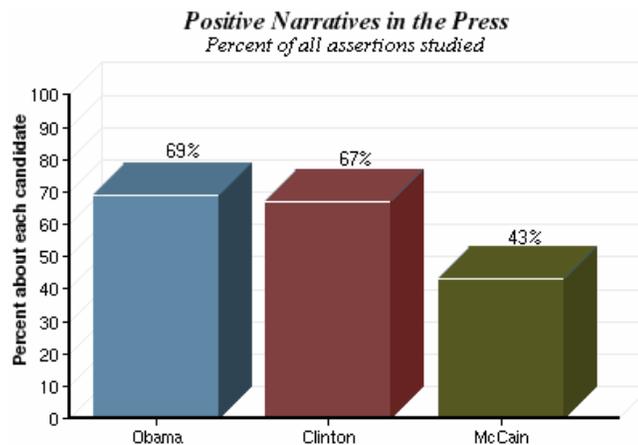




## CHARACTER AND THE PRIMARIES OF 2008: What Were the Media Master Narratives about the Candidates During the Primary Season?

If campaigns for president are in part a battle for control of the master narrative about character, Democrat Barack Obama has not enjoyed a better ride in the press than rival Hillary Clinton, according to a new study of primary coverage by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Joan Shorenstein Center on Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University.

From January 1, just before the Iowa caucuses, through March 9, following the Texas and Ohio contests, the height of the primary season, the dominant personal narratives in the media about Obama and Clinton were almost identical in tone, and were both twice as positive as negative, according to the study, which examined the coverage of the candidates’ character, history, leadership and appeal—apart from the electoral results and the tactics of their campaigns.



The trajectory of the coverage, however, began to turn against Obama, and did so well before questions surfaced about his pastor Jeremiah Wright. Shortly after Clinton criticized the media for being soft on Obama during a debate, the narrative about him began to turn more skeptical—and indeed became more negative than the coverage of Clinton herself. What’s more, an additional analysis of more general campaign topics suggests the Obama narrative became even more negative later in March, April and May.

On the Republican side, John McCain, the candidate who quickly clinched his party’s nomination, has had a harder time controlling his message in the press. Fully 57% of the narratives studied about him were critical in nature, though a look back through 2007 reveals the storyline about the Republican nominee has steadily improved with time.

Public perceptions of McCain and Obama, a companion survey shows, largely tracked with the tenor of the press coverage's major narrative themes. With Hillary Clinton, however, the public seemed to have developed opinions about her that ran counter to the media coverage, perhaps based on a pre-existing negative disposition to her that unfolded over the course of the campaign.

These are some of the findings of the study, conducted by PEJ, which is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the Shorenstein Center, which is part of the Harvard Kennedy School. The study first examined the dominant personal narratives about the candidates in the media during the heat of the primary season. Next, in conjunction with the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, the study measured how these media portrayals were registering with the public.

The dominant personal narratives for Obama were ones he tried hardest to project, a sign that he largely succeeded in controlling his media message, particularly early on. The most common of all was the notion that he represents hope and change. This was followed by the idea that he is a charismatic leader and powerful communicator. Obama has also succeeded in getting substantial coverage that refutes one of his greatest possible vulnerabilities, the idea that his appeal is too narrow or limited to blacks and elites. These three impressions permeated the coverage of his candidacy.

The most prominent negative theme in the coverage about Obama was the claim that he is inexperienced.

Clinton had just as much success as Obama in projecting one of her most important themes in the media, the idea that she is prepared to lead the country on "Day One." She has also had substantial success in rebutting the idea that she is difficult to like or is cold or distant, and much of that rebuttal came directly from journalists offering the rebuttal.

The most prominent negative theme about Clinton was the idea that she represents the politics of the past.

For McCain, one master narrative stands out above all in the coverage—that he is not a true or reliable conservative. More than five in 10 of all the assertions studied about McCain conveyed that idea, about six times as many as the number of assertions rebutting it. While this narrative—not conservative enough—might have been a problem for him in the primary race, it is harder to evaluate its implications for the general election. If McCain is seen as a maverick, someone not tied to President Bush, it will likely enhance his standing among independents and moderate swing Democrats. Yet lack of conservative credentials could also dampen turnout among some of the GOP base.

Among other findings:

- The year 2008 started off extremely well for Obama. Positive assertions commanded 77% of the narrative studied about him from January 1 - 13. By March 9, the figure had dropped to 53%. During this time statements concerning his inexperience and youth more than doubled in prevalence.
- The idea of Clinton as prepared to lead on Day One built steadily over time, reaching more than half of the assertions studied by mid-February. Despite this, over time likely Democratic voters came to think of Obama, more so than Clinton, as best prepared to lead the country—a sign that perhaps they forgive his inexperience in favor of change.
- The dominant theme about McCain, that he may not be a true conservative, was established early in the coverage—evident in the first months of 2007—and has resonated as a concern even among those in his own party. As late as April 2008, more than a month after McCain had secured the party’s nomination, likely Republican voters were split in our surveys over whether he really is a true conservative.
- The most common sources for these narratives were the campaign themselves—both the positive impressions candidates wanted to project about themselves and the negative images they wanted to suggest about their rivals. Fully 39% of the assertions studied came from the campaigns, notably higher than the 30% found in a similar study four years earlier, demonstrating the degree to which candidates directly influenced the coverage. Journalists were not far behind as a source of these master narratives (36%), though the results differed somewhat by candidate.
- While differences by media were minimal, some did stand out. Network morning news is notable for the degree to which it offered an exceptionally positive personal impression of Hillary Clinton. Fully 84% of the assertions studied in those programs projected positive master narratives of the former first lady, some 20 percentage points more positive than about Obama. And on cable news, the three rival channels differed markedly from each other in their treatment of the candidates.
- Looking beyond the master narratives about the candidates personally, coverage overall in 2008 has so far focused largely on the horse race. Fully 78% of the stories studied between January 1 and the first week of May have focused on political matters, such as who won the latest primary. By contrast, policy stories made up 7% of the stories, personal matters 7%, and the candidates’ public record, 2%. And few major storylines stand out.

This is the second PEJ-Shorenstein study of candidate coverage in the 2008 presidential campaign and the third presidential election cycle in which a PEJ study has examined what we call the “master narratives” about the candidates’ character: personality, history, leadership, and appeal.

We have found that these master narratives about character, record and personality have a particular influence. The idea that Al Gore tended to lie and exaggerate or that George Bush was a compassionate conservative proved to be enduring messages that shaped how the press covered the 2000 race and possibly influenced the outcome. This does not suggest that journalists are necessarily imposing their own views on the contest. Rather, as they try to decide what is worthy of coverage and give the race coherence, journalists may look for instances that illustrate or validate these master narratives. Events that fit the master narrative become a story. Those that do not may be ignored.

Examining the positive and negative master narratives is also a way to evaluate the tone of media coverage about the candidates, while filtering out judgments that reflect whether a candidate is winning or not. Studying the personal narratives, in other words, rather than the tone of all coverage, gives a better sense of how candidates themselves are being depicted.

In 2000 and 2004, PEJ examined the candidates’ themes driving the general election campaign, after the nominations had been secured. This year, PEJ and the Shorenstein Center began looking earlier, during the first three months of 2007 (and in the case of McCain, throughout 2007) and again in the 2008 primary race. We will continue to follow the narratives of the two nominees into the general election that ensues.

This year’s study identified the most prominent narratives for each of the five main candidates: Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton on the Democratic side and John McCain, Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee among the Republicans. For each candidate, we identified the most prominent themes in the coverage leading up to the Iowa primary. We found between four and seven narratives, depending on the candidate. We then measured how often that narrative was asserted or refuted in news stories during the primary season itself.

The study captured each personal theme or rebuttal of that theme that appeared in the 46 different news outlets included in PEJ’s Weekly News Index.<sup>1</sup>

We also analyzed the source of each assertion. Was it coming from a voter, the candidate, a campaign surrogate, or the journalist?

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<sup>1</sup> A total of 5,374 assertions across 23 different themes were identified between January 1 and March 9. For John McCain, the study also examined his major narrative themes throughout all of the 2007, another 199 assertions.

The results were then twinned with a companion survey of public attitudes about the candidates by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. The survey was conducted twice—February 8-11 and April 18-21—to gauge any shifts in public resonance. The two studies together allow us to explore how much these press messages may be shaping as well as reflecting and reinforcing public opinion of the candidates.

The analysis suggests that both Obama and McCain are heading into the general election battle with less control over their personal messages than they might like. In many ways, the coverage of the campaign has been dominated by a series of small storylines or boomlets of coverage that so far have raised unresolved questions but not yet framed an overall storyline—Obama’s friendships and core ideology, the meaning of his promise of change, McCain’s core ideology, his relationship with lobbyists, and a looming battle, largely quiet during the primaries, over the direction of the conduct of the war in Iraq.

### **Barack Obama**

Overall, the coverage of Obama has been far more positive than not. During the height of the primary season, January 1 through March 9, 2008, fully 69% of the prominent personal narratives studied about Obama carried a positive message.

The most prevalent master narrative about the Illinois senator was established early: the idea that he represents hope and change. More than a quarter of all the assertions studied about Obama (28%) projected this idea. What’s more, the attempts by his critics, or skeptical journalists, to suggest that the promise of change was empty or overblown, never got much traction in the press. Only 4% of the assertions studied were rebuttals of the narrative that Obama represented change.

The other most prominent master narrative, though not as strong, was that Obama has a special and rare charisma, someone whose rhetorical skills could move crowds in ways not often seen. In all, 17% of the personal assertions about Obama projected this idea. Here, however, opponents had some luck challenging the message, especially later in the primary season, though not nearly enough to match or neutralize it. Claims that he might have strong rhetoric but with only empty words behind it amounted to 6% of all statements studied about Obama.

<b>Barack Obama Character Narratives, Jan. 1—Mar. 9, 2008</b>	
Total Positive	69%
Represents hope and change	28
Has charisma and strong rhetoric	17
Refute of ‘narrow appeal’	16
Refute of ‘too young, inexperienced’	4
Is honest and has integrity	3
Total Negative	31%
Too inexperienced, young	12
Refute of ‘honest and has integrity’	6
Refute of ‘charisma and strong rhetoric’	6
Refute of ‘representing hope and change’	4
Has narrow appeal	3
Total	100%

(\* Total may not equal to 100% due to rounding.)

One negative personal narrative that opponents and critics tried to instill about Obama was that he appealed to a narrow range of voters. However, that criticism, which Hillary Clinton has continued to try to press even into May, received only limited coverage. Indeed, to his opponents’ dismay, the rebuttal of that claim—that his appeal is broader than some suggest—more than surpassed the criticism itself, at least until after the Texas and Ohio contests. There were about five times as many assertions refuting the idea that Obama had limited appeal (16%) as making the original accusation (3%).

(This narrative, questioning Obama’s appeal and leadership, may have grown since mid-March, beyond the period studied here. Indeed, a separate examination of campaign topics, detailed below in this report, shows that coverage of issues troubling for Obama gained force in April and May). But during the period when Obama was establishing the record of primary and caucus victories that have made him the apparently prohibitive front-runner, doubts about Obama’s appeal were more than neutralized. They were overwhelmed.

The skeptical narrative that gained the most traction in the press during the period when Obama was racking up his lead in the primaries was about lack of experience. Still, this appeared only half as frequently as the positive trait of representing change and hope, amounting to just 12% of the personal narratives studied.

One positive character thread that the opponents of Obama succeeded in refuting was the idea that Obama was a person of integrity and honesty. That positive trait amounted to just 3% of all assertions, while rebuttals were nearly double that (6%).

### **Hillary Clinton**

The findings here also belie the idea that Obama enjoyed the most positive coverage, or that the press has somehow gone easier on him than on Clinton during the

primaries. In the roughly 10 weeks studied, the former first lady had just as much success in the press as her rival in projecting the narratives she wanted about her personality, history, leadership and character: Fully 67% of the assertions about her as a person were positive, versus one-third ( 33%) negative—numbers almost identical to Obama.

Clinton had the most success projecting the idea of her preparedness to lead the country—to take the 3 A.M. phone call as her well-known ad proclaimed. A full 38% of all character assertions spoke to this trait. This message was much more clearly asserted than any other about Clinton.

The next biggest personal theme about Clinton in the media was a rebuttal to the idea that she is unlikable, a criticism that has hovered over her since the 1992 campaign.

The Clinton camp fought this claim head-on in early 2008 and managed to create more presence in the press of the refutation than the original criticism itself. Rebuttals of this assertion accounted for 14% of all character threads studied, nearly double that (8%) of those proclaiming her unlikable nature.

<b>Hillary Clinton Character Narratives, Jan. 1—Mar. 9, 2008</b>	
Total Positive	67%
Prepared to lead the country	38
Refute of ‘personality unlikable’	14
A skilled politician	9
Refute of ‘representing the status quo’	5
Refute of ‘lacks core beliefs’	2
Total Negative	33%
Represents the past	13
Personally unlikable	8
Lacks core beliefs	7
Refute of ‘prepared to lead the country’	4
Refute of ‘skilled politician’	1
Total	100%

(Total may not equal to 100% due to rounding.)

