

Poll Reflects Continued Mistrust of Media Election Coverage

Americans Cite Trivial and Biased Coverage, Rate News Sources Based on Trust

Cambridge, MA— Most Americans do not trust what they hear or read in media coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign. Poll results just released by the **Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School** and the **Merriman River Group** show that 62% of those surveyed are distrustful of campaign media coverage and that same percentage think that the media does a poor job of separating their own opinions from the facts in their reporting. The public's trust has not improved since one year ago, when a statistically equivalent 64% said they did not trust the media's election coverage.

Among the reasons for the lack of trust:

- 89% *agree* or *strongly agree* that the news media focuses too much on trivial issues,
- 77% *agree* or *strongly agree* that the news media is politically biased,
- 82% *agree* or *strongly agree* that media coverage has too much influence on who Americans vote for,
- And, to a large extent, negative coverage appears to be responsible for this influence; 42% say the media has influenced their vote *against* a candidate through negative coverage, while only 28% say it has influenced their vote *for* a candidate through positive coverage.

“Americans believe we face a crisis in leadership and that this election is critically important to the country's future,” said Seth Rosenthal, the study's lead author. “At a time when Americans are demanding better leaders, their mistrust of the media's coverage of the presidential campaign is troubling.”

Political Bias

77% of Americans believe that the news media's election coverage is politically biased: either *too liberal*, *too conservative*, or *both*. 45% say the coverage is *both*, *sometimes too liberal* and *sometimes too conservative*, 25% say that the media is *too liberal* and 5% say it is *too conservative*.

Americans' Most Trusted Media Sources

Americans vary widely in their response to the open-ended question asking *what news source or outlet do you trust most for information about the candidates and the campaign?* 39.5% trust cable television most, 18.9% trust over-air television news most, and 10.6% trust print media most. But 11.7% of Americans say they either don't trust or don't use any media source for campaign coverage.

Two news sources in particular, CNN and the Fox News Channel, are the clear leaders in Americans' trust. 19.7% of Americans name CNN's coverage as their most trusted and 13.9% name Fox as their most trusted. However, these two groups hold very different political attitudes.¹

- Those who trust Fox most support Senator McCain 86% - 6%, while those trust CNN most support Senator Obama 55% - 27%,
- 76% of those who trust Fox say they are *conservative* or *very conservative*, while 45% who trust CNN say they are *moderate* and 34% *liberal* or *very liberal*,
- 76% of those who trust Fox say the media is *too liberal*, while 52% who trust CNN say the media is *both, sometimes too liberal and sometimes too conservative* and 23% say it is *unbiased*,
- 55% of those who trust Fox most say they have been more influenced by negative coverage, while 14% say they have been more influenced by positive coverage. In comparison, those who trust CNN most are statistically split on this question; 40% say they have been influenced most by negative coverage and 38% say they have been most influenced by positive coverage.

“These findings suggest that the news media is at a crossroads in shaping their political coverage and winning viewers’ trust,” said Rosenthal. “One road forward is to provide coverage that echoes the political views of a particular segment of the population, gaining their trust while alienating others. The other is to make a serious attempt to discover why so many viewers of all political stripes perceive bias, and to strive for political coverage that more viewers trust as objective.”

The poll, of a demographically representative survey of 997 U.S. citizens, was conducted from September 13–22, 2008 and has a margin of error of $\pm 3.1\%$.

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I. Now, I'd like to ask you some questions about the news media's coverage of the presidential campaign...

