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Off to the (Horse) Races: Media Coverage of the "Not-So-Invisible" Invisible Primary of 2007

Lori Cox Han  
Chapman University, lhan@chapman.edu

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By all accounts, American voters now live in a perpetual presidential campaign. No sooner have voters made their selection in early November for the next president when speculation begins by political observers and pundits as to who might be running four years hence. Sometimes that speculation begins even before the conclusion of Election Day in November, as the news media attempt to keep people tuned in to the ever-expanding sources of campaign news and analysis. The 2008 presidential campaign provides an excellent example of both the never-ending campaign cycle as well as the dramatic growth in news sources about presidential campaign politics. What used to be a ten-month process from start to finish, give or take, the 2008 campaign lasted nearly two years, with most candidates declaring in the early months of 2007 their intentions to run. Add the increasingly front-loaded primary process, which saw the earliest nominating contests ever held (both the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary were held in early January 2008), along with an issue-intensive campaign, historic candidacies for both Democrats and Republicans, and a 24/7 availability of campaign news in both traditional and newer high-tech media, and American voters experienced an information overload on the way to electing Barack Obama the forty-fourth president of the United States.

While it may seem obvious to even the casual observer of U.S. politics how important news media coverage is for a presidential candidate in the heat of the primary or general election battle, it is the media attention garnered during the pre-nomination phase of the campaign that can play a crucial role in deciding if the candidate even makes it to the first nominating contest. Often referred to as the “invisible primary,” the pre-primary
period for the 2008 election occurred earlier and lasted longer than in any previous campaign in modern American history. The longer the invisible primary lasts, the more money candidates must raise to remain viable; in addition, the news media have even longer to speculate as to who will win and who will lose in the upcoming primary contests, which can inflate the importance of early public opinion polls and give an advantage to a candidate with more money and name recognition. The invisible primary has traditionally played out behind the scenes as potential candidates explore their options for running and try to gain support among top donors and party officials. However, with the extensive front-loading of the primary and caucus contests for 2008 (more and more states moved up their election dates to compete with the perennial early states, Iowa and New Hampshire, in an attempt to have a louder voice in the nomination process), and with the creation of what was nearly halfway to a national primary on February 5 (with Super Tuesday contests that day in twenty-two states), the invisible primary turned out not to be so invisible after all. By February 2007, which would have been considered early in any other election year, several big-name candidates, like Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama, Bill Richardson, and John Edwards on the Democratic side, and Mitt Romney, John McCain, and Rudy Giuliani on the Republican side, had already announced their bids for the White House. In what would be a crowded field for each party, the candidates were looking for any advantage in gaining news media coverage and attracting donors.

This chapter will consider two aspects of news media attention during the 2007 invisible primary. First, the role of the news media as the "great mentioner" was considered by analyzing how often candidates' names were mentioned in news coverage in the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today during 2007. By the end of the invisible primary season (that is, right before votes are actually cast in the first contests), a variety of factors contribute to granting a candidate front-runner status or at least placing them within the top tier of viable candidates. News media coverage is an important factor in gaining name recognition and familiarity with voters, and is a crucial tie to a candidate's fund-raising prowess and performance in public opinion polls, both of which make or break a candidate's viability in the primary process. A two-tiered campaign usually emerges during a party's primary process; that is, a few candidates are considered viable early on, while others never break through to that top tier of serious contenders (and as a result, do not receive a tremendous amount of media attention). How is this hierarchy determined? While there is not a specific formula, voters normally take their cues as to which candidate is viable and which is not from news media coverage, so the sheer number of mentions in news stories that a candidate receives can be important. As such, analyzing this aspect of news coverage during 2007 will show how the more newsworthy candidates fared in terms of early news coverage and whether or not that helped to place them among the top-tier candidates.

Second, a more specific analysis will be provided of the four candidates presenting a potential first to U.S. presidential politics—Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama, Bill Richardson, and Mitt Romney—and the news coverage each received during the invisible primary. The Democrats would have the opportunity to elect the first woman president (Clinton), African American president (Obama), or Latino president (Richardson), while Republicans would have the opportunity to elect the first Mormon president (Romney). While each of these candidates brought impressive accomplishments and résumés to the presidential contest, speculation began early as to whether or not the "first" factor for their respective campaigns would give a decisive edge in breaking ahead of the pack during the invisible primary phase of the campaign. Other candidates also presented firsts—for example, Giuliani had the opportunity to become the first Italian-American president—yet these four candidates presented the most compelling narratives for the news media to cover, as candidates who appeared to be most outside the norm in U.S. presidential elections. Specifically, the issue of gender will be considered for Clinton, the issue of race/ethnicity will be considered for Obama and Richardson, and the issue of religion will be considered for Romney. Content of news coverage in the New York Times and Washington Post was analyzed to determine if the "first factor" presented the dominant narrative in the coverage for each candidate, as well as whether the "first factor" was framed as a positive, negative, or neutral issue for readers (and by extension voters) to consider.

