

Election Watch '08: The Road to the Conventions

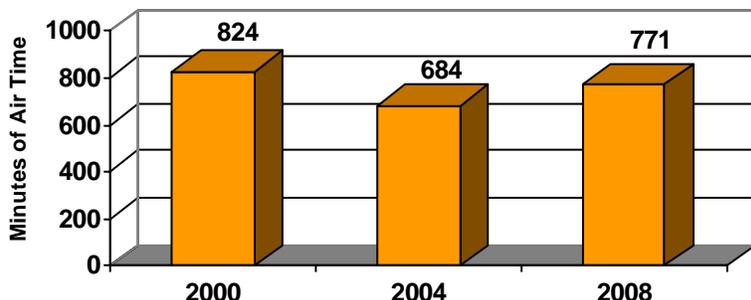
How TV News Has Covered McCain, Obama and Hillary

This issue of Media Monitor examines how the three broadcast networks and Fox News covered the three leading presidential candidates prior to the general election. We first compare the primary and summer coverage of the two party nominees, Barack Obama and John McCain. We then turn to the Democratic primary matchup between Obama and Hillary Clinton.

MAJOR FINDINGS:

- ◆ **Where Have All the Issues Gone?** — Only 1 out of 7 stories during the primaries dealt with the candidates' records or policy issues.
- ◆ **Obama Wins Visibility Race** – Barack Obama got 68% more coverage than John McCain did this year.
- ◆ **Trip Heard 'Round the World** — Obama's July trip got heavier coverage than the New Hampshire primary did.
- ◆ **Obamamania** — Obama's primary coverage on the broadcast networks was 2 to 1 positive, Hillary Clinton's was balanced, and McCain's was 3 to 2 negative.
- ◆ **Summer Doldrums** — But both Obama and McCain got more bad press than good press during the summer.
- ◆ **The Glass Half Empty** – FOX had the most negative coverage of Obama and the most positive coverage of McCain.
- ◆ **The Glass Half Full** – As a result, FOX also had the most balanced coverage of Obama and McCain.

Amount of Coverage



Amount of Coverage

From December 16, 2007 (two weeks before the Iowa caucuses) through June 7, when Hillary Clinton's withdrawal made Barack Obama the presumptive Democratic nominee, the ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox News Channel (FOX) evening newscasts aired 2,145 stories of campaign news lasting 69 hours and 7 minutes. (Note: The FOX figures represent the first 30 minutes of "Special Report with Brit Hume," whose format closely resembles that of the broadcast networks' evening news shows.)

This massive amount of coverage partly reflected the unusually lengthy Democratic campaign, which continued into June despite Obama's apparently insurmountable lead. To better compare 2008 with previous elections, we examined primary coverage on the broadcast networks during the peak period from Iowa through

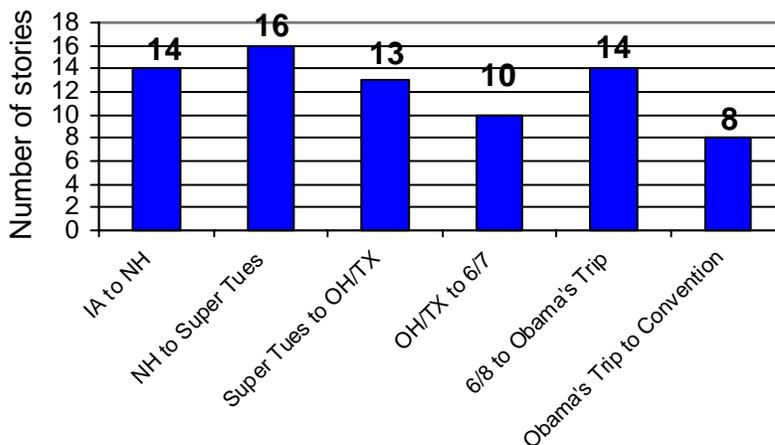
Super Tuesday. During this key early phase of the primaries, airtime in 2008 was up by 13 percent (771 minutes) over 2004 (684 minutes), but down by seven percent from 2000 (824 minutes).