The negative theme about Clinton most evident during the key primary season was the idea that she represented the status quo. This narrative, which developed largely as the contrast to Obama’s promise of change, was the third-biggest character thread about Clinton, filling 13% of all the character assertions about Clinton studied.

**Timing**

If the overall message in the press was positive for both Democrats, the momentum shifted markedly. Clinton’s coverage was relatively stable, with a brief exception. Obama’s, in contrast with what some critics might think, got steadily more negative as time went on, beginning as early as mid-January.

In looking at the two Democratic contenders, we divided weeks into four main time periods:

- Jan 1 – 13: Momentum shifts dramatically from Obama to Clinton with different verdicts in Iowa and New Hampshire.
- Jan 14 – Feb 11: The realization that there is no clear winner and likely won't be for some time.
- Feb 12 – Feb 24: Obama's primary winning streak make him the clear front-runner.
- Feb 25 – Mar 9: Clinton saves her campaign in Texas and Ohio while questions about Obama emerge.

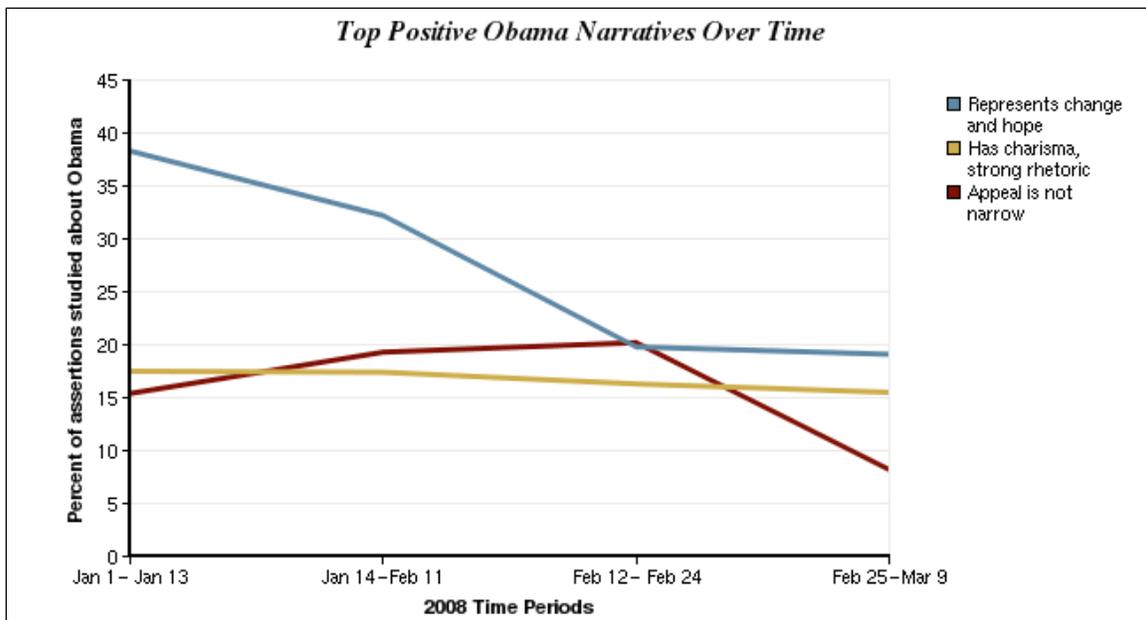
### *Obama over Time*

For Obama, the good news is the heavy dominance of positive character messages overall. The bad news is that over time, his positive narrative has been steadily eroding.

The year started off with pro-Obama assertions representing 77% of the narratives studied about him. But by early March that figure had dropped to 53%, a 24-point decline. The battle for control of the Obama message was clearly getting more difficult. The last period here, February 25 to March 9, encompasses the days after Clinton accused the media of being soft on Obama and his campaign faced questions over ties to a controversial Chicago developer and the consistency of his stance on NAFTA.

Much of the drop came from a fall off in the prevalence of Obama's message of hope and change and a rise the opponents' claims that he is too inexperienced for the job. In the first two weeks of the year—the Iowa and New Hampshire contests—the idea that Obama represented change accounted for a remarkable 38% of all the assertions about him that we studied.

That number fell slightly (to 32% of assertions) during the South Carolina and Super Tuesday battles—hard-fought, contentious contests that reinforced the sense of deadlock and drama in the Democratic race. By mid-February, even while Obama racked up impressive victories in the Potomac primaries and Wisconsin and emerged as the clear front-runner, the dominance of his hope message dropped by half, to only 20% of assertions about him.

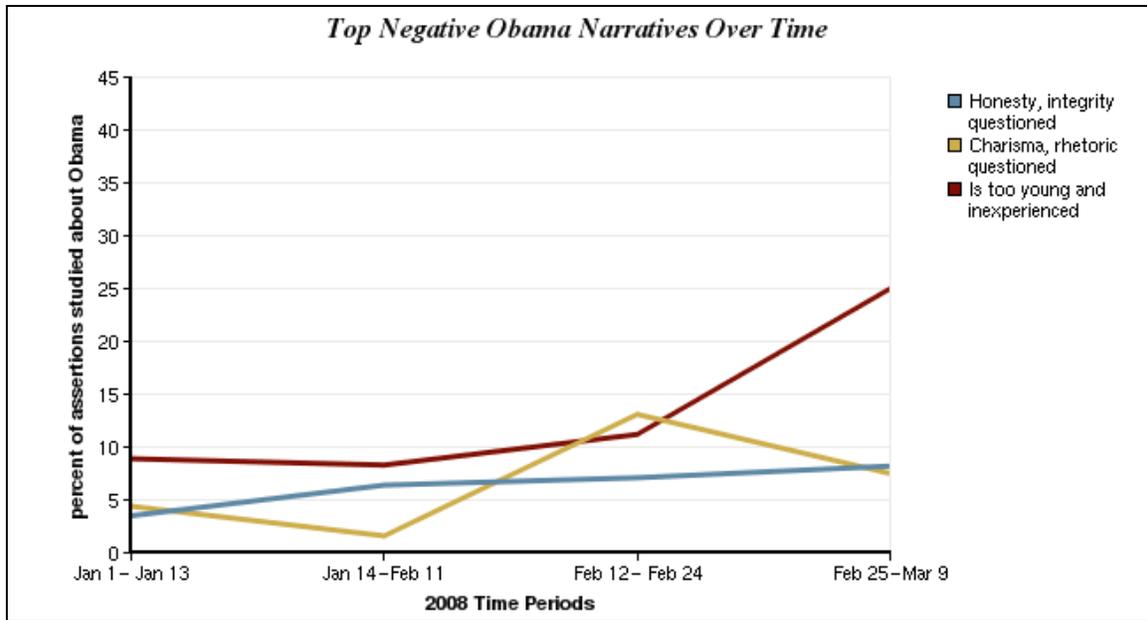


As the message of hope lost force, what rose, particularly from February 25 through March 9 (the final time period of this study), was closer scrutiny of Obama’s character and preparedness for the job. From the “Saturday Night Live” skit on February 23 suggesting Obama was getting an easy ride from the press (a skit Clinton seized on during a debate on February 26), to an “endorsement” from Louis Farrakhan, to a photo of Obama wearing traditional African attire, Obama found himself more on the defensive.

Criticism about his youth and lack of experience roughly tripled in the coverage compared with the first weeks of 2008. Whereas from January 1 through February 11, only 9% of the personal themes focused on his lack of experience, from February 25 through March 9, it jumped to 25%, making it the dominant thread during this time.

This turnabout also came the week *before* the Reverend Wright videos began to circulate.<sup>2</sup> It seems safe to imagine that as March wore on, things only got harder for the Illinois senator, as the press focused on his comments about “bitter” blue collar Americans and the issue of Rev. Wright and association with a former a former 1960s radical Weatherman member continued. Indeed, our separate analysis shows that these storylines got substantial coverage. Though these later events are not included in this analysis, even Obama himself called them distractions from the message he was trying to project.

<sup>2</sup> The Reverend Wright video began circulation the week of March 10. Obama’s speech in Philadelphia was on March 18.



One personal narrative that did not wane was the idea that Obama was an unusually charismatic figure with the ability to move audiences with his rhetorical skill. Throughout the 10-week period, the presence in the press of this personal narrative about Obama wavered only slightly. It accounted for 18% of the Obama narratives studied in the first weeks of January and was still at 15% by early March.

At several distinct points in the campaign, opponents tried to challenge the sense of charisma attached to the Illinois senator. The biggest challenge came in mid-February when the Clinton campaign felt her chances sliding away as Obama captured unexpectedly strong wins in Maryland, Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Wisconsin. During this time the Clinton campaign struck hard at Obama's rhetoric, and made considerable inroads. Assertions casting doubt about the substance of his rhetoric nearly matched statements praising it (13% doubting versus 16% praising).

But by early March, the challenges to Obama's appeal waned to 7%, or about only half as many assertions acknowledging his charisma.

### *Clinton over Time*

Unlike Obama's downward slide, the trajectory of the character themes surrounding the former first lady over the 10-week period might be better described as hitting a single pot-hole in the middle of an otherwise fairly smooth road.

In the first two weeks of the year, her narrative was almost as heavily positive as her opponent's. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of the prominent personal themes in the coverage were positive. As she rebounded from the Iowa loss with an upset win in New Hampshire, more than half of her character coverage focused on two traits: her preparedness to lead the country (28%) and her likeability (26%). Yes, it was her likeability—not her un-likeability—that commanded press attention. Assertions refuting

the idea that Clinton was unlikable appeared five times as often as statements about her unlikeability (6%) in these two weeks. One factor here was a moment that Clinton herself created, appearing to break down on camera when asked about the rigors of the campaign trail.

But from January 14 through February 11, as Obama stacked up primary wins in the Super Tuesday states and South Carolina, Clinton's personal narrative hit tougher times. In the heated and sometimes frankly personal exchanges between the two Democrats over race and character, comments by Black Entertainment founder Robert Johnson on behalf of Clinton ended up backfiring; Bill Clinton's attempt to take on a larger role in the campaign—largely as the daily attack dog—also appeared to misfire, leading ABC reporter Dan Harris wonder “whether Hillary Clinton can rein in her husband even if she wanted to.”<sup>3</sup>

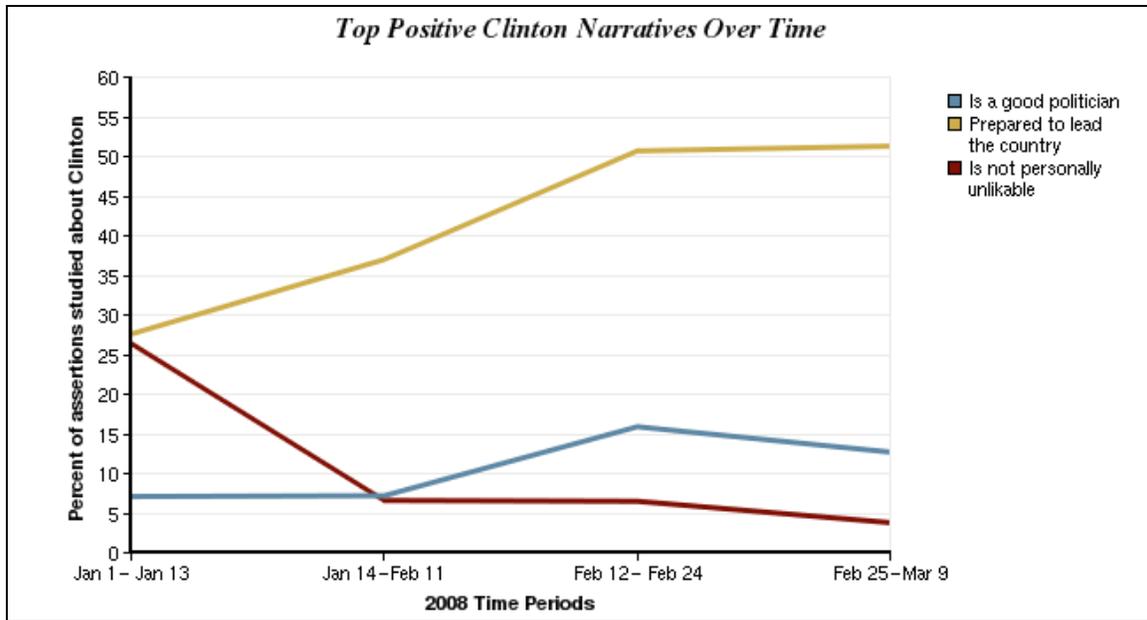
During this bruising time, her opponents hammered away at all three of the most prominent negative character traits. Charges of her un-likeability more than doubled from early January to 13%. Accusations about her lack of core beliefs increased nearly five-fold to 14%. And, the claim that she is stuck in the past continued its drumbeat (15%). Overall, the positive tone of her narrative faded to 55%, versus 45% that were negative.