**Media Coverage and the Invisible Primary**

What happens during the so-called invisible primary, and why is this so important when selecting presidential nominees? First dubbed the "invisible primary" by journalist Arthur Hadley in 1976, the pre-nomination period is between the end of a presidential election and prior to the first primary of the next when presidential candidates are vetted and when
Two things seem to matter more than anything else during the invisible primary—money and media—particularly as the invisible primary has grown increasingly longer in recent years with the front-loading of primaries. Candidates now announce their intentions to run earlier than ever before, sometimes well over a year prior to the Iowa caucuses (which, on January 3, 2008, were held earlier than any previous nominating contest ever). During this long pre-primary phase of the electoral calendar, candidates attempt to raise large sums of money, hire campaign staffs, shape their ideological and partisan messages, attempt to gain visibility among party elites (and gain high-profile endorsements), and hope to be taken seriously by the news media.\(^2\)

It is during the invisible primary when the often relentless “horse race” coverage of the campaign begins, when “reporters feel obliged to tell us which candidates are leading or trailing well over a year before any primary election votes are cast.” In recent campaigns, the news media have not focused much on the effects of front-loading primaries and caucuses (such as the increased reliance on millions of dollars to even remain competitive before any votes are cast), even though they contributed to the trend, since it was “saturation coverage of New Hampshire and Iowa, starting in the early seventies, after all, that spurred the front-loading process.” For the most part, voters outside of New Hampshire and Iowa do not actually see much of what the candidates are doing there, because the news media instead focus on the horse race of the pre-primary process as opposed to the actual campaigning and discussion of issues by the candidates.\(^3\) Often, “media buzz” about a candidate can amplify the effects of raising money, hiring staff, and shaping the message of a candidate early on in the process; by February 2007, for example, several Democratic hopefuls had already withdrawn (former Iowa governor Tom Vilsack and former Virginia governor Mark Warner) or decided against entering the race (Senator Russ Feingold of Wisconsin and Senator Evan Bayh of Indiana).\(^4\)

An early study of news coverage of the 2007 invisible primary showed several trends consistent with the usual horse-race coverage as well as other recent trends in campaign coverage. In a study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, coverage of the presidential race in the first five months of 2007 was the second-most-covered news story in all media behind coverage of the war in Iraq. The increased and early coverage resulted in part from early and heavy fund-raising by the candidates, front-loading the primaries and caucuses, and earlier-than-ever announcements to enter the race, as well as increased interest by readers and viewers leading up to the first wide-open presidential campaign since 1952. In addition, 63 percent of the coverage during this five-month period focused on “political and tactical aspects of the campaign” (the horse race), with 17 percent focused on the backgrounds of the candidates, and 15 percent focused on policy proposals. A majority of the coverage during this time period focused on just five candidates: Clinton, Obama, Giuliani, Romney, and McCain. Another interesting finding reported in the study was that eight in ten Americans surveyed by the Pew Research Center reported wanting more news coverage of the issues in the campaign.\(^5\)

To place the news coverage of the 2007 invisible primary into its proper context, it is important to first understand the current media environment along with the expectation of how journalists are supposed to be covering presidential candidates. Just as in other areas of news reporting, journalists covering presidential campaigns have developed patterns in how news is gathered and reported. Over the years, the news media have been quite consistent in how they cover the presidential race in all its phases, first during the invisible primary, then the primary and caucus season, and finally the general election. While different candidates, campaign strategies, and “big stories” (like scandals and gaffes) have emerged every four years, the American voter can always rely on news coverage to focus on the horse race of the campaign—the journalistic ritual of reporting on which candidate is ahead in the polls, in raising money, and in the delegate count during the primary and caucus season. The news media can also still play a role as kingmaker or the “great mentioner” in helping or hurting a candidate’s campaign by the type or amount of coverage provided. Even as primaries and caucuses have become more front-loaded since 1996, the news media are still a tremendous source of momentum for presidential candidates, which can help to propel a campaign along, to survive early contests, and to make a candidate viable for the party nomination. On the campaign trail, news organizations also often report similar stories because they rely on similar sources as part of the news-gathering process (known as pack journalism).\(^6\)

