

# Buying their way into 2008

## The importance of money in coverage of the presidential race

**Money is an integral part of the American political system. Could there be a connection between the fundraising figures of a candidate and the amount of press coverage he or she receives? MEDIA TENOR's analysis of three American news programs suggests this. Throughout the past summer, 98 percent of the election coverage focused exclusively on candidates with at least \$20 million dollars in the bank (Chart 3).**

Candidate fundraising was not only an important predictor of media presence; it was also an important coverage subject. The three U.S. news networks reported on the topic of fundraising more than any policy issue other than Iraq (Chart 2). Most of the networks' election coverage focused on campaign issues and polling, rather than policy issues. But the candidate's personalities also factored in heavily.

When combined with fundraising, these three topics accounted for 80 percent of all coverage.

Most negative reporting on the candidates was attributed to campaign setbacks, Iraq war policies and/or disappointing performances in the polls. On the flip side, high poll numbers were key for candidates to secure good press, though it didn't hurt if they delivered a particularly good line at one of the debates. Colorful campaign ads and cross-country tours put celebrity candidates in the headlines, as did their famous family members and personal anomalies – Hillary Clinton as the first female, Barack Obama as the first African American and Mitt Romney as the first Mormon.

### Coverage goes to the "top tier"

The "top tier" is a loose term used by U.S. journalists to describe which candidates are leading the

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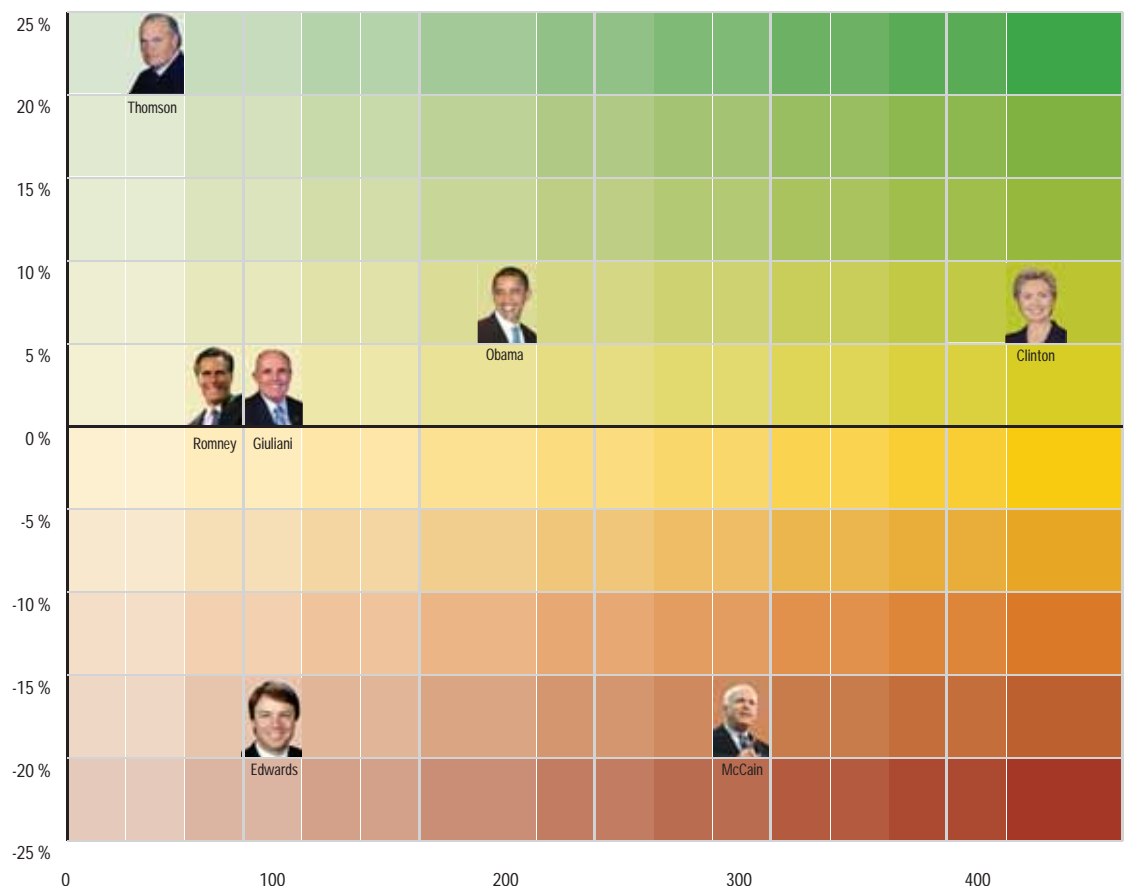
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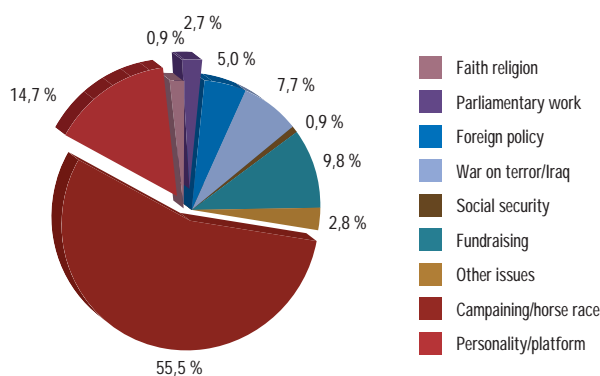
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### 1) Visibility and ratings of top tier candidates