The one saving factor during this time period was that, despite all that was happening, the campaign was able to increase (to 37% of all Clinton messages we studied) the attention to her preparedness to lead the country. The press may have portrayed Clinton as unlikable and opportunistic, but the idea of her experience and competence during this time grew, not waned.

In mid-February, the coverage of her leadership, history and character rebounded to 74% positive.

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<sup>3</sup> ABC's World News with Charles Gibson, January 21, 2008.



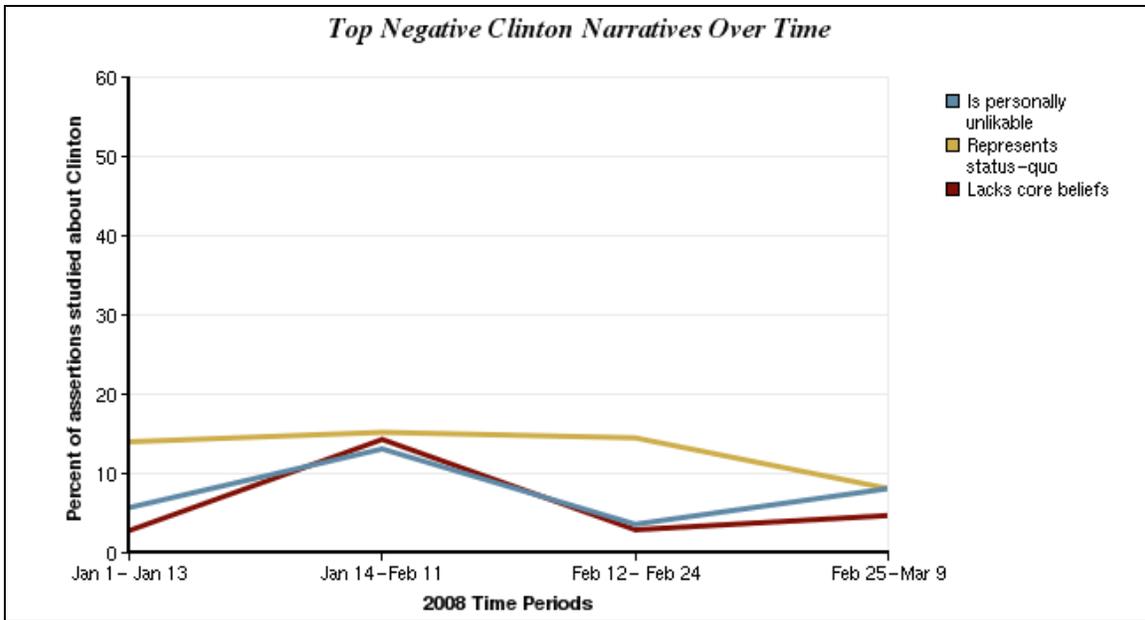
Indeed, during the next two-week period of big losses for Clinton in Maryland, Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Wisconsin, and Obama’s emergence as the front-runner, Clinton somehow managed to wrestle back on top of her message.

The dominance of the idea that she was ready to lead the country nearly doubled during this period from the first weeks of January, to 51% of all character assertions. The influence of Clinton as a skilled politician also doubled to 16% of all assertions. The only negative theme that garnered nearly that much press attention (14%) was that she represented the status quo.

It could be as well that some of her rebound had to do with the heavy focus on the primaries themselves. With the press and the Obama campaign so caught up in the primary results, much less attention was devoted to her personal themes at all—one-third as much.

In the last two weeks of the study (February 25—March 9) the positive tenor of Clinton’s personal narrative fell only slightly to 69%. As references to Clinton’s narratives increased (to 236 assertions), the sense of her as a ready leader remained steady (51%) and her image as a strong politician who could beat McCain dropped only slightly (to 13%). The theme that re-gained the most traction during these weeks was her un-likeability, though it was only a small fraction of her personal narratives (8%).

In the end, the Clinton campaign headed into the final weeks of the primary battle not only surviving a huge surge from her competitor that nearly put her out of the race, but also more in command of her message than the candidate known for his rhetoric.



**John McCain**

Despite an early win and what has in many ways been a simpler story, the Republican presumptive nominee John McCain has had a harder time controlling his personal narrative. Heading into the general election, there is a sense that much remains yet to be explored.

Overall, from January 1 through March 9, 2008, the coverage of his master narrative was 57% negative versus 43% positive.

<b>John McCain Character Themes, Jan. 1—Mar. 9, 2008</b>	
Total Positive	43%
Has admirable character, conviction	19
Can win in November, appeals to moderates	14
Refute of ‘not a trusted reliable conservative’	9
Refute of ‘perhaps too old, unwell’	1
Refute of ‘has strong temper, may be emotionally unstable’	<1
Total Negative	57%
Not a trusted reliable conservative	50
Refute of ‘admirable character, conviction’	3
Perhaps too old, unwell	2
Has strong temper, may be emotionally unstable	2
Refute of ‘can win in November, appeals to moderates’	<1
Total	100%

Within that battle, one criticism has proved particularly persistent. Claims that he is not a reliable conservative and may alienate the conservative core of the party

accounted for fully half of all threads studied during this time (and 88% of the all negative threads).

It is a not a new problem. Throughout the pre-primary period and even during his 2000 presidential bid, McCain's reputation as a political maverick put distance between him and the Republican Party. Partisans were especially critical of his successful sponsorship of campaign finance reform. What's more, McCain did not have strong ties to the conservative religious groups that were considered essential for the Republican nomination.

The two other prominent criticisms played a much smaller role in the McCain narrative. Claims that the 71 year-old is too old for the job accounted for a mere 2% of the personal themes during this time.

And, despite a front-page *New York Times* article about past displays of his strong temper (as well as a possible extra-marital affair with a lobbyist), assertions criticizing his temper similarly amounted to just 2% of all prominent personal themes studied in the press.

Nevertheless, the one criticism that stuck—his questionable conservatism—was hard to get away from. Attempts by the McCain campaign and his supporters to quell charges of him as an unreliable conservative got little traction in the press. In the end, the rebuttals amounted to a mere 9% of all assertions studied, meaning they were outdone by the negative assertions on this theme by six to one.

The campaign had better luck with a more specific counter-argument—that McCain's appeal to moderates gives him the strongest chance of winning in November. That assertion accounted for 14% of all threads studied.

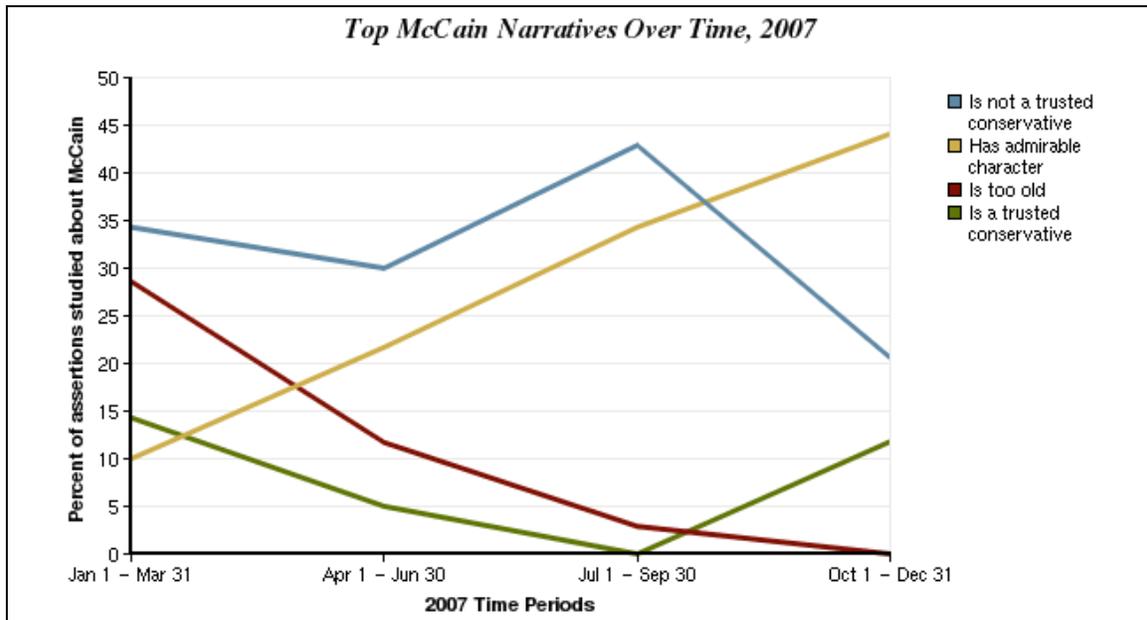
The positive narrative about McCain that gained the most traction as the primary season unfolded was the idea that he was a person of admirable character (19%), a trait he established even in his 2004 presidential bid.

### *McCain Themes over Time*

For John McCain, we conducted an additional analysis of his personal messages in 2007—the period that some observers call the “media primary.” During this time, the idea that McCain is not a reliable conservative was already well-established, accounting for roughly a third (32%) of the assertions about him. That was more than the press attention devoted to his admirable character (24%) and twice that of the second most popular negative message—that he is too old to serve as president (14 %).

Over the course of the year, however, coverage of his personal narrative shifted, becoming more positive as the field of Republican nominees winnowed.

Looking across 2007, questions about McCain’s ideological stance remained around 30% of the assertions studied during the first half of the year. They then rose sharply to 43% during the summer when Republicans were tantalized with the possibility of a Fred Thompson candidacy. But there was a significant about-face in September, when the conservative flirtation with Thompson faded. In the final three months of the year—October through December 2007—the media messages doubting McCain’s conservative credentials dropped to only 21% of assertions about him.



Likewise the concerns about McCain’s age declined dramatically from 29% in the first quarter of 2007 to a flat zero by the last three months of the year.

In the meantime, the positive views of McCain as a person of strong character more than quadrupled in attention. While this positive narrative amounted to only 10% of the personal assessments of McCain in the first quarter of 2007, they doubled in the second quarter, rose to 34% in the third quarter and increased to a whopping 44% in the last quarter.

In other words, by the time the early caucuses and primaries rolled around, the overall balance of McCain’s narrative was reversed—from 31% positive in the first quarter to a dramatic 71% positive in the last quarter of 2007. The sense of McCain’s admirable character mitigated the negative ideological trope, and his age all but disappeared as an issue. The stage was set for the primaries with a robust media endorsement of McCain’s personal character.

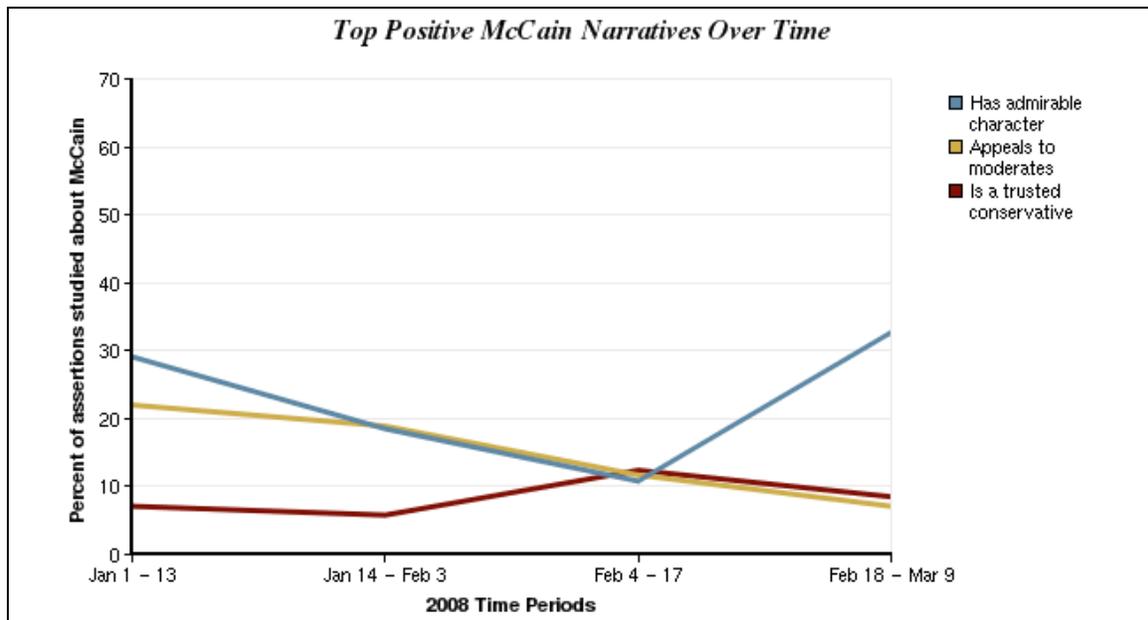
As 2008 dawned, McCain entered the primaries with solid control over his personal narrative. In particular, he managed to project the idea of his unwavering character to help battle continuing ideological concerns.