NBC led the broadcast networks with 15 hours 17 minutes of election news, followed

by 14 hours 18 minutes on ABC and 13 hours 57 minutes on CBS. However, FOX outpaced them all with 25 hours, 35 minutes of airtime, or 76 percent more coverage than the "big three" networks averaged. Similarly, FOX far outpaced the broadcast networks with 771 stories, compared to 496 on CBS, 443 on NBC, and 435 on ABC.

The coverage fluctuated surprisingly little over the course of the primaries. As usual, the heaviest coverage occurred early in the campaign. But this "frontloading" was not as pronounced as in some previous elections, with high levels of coverage lasting until early March. During the initial runup from mid-December to the Iowa caucuses on January 3 and

Average Number of Stories Per Day



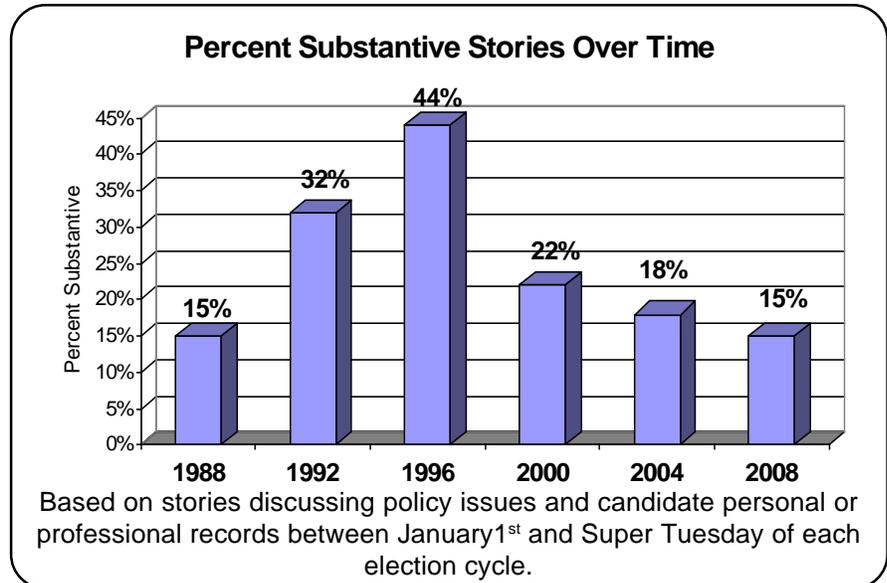
the New Hampshire primary on January 8, traditionally a period of saturation coverage, the four newscasts averaged 14 stories per day. Over the next three weeks leading to Super Tuesday on February 4, the coverage actually rose to 16 stories per day.

During the month from Super Tuesday until the March 4 Ohio and Texas primaries (which were widely viewed as representing Hillary Clinton's last chance to compete with Obama), the rate of coverage dropped to 13 stories per night, not far below the attention devoted to the Iowa and New Hampshire races.

Some of this staying power was linked to coverage of a rumored affair between John McCain and a lobbyist. The departure of Mitt Romney also spurred coverage, as John McCain moved closer to clinching the GOP nomination.

For the three months following the March 4 primaries, the coverage fell to an average of ten stories per night, with little month-to-month variation, until Hillary Clinton's withdrawal on June 7.

Past presidential nominees have sometimes taken a breather in the immediate post-primary



period. In 2008, however, Senators McCain and Obama moved quickly into the general election phase, and the media followed suit.

Network coverage rose to an average of 14 stories a night from the end of the primaries through Obama's international trip in July, including 16 stories per night during the nine-day trip July 18 to 26, heavier coverage than the Iowa and New Hampshire contests received. During the month after the trip ended, the coverage finally fell to only eight stories per night, as the candidates and the media prepared for the party nominating conventions.

A Matter of Substance

The media are frequently criticized for focusing on the campaign horse race rather than substantive issues. We measure substance as the proportion of stories that feature discussions of policy issues or the candidates' records and qualifications. By contrast, horse race coverage deals with the candidates' standing in the race and their strategy and tactics for winning.

