

# Media bias in the election of 2008

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Connie Zhang Media Bias Against Hilary Clinton in the Election of 2008 The election of 2008 was monumental in many respects, the most significant being the fact that there was a chance that the first woman or African American would become president of the United States. After Obama won the nomination, claims that the media had been negative and unfair to Clinton were examined. In earlier studies conducted by D'Alessio and Allen, it was concluded there were no significant biases in most forms of media. However, from the focus of her marriage to the questioning of her social conduct, Clinton was definitely treated differently than Obama was.

It is very evident that there was, in fact, negative bias towards Clinton, although it was not as numerous and severe as it seemed to be due to historical, situational, and personal matters. Using meta-analysis, a method that allows for the combination of many studies from relatively few media outlets, D'Alessio and Allen revealed no significant net amount of gatekeeping bias and no significant coverage bias. However, statement bias found in newsmagazines was pro-republican, and those found on TV were pro-democrat. The key here is that the “ net” amount of gatekeeping bias was equal to zero.

What this meant was that the number of conservatively biased forms of media was equal to the number of liberally biased forms of media. If someone only read a republican-favoring newspaper, then individually, he would be experiencing media biases which would impact his voting choices despite the fact that “ net” amount of gatekeeping biases was equal to zero. Another important fact demonstrated in this study is that Americans are

increasingly relying on TV for campaign information, so they are increasingly exposed to liberal biases, further affecting their political choices.

Although D'Alessio and Mike Allen are certainly correct in their claim that the identities of the presidential candidates changed many times, biases most definitely existed in the election of 2008. Using a positive versus negative coverage analysis, Moldovan found substantial evidence that Clinton received less coverage than Obama did. Historically, this trend has been recorded, and in 2008, it held true even when the female candidate, Clinton, was a front runner.

Six top newspapers ran 59 stories with Obama being mentioned in the headline, while only 36 mentioned Clinton. Between January 2007 and June 2008, 343 articles were written about Obama, while only 293 were focused on Clinton. In Time magazine, 2 covers featured Clinton, 2 covers featured both Clinton and Obama, and a whopping 25 covers featured Obama only. Clearly, there is a bias favoring Obama in the case of agenda setting. Additionally, Moldovan found that coverage of Clinton was more negatively framed than Obama's was, in both specific cases and in general.

When Clinton cried after winning the New Hampshire primaries, there was plenty of coverage deeming her a phony trying to rally emotional support as a woman, whereas her victory was extremely likely due to her administration's superior organization in that state. In contrast, Obama's condescending " You're likeable enough, Hillary", remark, received substantially less time and focus. Another example where treatment of Obama was not as harsh or prolonged as it could have been was in

regards to Michelle Obama's remark about being proud of her country " for the first time in her life".

Furthermore, the treatment towards Obama's connections to anti-American individuals, such as his former reverend Jeremiah Wright, was softer in comparison to criticism of Clinton's fashion, lack of womanly characteristics, and marriage. Overall, Clinton's coverage was more negative than Obama's, from the amount the media covered her weaknesses to the way it framed them. But all the biases claimed to have existed may not really have been actual biases, as Moldovan further explains. Some may have only been believed to be there as a result of historical, situational, and personal situations.

The year 2008 was a crucial time. The country was in the worst recession since the Great Depression, with foreign tensions only aggravating the situation. Despite Clinton's political prowess, her marriage to Bill Clinton and its scandalous complications gave her a very " yesterday" feeling that Americans did not need in such a dire time. Additionally, her refusal to disclose her tax returns increased the feelings of secrecy that retrogressively reminded people of the Nixon and Bush administration. Furthermore, coming out of George W.

Bush's rule, the fact that she was a Clinton added to the feeling of the persistence of a family dynasty that Americans did not want again. Finally, Clinton's approach to the campaign itself was not only perceived negatively, but was in fact negative. Clinton's method to winning focused on questioning Obama's foreign policy experience, military capabilities, and economic policies. Her offensive remarks about Obama's kindergarten essay and her

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red phone call ad were things that didn't need the media's framing or bias for people to recognize that they were disrespectful and unappealing.

Although the press unnecessarily focused on these negative aspects, it cannot be denied that most of Clinton's campaign was, in fact negative in itself due to the fact that it had been an attack on Obama's flaws as a person, rather than a logical and fair assessment of his abilities and potential as a leader (Moldovan, 2009). When coupled with the fact that Obama revealed his maturity and professionalism by focusing on substance rather than resorting to mud-slinging, the situation worsened for Clinton.