Campaign coverage has also followed overall trends in the news media in recent years. Economic pressures can be critical in the selection of stories, especially for national shows or publications, since mass media companies, like other businesses, must make a profit. Stories and content must appeal to a broad base of viewers or readers, and so stories are aired and published that will have a strong impact, that focus on violence,
conflict, disaster, or scandal; and publishers and broadcasters consider in advance the familiarity and proximity of the story to the audience, and whether or not the story is timely and novel. The effect of the Internet on political news has been significant as well, as witnessed during the 2008 campaign season. Various political blogs (such as Daily Kos on the left and Townhall on the right), vlogging sites (such as YouTube), and social networking sites (such as Facebook and MySpace) now provide extensive and up-to-the-minute political coverage as well as a high-tech way of spreading political information, and these newer sources of information were ever-present throughout the 2008 presidential campaign, garnering a significant amount of news coverage in more traditional sources such as newspapers and television. Other Internet news sites such as Politico.com and the Huffington Post have also emerged as major players in political and campaign news coverage. According to Michael Scherer, correspondent for Time magazine, individual stories as opposed to packaged news sources (like a newspaper or magazine stories) became more influential in the 2008 campaign thanks to the immediacy and availability of online sources:

This means that the competition on the level of the individual story is more intense than ever before, and there is enormous pressure to distinguish yourself from the pack. Assume, for instance, that 12 news organizations do the same story on the same day about how Hillary Clinton has a tough road ahead of her to get the nomination. Which story is going to get the most links and therefore the most readers? Is it the one that cautiously weighs the pros and cons, and presents a nuanced view of her chances? Or is it the one that says she is toast, and anyone who thinks different is living on another planet? ... This trend towards story-by-story competition, and away from package-by-package competition, is a blessing and a curse. It is forcing better writing, quicker responsiveness, and it is increasing the value of actual news-making and clear-eyed thinking. But it is also increasing pressure on reporters to push the boundaries of provocation.8

In addition to the many structural changes occurring within the news industry, another important trend that has emerged is the increase in "soft news." Defined as news having no real connection to substantive policy issues, or as the opposite of "hard news" that includes coverage of breaking events or major issues impacting the daily routines of U.S. citizens, soft news has steadily increased during the past two decades in response to competition within the marketplace. The bottom line is that the new news—soft, entertainment-focused, and market-driven news—is much more profitable than the traditional "who, what, where, when, and why" of traditional political news. Journalism has also become increasingly critical in its tone toward government officials, in an attempt to grab more viewers and readers, to which some scholars point as evidence of weakening the foundation of democracy by diminishing the public's interest in and information about politics.9

Various effects of the news media can be particularly evident during coverage of a presidential campaign. For example, agenda setting represents the theory that journalists can influence which stories are treated as important in the news media through the selection process. The news media cannot tell you what to think, but can tell you what to think about. Through prominent coverage, these issues become salient to the public, especially politicians and other elites. Studies have shown that public opinion of important issues often tracks media attention.10 Priming also has an impact on the audience, which means that the news media have a substantial impact on how Americans view the political system and its participants based on which stories are emphasized; priming by the news media draws attention to some aspects of political life at the expense of others. An example is the ability of the news media to isolate particular issues, events, or themes in the news as criteria for evaluating politicians. For example, when primed by news stories on the economy, the president is then judged on the economic health of the nation. This can be particularly important during a presidential election, as President George H. W. Bush learned in 1992. Following record approval ratings after the first Gulf War in 1991, the media's emphasis on the bad economy in early 1992 just as Bush was beginning his reelection campaign seemed to prime voters to blame Bush and give then-candidate Bill Clinton more support for his economic proposals. Similarly, the strong media focus on terrorism during the 2004 presidential campaign benefited President George W. Bush, who campaigned as the better choice to keep the United States safe from terrorists.11

Another effect of news media coverage can include the framing of news, which is when the news media tells us more than what to think about, but how to think about it. The concept of framing has been of
of mentions for each candidate who declared his or her intention to run for party nomination in 2007, a search by candidate name was conducted for five of the nation’s leading daily newspapers: the New York Times, the Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, the Wall Street Journal, and USA Today, between January 1, 2007 and January 3, 2008 (the latter date representing the first nominating contest in Iowa). 15 These five newspapers are among the largest in terms of circulation. 16 The number of mentions per candidate in Tables 1 and 2 reflect the number of stories per publication in which the candidate’s name appeared. All stories, editorials, and columns were counted from the stories generated for each search. The results show, not surprisingly, a stark contrast between the amount of attention paid to top-tier candidates as compared to second-tier candidates for both parties in all five newspapers during the invisible primary period.