Basis: 5,925 statements on/from selected US politicians in 3 US TV Networks (ABC, CBS, NBC); June/July 2007

## 2) Campaign coverage by topic



Basis: 5,925 statements on/from selected US politicians in 3 US TV Networks (ABC, CBS, NBC), June/July 2007

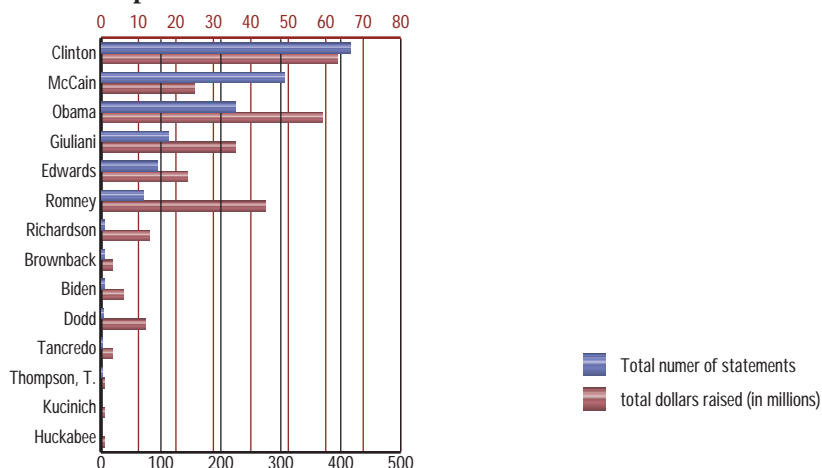
race. It is determined by poll numbers, bankrolls and various intangibles like charisma, strength of supporters and journalistic “instinct.” In June and July 2007 the so-called “top tier”– Rudy Giuliani, Mitt Romney and John McCain for the Republicans; Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards for the Democrats – received more than 98 percent of the total reporting, even though they represent less than half the candidates.

While the “tier” distinction may help voters identify which candidates are worth watching, it works to the detriment of second and third tier candidates. Higher tier candidates are prevented from attracting higher poll numbers and donor dollars, due to a lack of name-recognition and saliency.

’s analysis of the 2004 election showed that press coverage shifted money and public opinion away from Howard Dean to John Kerry. The best chance for the forgotten tier to reach out to U.S. voters has been through a partisan debate series that has included every major declared candidate. But even at these forums, higher tier candidates have complained about receiving unequal attention.

American journalists recently began to include actor/politician Fred Thompson in the top tier, even though he has yet to declare his entry into the race. However his fundraising, poll numbers and passionate following (dubbed “Fred Heads”) created a perfect formula to be cashed in for journalists’ ink. According to MEDIA TENOR research, Thompson’s media presence surpassed that of all second and third-

## 3) Fundraising dollars compared with media presence



Basis: 5,925 statements on/from selected US politicians in 3 US TV Networks (ABC, CBS, NBC); June/July 2007; Fundraising data provided by the U.S. Federal Election Commission. (Fred Thompson excluded.)

tier candidates – he received a total of 18 mentions, while second and third-tier candidates received an average of 5.5. With a prominent role on the popular American TV show *Law and Order*, Thompson has demonstrated the power of cross-pollination in American media, entertainment and politics. **Chart 1** demonstrates that his coverage was the most positive (albeit sparse) of any top tier candidate.

