



PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

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Contacts: PEJ—Tom Rosenstiel or Amy Mitchell at 202-419-3650
Shorenstein Center—Marion Just at 617-496-4858

The Invisible Primary No Longer: A First Look at 2008 Presidential Campaign Coverage

Monday, Oct. 29— Nearly 11 months before anyone could cast a vote, the press had already narrowed the presidential horserace to five candidates. And while the coverage provided ample information on political tactics and fundraising, it offered citizens relatively little information on the candidates' records or where they proposed to take the country, according to a joint study released today by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) and the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy.

While Hillary Clinton received the most press exposure (17% of stories), fellow Democratic candidate Barack Obama was the candidate covered the most favorably—followed by Fred Thompson, during the first five months of 2007. In contrast, Republican hopeful John McCain received the most negative coverage. The tone of the stories about Clinton and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani were nearly identical: more negative than positive, according to the study.

The most striking finding is how oriented to tactics and polling the coverage was, even though experts know that a race so early is fluid, and polls are mostly about name recognition. Fully 63% of stories focused on such matters—and by most of these were polls and strategy rather than fundraising or other political matters. Another 17% of stories examined the personal backgrounds of the candidates. A mere 15% of stories focused on candidate policy proposals and ideas, which marks a sharp turn from what the public says it wants from campaign coverage.

And this tactical focus is even more pronounced when one looks at how stories were framed rather than the topic of the story. Just 12% of stories examined were presented in a way that explained how citizens might be affected by the election, while nearly nine-out-of-ten stories (86%) focused on matters that largely impacted only the parties and the candidates.

The public, moreover, says it wants something different from the media. A new poll by The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press conducted for this report finds that about eight-in-ten of Americans say they want more coverage of the candidates' stances on issues, and majorities want more on the record and personal background, and backing of the candidates, more about lesser-known candidates and more about debates.

These are some key conclusions from this study, which analyzed 1,742 campaign stories that appeared from January to May 2007 in 48 different news outlets from print, cable, online, network TV and radio. This study was designed and produced jointly by PEJ, a non-partisan, non-political institute that is part of the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C., and the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, which is part of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

[Read the full report.](#)

Among the report's major findings:

- Clinton, Obama, Giuliani, McCain, and Mitt Romney were the focus of more than half of the total coverage.
- Democrats have enjoyed more positive coverage than Republicans (35% vs. 26%); for both parties a plurality of 39% of stories were neutral or balanced.
- The difference in tone can be related to the 47% positive coverage of Obama and the only 12% positive coverage of McCain. With these candidates excluded, tone coverage is strikingly similar.
- Democrats generally got more coverage than Republicans, (49% of stories versus 31%). One reason was that major Democratic candidates began announcing their candidacies a month earlier than key Republicans, but that alone does not fully explain the discrepancy.
- Different media segments covered the election in distinct manners: Newspapers were more positive about Democrats; talk radio was more negative overall and network TV tended to spotlight the personal aspects of the candidates.
- However, all media focused on strategy above all other story topics. Focusing on strategy directly contrasts the public's desire to know what candidates will do in office, according to a [new poll by The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.](#)