The turning point in the battle for the Republican nomination differed somewhat from those of the Democrats. For this analysis, we identified four main time periods:

- January 1—January 13: McCain’s surprise win in New Hampshire and bursting of the Romney bubble
- January 14—February 3: The Florida primary and McCain’s emergence as the front-runner
- February 4—February 17 : McCain’s lead solidifies
- February 18—March 9: The weeks following the *New York Times* front-page article questioning McCain’s character.

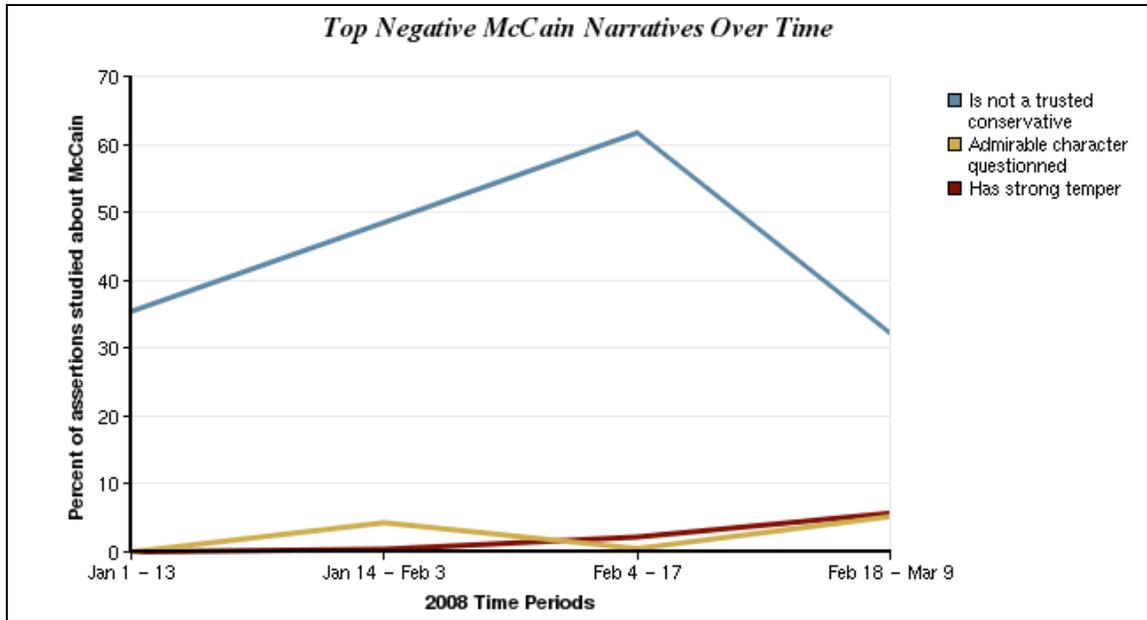
On January 8, McCain earned a strong win in New Hampshire. Anointed the Republican “Comeback Kid” by some in the press, he was also anointed with a more favorable image in the coverage of his character. Of the personal narratives studied about McCain, 62% were positive in the first two weeks of January. This was driven by a heavy presence of statements about his admirable character (29% of assertions during this time) as well as his ability to appeal to moderates (22%). Questions about his conservatism still represented the largest theme (35% of assertions), but the combination of positive messages outweighed the negative during this time.

The ride didn’t last long. In mid-January, a quick Romney rebound in Michigan (January 15) began to shift the balance. From January 14 through February 3, the negative narratives took hold, outpacing the positive 56% to 44%. Questions about his conservatism rose to roughly half (48%) of all assertions studied while the most prevalent positive messages fell to 19%.



Through mid-February, McCain continued to lose control of the personal narrative, despite his electoral success. During this period, negative messages reached the

highest level of any candidate during this study (65% negative). Despite strong wins on Super Tuesday, which cemented his lead and led to a Romney withdraw (February 7), the battle for positive personal coverage proved elusive.



Questions about McCain’s conservative credentials shot to nearly two-thirds (62%) of the personal assertions about the GOP candidate during this time.

McCain supporters amped up their defense and managed to double the presence of rebuttals to this charge (12% versus 6% in the previous time period). That still meant that doubts about McCain’s conservatism outweighed defenses of it by roughly five to one.

McCain battled on, however, and by early March, now the presumptive nominee, he moved the marker back to the mid-line with a roughly 50-50 split between positive and negative personal narratives from February 18—March 9.

During these weeks, the McCain campaign was able to combat a February 21 *New York Times* story citing lapses in ethics and self-control. It also managed to triple references to his conviction and strong character, reaching 33% of all threads studied (up from 11% in Mid-February), even outpacing (albeit barely) questions of his conservatism (32%).

As McCain ducked onto the sidelines to watch Clinton and Obama duke it out, he was at least on an even keel, having once again proven his comeback ability.

## Sources of the Assertions

The other question, beyond what the master narratives are, is the matter of who is driving that message? Are journalists themselves the source for these master narratives? Are the campaigns controlling the message directly, through the candidate? Is it coming from campaign surrogates, in campaign control but at arm's length?

<b>Sources of Assertions, Overall</b>	
Journalists/Authors	28%
Voters	6
Experts	6
Campaign surrogates	9
Candidates	30
Other media	1
Polls	4
Entertainment celebrity	<1
Other Democratic public figure	2
Other Republican public figure	3
Talk Show hosts	7
Campaign advertisements	2
Other	2
Total	100%

To answer this, the study examined the source of each assertion studied about the candidate's personal qualities.

The answer is that in 2008, the candidates and their campaigns were driving the message more than any other source, with journalists themselves close behind.

Overall, roughly four-in-ten (39%) statements studied came from the contenders themselves or their surrogates. The press was almost as

prevalent a source for these master narratives, with 36% of the statements coming from journalists or talk show hosts. Other groups shaping the campaign narrative were not heard nearly as often. Voters, for example, made only 6% of the assertions counted in this study, the same percentage for people considered independent experts. And 4% of the assertions about these personal narratives about the candidates originated from poll results.

In Clinton's case, much of the coverage she wanted to get across came directly from her campaign. Fully 54% of the positive assertions about Clinton came from either a candidate or a campaign surrogate—by far the most control over positive message of any of the major candidates studied, and twice the percentage driven by journalists themselves (25%). In the case of the most prominent narrative about her—her preparedness—the campaign was three times more likely to make the case than was the press (49% to 17%). Interestingly, almost all of these campaign assertions came from unnamed surrogates, meaning that the press was ferrying positive spin about Clinton anonymously from her own people.

This might suggest that Clinton had to press her case because journalists wouldn't do it for her. But it isn't that simple. Journalists played a large role in refuting one of the most important criticisms about her character, the argument that she is cold or hard to like. Fully 40% of the assertions rebutting the idea that she was unlikeable came from journalists themselves, and another 7% came from talk show hosts. That combined number (47%) is more than the amount that came from the Clinton campaign (39%). Many of these assertions—that Clinton was, in fact, likable and personable—were made

around the time of the January 8 New Hampshire primary when Clinton became visibly emotional when asked during a campaign stop how she is able to maintain an upbeat attitude during the difficult campaign. Many journalists analyzed that this moment showed a different side of Clinton,

one that was more personable and connected with voters in a way that had not previously been the case with her.

The Obama campaign itself was not driving the positive picture of its candidate as directly as Clinton was. Overall, just over a third of the positive personal master narratives about Obama came from his campaign (35%), the same

<b>Journalists versus the Campaigns as Sources</b>			
Percent of all Positive or Negative assertions about the candidate			
		<u>Press</u>	<u>Campaign</u>
<b>Obama</b>	Positive Narratives	35%	35%
	Negative Narratives	19	61
<b>Clinton</b>	Positive Narratives	25	54
	Negative Narratives	33	40

number that came from journalists. In this case, the Obama campaign drove some of the positive messages and journalists drove others. When it came to arguing that he represented change, for instance, Obama had to make that case himself. Fully 40% of those assertions came from him, and another 12% from his surrogates, versus 20% from the press. But when it came to the idea that Obama was a candidate of exceptional charisma, the press was far more likely to state that on its own. Fully 47% of the assertions about Obama’s charisma came from the press. Another 9% came from voters.

In trying to defuse the positive narratives about Obama, on the other hand, the rival candidates themselves did much of the heavy lifting. In refuting both the idea that Obama had exceptional charisma and represented change, more than six out of 10 assertions came from rival candidates. The candidates themselves also played a major role in trying to argue that Obama lacked the experience to lead. Here 44% of this narrative came from rival candidates, largely Clinton, while journalists represented 15%. Was the press less willing to raise those doubts itself, given that Obama was winning primaries and caucuses or because of their own views? Or did the willingness of rival candidates to cast those aspersions about him make it unnecessary? That is harder to pin down.

For McCain, the positive narratives about his character, history and leadership came fairly evenly from both his campaign and the press. In all, 32% of the affirmative or positive assertions about McCain came from the candidate or his campaign surrogates, roughly split with the 34% of those assertions that came from the press. Journalists were a strong voice—albeit a conflicting one—on the two ideologically driven themes about McCain. Their strongest presence was in criticizing his ideological underpinnings. More than a third (34%) of these claims came from journalists. And, the ever-opinionated talk radio hosts accounted for another 22%. In all, then, 56% of the skeptical assertions about McCain’s conservatism came directly from the media. The flip side was also true, however. Journalists’ voices were also strongly present in the image of John McCain as appealing to moderates. In this case, nearly half (46%) of such statements came from

journalists (41%) or talk show hosts (5%), versus a mere 15% from the McCain campaign.

### **Resonance with the Public**

If both Obama and Clinton enjoyed success in controlling the master narratives about their campaigns, and McCain less so, how did the public respond? How closely did public opinion about the candidates match up with the major media narratives about the campaigns? And which candidates fared best?

To find out, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press conducted two surveys testing the narrative messages we found in the press coverage with the public, one in February and April 2008. They asked Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents which of the two Democratic candidates the public associated more with certain character traits. Republicans and Republican-leaning voters were asked how closely they associated certain traits and characteristics with John McCain.

The results suggest that perceptions of Obama's candidacy among Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters tracked closely with key media narratives about him.

That was also the case with GOP candidate McCain, whose ratings among the Republican-aligned population largely dovetailed with both his positive and negative themes.

With Clinton, the verdict was more mixed. Some of the views Democrats hold of the New York senator—particularly regarding her honesty and preparation for leadership—appear to be based on factors other than the media narratives, a sign that perhaps perceptions of Clinton were solidified well before the campaign began.

There was another notable difference among the candidates. Despite intense campaign coverage and shifting narratives, voters' perceptions of Obama and Clinton changed little between February and April 2008. In McCain's case, public opinion on a range of character and leadership issues improved noticeably, even though the coverage of him personally was not particularly positive. It may be that winning is simply its own reward.

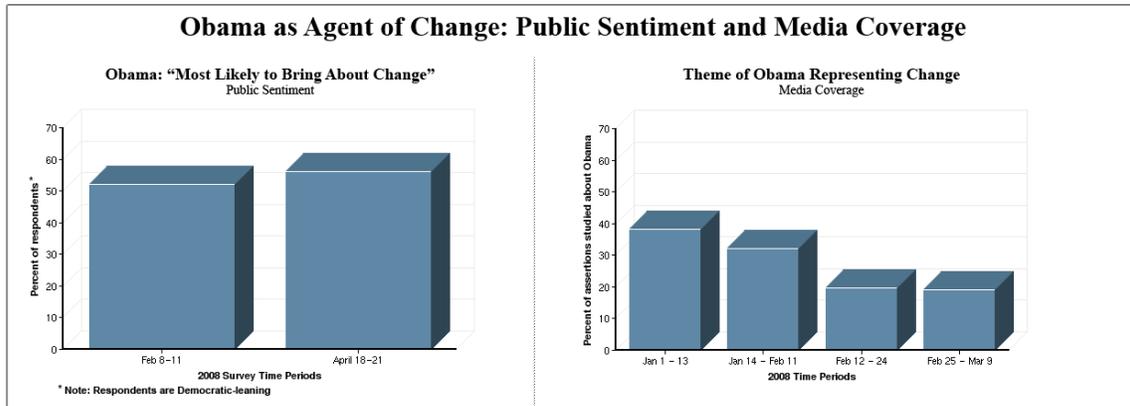
These findings do not imply a simple cause and effect. In some cases, the press may have been reflecting existing public attitudes rather than shaping them. In others, the coverage and the public may have arrived at similar conclusions at similar times. And some public perceptions may simply have pre-dated the campaign. Rather it speaks to the extent that press coverage and public views corresponded to each other during the primary battles.