From December 16 to June 7, only one out of every five stories (21%) contained substantive material, while twice as many (40%) dealt with the horse race. FOX "Special Report" led with 24 percent substantive stories, followed closely by CBS (23%), with

NBC (18%) and ABC (17%) trailing behind.

Once again, to make meaningful comparisons across campaigns, we examined the percentage of substantive coverage on the broadcast network evening newscasts from January 1 through the Super Tuesday contests each year. The result? The peak period of the 2008 primaries saw a continuing decline in substantive news.

The proportion of substantive coverage in primary campaigns from Iowa to Super Tuesday fell from a high of 44 percent in 1996 to 22 percent in 2000 to 18 percent in 2004 and only

15 percent in 2008. The 2008 campaign was the least substantive we have measured since 1988 – the last time the race for both parties' nominations was wide open.

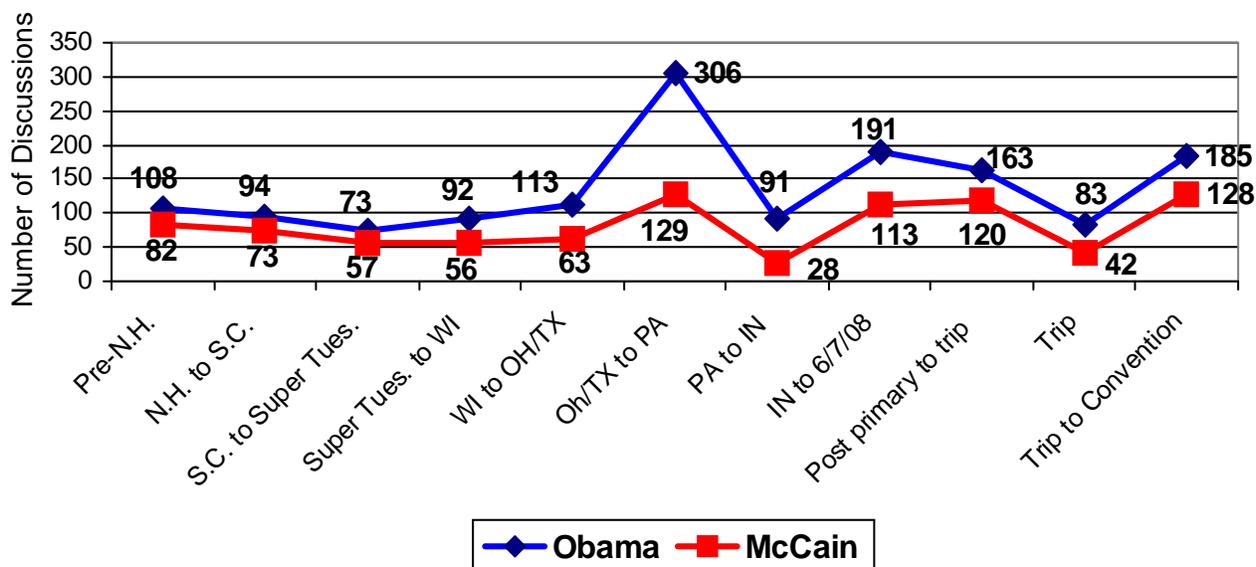
Coverage of the Candidates

Everyone knows that Barack Obama enjoyed higher visibility than John McCain throughout the primaries. Overall, he was the subject of 78 percent more discussions than McCain – 1068 to 601. (To be counted, a discussion must last at least 20 seconds.) However, the difference was much less obvious

while both men still faced competitive races.

Prior to Super Tuesday, Obama received 30 percent more coverage than McCain (275 discussions to 212). Then Romney's withdrawal left McCain as the presumptive GOP nominee, opposed only by Mike Huckabee. By contrast, Obama and Hillary Clinton emerged from Super Tuesday virtually tied in the delegate count. From then until the Ohio and Texas primaries on March 4, Obama's lead in coverage jumped to 72 percent. At that point Huckabee's withdrawal ended the GOP competition.

