

The Pro-Obama Mainstream Media Bias in the 2008 Election Campaign

Mebarek Laouamri*¹ Pr. Amine Belmekki²

¹University Abu Bekr Belkaid, Tlemcen (Algeria)
aouamrin@yahoo.fr

²University Abu Bekr Belkaid, Tlemcen (Algeria)
amibel213@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This article examines the role that the mainstream media played in the efforts to elect Barack Obama president of the United States in 2008. The article argues that the mainstream media openly took sides in favor of the Democratic candidate, and attempts to demonstrate that the media one-sided coverage of the campaign amounted to blatant bias. The article concludes that the failure of the media in delivering fair and balanced coverage of the campaign significantly affected the outcome of the election.

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★ Corresponding Author

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INTRODUCTION

The media outlets have always played a crucial role in the American presidential elections through their huge impact on shaping the public opinion of the masses and through their ability to form or modify the public opinion in different ways depending on which candidate they want to win. The candidate that has the favors of the media usually receives more attention and is granted more and granted him unwavering support, making him the dominant figure positive coverage, enabling him to have more influence on public opinion and thus to receive more votes. Such was the case with the 2008 presidential election when the American mainstream media almost unanimously embraced Obama's cause in the campaign both in terms of press coverage and public visibility. In doing so, the media failed to abide by the ethical rules governing the profession, which oblige them to treat contestants fairly, so that voters could choose their preferred candidate with conviction and on the right basis. This positioning of the mainstream media behind Obama reignited the perennial debate over media bias in the presidential election and confirmed the widely spread driving bias that when it comes to the nation's big issues, the American mainstream media is overwhelmingly subservient to the political power of the establishment.

Endorsements: The massive line-up:

In the 2008 elections, and in line with the general mood in the country which was seeking change, the American leading mainstream media newspapers lined up behind Obama's candidacy and served his campaign in multiple ways. To begin with, the leading newspapers openly endorsed the man and praised his outstanding qualities that entitled him as President to address the enormous challenge to get the nation back to where it was before President Bush, to begin to mend its image in the world and to

The Pro-Obama Mainstream Media Bias in the 2008 Election Campaign

restore its self-confidence and its self-respect. The most influential daily the New York Times, explaining and justifying its endorsement of Obama, wrote:

Mr. Obama has met challenge after challenge, growing as a leader and putting real flesh on his early promises of hope and change. He has shown a cool head and sound judgment. We believe he has the will and the ability to forge the broad political consensus that is essential to finding solutions to this nation's problems (as cited in Barack, 2008).

For the liberal daily, the choice between Obama and the Republican candidate John McCain was easy to make: "Mr. McCain, whom we chose as the best Republican nominee in the primaries, has spent the last coins of his reputation for principle and sound judgment to placate the limitless demands and narrow vision of the far-right wing" (as cited in Barack, 2008).

A similar stance was taken by the not less influential daily the Washington Post which cited Obama's impressive qualities to justify its endorsement of his candidacy:

Yet it is without ambivalence that we endorse Sen. Barack Obama for president. The choice is made easy in part by Mr. McCain's disappointing campaign, above all his irresponsible selection of a running mate who is not ready to be president. It is made easy in larger part, though, because of our admiration for Mr. Obama and the impressive qualities he has shown during this long race (as cited in Barack, 2008).

Following in the footsteps of its predecessors, the daily the Boston Globe enthusiastically endorsed Obama. Like the Times and the Post, the Globe did not fail to mention the exceptional qualities that dictated the choice of its favorite candidate:

The nation needs a chief executive who has the temperament and the nerves to shepherd Americans through what promises to be a grueling

The Pro-Obama Mainstream Media Bias in the 2008 Election Campaign

period and who has the vision to restore this country to its place of leadership in the world. Such a leader is at hand. With great enthusiasm, the Globe endorses Senator Barack Obama for president. The charismatic Democrat from Illinois has the ability to channel Americans' hopes and rally the public together (as cited in Obama, 2008).

Finally, even the daily the Los Angeles Times which had not backed any presidential candidate since 1973 joined in and expressed its full support for Obama's candidacy arguing that Obama "held most of the same positions as the paper's editorial board — namely, being anti-war and for health care reform — combined with a "sense of aspiration." Urging its readers to capitalize on the "historic moment" and vote for Obama, the paper wrote:

No public relations campaign could do more than Obama's mere presence in the White House to defuse anti-American passion around the world, nor could any political experience surpass Obama's life story in preparing a president to understand the American character (as cited, Barack 2008).

The first observation that we can draw from the alignment of the four major newspapers in the country behind the Obama campaign is that none of them explicitly or even implicitly explained to their readers why Obama would be a better president than his opponent. The four dailies "coincidentally" failed to mention anything about their favorite candidate's political experience, a major asset and a strong argument for anyone running for president. Instead, there was a consensus among them to highlight and praise his personal qualities. They focused more on the candidate's personality; his charisma, his oratorical talents and his ethnicity than on his intellectual and ideological background, giving the impression that the whole election was a public relations contest.