*Obama and Clinton*

Question: Which candidate...	Democrats and Democratic Leaners				
	Hillary Clinton	Barack Obama	Neither	Both	Don't Know
Is prepared to lead the country?	31%	34	13	20	2
Is most likely to bring about change?	25%	56	8	10	1
Is honest and trustworthy?	18%	42	19	19	2
Is inspiring?	20%	56	10	14	
Is someone who is hard to like?	42%	9	44	3	2
Don't stand for anything?	17%	13	63	3	4
Is too inexperienced for the job?	13%	42	38	4	3

*Note: Responses to People and the Press Survey April 18-21, 2008. Respondents are Democratic-leaning.*

Democrats and Democratic-leaning voters associated Obama over Clinton as “most likely to bring about change” by a ratio of about 2-1, and that number increased slightly but not dramatically over time. In February, the margin was 52%-26% and it inched up to 56%-25% in April. The voters’ verdict was about the same in a related question—which of the candidates was more inspiring. Respondents again selected Obama by a 54%-20% margin in February and by virtually the same spread (56%-20%) in April.



In both cases, public sentiment closely tracks the most prominent Obama theme of hope and change, and it may well reflect on the most dominant negative theme about Clinton, that she is the candidate of the status quo and the politics of the past.

If the public saw Obama as a change agent, they also had growing doubts about his readiness for the presidency, tracking with growing press coverage raising that issue. In February, likely Democratic voters viewed the Illinois senator as too inexperienced for the presidency by a 35% to 18% margin over Clinton. By April, the gap had stretched to 42% to 13%.

Several questions seemed to reflect some disconnect between the public and the media coverage. One had to do with which candidate Democrats saw as more honest and trustworthy. In the two primary season surveys, likely Democratic voters clearly saw Obama as more honest, associating this trait with him over Clinton by a margin of about 2-1. Yet in the press coverage, honesty was not an attribute particularly associated much with either candidate. For Obama, indeed, rebuttals about the idea that he is honest and has integrity exceeded the assertions. The narrative thread about Clinton that connects to this question of trustworthiness, the idea that she lacks core beliefs, was also not a major element in the coverage during the time studied.

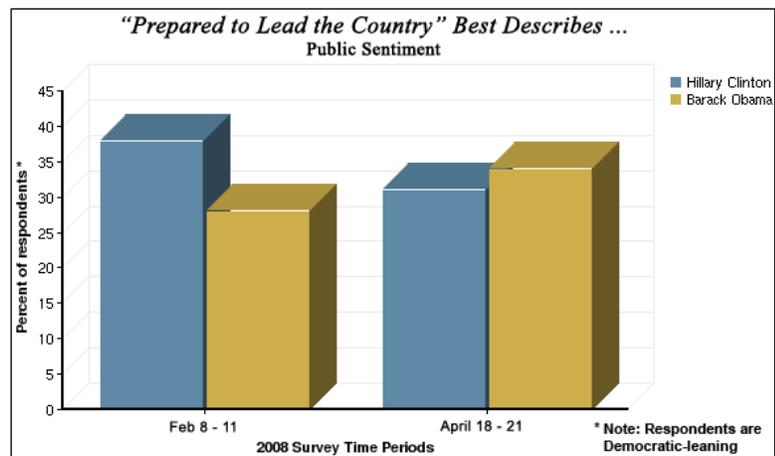
There also seemed to be some disconnect over the question of likeability. In both the February and April surveys, 42% of the respondents said Clinton was hard to like compared with only 9% who said this about Obama. Yet, in press coverage, Clinton appeared to have waged a successful battle against this impression. In short, while the subject of Clinton’s likeability was a major story, with the media coverage split (22% of all assertions dealt with the issue one way or another, but a majority refuted the idea she was not likeable), a large portion of the public had already decided they had her doubts about her.

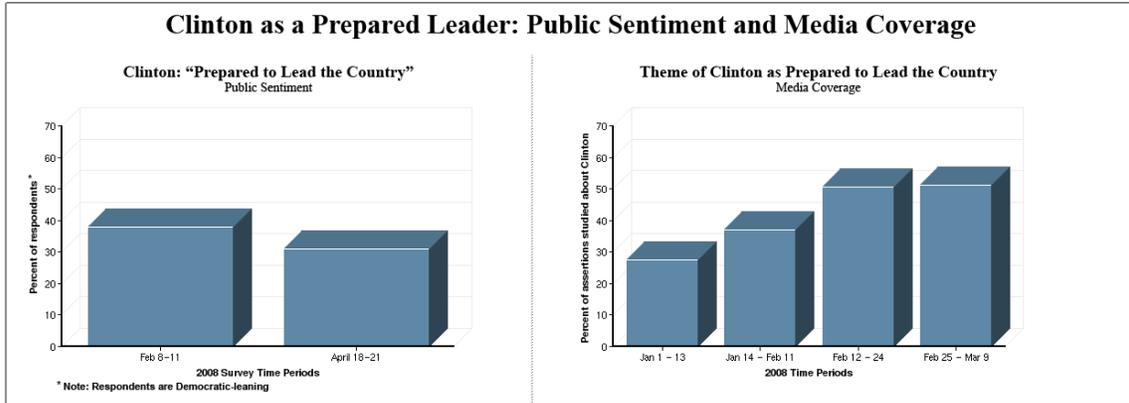
*Shifts over time*

It’s hard to pinpoint when Democratic-leaning voters solidified their views of the candidates, but for the most part, there was little movement between the February and April polls. Opinions persisted despite the sheer intensity of the coverage (the campaign filled 46% of the overall newshole during the weeks studied in the 2008 early primary season).

On at least one key question where public perceptions did change, it seemed to be much more closely tied to actual primary results than any media narratives. In the

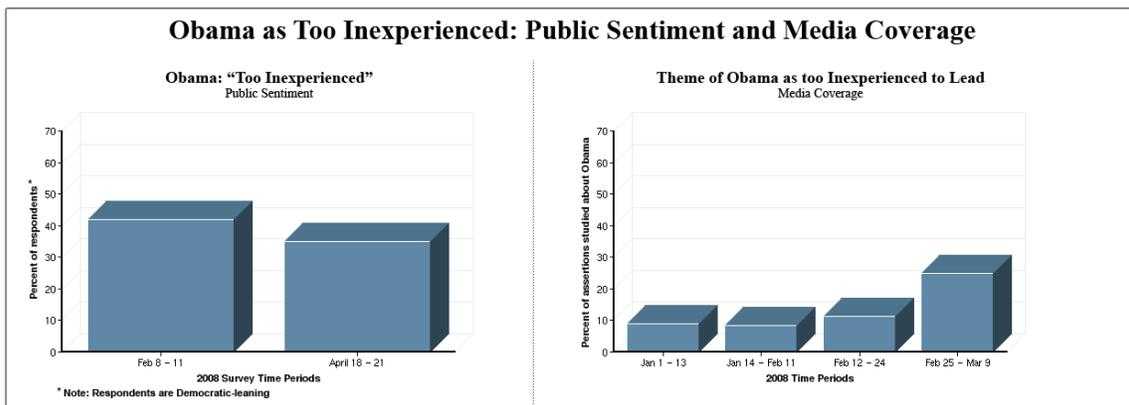
February poll, Clinton held a 10-point lead (38%-28%) when voters were asked who was more prepared to lead the country. But by April, Obama had inched ahead on the question by a margin 34% to 31%. (This despite the fact that respondents in both polls overwhelmingly named Obama as the Democrat who was too inexperienced for the job.)





Yet the message that Clinton was prepared to lead on Day One was the most prominent thread in the coverage about her, and it gained strength as time went on. It originated, however, with the candidate herself. In short, despite the coverage of the idea that Clinton was prepared to lead, Obama gained momentum on this question with the public—and this came in the face of substantial coverage of the Clinton camp’s attacks on his lack of experience. Democrats, in other words, seem to discount Obama’s relative inexperience, or believe he is ready to lead the country anyway, despite Clinton’s emphasis on this issue, and sizable media coverage of it as well.

This sets up a clear question for the fall campaign. Americans have heard a growing chorus of doubts in the media about Obama’s readiness. They are likely to hear more. This has already become a common refrain of the McCain camp, as it was in the Clinton camp. The question is whether that will begin to erode support in a challenge against McCain, or whether Obama’s lack of seasoning is viewed by Americans as simply part of what comes with a candidate who represents a vision something new and different



*John McCain*

By and large, there was a solid connection between what the press was saying about John McCain and what the public was thinking about him. Much of McCain’s media narrative improved over time, as the 2007 media primary spilled over into the 2008 voter contests. And by the time the Pew Research Center polled likely Republican voters earlier this year, their view of him on most issues was positive and getting even more positive.

The February and April polls of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents offer a lot of good news for McCain on a series of personal and character issues. But there is one big area of doubt, and it is the same area he has struggled with in the press: The idea that he is not a true conservative. That has been McCain’s dominant media narrative throughout 2007 and in the early part of 2008. And Republicans seem clearly split over this. In the Feb. 8-11 survey, 44% of the respondents agreed with the statement that he is not a true conservative versus 46% who did not. That number only improved marginally, to 40% agreeing and 49% disagreeing, by April. (It is worth noting that the unreliable conservative narrative about McCain did abate in late February and early March.) While slightly more Republicans said it did *not* describe him, the verdict is clearly still out.

Republican-leaning voters also have come to believe what was in the press coverage about McCain’s character and conviction, the strongest positive theme in the personal narrative about him. That coverage was based largely on assertions from the candidate (27%) but a substantial portion also came from the press (23%). Three-quarters of respondents surveyed in February agreed that the Arizona senator had admirable character, and that number moved up further to 84% in April.

<b>Does this describe John McCain?</b>	<b>Yes</b>		<b>No</b>		<b>Don't Know</b>	
	February	April	February	April	February	April
Has admirable character	75%	84	18	11	7	5
Not a true conservative	44%	40	46	49	10	11
Too old for the job	19%	14	78	84	3	2
Can't control his temper	34%	25	50	59	16	16
Honest and trustworthy	70%	81	22	13	8	6

*Note: Responses to People and the Press Surveys, February 8-11, 2008 and April 18-21, 2008. Respondents are Democratic-leaning.*

The question of McCain’s age, another issue in the coverage, also began to diminish somewhat over time. In February, just 19% of those likely Republican voters thought McCain is too old for the job. And by April, it had fallen to 14%. That roughly reflects the trajectory of the media narrative that McCain was too old, which was a significant theme in 2007 coverage but had decreased to less than 2% of the 2008 campaign storyline.

Potential McCain voters appeared to have more concerns about the GOP candidate's temperament, but they too abated as that issue diminished in his 2008 coverage. The percentage of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents who said that he can't control his temper declined from 34% in February 2008 to 25% in April of that year.

The good news for McCain is that in almost every category, potential voters' perceptions of him—already quite upbeat—grew more positive between the February and April polls.

It's also true that key aspects of his media narrative improved over time as a campaign once written off by many journalists came back to capture its party's nomination.

### *Mitt Romney*

How did personal narratives come into play for Mitt Romney, at one time considered McCain's chief rival for the GOP nomination but then the first of the final five to drop out?

From January 1 through March 9 (Romney dropped out of the race on February 7 and press coverage largely disappeared by late February) the master narrative about Romney was roughly divided. In all, 53% of the assertions studied about Romney personally were positive in nature, while 47% negative.

There were four main master narratives about the former Massachusetts governor. The most prominent of all was a message that the Romney campaign worked hard to project—the image of Romney as a successful businessman. Fully 31% of all assertions studied about Romney were about this theme.

The other master narrative that Romney was trying to project was more mixed in its success. Key to a Romney candidacy was the ability to persuade voters that he was the true conservative candidate—something that would have distinguished him from McCain. And he had some success in projecting this idea. Roughly one-in-five (21%) of the assertions studied carried this theme.

<b>Mitt Romney Character Narratives, Jan. 1—Mar. 9, 2008</b>	
Total Positive	53%
Successful businessman	31
True conservative	21
Refute of ‘Romney as too negative’	1
Refute of ‘Romney is a flip-flopper’	0
Total Negative	47%
Flip-flopper, not reliably conservative	26
Has gone too negative	13
Refute of ‘is true conservative’	5
Refute of ‘successful businessman’	3
Total	100%

But the notion that Romney was a true conservative was actually more than matched by a negative master narrative about him that undermined this notion. This was the idea that Romney was an unreliable “flip-flopper” on policy positions. In the end, the notion of the opportunistic flip-flopper outshone the notion that he was a true conservative, making up 26% of the assertions studied about him.

One other less-than-flattering master narrative emerged about Romney: the idea that he was too negative in his campaign style (13%).

The Romney campaign had little success *refuting* the negative master narratives about his opportunism and malicious campaigning tone. And only 1% of all assertions about Romney studied rebutted negative images (5 statements in all).

In short, Romney failed to blunt the strong negative image developing about him in the press, as a flip-flopper who could be nasty in criticizing his rivals.

