

Agenda setting in the presidential election



In presenting the news, the media disseminates important information for public awareness. During presidential elections, media plays an important role for shaping the reality of political debates. In the current presidential election the mass media set their agenda by reflecting on personal aspects of the candidates rather than on the issues that were important to our nation's concerns.

It was stated by Defleur and Ball-Rokeach, " that certain questions do not have clear answers but it is those questions that broaden the importance of the agenda setting hypothesis from descriptive formulation to one that has potential significance for the dynamic relationship between press, public, and politicians" (Defleur, M. and Ball-Rokeach. 1989).

This relationship influenced voter's views in the 2008 presidential elections. The media's agenda setting was on how the candidates applied unethical means and immoral attacks on their opponents related to race, personalities, and culture. The media focused on these areas because they were attempting

" to keep up the declining but powerful traditional news organizations. Straight news reporters clutter the front pages with opinionated ' analysis' pieces. The media's cheerleading for Barack Obama was overt, and conservative liberalism was caught off guard. It does no good to denounce media bias, as the McCain campaign did, when that bias is out in the open, in full view of a public that doesn't seem to care" (Spruiell, S. 2008).

For instance, " Republicans strategists employed spin to divert voters' attention from accurately assessing candidates' actual differences on policy

issues by reinventing the records and credentials of both candidates and reducing good governance to voters attitudes in short, cultural identity” (Lashley, M. 2009). The media used candidates knife throws at each for their agenda and turned it into a drama-based coverage. It was like watching a boxing match where one person would take a jab and the contender would come back with an even harder jab. An example came from Palin, “ Palin called Obama a socialist for his tax plans and accused him of palling around with terrorists for his association with William Ayers, who led the Weather Underground, a radical group that bombed government buildings during the early 1970s.” (Rhee, F. 2008). The comments made by the 2008 presidential candidates became a war of words to see who could down grade another with harsh allegations in swaying the public to think about who they should vote for. The candidate’s tried to shape or paint ruthless pictures of their contenders through the media.

The media used the candidates shaping and acknowledged how Palin and McCain attacked Obama with the connection of the Ayre. During their rallies they actually got the crowd to consider Obama as a trader. Due to all this type of media coverage a woman actually stated she, “ didn’t trust Obama” because of things she’d been hearing about him, stammering “ he’s an Arab!,” (PressTV. 2008). This was just one way to show how the media had their own agenda by focusing on shaping personalities through personal events.

The media emphasized a lot on Palin especially after they heard of her being involved with a scandal in Alaska. Palin became the center of attention and more aspects of her personal life were reflected through the media.

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Throughout the remainder of her campaign with McCain she became “ attack dog and raise controversy on the campaign trail?” (PressTV. 2008). Other than the spectacles the candidate’s made of themselves there were other highlights, which the media captured. The highlights were based on a spin of words that the candidates implemented into their debates.

McCain used the analogy ‘ Joe the Plumber’ as an assault onto the Obama campaign. This analogy was to illustrate how Obama’s tax reform would apply higher taxes to those with small businesses. This became a major highlight in the McCain campaign. It was used frequently to show how Obama’s tax reform would hurt the smaller business person compared to McCain’s tax reform. It turned out that ‘ Joe the Plumber’ that McCain was referring to was not a plumber with a license. This analogy “ was interrupted daily by a scandal or juicy news story that tends to dominate news cycles in the era of media spectacle” (PressTV. 2008).

The media made spectacles of themselves too. The media mainstreamed a bias perception. An article by Stephan Spruiell stated,

“ The mainstream media have staked their future on Obama; that was evident in the way they conducted themselves during this campaign. Economic and political forces are driving notionally objective news organizations toward overt partisanship. Now is the time to invest in conservative alternatives and work to secure mainstream recognition for conservative voices. The media game has changed, and we have to get better at playing it.”

The game the media played was viewed by many voters. The agenda setting function for the media focused on publicizing scandalous opportunities for influencing the viewers' opinions of Obama's opponents.

Another twist in the media pertained to minority issues. Hillary Clinton attracted a large audience of female Democrats. After her loss "the vast majority of female Democrat voters who support Hillary Clinton shifted their support to Obama because they viewed the 2008 election as a referendum on the American Dream - the choice between voters who want to keep the Dream for a few and those who want to spread the Dream around" (Lashley, M. 2008). Also, women started to question Palin's qualifications and McCain's strategies for his campaign based on the media coverage. The media had a field day with all the publicity on candidate's private lives and used it in shaping societies thoughts of who was the best candidate. This campaign was a free for all demolition derby between the candidates for presidency. The viewers heard more of scandals, deceit, name calling and finger pointing rather than the issues of importance for the nation.

In spite of all the controversy and media's reformed agenda setting for this election there was emphasis applied to the swing states. Swing states are states that either candidate has a reasonable chance of winning. These states are focused on the most by candidates because a win in swing states gives them the opportunity to gain electoral votes. The candidates need 270 votes for electoral victory.

During the 2008 presidential elections there were issues which had significant impact of these electoral votes. One issue was Senator McCain's

choice for Governor Palin in running side by side with him. Palin had a significant impact for “” White women, a key demographic group in any national election, appear to be in play, with some movement towards Sen. McCain in Pennsylvania and Ohio,” (Quinnipiac University. 2008).

Independent voters that once supported Hilary Clinton had turned to McCain once Palin took his offer. This held significance with the swing states along with political issues of the economy.

In Ohio a vast majority of voters indicated that the economy was the most important issue. Stated by Quinnipiac University “ 52 percent of Ohio voters, the economy is the biggest issue, while 11 percent cite health care; 10 percent say the war in Iraq; 9 percent list energy policy and 8 percent say terrorism.” Ohio was the biggest swing states consisting of 20 electoral votes. Obama and McCain focused highly on the economy to win over the swing states. History shows that normally those who win electoral votes in Ohio wins the presidency.

“ In all five states, more voters trusted Obama than McCain on economic issues” (Rasmussen Reports. 2008). In Ohio, early polls showed McCain was favored. However, within one month the tables turned and Obama pulled ahead by a small margin. The Rasmussen reports conducted a survey on October 12, 2008 in support of this turn around. These surveys were conducted every Sunday since September 7, 2008. The surveys were based on a “ total of 1, 000 likely Voters were interviewed in each state using the Rasmussen Reports automated telephone survey methodology” (Rasmussen Reports. 2008).

The 2008 presidential election marked many historical turning points in society, media dissemination, and political agendas. This display of ruthless attacks affected the media in portraying bias views through candidate's poor moral ethics. The media used the scandals and back lashing comments as a weapon to increase their ratings and stray the viewers to think more about moral, ethical, and personal issues of who they were about to vote for as president. However, through this smoky screen the media did fulfill the necessary means in implementing highest most important factor to every state which was the economy. The election came down to truth, candidate's personal portrayals, and media's influential bias views. The nation wanted change and Barack Obama granted that promise. He stated " our diversity should define us, not divide us." Hopefully through all the influential scandals acknowledged and boxing match, Barack Obama will be able to live up to his promises.