Amount of Candidate Coverage Over Time



For the rest of the primaries, Obama's coverage more than doubled McCain's (588 discussions to 270). The greatest imbalance occurred when Obama's coverage spiked because of controversies over his radical former pastor and his own comments about pro-gun and anti-immigrant attitudes among "bitter" small town voters.

During the summer, Obama retained his lead in visibility by attracting nearly half again as many discussions as McCain – 431 to 290, a difference of 49 percent. The visibility gap reached a two to one margin during Obama's overseas trip, which garnered 83 discussions compared to 42 for McCain during the same period. For the primaries and summer com-

bined, Obama received 68 percent more coverage than McCain.

The Battle for Good Press

John McCain and Barack Obama both received highly positive press in the early races for Iowa and New Hampshire. But after his New Hampshire victory established him as the GOP frontrunner, McCain's press turned sour and never recovered. By contrast, Obama's coverage remained mostly favorable, and he suffered only temporary setbacks from the controversies over Rev. Wright and "bitter" small town voters.

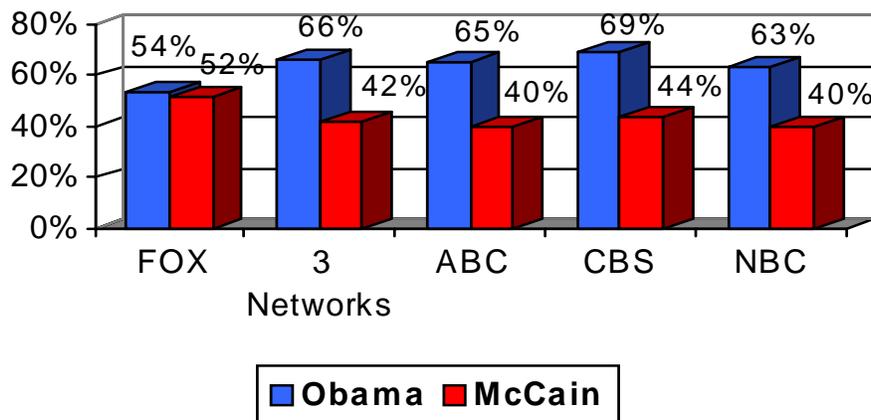
As a result, over nearly six months of primary campaigning, Obama had a clear advan-

tage over McCain on broadcast network news. His coverage on the three broadcast network evening news shows was 2 to 1 positive (66%), compared to a nearly 3 to 2 negative ratio (42% positive) for McCain. The good to bad press ratio of the two was nearly identical across the three networks.

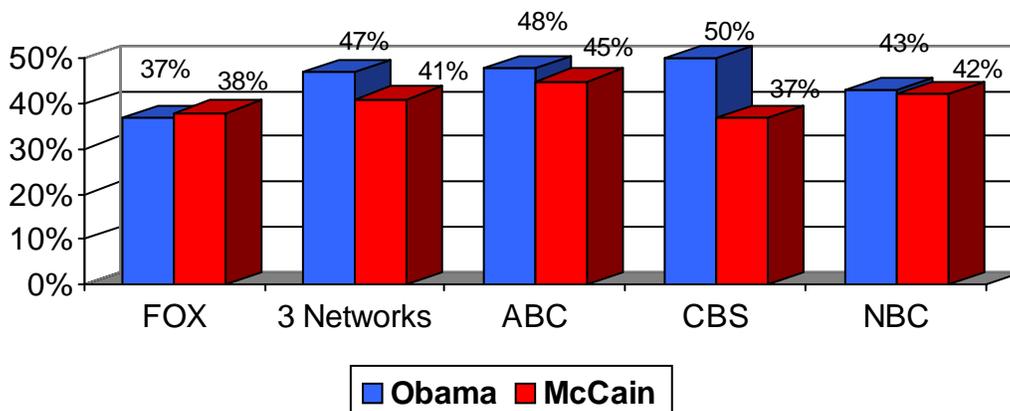
The pattern was different on FOX, where Obama fared worse and McCain fared better than they did on the broadcast networks. As a result, FOX's coverage of the two was the most balanced, with 54 percent positive comments about Obama and 52 percent positive about McCain.