### Media spotlight rests on Clinton and casts a glare on McCain

Coverage of the Democratic presidential candidates exceeded that of the Republicans by a margin of nearly 20 percent. This disproportionate coverage was due in no small part to the “star power” of the Democrat’s two front runners. In June and July both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama garnered substantial press for blockbuster YouTube clips – Ms. Clinton starring in highly-trafficked political ad with her husband, in which they spoofed the mafia family from TV’s *The Sopranos*; and Mr. Obama receiving a racy (though unsolicited) paean from an aspiring female singer/songwriter called, “I Got a Crush on Obama.”

Hillary Clinton led the pack in terms of individual candidate coverage, attracting nearly a third of all the references to the presidential race, as well as more mentions than the rest of her democratic counterparts combined. Each spike in her coverage was around the time of a Democratic debate, at which she drew big applause with several controversial comments: “For 15 years, I have stood up against the right-wing

## Further questions

How does media coverage impact a candidate's poll numbers and fundraising?

What tipped the balance for particular candidates to be referred to as a first, second or third tier candidate?

At what point will the coverage of fundraising subside? What will replace it?

machine," she said at the August 8 forum, "and I've come out stronger, so if you want a winner who knows how to take them on, I'm your girl."

### A costly haircut and John McCain's bad week

John McCain was once considered to be a shoo-in for the Republican nomination. But in the past few months he has slipped below the 20th percentile of Republican public opinion polls. In MEDIA TENOR's analysis, he came in second to Clinton with the amount of coverage he received. However it was the most negative of any candidate.

Both McCain's high presence and negative rating could be attributed to one particularly bad week, during which he received 251 mentions. At this time, a Senate debate raged over legislation demanding an Iraq pullout. McCain was put in the position of defending the President's unpopular position, imploring an impatient American public to wait out the results of the Baghdad troop surge.

Throughout his political career one of McCain's trademarks has been that he stands by his principles, even when they are unpopular. But his strident and visible support for the surge has severely cut his support among Republicans who no longer back a continued U.S. presence. In July, McCain announced disappointing fundraising numbers, which forced him to reduce his campaign staff by half.

Rudy Giuliani filled the void. He led Republican polls throughout the summer. And yet, during this period he received little media attention. According to MEDIA TENOR research, he received about a quarter of the coverage given to Hillary Clinton.

Barack Obama's individual coverage ranked third



Barack Obama

among the candidates, despite his reputation as a media darling. In late July, Obama was criticized by both sides of the aisle for hawkish comments he made about his position towards Pakistan. He subsequently told an Associated Press reporter, "I think it would be a profound mistake for us to use nuclear weapons in any circumstance," violating a cardinal rule of American public diplomacy that you do not make blanket statements about nuclear policy. Both statements produced negative coverage that played into the notion that Obama is a foreign policy novice.

John Edwards suffered his own PR blow early in July, when he was reported to have spent \$1,250 on a Beverly Hills hair stylist. The story created the largest buzz around Edwards all summer, undermining his position as an advocate against poverty.

### Journalists follow the money trail

It has already been an unprecedented election for campaign fundraising. The Democrats have shattered every financial record in history. The upshot of this fact has been significant portions of coverage going towards the money race. The subject ranked third on MEDIA TENOR's list of all election-related topics.

The only problem with this amount of coverage is that voters consistently say they do not care about how much money a candidate can raise. According to a June 2007 Pew Research Center poll, more than half of Americans said they wanted to see less coverage of candidate fundraising. Majorities of Democrats, Republicans and Independents also agreed that they would like to see more discussion of the candidates' stances on issues and coverage of second and third tier candidates.

The majority of the network news election coverage focused on campaign-related issues such as public appearances, the shuffling of front runners and "getting to know" the candidates. Fundraising was one of the next most important topics. Its coverage exceeded that of numerous policy issues – including domestic security, faith and religion, social security, environment/energy and both the global and domestic economy. But from the perspective of a journalist, fundraising is a reliable metric by which to gauge a candidate's potential for success on an increasingly expensive American political landscape. (se, sj)

**Basis:** 5,925 statements on/from selected US American politicians in three US TV Networks: ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News

**Time frame of the study:** June 1st – July 30th 2007