For the Democratic candidates (see Table 1), Clinton and Obama dominated in terms of number of mentions in all five newspapers; Clinton topped Obama in all five newspapers with the exception of the Los Angeles Times. Clinton had the most mentions in the New York Times, although as a high-profile U.S. senator from New York, this result is not surprising. Obama, a U.S. senator from Illinois, also drew significant media attention when he announced his intention to run in early 2007. His first introduction on the national stage came as Obama delivered the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, which immediately began media speculation about his future presidential prospects, particularly as the potential first African American president. John Edwards, a former U.S. senator from North Carolina, presidential candidate in 2004, and the 2004 Democratic nominee for vice president, is the only other Democratic candidate based on this analysis that would fall within the top-tier of these five newspapers, as it was long speculated that Edwards would pursue the presidency again in 2008. In addition, these three Democratic candidates dominated the coverage in terms of number of mentions among all presidential candidates in both parties, suggesting not only the shifting political winds from the Republican to Democratic party, but also the increased attention paid to a woman candidate and an African American candidate among the front-runners for the Democratic nomination.

The remaining six second-tier candidates can be categorized by those with greater name recognition on the national level as opposed to those not known as well on the national stage. As long-serving U.S. senators with seniority on Capitol Hill, Joe Biden (D-DE) and Chris Dodd
Los Angeles (D-CT) would receive national news coverage as members of Congress even without announcing a presidential bid. Similarly, New Mexico governor Bill Richardson was also widely known due to his time in the House of Representatives followed by appointments as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and energy secretary in the Bill Clinton administration; he is also known as one of the most influential Latino politicians in America. The number of mentions in the Washington Post for Eiden, Dodd, and Richardson also reflect the focus on national politics by the leading newspaper in the nation's capital. Finally, the remaining second-tier candidates—U.S. Representative Dennis Kucinich (D-OH), former Iowa governor Tom Vilsack, and former U.S. senator Mike Gravel (D-AK) received little attention during the invisible primary in these five newspapers, as none emerged as viable candidates in the eyes of the news media and none commanded national attention (despite the fact that Kucinich had also sought the Democratic nomination in 2004).

In addition, when compared among the five newspapers, the amount of coverage for all candidates (and the presidential contest in general) shows how the New York Times and Washington Post provide more in-depth coverage of national politics than the other three newspapers; for comparison purposes, it is also important to note that neither the Wall Street Journal (whose primary emphasis is international business and economic news) and USA Today do not publish seven days a week.

On the Republican side, the five newspapers analyzed also showed a two-tiered approach to how often each candidate was mentioned (see Table 2). Senator John McCain (R-AZ), a high-profile figure on Capitol Hill and a presidential candidate in 2000, was long considered among the potential frontrunners for the Republican nomination in 2008. Former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, who gained national attention and acclaim for his response to the terrorist attacks in his city on September 11, 2001, had also been regularly discussed in the news media as a possible front-runner. Like with the coverage of Clinton, Giuliani's number of mentions in the New York Times and Wall Street Journal more than likely reflect how each paper covers a hometown politician. Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, has a family history in politics (his father, a former presidential candidate, was governor of Michigan) and was also considered to be among the front-runners as early as 2007. Mike Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas, was initially considered a dark horse for the nomination in early 2007, but gained more media attention as his poll numbers improved leading up to the early state contests (particularly Iowa, which he won) by the end of 2007. Fred Thompson,
a former U.S. senator from Tennessee and star of the NBC drama Law and Order certainly had a high public profile going into the campaign. However, Thompson’s late announcement in early September 2007 that he was seeking the nomination (after all other candidates, with the exception of Alan Keyes, had already announced their candidacies months earlier) contributed to the lower number of mentions in stories.

The six remaining Republican candidates that made up the second tier, like their Democratic counterparts, suffered from a lack of national prominence and its resulting news media attention. Four of the six were members of Congress—Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS), and Representatives Ron Paul (R-TX), Tim Tancredo (R-CO), and Duncan Hunter (R-CA)—but none had the notoriety or national name recognition as their colleague John McCain. (Ron Paul would gain much more media attention in early 2008 as a grassroots effort emerged to raise money in support of his campaign; many of his supporters were attracted to the libertarian views that distinguished him from his fellow Republican rivals). Jim Gilmore, a former governor from Virginia, became the first Republican to end his presidential bid in July 2007. Alan Keyes, a former State Department appointee during the Ronald Reagan administration, considered a perennial political candidate, did not announce his candidacy until September 14, 2007.

The “First Factor” as Narrative in 2007

Over the years, there have been many firsts for the news media to report in U.S. politics. Americans know John F. Kennedy as, among other things, the first Catholic president, while Nancy Pelosi will forever be remembered as the first woman Speaker of the House. Thurgood Marshall and Sandra Day O’Connor represented important firsts on the U.S. Supreme Court as the first African American and female justice, respectively. Americans particularly take note of firsts on the presidential campaign trail. Victoria Woodhull was the first woman to run for president (in 1872), Shirley Chisholm was the first African American to run for president for a major party (Democrat, in 1972), and Jesse Jackson was the first African American male to run for president and was also the first minority candidate to win a presidential primary or caucus (winning five Democratic contests in 1984 and eleven in 1988). Other campaign firsts include Geraldine Ferraro as the first woman to run for vice president on a major-party ticket, as Democrat Walter Mondale’s running mate in 1984, and Joe Lieberman as the first Jewish American to run for vice president, as Democrat Al Gore’s running mate in 2000. While giving any of these political luminaries the title “first” surely does not take anything away from their substantial list of achievements, it is instead often used as American journalistic shorthand, implying that this is one of their most notable accomplishments. Breaking through a political barrier, whether it is based on gender, race, ethnicity, or religion, is an example of giving voice to the Other in American politics (that is, ones outside the norm of the white, Protestant, male standard for those holding top government positions).