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
1a. Would you say that you generally trust or do not trust the news media's coverage on the most important aspects of the presidential campaign? (2008)			
Trust	30%	42%	18%
Do Not Trust	62	49	75
Not Sure*	8	9	7
1b. Would you say that you generally trust or do not trust the news media's coverage on the most important aspects of the presidential campaign? (2007)	Overall		
Trust	34%		
Do Not Trust	64		
Not Sure*	2		
2. Media coverage has too much influence on who Americans vote for	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
Strongly Agree	44%	41%	51%
Agree	38	38	36
Disagree	13	16	11
Strongly Disagree	2	3	0
Not Sure*	3	2	2
3. The news media focuses too much on trivial rather than important issues	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
Strongly Agree	54%	53%	59%
Agree	35	36	31
Disagree	8	10	7
Strongly Disagree	1	1	2
Not Sure*	2	0	1
4. The media does a good job of separating their own opinions from the actual facts of the campaign	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
Strongly Agree	7%	8%	8%
Agree	27	35	14
Disagree	34	37	32
Strongly Disagree	28	18	45
Not Sure*	4	2	1

5.	The news media is politically biased	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	Strongly Agree	42%	31%	59%
	Agree	35	40	29
	Disagree	16	23	6
	Strongly Disagree	3	2	3
	Not Sure*	4	4	3
6.	Do you think the news media is too liberal, too conservative, or both, sometimes too liberal and sometimes too conservative?	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	Too Liberal	24%	8%	49%
	Too Conservative	5	9	2
	Both, Sometimes Too Liberal and Sometimes Too Conservative	45	52	34
	None of the Above	1	1	2
	Not Sure*	2	1	1
	Not Biased (Question 5, <i>disagree</i> or <i>strongly disagree</i>)	19	25	9
	Not Sure* (Question 5)	4	4	3
		Trust CNN	Trust Fox News	
	Too Liberal	14%	76%	
	Too Conservative	5	1	
	Both, Sometimes Too Liberal and Sometimes Too Conservative	52	19	
	None of the Above	1	0	
	Not Sure*	1	0	
	Not Biased (Question 5, <i>disagree</i> or <i>strongly disagree</i>)	23	4	
	Not Sure* (Question 5)	4	0	

7a. What news source or outlet do you trust most for information about the candidates and the campaign?*

Media Type	Media Outlet		
Cable/Satellite Television		39.5%	
	CNN		19.7%
	Fox News		13.9
	MSNBC		3.4
	CSPAN		1.3
	Link TV		0.4
	Comedy Central		0.3
	Unspecified/Other		0.5
Over-Air Television		18.9	
	NBC		4.4
	Local News		2.4
	PBS		1.5
	CBS		1.4
	ABC		1.3
	Unspecified/Other		7.9
Print Media		10.6	
	Wall Street Journal		0.8
	New York Times		0.6
	Associated Press		0.4
	Newsweek		0.3
	Newspapers (Unspecified/Other)		5.6
	Magazines (Unspecified/Other)		1.7
	Print Media (Unspecified/Other)		1.2
Don't Trust Any/None		8.5	
Internet/Blogs		8.1	
	Liberal Blogs		0.3
	Conservative Blogs		0.3
	Unspecified/Other		7.5
Radio		4.1	
	National Public Radio		1.7
	Conservative Talk Radio		0.6
	Liberal Talk Radio		0.2
	Unspecified/Other		1.6
Own Research***		3.2	
Multiple Sources		1.2	
Christian Media		0.8	
International Media		0.8	
	BBC		0.5
	Unspecified/Other		0.3
Don't Know/Not Sure		2.6	
Refused/Uninterpretable		1.7	

7b. Percent Who Trust _____ Most Who...	...Support Obama	...Support McCain	Margin of Error
CNN (19.7% of sample)	55%	27%	± 7.0%
Fox News Channel (13.9% of sample)	6	86	± 8.3%

7c. Percent Who Trust _____ Most Who Are...	...Liberal or Very Liberal	...Moderate	...Conservative or Very Conservative
CNN	34%	45%	19%
Fox News Channel	5	18	76

8. How would you say the media has influenced your voting decision? Has it provided more positive information about who to vote <i>for</i> , or negative information about who to vote <i>against</i> ?	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
Positive Information About Who to Vote For	28%	35%	24%
Negative Information About Who to Vote Against	42	36	50
Positive and Negative Information Equally*	8	10	7
No Influence on Voting*	16	14	17
Not Planning to Vote*	1	0	0
Not Sure*	5	5	2

