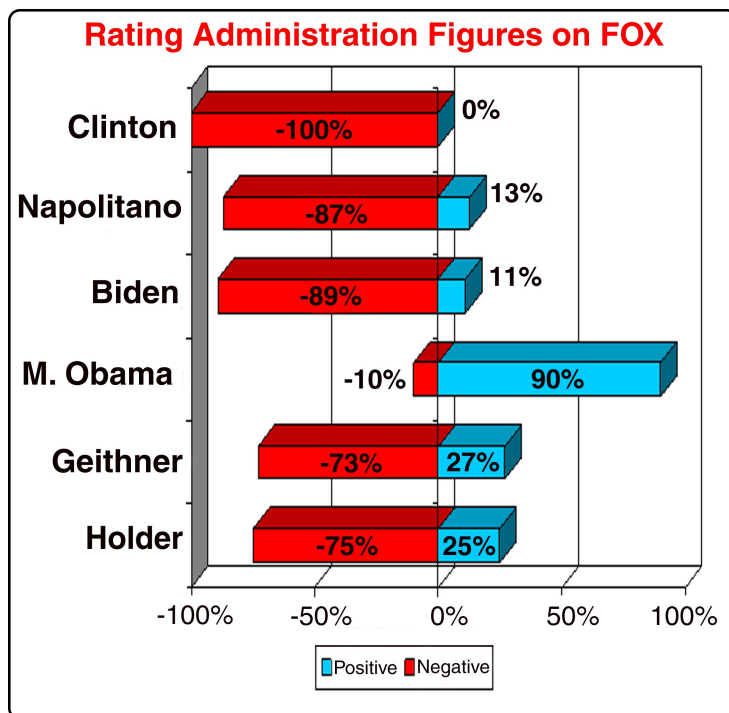
that would have helped in this close fight. Subtle statements from the White House are not enough.” (11/6/09) Evaluations of the president’s policies and issue stances received only 15 percent approval. For example, the Progressive Change Campaign Committee denounced health care reform, “President



As in the mainstream media, the president fared best in personal evaluations on “Special Report.” These general evaluations of the president were the only area where opinions were more positive than negative (56% positive vs. 44% negative). The CEO of US Bancorp summed up a White House meeting, “He didn’t call us any names, it was productive and I would say it was very serious. . .” (12/14/09). Appraisals of the president’s job performance were only 21 percent positive. One gay rights activist complained, “President Obama missed an opportunity to state his position against these discriminatory attacks with the clarity and moral imperative

Obama should frankly feel ashamed that he promised Americans a public option, got people to believe real reform was possible and then never truly fought for it – instead pushing an insurance mandate that he specifically campaigned against” (12/23/09). All other evaluations ran 21 percent positive.

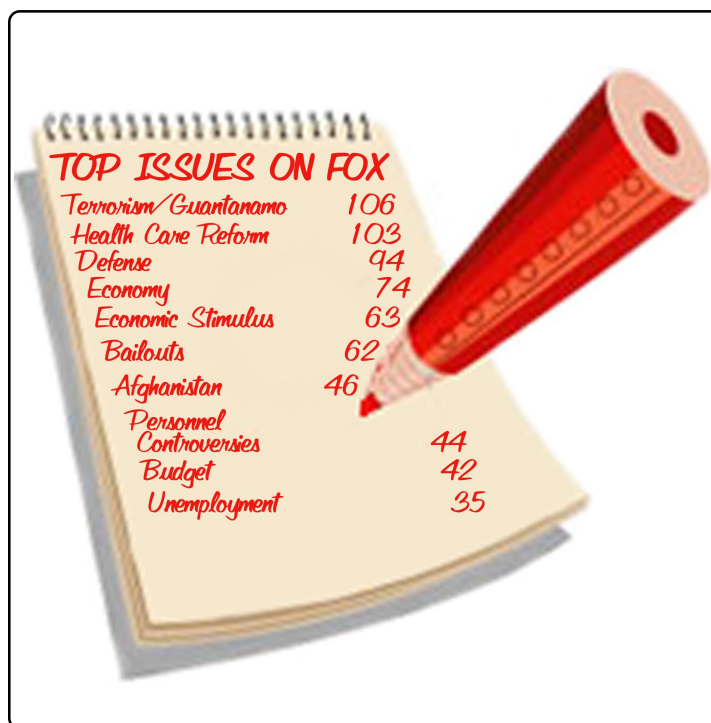
While President Obama received overwhelmingly negative coverage on FOX, he did fare slightly better than the rest of his administration. The administration garnered only 19 percent positive evaluations among non-partisans on “Special Report.”



The Wall Street bailout was the subject of 62 discussions, putting it in sixth place versus its third place position in the mainstream agenda. The war in Afghanistan, with 46 discussions on FOX, placed seventh in both issue agendas. The assortment of gaffes and scandals that has affected one or more administration figures placed eighth on both Fox (44 discussions) and the mainstream media. The federal budget, with 42 discussions, and concerns about unemployment (35 discussions) round out the top ten issues.

FOX on the Issues

While the state of the economy headlined administration news in the mainstream media, terrorism and operations at Guantanamo (106 discussions) led the issue agenda on FOX. The health care reform debate (103 discussions) ranked second in FOX issue coverage compared to sixth in the mainstream media. Defense issues placed third on FOX with 94 discussions. The general state of the economy (74 discussions) placed fourth in the FOX issue agenda compared to first in the mainstream media. The economic stimulus package (63 discussions) placed fifth in both the mainstream media and on FOX.





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