It is the news media that most often give politicians the label of being “first” to reach a particular achievement, as this is an effective way to catch the attention of the reader or viewer, or to assert why someone is deserving of news coverage. As political reporters geared up for covering the 2008 presidential race, the word “first” was popping up quite frequently in discussions and predictions about who the top contenders would be and what Americans could look forward to when selecting their next president. As contenders began throwing their hats into the ring in 2007, the race was billed as the first wide-open nomination process for both Democrats and Republicans since 1952, which was the last time that neither an incumbent president nor his vice president was seeking his party’s nomination. Then, as the field of candidates for both parties grew more crowded (a total of nine Democrats and eleven Republicans), discussion centered on the four aforementioned candidates as to the potential historic possibilities of their respective campaigns.

In addition, it is worth noting prevalent trends in how gender, race, ethnicity, and religion tend to be covered by the U.S. news media. As one of the most important agents of political socialization, the mass media—and more specifically the news media—play an important role in how women and minorities are viewed as current or potential political leaders. Theories abound among scholars about how people receive information through the mass media. Some scholars suggest that the media have a powerful impact on society and that people may actually need to be protected from its effects. For example, viewers can be led to believe that reality mirrors the images in the mass media and that women and minorities can develop poor self-esteem due to negative stereotyping by media sources. A contrasting theory, known as the minimal effects approach, suggests that the mass media are weak in their impact on society, since people only expose themselves to media content that goes along with their current views or perceptions. Nevertheless, the mass media perpetrate many negative stereotypes about women and minorities in American society. Stereotyping
is the act of using a simplified mental image of an individual or group of people who share certain characteristics or qualities; this allows people to quickly process information and categorize people based on what are often negative characteristics.

News coverage of women in general, but particularly of women professionals and athletes, often relies on stereotyping, and women are drastically underrepresented in news coverage across all news outlets. Even with the steady increase of women in all professions, including politics, law, medicine, higher education, and the corporate world, most news coverage continues to rely on men, and not women, as experts in their respective fields. Women in the news are more likely to be featured in stories about accidents, natural disasters, or domestic violence than in stories about their professional abilities or expertise. A relative lack of news coverage for women politicians can be particularly problematic if they are not portrayed as strong and capable leaders, and as authoritative public policy decision makers, when they are covered. This can be a difficult cycle to break, since women in Congress, for example, do not receive as much attention as men, due to lack of seniority and leadership positions (the ascent of Representative Nancy Pelosi to Speaker of the House in 2007 has certainly provided more news media coverage of a woman in a leadership position; however, she still remains the only woman to hold such a position). While breaking the negative stereotypes of women and the portrayal of women as the political Other in the news media is necessary to help facilitate the continued progress of women in government, recent studies have shown that the news media cover male and female candidates differently—female candidates often get less coverage, more negative coverage, and more frivolous coverage (that is, attention to their hair or wardrobes, their personalities, or personal lives).

Similarly, news coverage of racial and ethnic minorities often provides negative stereotypes or inadequate information about and attention to minority communities and issues. The news media industry is still dominated by white men, both within news organizations and in the coverage that is produced. Therefore, the social and cultural norms that are reflected in a majority of news coverage do not represent the views of women or ethnic minorities, since the internal constraints of media organizations and personnel tend to dictate the final news product. During campaigns, news media coverage is often racialized, meaning that the news media either act as racial arbitrators by limiting the emphasis placed on the race of a candidate, or the race of a candidate is highlighted, brought to the forefront by the news media (creating racial dualism in news coverage). One particular study of how the news media has covered African American candidates in congressional campaigns suggests that in news coverage, inter-candidate racial differences are often highlighted, and that coverage “consistently highlights the race of black candidates and their constituents in both same-race and biracial contests.” In addition, the news media are often inconsistent in how they cover candidate race and ethnicity, due to the inconsistency of editorial guidelines, which allows reporters to then determine the newsworthiness of a candidate’s race during an election.