	Trust CNN	Trust Fox News
Positive Information About Who to Vote For	38%	14%
Negative Information About Who to Vote Against	40	55
Positive and Negative Information Equally*	11	6
No Influence on Voting*	8	16
Not Planning to Vote*	0	0
Not Sure*	3	9

9. Who would you like to become the next president?*****	Overall	Margin of Error
Obama	47%	± 4.5%
McCain	37	± 5.1%
Other*	7	
Don't know*	8	

II. Weighted demographics

		Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
D1. Gender				
	Male	48%	49%	45%
	Female	52	51	55
		Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
D2. Median Age		44 years	42 years	49 years
D3. Party Identification		Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	Democrat	31%	55%	5%
	Republican	24	3	56
	Independent	40	41	36
	Other*	2	0	2
	Not Sure/Refused*	3	1	1
D4. Household Income		Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	Less than \$20,000	12%	13%	10%
	\$20,000 - \$34,999	14	17	11
	\$35,000 - \$49,999	13	12	10
	\$50,000 - \$74,999	17	17	18
	\$75,000 - \$99,000	12	10	15
	\$100,000 - \$124,999	9	9	10
	\$125,000 - \$149,000	4	4	7
	\$150,000 and above	8	8	10
	Refused*	11	10	9
D5. Born Again/Evangelical Christian		Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	Yes	35%	28%	44%
	No, neither	61	68	54
	Not Sure/Refused*	4	4	2
D6. Political Orientation		Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	Very Liberal	6%	12%	2%
	Liberal	21	32	6
	Moderate	34	36	30
	Conservative	25	13	41
	Very Conservative	10	3	17
	Not Sure/Refused/Other*	4	4	4

Method

Survey results were obtained through telephone interviews of a weighted, representative sample of U.S. citizens, 18 years of age or older, in the continental United States.

Study data were collected by Merriman River Group. A total of 997 respondents were interviewed. Random-digit dialing was used to ensure that individuals with unlisted numbers and cell phones would be included in the study. U.S. Census data were used to weight key demographic dimensions to ensure that the sample was representative of the adult population. Statistical weighting was conducted by Martin R. Frankel, Ph.D.

Interviews were conducted from September 13–22, 2008. Calls were made from 12:00 noon to 9:00 P.M. in each local time zone. The response rate was 28% and the margin of error was $\pm 3.1\%$.

The survey is part of the *National Leadership Index 2008*, a collaboration between the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School and the Merriman River Group. *The National Leadership Index* is an annual report, begun in 2005, of the Center for Public Leadership's National Study of Confidence in Leadership. Full results of the 2008 study will be released on November 24, 2008. Past editions of the *National Leadership Index* can be found on-line at:

http://content.ksg.harvard.edu/leadership/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=413&Itemid=98

Notes

1. Results specifically represent attitudes of individuals who choose Fox or CNN as their *most trusted* source of information about the campaign and candidates. These analyses may not generalize to the attitudes of more average or casual Fox or CNN viewers.

*All responses of *not sure, other, no influence on voting, and not planning to vote* were volunteered by interviewees. In some cases, data in *not sure* or *refused* response categories were adjusted to correct rounding errors so data sums to 100%.

**Open-ended responses. In cases where multiple responses were given, only the first response was coded. All specific media outlets with $\geq 1\%$ response rates are listed. Specific media outlets of interest with $< 1\%$ response rate are listed at the authors' discretion.

***Own research category includes examining candidates' speeches, voting records, and promotional materials, as well as watching debates, and discussing election with others.

****Candidate preference data are *not* adjusted with respect to voter registration status, likelihood of voting, or voter turnout models. Accordingly, the candidate preference question should not be interpreted in the context of any potential outcome of the voting in the 2008 presidential election.

Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School: <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/leadership>

Merriman River Group: <http://www.merrimanriver.com>

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