The Pro-Obama Mainstream Media Bias in the 2008 Election Campaign

Interestingly, Obama's candidacy even drew support from conservative publications. The conservative writer Andrew J. Bacevich wrote an article entitled "the Right Choice" in the then monthly *American Conservative* making a conservative case for Barack Obama. In the article, he wished the Democratic candidate would win the general election and urged whom he called his fellow principled conservatives to seize the "chance" of the Obama candidacy and vote for him in the absence of a reliable alternative. Whilst he did not praise any of Obama's assets, he warned his fellow conservatives against an eventual McCain presidency. In his words:

Conservatives who think that a McCain presidency would restore a sense of realism and prudence to U.S. foreign policy are setting themselves up for disappointment. On this score, we should take the senator at his word: his commitment to continuing the most disastrous of President Bush's misadventures is irrevocable. McCain is determined to remain in Iraq as long as it takes. He is the candidate of the War Party (Bacevich, 2008).

On his part, Wick Allison editor in chief of the fortnightly the *National Review*, the most conservative magazine, endorsed Obama, blaming his choice on McCain:

Barack Obama is not my ideal candidate for president. In fact, I made the maximum donation to John McCain during the primaries, when there was still hope he might come to his senses. But I now see that Obama is almost the ideal candidate for this moment in American history. I disagree with him on many issues. But those don't matter as much as what Obama offers, is a deeply conservative view of the world (Allison, 2008).

As a matter of fact, the conservative media support for Obama's candidacy was further proof that he was the candidate of the Washington

The Pro-Obama Mainstream Media Bias in the 2008 Election Campaign

establishment. The conservative media, just like the mainstream media, Wall Street and other national institutions could only endorse the candidate of “change and hope” notwithstanding his poor political record and the presence before him of such giants of American politics as Hillary Clinton and John McCain. Obama’s election was the endeavor of the establishment, and some of the conservative media had but to turn their back on their natural candidate and support his opponent despite their huge political and ideological differences with him.

Campaign Coverage: The blatant imbalance:

Support for Obama was even greater among the US major television networks. ABC, CBS, and NBC generally took a more favorable stance toward the Democratic candidate than his Republican opponent, making the latter struggle throughout the campaign to find a media spotlight (Mann, 2008). This was obvious in the huge imbalance in the major networks’ coverage of the two candidates.

According to the Tyndall Report, a network-news observer, Obama received more than twice as much network air time as McCain in the last month and a half following the end of the primary season; Obama got 166 minutes of coverage compared with 67 minutes for McCain (as cited in Top, 2008). A similar report from the Pew Research Center states that in 12 of 13 consecutive weeks since February’s Super Tuesday primaries, Obama was consistently the most visible presidential candidate and the one that Americans had heard the most about in the news. In fact, the disparity between the two candidates was not limited to the time of coverage, but extended to the nature of the coverage as well. Obama’s coverage on the three networks evening news was 2 to 1 positive (66%), compared to a nearly 3 to 2 negative ratio (42% positive) for McCain (as cited in Many, 2008).

The Pro-Obama Mainstream Media Bias in the 2008 Election Campaign

The clearest example of the biased TV networks attitude toward the two candidates was their campaign coverage outside the US. Obama's trip to the Middle East and Europe, while the campaign was in full swing, was widely covered by anchors from the main television networks. Some of the journalists made the trip by the Democratic candidate's 757 plane dubbed "Obama One" and painted with his slogan "Change we can believe in", while others traveled on their own because there were not enough seats available (MacAskill, 2008). By contrast, when McCain made a similar trip to the Middle East five months earlier, the reporters were not willing to travel. In CNN Headline News host Glenn Beck's words: "McCain didn't have to worry about finding seats for any network anchors, because none of them wanted to go" (Beck, 2008).

Support for Obama reached its peak when, in an unprecedented move, seven networks CBS, Fox, NBC, BET, MSNBC, TV One and Univision a Spanish language channel, simultaneously broadcast a 30-minute Obama commercial that was seen by 33.55 million viewers, according to figures released by Nielsen Media Research (Carter,2008). In the informational there was almost no mention of Sen. John McCain or the Republican Party.

As a matter of fact, this excessive enthusiasm for Obama on the part of the media was not at all surprising but was widely expected, as most men and women in the profession had chosen their camp long before the campaign began. Two years after the election, some statistics revealed by the conservative magazine the Washington Examiner showed that 1,160 employees of NBC News ABC and CBS and two other major broadcast television networks donated a total of \$1,020,816 to the Democratic Party while the Republican Party received only \$142,863 from 193 donors (Obama, 2010).