Beginning in June, the two men went head to head as the presumptive nominees of their parties. The summer saw a

Percent Positive Evaluations - Primaries



Percent Positive Evaluations - Summer



falloff in good press for both, which left them with more negative but also more evenly balanced media images. On the broadcast networks Obama received his first extended run of bad press, finishing with only 47 percent positive coverage until late August, when the next phase of the campaign began with the Democratic convention.

That was still good enough to retain his lead in good press over McCain, whose coverage was almost unchanged from the primaries at 41 percent positive. But most of this difference was limited to CBS, where Obama outstripped McCain by 50 percent to 37 percent positive comments. By contrast Obama's margin over McCain was only 48 to 45 percent

positive on ABC and 43 to 42 percent on NBC.

On FOX coverage of both candidates turned negative, leaving them with relative parity. Obama's level of good press fell from 54 percent to 37 percent, while McCain's dropped from 53 percent to 38 percent. Thus FOX's summer coverage of the two presumptive major party nominees was both the most balanced and the most negative of the four networks.

SAMPLE EVALUATIONS – SUMMER*

OBAMA:

Positive:

"I think he's the new president for America." — German man reacting to Obama's Berlin

speech (ABC 7/24)

"Obama's social policies, his economic policies are more in line with American traditions, with Christian traditions." -- Man at the saddleback Forum (CBS 8/17)

Negative:

"He is not a head of state. He is not our President. But he thinks he is." -- Ohio voter reacting to Obama's Berlin Speech (ABC 7/24)

"[Obama] now says he supports a broad deal regulating government wiretapping, even though the deal still grants immunity to the phone companies, something he says he's still against." -- Lee Cowan, NBC reporter (NBC 7/2)

McCAIN

Positive:

"... John McCain is one of us. He's an all-American person. He stands for what we believe in." -- Ohio voter (ABC 7/24)

"It was brilliantly planned. McCain looked like a somewhat grandfatherly figure talking to folks at home. Now, that can work because folks at home are worried about what's happening at home." Cokie Roberts, ABC reporter, on McCain's visit to a German restaurant in Ohio while Obama was in Germany (ABC 7/26)

Negative:

"John McCain is increasingly putting himself in danger that

he's going to become the subject of ridicule." — David Gergen, political analyst (NBC 8/1)

"I think it's going to backfire. John McCain's campaign is predicated on the idea of loyalty, someone of honor. This seems a little juvenile." — David Mark, politico.com, on McCain's negative campaigning (CBS 7/30)

JOINT:

"Neither one of them [Obama or McCain] come even remotely close to representing my values." Evangelical voter (CBS 8/2)

"Experts say that both campaigns are exaggerating the

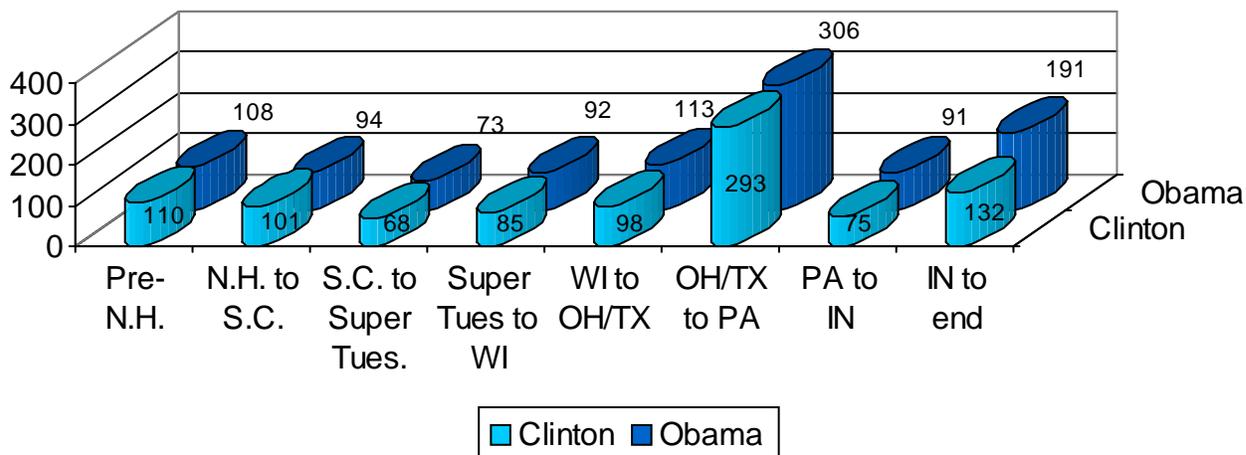
virtues of their energy proposals and not telling voters how truly difficult it would be to become really independent of foreign oil." (NBC 8/5)