When it comes to covering religion and its effects on politics, the news media often oversimplify the intersection between the two. One recent study showed that conservative religious voices dominate in news media coverage, with progressive religious voices often left out of the dialogue, particularly when political issues are being discussed: “Religion is often depicted in the news media as a politically divisive force, with two sides roughly paralleling the broader political divide: On one side are cultural conservatives who ground their political values in religious beliefs; and on the other side are secular liberals, who have opted out of debates that center on religion-based values.” The study concludes that this type of reporting, where conservative religious leaders are most often quoted, gives the conservative religious viewpoint, and by extension the conservative political viewpoint (for example, the viewpoint of evangelical Christians) a substantial advantage within the deliberative political dialogue. This is a particularly salient point given the increased influence of conservative Christian voters in recent presidential and congressional elections, a trend that began in the late 1970s and reached its peak during the 1990s, with the election of a Republican-controlled Congress in 1994, and then again with the reelection of George W. Bush in 2004.

To determine the extent to which the “first factor” for each of the four potential history-making candidates represented a narrative of each campaign in news coverage, coverage in the New York Times and Washington Post between January 1, 2007, and January 3, 2008, was content analyzed. The New York Times is still widely recognized as the nation’s leading newspaper, and is also one of the top national dailies, along with the Washington Post, from which the nightly network newscasts take cues in terms of story selection. Each news story filed from the national desk that mentioned any or all of the four candidates (Clinton, Obama, Richardson, and Romney) was included in the analysis. Each paragraph
that mentioned a candidate was coded by topic into one of five categories: First Factor, Campaign/Horse race, Personal Background, Domestic/Economic Policy, and Foreign Policy. Within the “First Factor” category, each paragraph was also coded for tone as Positive, Neutral, or Negative (based on whether the information presented about each candidate was framed as an asset or liability in terms of electoral viability). For example, did coverage focus on whether or not men would vote for Clinton, whether or not whites would vote for Obama or Richardson, or whether or not evangelical Christians would vote for Romney? Such a frame would suggest a negative connotation to the unique status of each candidate; they are political Others and outside the norm. Or did the coverage more often frame the “first factor” as a positive attribute for each candidate that set them apart from the rest of the contenders, thereby granting more attention and perhaps momentum to each candidate? Comparing coverage of the four candidates, Clinton received the most coverage (total number of paragraphs) during the time period studied, while Richardson received a much smaller amount of coverage compared to the other three top-tier candidates. Also, coverage devoted to campaign logistics and the “horse race” dominated for all four candidates, while only a small percentage of coverage was devoted to the “first factor” (particularly for Clinton and Obama). In addition, while coverage of the “first factor” was sparse in both newspapers, the larger percentage in the New York Times suggests different reporting styles and editorial guidelines between the two papers (see Tables 3, 5, 7, and 9).

**Hillary Rodham Clinton:** Not surprisingly, of the four candidates studied, Hillary Clinton received the most coverage. The prospect of Clinton’s campaign had been discussed for several years in the press, most notably beginning in 2005 when major news outlets began labeling her as the presumptive Democratic front-runner and the “candidate to beat” in 2008. In addition, while the New York Times is the leading national newspaper, it is also the hometown paper for Clinton in her role as a U.S. senator from New York. Also among the four candidates, Clinton received the most campaign horse-race coverage, due in part to her lead in the early national polls throughout most of 2007 and her strong showing in early fund-raising (both polls and the race for money were prominent features for all candidates in the coverage), as well as stories focusing on the role that her husband, former president Bill Clinton, would play or was playing in the campaign. Perhaps surprisingly, just over 1 percent of Clinton’s coverage in the New York Times and one-half of a percent in the Washington Post discussed her campaign within the frame of “the first woman president,” with most of that coverage being neutral in tone. Clinton also received less coverage than the other three candidates in the “personal background” category, perhaps due to her years in the national spotlight beginning in 1992, during her husband’s successful campaign for the presidency.