Additionally, the most negative coverage about Obama may have emphasized a trait that would have been unattractive in other times, but in this situation, served to help him. The media revealed Obama's "elitism", from his food choices, to his education, to his up-scale Chicago neighborhood. Normally, this would have harmed a candidate's campaign, but in 2008 when Americans really needed a talented and intelligent president, it seemed to make sense to want more than just an average American candidate.

Despite his race and lack of professional experience, in contrast to Clinton's feelings of backwardness and her attack tactics, Obama's youthful charisma and focus on hope were simply more appealing to the American people, and although the media did give him an unfair amount of attention in his positive traits and was biased in focusing on his image rather than his experience, Obama didn't need the media's framing for it to be known that the way he approached the campaign was much more mature and professional than Clinton.

Because people tend to react much stronger to emotional appeals rather than dense, political facts, the fact that Obama handled the campaign better as a person really assisted him to victory (Moldovan, 2009). Clinton's circumstances may have been further exacerbated not by the media's bias, but by the fact that in general, people are just harsher when judging a woman. In a representative national sample, 51 percent of the surveyed believed that Americans were not "ready to elect a woman into high office" (Lawless 74).

In general, women are more likely to receive media coverage based on their appearance, feminine traits, and ability to handle women's issues. The situation was worsened by fact that Clinton was not the average female candidate. From the perceived lack of affection towards her pets to her hard, tough demeanor, Clinton lacked many of the stereotypical womanly characteristics people expected from her. But as soon as she cried after her New Hampshire victory, the press had an unnecessarily generous and negative focus on these womanly qualities.

Although there is a general and accepted consensus that Clinton did not lose the race because she was a woman, she was forced to operate in a sexist environment and deal with different expectations and standards. Thus, her campaign in general was more difficult as voters relied on stereotypical ideas of women and men's attributes, affecting the way people judged and viewed her differently from Obama. In this case, the media may not have been biased against Clinton, but simply reinforcing these sexist norms (Lawless 2009).

A further reason why these biases may not be as strong as they are claimed is demonstrated by Watts, Domoke, Shah, and Fan. After examining shifts in public perception of media bias, press coverage of media bias, and coverage in presidential campaigns, they concluded that the rise in the belief of media bias is a result of increasing news self-coverage focusing on the topic of news content bias itself. These authors discovered that a lot of people's evaluation of media credibility is misinformed, especially when comes to political news and campaign coverage.

In presidential campaigns, candidates may merely be attempting to generate support for themselves and opposition for their opponents, not intentionally wanting to create bias. With the increase in these patterns, allegations of biases may now be a part of the presidential campaign rhetoric, and journalists feel increasing pressure to make these claims of the existence of biases to prove that they are not biased themselves.

The rise in media sources has further contributed to the pressure traditional media sources have felt to reinforce their reliability by supporting claims of biases. Doing so not only generates credibility from their audience, but their peers as well. In consequence, a cyclic effect has taken place in which news media find their attention as sources of information in political campaigns to be of increasing importance.

In these ways, biases that are claimed to exist may not be as severe—or even existent—as people believe them to be. Due to these historical, situational, and personal matters, the negative biases against Clinton may not have been as frequent and harsh as they seemed, although biases against her existed for sure. In both agenda setting and framing, the media

seemed to be against her as she received less coverage overall, and the coverage she did receive tended to be harsher than the coverage on Obama.

Other biases that were claimed to exist, however, such as emphasis on her marriage to Bill Clinton, however, may not really have been biases, but true, negative facts that just didn't help her campaign. In addition, she was operating under a sexist environment, so it cannot be said that the media was being biased against her gender since everyone else was too. Finally, assertions of biases may not have actually arisen from real biases, but could have been a result from increasing news self-coverage focusing on the topic of news content bias.

Overall, as Moldovan points out, the press' true biases lay in conflict, because conflict generates both viewers and revenue. It just happened to be that out of the two candidates, Hillary Clinton had more problems to talk about. Works Cited Lawless, Jennifer L. " Sexism and Gender Bias in Election 2008: A More Complex Path for Women in Politics. " *Politics & Gender* (2009): 70-80. Print. " Media Bias in Presidential Elections: A Meta Analysis. " *Journal of Communication* 50. 4 (2000): 133-56. Print. Miller, Melissa K. , Jeffrey S. Peake, and Brittany Anne Boulton. Testing the Saturday Night Live Hypothesis: Fairness and Bias in Newspaper Coverage of Hillary Clinton's Presidential Campaign. " *Politics & Gender* (2010): 169-98. Print. Raluca, Moldovan. " A TALE OF TWO CLINTONS: MEDIA BIAS IN THE COVERAGE OF HILLARY CLINTON'S 2008 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN1. " *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Studia Europaea* (2009): 41-59. Print. Watts, Mark D. , et al. " Elite Cues and Media Bias in Presidential Campaigns - Explaining Public



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