* For primary evaluations see: **Election Watch '08: The Primaries** [How TV News Covered the GOP and Democratic Primaries March/April 2008](#)

Postscript: The Obama - Clinton Matchup

The primary campaign between [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Barack Obama](#) was a close contest, and its competitiveness was reflected in the amount of coverage each received. They were

Amount of Coverage Clinton vs. Obama



discussed in an almost equal number of stories through the early primaries.

Until the Wisconsin primary, they were never more than seven stories apart in levels of coverage. After Wisconsin,

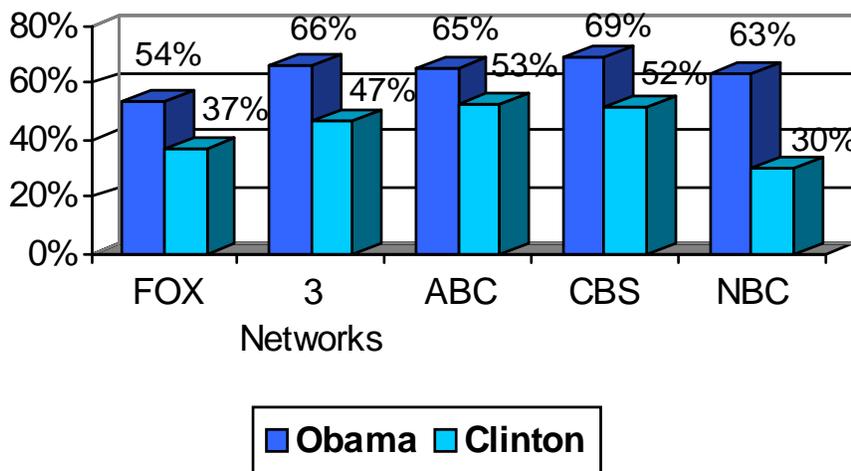
The Democratic Good Press Race

Obama's 60 percent positive evaluations on broadcast network news gave him a sizable advantage over Clinton, who finished the primary season

press. On NBC, by contrast, her press was only 29 percent positive, a negative to positive ratio of more than 2 to 1.

Clinton's coverage was also mostly negative on FOX, where her 37 percent level of good

Percent Positive Evaluations - Primaries



Obama began to draw more coverage and gradually took a clear lead over Clinton. It was not until after the Indiana primary (when many pundits believed that Obama had clinched the nomination) that his coverage jumped significantly over Senator Clinton's.

with 47 percent good press. In contrast to their treatment of Obama and McCain, the broadcast networks varied in their portrayal of Clinton. Her evaluations on ABC (53 percent positive) and CBS (52 percent positive) were nearly identical, as well as almost evenly balanced between good and bad

press was still better than she fared on NBC. Since FOX also offered the least positive portrayal of Obama (54 percent positive evaluations), its combined coverage of the two candidates was the most negative of the four networks.



Election Watch '08: Early Returns

Media Monitor (Copyright © 2008) is published bimonthly by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and nonprofit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues. Yearly individual and organizational subscriptions are available.

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