**Barack Obama:** Barack Obama received only three-fourths of the coverage that Clinton received in 2007 in both newspapers, yet his coverage was still extensive thanks to his status as a top-tier candidate and perhaps Clinton’s biggest hurdle to winning the nomination, from the moment he announced his candidacy. When combining the two newspapers, 77 percent of the coverage for Obama was in the campaign/horse race category, with just under 12 percent devoted to information about his personal background. Obama also received minimal coverage in the “first factor” category, with little attention paid to whether or not he could attract white voters or build the necessary coalition within the Democratic Party to win the nomination (that type of coverage seemed to come once the primary and caucus voting got underway after January 3, 2008). The
The bigger question presented in the coverage in both newspapers seemed to focus on whether or not black voters would support Obama or Clinton, since Clinton benefitted early in the primary process from the support Bill Clinton had always enjoyed among African American voters. Much of the coverage of Obama outside of the campaign/horse race category focused on introducing him to readers as a lesser-known quantity than some of the other Democratic contenders. **Bill Richardson:** Looking at the coverage in both newspapers, it is clear that Bill Richardson never achieved his goal of breaking into the top tier of the Democratic candidates. He had roughly one-tenth of the coverage of Clinton (just over 8 percent) and Obama (just over 11 percent). However, his campaign as the first Latino running for president did comprise more than 4 percent of his coverage; while still a small amount, he received more coverage in this category than both Clinton and Obama. Coverage of his historic campaign as the first Latino presidential candidate was mostly neutral; his competition with Clinton for the Latino vote (and Clinton’s endorsement by Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa) led to the only negative comments (with the suggestion that Richardson was not a strong enough candidate to win the Latino vote). Still, Richardson was portrayed as a candidate capable of tapping into the all-important Latino vote in 2008 if he eventually emerged as a top-tier candidate. Attention was paid in both newspapers to his impressive résumé (his fourteen years in Congress, his positions as both energy secretary and U.N. ambassador during the Clinton administration, and as a popular two-term governor from New Mexico). He did, however, seem to have credibility in domestic and economic policies, due mostly to his current position as governor (16 percent of his coverage fell into this category). A total of 55 percent of his coverage fell into the campaign/horse race category; this percentage is lower than the other three candidates in the study, due to his second-tier-candidate status. Despite his impressive résumé, Richardson’s campaign just did not get much attention. Richardson was often referred to as a “likable” candidate; according to New York Times columnist David Brooks, Richardson is “somebody the average person would like to have a beer with ... he’s Budweiser, not microbrew.” In that March 4, 2007, column, Brooks suggested that Richardson was the candidate “most likely to rise” as voters grew tired of the “Clinton-Obama psychodrama.” The question remains as to whether or not Richardson broke an important barrier for Latino candidates, given that his campaign garnered so little attention. His chances were hurt mostly due to the star power of the other candidates in the Democratic race—a former vice presidential candidate in John Edwards, and the two other historic campaigns of Obama and Clinton. **Mitt Romney:** Nearly 70 percent of Mitt Romney’s coverage fell into the campaign/horse race category. More than 5 percent of the coverage was devoted to the fact that he would be the first Mormon president if elected, so of the four candidates, he received the most “first factor” coverage. Of that coverage, 49 percent was negative, heavily focusing on distrust and dislike among evangelical Christians of Mormonism. Toward the end of the year, Republican rival Mike Huckabee’s comment that “Mormons believe
that Jesus and Satan are brothers” also received attention over a span of several days, which seemed to highlight the reservations among Republican voters about Romney due to his religion. These stories continued to suggest that Romney probably would not, or could not, earn the support of the evangelical voters who have made up a crucial part of the Republican base in recent elections. While the dominant narrative in Romney’s coverage, as with the other three candidates, was about the campaign “horse race,” there was a regular second-tier narrative on Romney’s religion. In this case, in news coverage of his attempt to become the first Mormon elected president, the uniqueness seemed to play against him somewhat.

Once the invisible primary ended, and voters began to have their say about the crowded field of candidates for both parties, many different narratives emerged within news media coverage. On the Democratic side, an important narrative following the Iowa caucuses on January 3 became the issue of how the news media was covering gender and race. An Associated Press story on January 14 seemed to sum up the basic question:

Expressions of sexism and racism emerging from the contest between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama have been blatant, subtle and perhaps sometimes imagined, and they are renewing the national debate over what is and isn’t acceptable to say in public. Hillary Rodham Clinton’s camp has perceived sexism in comments about her appearance and emotions. Supporters of Barack Obama have complained about racial overtones in remarks about his Muslim-sounding middle name, Hussein, and his acknowledged drug use as a young man. Beyond the back-and-forth between a white woman and a black man seeking the Democratic presidential nomination, the situation has created a snapshot of the nation’s sensitivity—or lack thereof—to certain kinds of comments. Is it more acceptable, for instance, to make a sexist remark than a racist remark?

This issue would be covered in depth through the end of the Democratic primary fight in June 2008, as both race and gender came to the forefront of the Clinton and Obama campaigns in their epic battle to win the Democratic nomination. However, during the invisible primary of 2007, gender, race, ethnicity, and religion as unique factors for the candidates did not matter much in the overall coverage in the New York Times and Washington Post, and most of the coverage on the “first factor” was either neutral (just stating facts) or positive in suggesting how race or gender could attract specific voting demographics. The only exception seemed to be religion, and while the coverage of Romney’s Mormon faith was still sparse, it took on a negative tone. While the Times included more “first factor” coverage than the Post, the tone of the coverage was similar in both papers. Comparing coverage of Obama and Clinton (the two “stars” of the Democratic race), Clinton benefitted from being a known quantity and from being a senator from New York, these getting her more coverage, and also from being labeled the front-runner for a good part of
2007 (which blunts the fact that she also had more coverage devoted to campaign logistics and the “horse race”).