The Debate: Bias or not Bias?

The Pro-Obama Mainstream Media Bias in the 2008 Election Campaign

The negative attitude of the mainstream media towards the Republican candidate sparked a heated debate over the role of the media in the national events. John McCain and his supporters complained about what they called unfair treatment and rejected the media behavior, describing it as pure bias in favor of the Democratic candidate. The Republican Party protested what they called media's "bizarre fascination" with Barack Obama (Landers, 2008) and the Republican National Committee fundraising decried "the fawning, one-sided coverage Barack Obama receives from the mainstream media."

The media, for their part, backed by the Republican candidate's opponents, rejected the accusations of bias, describing them as pure myth (Wilson, 2008). They argued that even though McCain might have got less coverage than Obama, he still got more coverage than any candidate from previous years (Top, 2008). They tried to justify the coverage gap by claiming that it partly reflected greater public interest in Obama, and that lesser interest in McCain could not be attributed solely to the lack of media coverage. To them, Obama's personal appeal and his consequent value to the media as a hot newsworthy topic induced journalists to give him favorable coverage to the point of blatant bias (Shlichta, 2009). In CNN Headline News host Glenn Beck words:

The Media aren't around for their health, they're around to make money, and if Obama drives sales or ratings, then I can't really blame them for continuing to tap that well until it runs dry. Obama is on the cover of magazines because his face sells a lot more magazines than McCain's picture. That's a pro-profit bias, not a liberal bias (Beck, 2008).

McCain's campaign refuted the aforementioned arguments. To them, the massive flaw in coverage was not due to Obama's personal charisma and newsworthiness but rather to systematic and intentional bias. To assert their accusations, they cited the refusal of the New York Times to

The Pro-Obama Mainstream Media Bias in the 2008 Election Campaign

publish an essay that Sen. John McCain wrote defending his Iraq war policy (McCain, 2008). The piece was in response to an op-ed from Sen. Barack Obama that the paper published a week earlier. The campaign also posted a video to YouTube, compiling clips from well-known American television reporters describing their affection for Obama. In the video, journalists are shown describing their feelings for the democratic candidate, interspersed with a video collage of news reports about Obama and his wife, Michelle. “I felt this thrill going up my leg. I mean, I don't have that too often,” says political talk show host Chris Matthews in one clip. In another clip, asked by a reporter what percentage of the US mainstream media is “in the tank” for Obama, Hillary Clinton's former campaign chair Terry McAuliffe says, “Oh, probably 90 per cent” (as cited in Landers, 2008).

The accusations of deliberate pro-Obama media bias were not limited to McCain's campaign staff but extended to many media professionals as well. Speaking at a conference on the 2008 election, Time magazine's Mark Halperin dismissed what he called “the most disgusting failure of people in our business since the Iraq War; it was extreme bias, extreme pro-Obama coverage” (as cited in Burns, 2008). The Los Angeles Times writer Mark Barabak expressed similar sentiments: “I think it is incumbent upon people in our business to make sure that we're being fair. The daily output was the most disparate of any campaign I've ever covered, by far” (as cited in Burns, 2008). But the most virulent criticism toward the media line-up behind the Democratic candidate came from conservative talk radio show host Rush Limbaugh who conceded that: “the media were following Obama with their tongues dragging along the concrete to the floors. Lenin, Stalin never got this kind of coverage from their media” (as cited in Wilson, 2008).

While media bias in American presidential elections is by no means a new issue, it took on added significance in the 2008 election; it was

The Pro-Obama Mainstream Media Bias in the 2008 Election Campaign

so blatant that the media failed to deny it. According to the Harvard Political Review:

Serious analyses of media bias date back as far as the Lincoln-Douglas days over 150 years ago. But honest and objective analyses clearly indicate that such bias has only worsened. During President Obama's 2008 campaign, the overwhelming majority of news media was clearly and unabashedly behind the campaign of hope and change (as cited in Media, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The role played by the media in the 2008 US presidential campaign will go down in history as the worst example of bias. The media squarely failed in their primary mission, which is to objectively inform public opinion about the candidates and their programs, and to provide equal opportunities for them both in terms of fair and balanced coverage and public visibility, leaving the final decision to the voters to make their choice. Instead, most of the media deliberately obfuscated McCain's campaign and openly sided with Obama, making his success in that election their own cause. In the face of severe criticism, the media tried to downplay the extent of their unprofessional and unethical behavior by denying the charge of bias on the one hand and by attributing the disparity in their coverage of the election campaign to the attractiveness and dynamism of the democratic candidate on the other hand. The arguments were flimsy; as most observers of media and electoral affairs agreed that the failure to provide fair and balanced coverage of the campaign amounted to blatant bias and significantly affected the election outcome.

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