### ***Romney over Time***

Some might imagine that Romney’s master narrative became more troubled as his candidacy lost steam. But that was not the case. Despite an ultimate defeat in the vote, Romney’s presidential hopeful story shows a personal message that grew steadily more positive. What began as a 60-40 tilt to the negative reversed to a roughly 60-40 positive tilt during the time of his withdrawal.

The shift in the tone about Romney was not a case of media remorse once he bowed out. The tone of his narrative message grew most positive in the weeks *prior* to his departure.

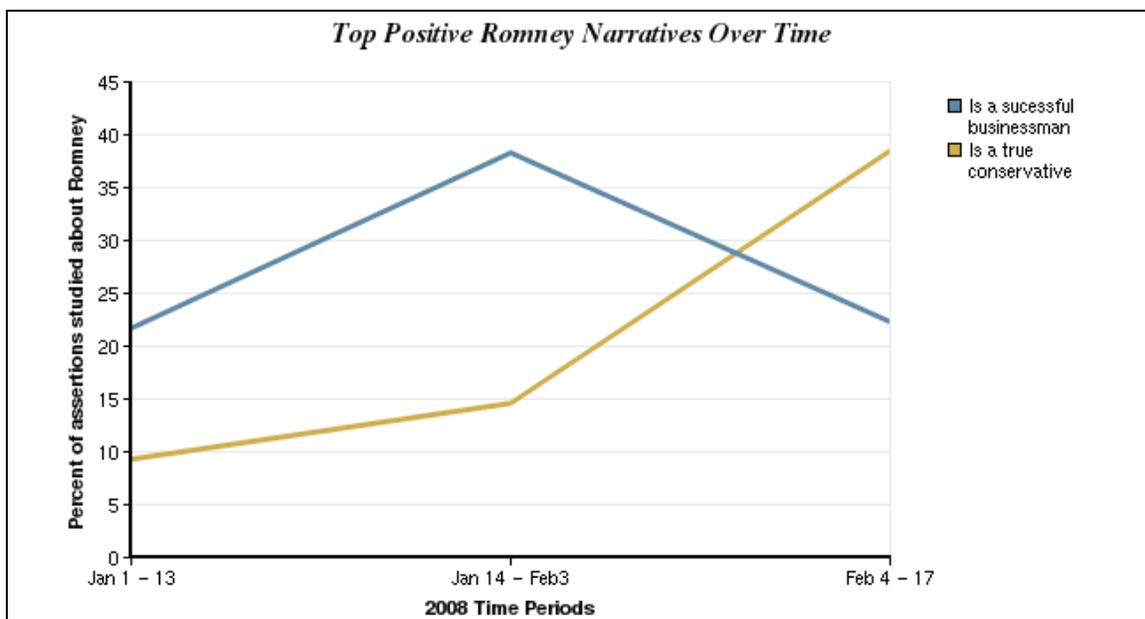
In the first period studied (January 1 – 13), as Romney weathered defeats in both Iowa and New Hampshire, his personal narrative was also battered in the press. Fully 60% of the themes studied about Romney were negative, and the criticism that dominated was Romney’s own negativity. Fully 37% of the assertions focused on Romney’s

negative campaigning, spurred largely by a stream of attack ads sponsored by his campaign. During the January 5 debate in New Hampshire, McCain (the subject of most of the attacks) laid into Romney: “You can spend your whole fortune on your ads and it still won’t be true,” and Giuliani commented that even Ronald Reagan would be in one of Romney’s negative attack ads.

In a “Good Morning America” interview on January 3, interviewer Chris Cuomo asked Romney: “You have Ed Rollins from the Huckabee campaign saying he wanted to ‘hit you in the mouth,’ he’s getting so upset at the negative ads. Do you regret a little bit the strategy recently, do you think maybe that’s why you’ve taken a hit in the polls?” Romney coolly answered, “No actually, I’ve been rising in the polls...”

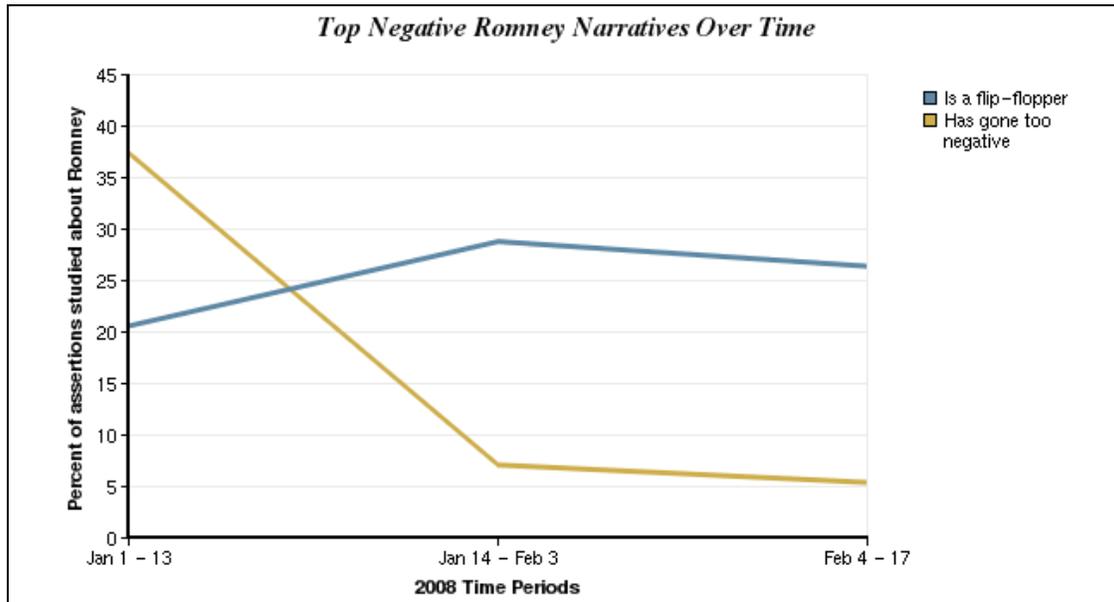
But the Romney campaign had a hard time fending off this image, with rebuttals amounting to just 4% of the assertions about him; by the end of this period, the campaign seemed to be abandoning this tactic. *Newsweek*’s Howard Fineman, commenting on Romney’s speech on January 8, remarked, “What else was good about Romney tonight is that he was positive... He was the positive, ‘decent as the day is long’ guy that a lot of his friends say he really is, as opposed to the guy whose campaign advisors and consultants are feeding him all these negative lines and negative ads.”

From January 14 through February 3—as Romney pulled in a strong win in Michigan, but then came up short on Super Tuesday—he gained back some control over his personal message. There was a slight tilt toward the positive, 53% to 47% negative.



In these weeks, coverage of Romney’s personal messages grew overall. As it did, his campaign successfully *increased* his positive personal associations and *decreased* his negative. The portrayal of Romney as a nasty politician declined dramatically to just 7%

of all statements studied while his image as a successful businessman grew to 38%—higher than in any other period.



It was in the final days of his campaign, though, that his personal themes reached most positive levels of all. In the third phase studied, after February 4, the master narrative for Romney personally became more positive. Fully 61% of the assertions were positive in nature. (Romney dropped out during this period, on February 7).

### *Mike Huckabee*

Though less a presence in the press overall, Huckabee’s narrative was also more positive than either of his Republican opponents’: 59% overall, from January 1 through March 9. And, unlike the presumptive nominee John McCain, Huckabee’s positives continually climbed from 48% in early January to 75% by February 17.

In the fourth and final time period of the study—even after Mitt Romney had abandoned his bid for the nomination, McCain had begun efforts to consolidate the party behind him, Huckabee dropped out and George Bush endorsed McCain—Huckabee’s positives still outshone McCain’s by 72% to 51%. Granted, however, the total number of assertions for Huckabee had dropped precipitously by that time.

The most dominant narrative about Huckabee involved his dedication to his religion. Almost a third, 31% of all of assertions studied about Huckabee spoke favorably of his strong religious ties. Another 19% fostered the image of him as a likeable and gifted politician.

The coverage of these two positive narratives about Huckabee had opposing trajectories. Mentions of him as a gifted politician dropped sharply after the first time period (January 1-13, which included his Iowa win). After failing to follow his Iowa

victory with other wins, in other, words, the notion that Huckabee had such as skill on the stump began to fade away.

Meanwhile mentions of Huckabee as a man of faith saw steep increases in both the second and third time periods of the study.

Yet not all of the master narratives about Huckabee were positive. The second most prevalent theme in the coverage about him was that he lacked the political wherewithal to actually win. Nearly a quarter (23%) of the assertions about Huckabee studied suggested that his campaign, due to lack of money, experience and organization, could not survive. Many of these statements focused on public missteps and misstatements about Pakistan, Iran, and crossing the picket line during the writer’s strike.

<b>Mike Huckabee Character Narratives, Jan. 1—Mar. 9, 2008</b>	
Total Positive	59%
Is a man of faith	31
Is a likable, gifted politician	19
Refute of ‘religion has narrow appeal’	6
Refute of ‘lacks money, experience, organization to win’	3
Total Negative	41%
Lacks money, experience, organization to win	23
Religion has narrow appeal	18
Refute of ‘is a likable, gifted politician’	1
Refute of ‘is a man of faith’	0
Total	100%

(Total may not equal to 100% due to rounding.)

Another 17% of all of the assertions in this study addressed the notion that—while he was otherwise strongly (and positively) identified as a man of faith—his religion might translate into overall narrow political appeal.

Looking at the two religious-based themes together—his strong faith and the sense that his faith might lead to a very narrow appeal, fully 54% of Huckabee’s narrative related in some way to his faith. Starting from a level of 44% of all the threads in the first time period of the study, this percentage climbed to 63% in the second time period, and peaked at 74% in the third time period which included Super Tuesday on February 5.

Even by Super Tuesday, the press had largely discounted Huckabee as a real contender. Over half (54%) of the total assertions recorded for Huckabee during the course of this study occurred in the first two weeks of January—a spate of media coverage coinciding with Huckabee’s victory in the Iowa caucus on January 3. But, in what was perhaps a bad omen for the candidate, the most dominant theme during this time (at 32%) was his lack of experience or money needed to win.

## **DIFFERENCES BY MEDIA**

Were there any notable differences in the way different media portrayed the major personal narratives about the candidates? In some specific cases, stark differences emerged, though overall, the press was in many ways more similar than different.

Among the differences, on network television, the morning news programs stood out for an exceptionally positive portrayal of the female candidate. Her rival had a harder time of it.

Within cable news, which has given an extraordinary amount of attention to the campaign as it lifted ratings, there were noticeable differences among channels: MSNBC was the most positive about all of the three major candidates. Fox News was the toughest on Clinton and McCain—and much more positive about Obama. CNN fell somewhere in the middle.

Finally, talk radio, a medium that was dominated by discussions about the campaign, was also very harsh in its evaluations of Clinton and McCain, while Obama found more positive support.

### **Newspapers**

The front pages of newspapers devoted 13% less coverage to the campaign compared to the media overall. Roughly a third of the space (33%) on newspaper front pages was about the campaign versus 46% for all of the media combined. The coverage that newspapers carried mostly mirrored the overall numbers.

### **Online**

The lead stories of the five most popular news websites<sup>4</sup>, devoted even less attention than newspaper front pages to the campaign, at 29%. The coverage of the candidates' personal themes closely tracked that of the media overall, but small differences are worth noting. In the treatment of Clinton's major personal narratives, these Web sites focused less on two particular negative themes. There was half as much attention to her unlikability (4% versus 8% overall) and nearly half as much to her lack of core beliefs (4% online versus 7% overall). At the same time, Obama was more likely to be portrayed as having wide appeal (21% online compared to 16% overall).