Perhaps the two most important questions that emerged involving news coverage during the 2008 campaign cycle were whether there was gender bias and whether the press was too soft on Obama. These two questions garnered much attention among political pundits and commentators throughout the primary season in 2008, particularly the issue of whether or not the news media was treating Clinton unfairly due to her gender and whether or not many members of the mainstream press were “in the tank” for Obama (the latter issue continued to be raised throughout the general election campaign). Other studies will likely follow on these issues and others from media coverage of this historic campaign. The appropriate studies looking for gender bias will probably find that Clinton’s campaign did not escape recent trends of stereotyping of women candidates. However, it now seems more acceptable to cover “soft” and “style” issues for all candidates, male or female, than ever before (for example, the attention paid to John Edwards’s $400 haircut, or a story in the New York Times on the candidates’ eating habits on the campaign trail). This fits the trend in recent years for “soft” versus “hard” news.

For anyone looking for evidence that Clinton was treated unfairly because she is a woman, that task will be complicated by the fact that she is also a Clinton. Since American voters have never seen a candidate with such high negatives entering the presidential race, it is difficult to separate the gender factor versus the Clinton factor in her coverage. Also, there is not much that Americans do not already know about the Clintons, and since so many of the “big stories” of Bill Clinton’s presidency revolved around negativity (including scandals during his campaign in 1992, followed by the Whitewater investigation, the sexual harassment lawsuit by Paula Jones, the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and the impeachment in 1998–1999), it is difficult to wipe the slate clean of all that the public and journalists, know. Any study of gender bias in Clinton’s campaign may have to stand alone in its findings, as Hillary Clinton may not be a good test case to make a clear and clean determination—perhaps any bias is more about Hillary as Hillary (and a partner to Bill) than Hillary as a woman. Obviously the two cannot be separated, but it puts the question into a unique context and perspective.

As for coverage of Obama, did the media wait too long to properly vet Obama (as the Clinton campaign constantly pointed out), or did it just seem unfair in comparison to the long history of covering Hillary Clinton? Obama’s introduction to the national stage was as keynote speaker at the Democratic Convention in 2004, for which he received high praise. He really did not make national news again until he announced his candidacy in early 2007, so for almost every candidate, there is a bit of a honeymoon with the press as they introduce themselves to the American electorate. Obama did not really feel the wrath of the press until he became the front-runner, thanks to his lead in pledged delegates, by early March 2008. Negative stories about the Obama campaign came from, among other things, his relationship with his pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, and Wright’s incendiary comments about the United States. When the Clinton campaign announced its “kitchen sink” strategy against Obama in late February 2008, as an attempt to break Obama’s momentum as the new front-runner (meaning that they intended to throw every negative charge possible at Obama through the press), Obama’s press coverage clearly left its honeymoon stage. And while the issue of race did not resonate much in coverage during 2007, it became a major issue for Obama’s campaign in mid-March of 2008 (culminating with Obama’s speech on the issue of race in America on March 18).

Many other questions remain about the role of the news media in the 2008 presidential campaign, as this is just an initial look at four candidates covered by a handful of newspapers, providing a snapshot of the “first factor” in coverage in two of the leading daily newspapers in the United States. There are two ways to look at the findings—first, that a narrative about the “first factor” or the historic significance of each campaign did not dominate news coverage or even come close during 2007, which might suggest that American voters have made some progress in accepting the Other within the political arena (and Obama’s election would certainly suggest that). But, second, if that finding is turned on its head, the “horse race” still dominates and shuts out more substantive coverage that might actually work to break down some of the stereotypes that still exist. The ultimate answer as to how gender, race, ethnicity, and religion of presidential candidates are covered by the news media—and in turn how that coverage shapes each candidate’s public narrative—and whether the Other still exists in presidential politics, may only come when the next woman, African American, Latino, or Mormon candidate runs for president.
Notes


15. Stories in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today* were accessed via the Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe database, and stories in the *Los Angeles Times* and *Wall Street Journal* were accessed via the ProQuest database.


17. Following his loss in the 1952 New Hampshire primary, President Harry Truman withdrew from the presidential race. His vice president, Alben Barkley, announced his intention to seek the Democratic nomination, but withdrew less than three weeks later when labor leaders stated they would not support his candidacy. Barkley’s withdrawal from the race left the presidential contest wide open for both Democrats and Republicans.


20. For a discussion of recent studies about how women candidates are portrayed in the news media, see Gina Serignese Woodall and Kim L. Fridkin, “Shaping Women’s Chances: Stereotypes and the Media,” in *Rethinking Madam President: Are We Ready for a Woman in the White House?*, eds. Lori Cox Han and Caroline Heldman (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007).