### **Network Morning News**

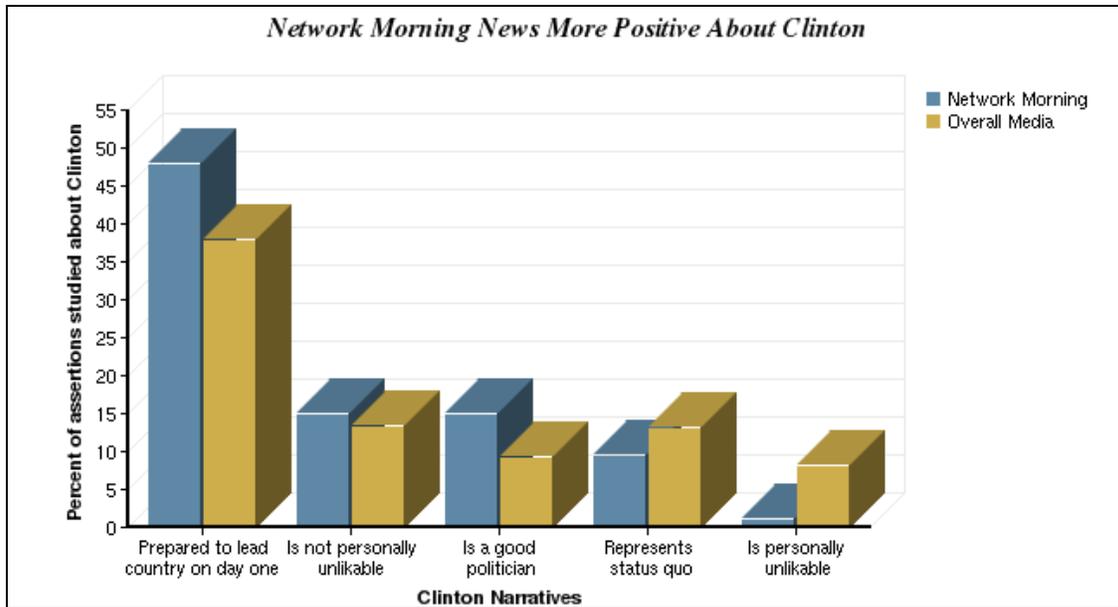
If Clinton and Obama had nearly identical success in the press overall, this was clearly not the case on network morning news shows. The first 30 minutes of these programs from January 1 through March 9 painted an especially positive personal narrative about Clinton, more so than the media overall and much rosier than the narrative image portrayed of Obama.

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<sup>4</sup> The sites tracked by PEJ were AOL News, CNN.com, Google News, MSNBC.com, and Yahoo News.

Fully 84% of the assertions studied were positive in tone, 16 percentage points higher than the media overall (68%). And Obama did not have quite as much success on morning TV as he did in other media. On the morning shows, 61% of the statements about him personally were positive, compared with 69% overall.

The main reason for Clinton’s sunny portrayal on the morning shows? One possible explanation some might suggest may have to do with gender and audience demographics. The programs might be sensitive to the fact that as a woman candidate, Clinton might have special appeal to the heavily female audience for these programs.



In its place, morning network television discussed her preparedness to lead the country—a key element of Clinton’s campaign message. Nearly half (48%) of the assertions studied about Clinton made this claim versus 38% in the media overall.

When it came to Clinton’s main rival, the first half hour of the morning shows gave more than twice as much attention than the media overall to the his dominant criticism: that he is too inexperienced to be president (21% versus 12%). The morning shows were also more than half as likely to refute the charge that Obama’s appeal is narrow and would hurt him in a general election, 6% versus 16% for the media overall.

**Network Evening News**

The network evening news programs offered a more similar treatment of the two Democratic rivals and a more positive portrayal of all three than did the media overall. Roughly three-quarters of the assertions studied about the two Democrats supported positive themes (75% for Clinton and 77% for Obama) as did 52% of those about McCain.

## **Cable TV**

On cable, the first thing that stands out is the amount of coverage. During the first few months of 2008, fully 68% of the newshole studied on the three cable news channels (CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC), was devoted to the presidential contest. The vast majority of this came in the evening hours studied. At night, the programs examined spent more than three-quarters (76%) of their time on the campaign, nearly twice the coverage of the daytime hour studied (40%).

### *Differences between Cable Channels*

But the other thing that stands out on cable news is how differently each portrayed the major candidates. MSNBC offered the most positive assessments of each of the candidate when it came to their personal narratives. Fox News was the toughest on McCain and Clinton and almost as positive about Obama's personal themes as MSNBC. Fox News also spent significantly more time discussing McCain's campaign than either of the other networks. CNN fell in between the other two.

<b>The Positive Nature of Narrative Themes on Cable News</b>			
Percent of all statements about each candidate that were positive			
Candidate	Fox News	CNN	MSNBC
Obama	69%	59%	70%
Clinton	54	70	72
McCain	45	49	53

*Jan. 1—Mar. 9, 2008*

### *MSNBC*

All three major candidates had most success in projecting their message about character on MSNBC. Obama and Clinton received roughly equally positive narratives (70% for Obama and 72% for Clinton). The tilt was not as heavily for McCain (53%) but that was still better coverage than he received on either of the other two cable channels.

The Clinton campaign had MSNBC to thank for a greater portion of statements disputing the concept that she is unlikable, 22% on MSNBC versus 13% on CNN and 12% on Fox News.

For McCain, two factors contributed to his more positive image. First, MSNBC gave more attention than the other cable channels to his appeal to independents and moderates (22% versus 13% on CNN and 11% on Fox News.) In addition, MSNBC focused less on criticisms of him as not reliably conservative. Just 39% of MSNBC's assertions about McCain were on this topic compared to 49% on Fox News and 46% on CNN.

The biggest factor for Obama’s positive coverage on MSNBC was less coverage of the assertion that he is too inexperienced to be president. Only 7% of the Obama themes on MSNBC made this claim compared with 17% on Fox News and 19% on CNN.

In our study of the first three months of the campaign in 2007 and again in the primary season of 2008, we found that MSNBC has been consistently more positive to all of the candidates than any other cable channel.

*Fox News*

Fox News was the harshest of the three channels on the presumptive Republican nominee. More than half (55%) of the prominent personal statements about McCain were negative, the vast majority of which (49% overall) questioned his conservatism.

<b>Total Campaign Coverage about Each Candidate</b>			
<i>By Cable Network, Jan. 1—Mar. 9, 2008</i>			
Candidate	Fox News	CNN	MSNBC
Obama	39%	41%	49%
Clinton	37	41	48
McCain	36	29	23

*Based on total campaign stories that were 25% or more about that candidate*

In its criticism, Fox News devoted more overall attention to McCain compared with the other cable channels, nearly the same attention it gave the two leading Democrats, 36% for McCain, 37% for Clinton and 39% for Obama. Both CNN and MSNBC, on the other hand, devoted far less of their coverage to the McCain campaign than they did to Clinton’s or Obama’s.

Fox News was also more positive in its portrayal of Obama’s major personal narrative than either McCain or Clinton. Fully 69% of the assertions about Obama personally were positive, a number that rivals what he received on MSNBC (70%).

Fox News did offer more positive than negative assertions about Clinton, but less so than the other channels (54% positive versus 70% on CNN and 72% on MSNBC). In particular, Fox News gave more attention to the image of Clinton as unlikable and divisive than either of the other networks, (22% versus 13% on CNN and only 4% on MSNBC).

*CNN*

If MSNBC was the most positive channel for each candidate, and Fox News was the harshest on Clinton and McCain, then CNN fell somewhere in between.

Coverage of Clinton’s personal narrative was nearly as positive as on MSNBC, an overwhelming 70% of all assertions studied. McCain’s personal message was almost

evenly balanced (49% positive and 51% negative), versus a negative tilt on Fox (55% negative) and a positive one on MSNBC (53% positive)

Obama, on the other hand, found CNN to be much tougher on his campaign than either of the other channels. In particular, CNN spent less time reaffirming the notion that Obama representing hope and change (19% of Obama themes versus 28% on Fox and 26% on MSNBC). The network also spent more time questioning his integrity and honesty (11% versus 6% at both MSNBC and Fox.)

### **Talk Radio**

In talk radio, the campaign was also a major focus. In the five talk radio shows tracked as part of PEJ's News Coverage Index, more than two-thirds (67%) of the airtime was devoted to the race. Clinton was the biggest focus of attention. Fully 37% of the campaign segments including her as a significant figure, followed by Obama at 30% of the segments and McCain at 23%.

While McCain got the least amount of attention on talk radio, he also got the most negative attention when it came to the personal narrative themes about him. Only 19% of the assertions about McCain personally were positive in nature while 81% were negative. By far, the biggest topic of conversation for McCain was the question of whether he was a true conservative politician. Fully 69% of the assertions about McCain, and 73% from the three conservative talk show hosts included in our sample, were supporting the notion that McCain was not a true conservative. From the conservative talk show hosts, only 16% of assertions about McCain were positive. Liberal radio talk show hosts, by contrast, barely paid attention to McCain during this time period; only 12% of campaign segments including McCain in any meaningful way.

One major reason for the amount of negative coverage about McCain on conservative talk radio was the doubts about his ideological credentials. Top-rated hosts such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity made McCain a key target during the Republican primary season. They argued that such candidates as Fred Thompson and Mitt Romney were genuine conservatives while McCain was a maverick and the candidate of the mainstream, or as Limbaugh calls them, the "drive-by" media.

If McCain was given a hard time from talk radio, so was Hillary Clinton. Thirty percent of the assertions about her suggested that she lacked core beliefs or was too politically calculating. (This included 16% of the assertions on the two liberal radio shows we tracked and 38% of the assertions on conservative talk radio.) Overall, only 25% of the assertions on conservative talk radio about Clinton were positive compared to a much higher 55% on liberal talk radio.

Obama found himself with much more support on talk radio, both for liberals and conservatives alike. Among liberal talkers, 67% of the assertions were positive. Conservative talkers, who would seem to oppose the Democratic senator's campaign, also gave Obama more positive assertions (55%) than negative ones (45%). That was a

rate more than three times higher than they gave the Republican front-runner McCain. The motives here are impossible to divine, but one obvious possibility is that a desire among conservative talk hosts to defeat a familiar antagonist in Clinton made Obama seem more attractive.

## **BEYOND THE MASTER NARRATIVES**

### **Horse Race vs. Policy vs. Personal Matters**

Beyond the master narratives about each candidate personally, what was the broader focus of the coverage so far?

To answer this, the study also examined a different set of elements in the campaign coverage, and over a longer period of time. As part of PEJ's regular Campaign Coverage Index, the study analyzed every campaign story from January through May 18, almost 8,800 stories. Each story was coded for both the topic of the story and which party was the primary subject (Democrats, Republicans, mix of both, or third parties).

The clearest finding is that the coverage has been overwhelmingly about political concerns—tactics, strategy, horse race—as opposed to policy, background or personal issues.

Fully 78% of the stories studied between January 1 and the first week of May 4 have focused on such political matters. By contrast, policy stories made up 7% of the stories, personal matters, 7%, and public record, 2%.

That the horse race focus may be particularly understandable given that there were 84 primaries and caucuses between January 1 and May 4.<sup>5</sup> This might be the time when journalists would most defend horse race coverage. With a contest every few days, the news was the horse race and the voting results.

And indeed this number is higher than during the roughly same period a year earlier, when a PEJ-Shorenstein study from January through May 2007 found that 63% of stories were focused on the politics of the race. During those early days, arguably the horse race was softest, and the polls that helped define it were the least likely to accurately predict actual outcomes.

Thus the coverage became about a fifth more political in 2008 than it was in early 2007 (78% vs. 63%).

But 2008 probably also breaks down into two distinct periods, one from January through March, in which the primaries were highly concentrated, and the period after Ohio and Texas, when six weeks went by before the next contest in Pennsylvania. Did

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<sup>5</sup> The 84 figure includes Democratic and Republican contests separately. It also includes non-state oriented contests like Samoa and "Democrats abroad."

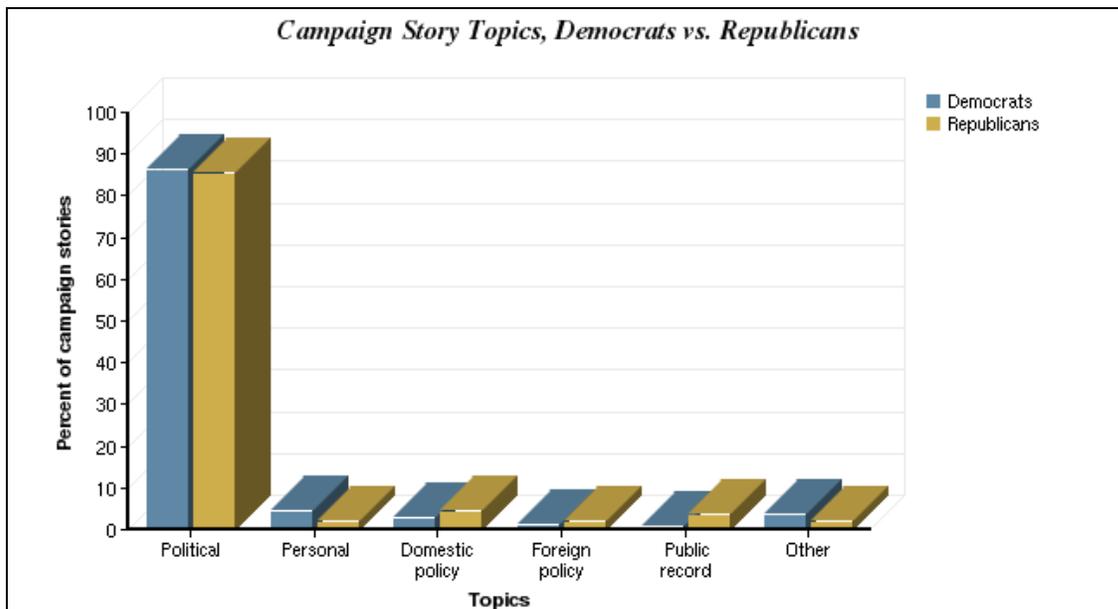
the nature of the coverage change along with the pace of the primary schedule? Somewhat, but the difference is not dramatic.

If we break the 2008 race so far into periods, we will see that the horse race coverage was indeed more intense between January 1 and March 9, the end of the week of the Ohio and Texas primaries. During those weeks, fully 83% of all campaign stories studied were about political matters. Policy matters made up 5% of the stories, personal matters 3% and public record 2%.

In the six weeks without a primary leading up to Pennsylvania and the two weeks after that, the coverage did get somewhat less political, but not dramatically so.

During this less concentrated period, 67% of the stories were political in nature. Another 13% have been about personal matters, and 12% have been about policy. Just under 3% have been about the candidates' public record.

Those numbers, incidentally, do not vary by party.



Beyond the focus on politics, however, there were some differences in the way the two parties were covered.

First, the coverage was focused more on the heated Democratic race than on the GOP. Fully 51% of the stories through March 9 were focused on Democrats, versus 31% that focused on the GOP (15% were focused on both). And between March 10 and May 18, 79% of the stories have been focused more on Democrats.

The coverage of the GOP candidates also tended to focus somewhat more on policy differences. Coverage of Democrats focused more on personal differences.

In all, 7% of the stories about the GOP focused on policy, versus 4% for Democrats.

Coverage of personal matters, meanwhile, totaled 5% of the stories studied for Democrats, while such personal coverage amounted to just 2% for the GOP.

The higher level of policy coverage on the GOP side may reflect the fact that the differences among the candidates were more philosophical. The differences between Huckabee and McCain, in other words, were over policy. This reinforces the ideological narrative about McCain, and the extent to which he was or wasn't really a reliable conservative.

The lack of policy coverage among Democrats, in that sense, may in turn reflect the idea that the main Democratic rivals differ little over policy. Whether Clinton's health plan would include everyone while Obama's might not, in many people's minds, might not be a decisive difference.

But the focus instead on more personal matters may also reflect that the differences between Obama and Clinton often boiled down to matters of personal appeal, background and history

### **No Overarching Narrative to the Race**

The other major finding beyond the personal narratives of the race comes from looking at what events or themes got the most coverage in the race so far, to see if there is a pattern or basic larger narrative emerging in the coverage.

To do this, the study examined the story-line in each story, the event it was about. If stories about primary and caucus results are eliminated, what we see is that no clear narrative has emerged. The story-line or event that has received the most coverage so far is Obama's relationship with Rev. Jeremiah Wright, which accounted for 6% of all stories and dwarfed all of the other episodes or storyline of the campaign that didn't have to do with the horse race itself.

The next biggest story-line is what will happen with superdelegates, which accounted for less than 2% of the stories studied. And that has been followed by Obama's comments about working-class Americans being bitter about their plight (2% of stories).

<b>Top Ten Campaign Stories, Jan 1 – May 4, 2008</b>		
Rank	Story	% of newshole
1	Obama's relationship with Rev. Wright	6.4%
2	The issue of superdelegates	1.6
3	Obama's "bitter" remark	1.5
4	Florida and Michigan primary re-do	1.4
5	McCain scandal - ethics/ lobbying history	1.3
6	Role of Bill Clinton	1.2
7	Pennsylvania Democratic debate	1.1
8	Kennedy family endorses Obama	0.9
9	McCain attempts to unite GOP	0.9
10	Clinton's Bosnia story from 1996	0.9

Thus two of the biggest stories of the year have been problems frustrating the Obama camp. This is a much larger percentage of the coverage than anything frustrating either McCain's or Clinton's messages.

The biggest problematic story-line for McCain, beyond questions about his conservatism, has been his relationships with lobbyists. This was the fifth-biggest story or event of the year, and it was concentrated largely in one week, when the *New York Times* tried to focus on concerns among unnamed members of McCain's staff about a relationship the Senator had with one female lobbyist in particular. The story accounted for 1% of all stories studied.

The biggest story that involved Hillary Clinton in particular concerned the role of former President Bill Clinton in her campaign at 1% of the stories. Next for her was the recollection that she was under sniper fire during a trip to Bosnia in 1996, which made up slightly less than 1% of the stories studied.

Contrary to the idea that Obama's coverage has been entirely positive, in other words, two of the three biggest story-lines of the year have been negative for him. Perhaps more important is the fact that these stories emerged late in the primary season and the Wright story in particular may not have run its course.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This report is a joint project conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

PEJ and Shorenstein designed the study, analyzed the findings and wrote the report in conjunction. The content analysis was conducted by PEJ staff with the financial support of both the Shorenstein Center and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Professor Marion Just was the lead researcher from The Shorenstein Center.

### **Sample Design**

The content was based on media coverage originally analyzed for PEJ's weekly News Coverage Index (NCI) from January 1-March 9, 2008.

Each week, the NCI examines the coverage from 48 different outlets in five media sectors, including newspapers, online news, network TV, cable TV, and radio. Following a system of rotation, 35 outlets each weekday are studied as well as 7 newspapers each Sunday.

For this particular study of campaign coverage, ABC and CBS radio headlines were excluded. Therefore, the 46 media outlets examined for this campaign study were as follows:

#### **Newspapers (13 in all)**

*The New York Times* was coded every day

#### Coded two out of these four every day

*The Washington Post*

*Los Angeles Times*

*USA Today*

*The Wall Street Journal*

#### Coded two out of these four every day

*The Boston Globe*

*Star Tribune* (Minneapolis)

*Austin American-Statesman*

*Albuquerque Journal*

#### Coded 2 out of these 4 every day

*The Sun Chronicle* (Attleboro, MA)

*Star Beacon* (Ashtabula, Ohio)

*Chattanooga Times Free Press*

*The Bakersfield Californian*

#### **Web sites (Five in all, Mon-Fri)**

CNN.com

Yahoo News

MSNBC.com

Google News  
AOL News

**Network TV** (Seven in all, Mon-Fri)

Morning shows

ABC – Good Morning America  
CBS – Early Show  
NBC – Today

Evening news

ABC – World News Tonight  
CBS – CBS Evening News  
NBC – NBC Nightly News  
PBS – Newshour with Jim Lehrer

**Cable TV** (Fifteen in all, Mon-Fri)

Daytime (2:00 to 2:30 pm) coded 2 out of 3 every day

CNN  
Fox News  
MSNBC

Nighttime CNN – coded 3 out of the 4 every day

Lou Dobbs Tonight  
Situation Room (6 pm)  
Out in the Open/CNN Election Center  
Anderson Cooper 360

Nighttime Fox News – coded 3 out of the 4 every day

Special Report w/ Brit Hume  
Fox Report w/ Shepard Smith  
O'Reilly Factor  
Hannity & Colmes

Nighttime MSNBC – coded 2 out of the 4 every day

Tucker (6 pm)  
Hardball (7 pm)  
Countdown w/ Keith Olbermann  
Live with Dan Abrams

**Radio** (Six in all, Mon-Fri)

NPR Morning Edition every day \*

\*From January 1 to 11, we coded the first half-hour of “Morning Edition” (5:00-5:30 am); from Jan 14 on, we coded following a rotation between the first half-hour (5:00-5:30 am) and the first 30 minutes of the second hour (6:00-6:30 am).

### Talk Radio

Rush Limbaugh was coded every day

One out of two additional conservatives each day

Sean Hannity

Michael Savage

One out of two liberals each day

Ed Schultz

Randi Rhodes

From that content, the study included all campaign-related stories:

- On the front page of newspapers
- In the entirety of commercial network evening newscasts.
- The first 30 minutes of network morning news, the PBS evening news, and all cable programs
- The first 30 minutes of the talk radio programs and a 30 minute segment of NPR’s Morning Edition
- The top 5 stories on each website at the time of capture

The basic NCI codebook codes for topic at three different levels, and includes the following variables: date coded, Story ID number, story date, source, broadcast start time, broadcast story start timecode, headline, story word count, placement/prominence, story format, story describer, broadcast story ending timecode and lead newsmaker. Since January 1, 2008, three additional variables were analyzed for campaign stories in the NCI routine coding. These included the variables campaign lead newsmakers, significant presence and presidential campaign topic. The complete methodology for the weekly NCI and CCI, a sub-set of NCI, has further details on the coding system and intercoder reliability.

### **Sample Selection**

*Stories from January 1 through March 9, 2008*

To arrive at the sample for this particular study of campaign coverage, we began by pulling all the stories from January 1 through March 9, 2008, that were originally coded as campaign stories, meaning that 50% or more of the story was devoted to discussion of the ongoing presidential campaign. From that group, we selected stories that focused on at least one of the five candidates (Mitt Romney, John McCain, Mike Huckabee, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama) for 25% or more of the time or space of the story.

All newspaper and online stories were then included. For broadcast, stories 30 seconds or less was removed from the sample. For the stories from cable TV and the three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) further sampling was conducted by selecting every other campaign story by outlet. This was done by listing the stories from each show in chronological order and randomly selecting the first story. We then selected every-other story within each outlet to arrive at the final sample of television stories.

This process resulted in the following sample size for the stories from 2008: 2,590 total stories, including 413 newspaper stories, 281 stories from news websites, 540 stories from network TV, 984 from cable TV, and 372 from radio programs. Out of these stories, we discovered and coded 5,374 total assertions.

### *Stories about John McCain from 2007*

This study also examined John McCain's major narrative themes throughout 2007. To gather the stories focused on McCain in 2007, we selected all the campaign stories in the weekly News Coverage Index sample that were about the campaign and included McCain as 50% of the story or more.

For all of 2007, 239 stories were selected that focused on McCain and the campaign, which resulted in 199 McCain narrative assertions.

### **Coding Design**

A coding protocol was designed for this project based on previous studies by PEJ and Professor Just and the particular aims of the PEJ-Shorenstein study.

For each of the five major presidential candidates (Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, John McCain, Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee) a survey of campaign coverage was conducted and the coding team, Professor Just, and senior PEJ staff arrived at four or more common themes that were appearing frequently within the media coverage about each candidate. These themes became the assertions that the coders were looking to identify within each campaign story in the study's sample. In some instances, new master themes emerged after coding had begun and were added to the analysis.

### *Unit of Analysis*

The unit of analysis for this study was the assertion (or thread/theme). Any time a coder came across an assertion within one of the stories that were coded, he or she noted the assertion and coded the following variables for each assertion. Because the unit of analysis was the assertion and not the story, many stories had multiple assertions within them, and some stories may not have had any relevant assertions for this study.

## *Variables*

In addition to certain existing variables from the NCI and CCI projects, the variables included in this study were the following: theme/message, affirming the narrative thread or rebuttal, significance of the statement within the story, and variable source of statement.

***Theme/message*** are the overarching themes that the press, candidates, and operatives focus on and are usually centered on a candidate's character. As noted above, in most cases the master themes about each of the five candidates were identified and tested prior to coding. This variable measures which of the themes the statement addressed.

***Affirming the narrative thread or rebuttal*** captures whether the assertion being coded is affirming the narrative thread or refuting it.

***Significance of the statement within the story*** indicates whether the thread was the central theme of the story or whether it was just a passing reference in a story about something else. For a thread to be a significant part of a story, 50% or more of the story must relate directly to that thread.

***Source of statement*** designates the person who is making the statement. This is not necessarily the author of the piece, but the person who expresses the particular *statement*. For example, if a newspaper story quotes an unnamed voter as asserting that, "Senator Obama represents change," that means the source of the statement is the voter and not the journalist writing the piece.

## **Coding Team & Process**

Using the existing data in the Index and adding the codes for new variables, the team responsible for performing the content analysis on this particular study was made up of five trained coders, a coding administrator, and a senior research methodologist on the PEJ staff.

We have tested all of the variables derived from the regular weekly Index coding and all the variables reached a level of agreement of 80% or higher. For specific information about those tests, see the methodology section for the NCI.

During coder training for this particular study, intercoder reliability tests were conducted for all the campaign-specific variables. There were two different tests conducted to assure reliability. The first test was to assure that coders could identify the assertions within campaign stories. Each coder was given the same group of stories and asked to identify where threads appeared in those stories. The agreement between all the coders on this task was above 80%, however, some further training was conducted with each coder to make sure that the instances of disagreement were identified and understood prior to the start of the actual coding for the study.

The second test consisted of each coder being given a list of assertions and asked to code each of the campaign specific variables for those threads.

From that test, the specific levels of agreement for the variables in this study were as follows:

Thread/statement: 90%

Affirming narrative thread or rebuttal: 95%

Significance of statement within the story: 80%

Source of statement: 86%

### **Additional Analysis**

The results of PEJ's coding were twinned with a companion survey of public attitudes about the candidates by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. The survey was conducted twice, on February 8-11 and April 18-21, 2008, to gauge shifts in public resonance about the candidates. Together, the two studies allowed us to explore how much these press messages were shaping public opinion of the candidates.