



## **Media Fairness? It's in the Eye of the Beholder, National Annenberg Election Survey Data Show**

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Contact: Diana Mutz, [mutz@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:mutz@sas.upenn.edu)

Are the media being fair this campaign season? The answer is in the eye of the beholder. Supporters of the candidate who is doing well in public opinion at the time perceive press coverage as fair, whereas those supporting the opposition see it as lopsided.

These perceptions, however, can change as quickly as public opinion shifts, according to new data released today by the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

“It is common for strong supporters of a candidate to blame media coverage when their candidate’s popularity suffers, and to consider press coverage unfair and the likely reason for their candidate’s lack of apparent success,” said Diana Mutz, Director of Innovation for the National Annenberg Election Survey. “Conversely, when things are going well, it is simply because their candidate is receiving his or her ‘fair’ shake from the press. Media coverage is a highly visible potential cause of shifts in opinion, but it is difficult to please strong advocates on different sides of a contest.”

Overall, roughly equal numbers of Americans perceive the press as having been fair to the candidates as unfair, but the perception of fairness has declined slightly as the campaign has gone on. That generally positive assessment of the press masks a lot of variation both over time and based on differences in the candidate a person supports.

During the pre-primary season, when New York Sen. Hillary Clinton held a substantial lead for the Democratic nomination, supporters of Illinois Sen. Barack Obama were more likely to say news coverage was lopsided. Sen. Clinton’s supporters were more likely to say it was fair (See Table 1). By the thick of the primary season – when public opinion was shifting toward Sen. Obama – his supporters were significantly more likely to say press coverage was fair, and Sen. Clinton supporters to say it was lopsided (See Table 2).

Since January, Sen. Clinton supporters have become much less likely to say that press coverage has been fair, a shift of over 20 percent. During the same time period, Sen. Obama supporters have varied somewhat in perceptions of press coverage. More Obama supporters said coverage

has been fair than unfair, but there has been no clear trend in either direction, according to the NAES data.

Campaign events have produced changes in perceived fairness of press coverage by supporters of the two Democratic candidates. After Super Tuesday, Feb. 5th, perceptions of fairness fell among Sen. Clinton supporters. Perceptions stayed constant among supporters of Sen. Obama until the controversy broke about comments made by his former pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Then, perceptions of fairness among Sen. Obama supporters began to fall. There was also a large drop in perceptions of press fairness among his supporters after the Illinois Senator described white, working-class Pennsylvanians as “bitter.” Fairness perceptions dropped among Sen. Clinton’s supporters after her comments about snipers in Bosnia were proven false (See Table 3).

Data for this study were gathered via the Internet continuously between October 1, 2007 and March 31, 2008. Figure 1 includes data collected between October 1, 2007 and December 31, 2007 from a total of 6,536 self-identified Democrats who preferred either Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama for the Democratic nomination. Figures 2 and 3 include data collected between January 1, 2008 and March 31, 2008 from a total of 7,512 self-identified Democrats who preferred either Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama for the Democratic nomination.

## Appendix

Table 1:

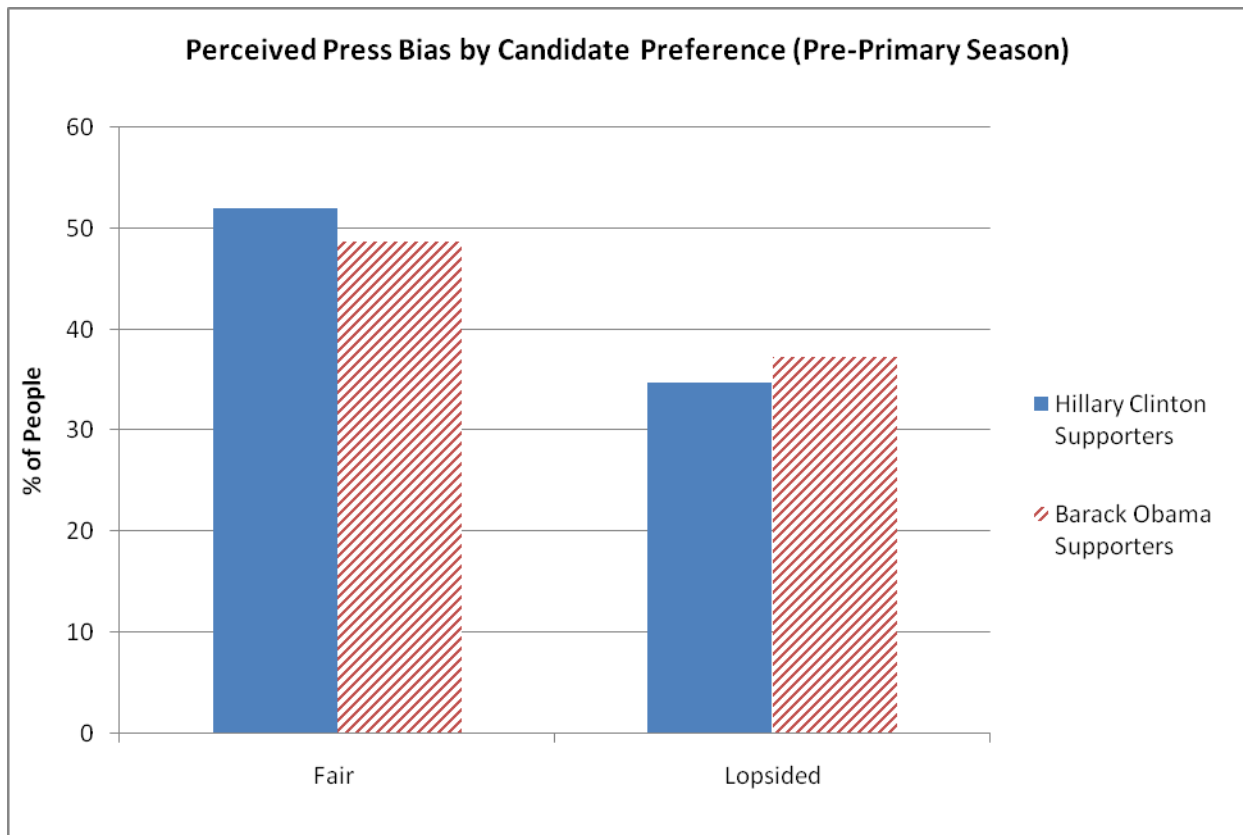


Table 2:

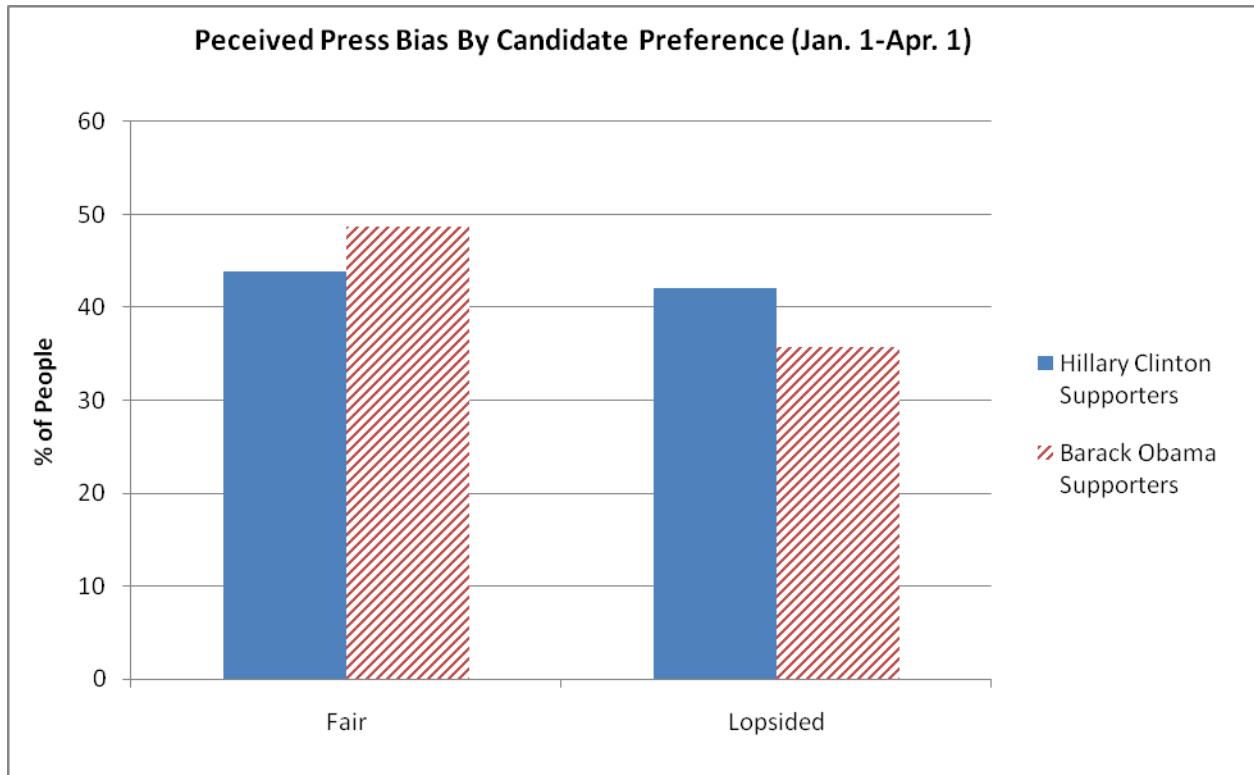
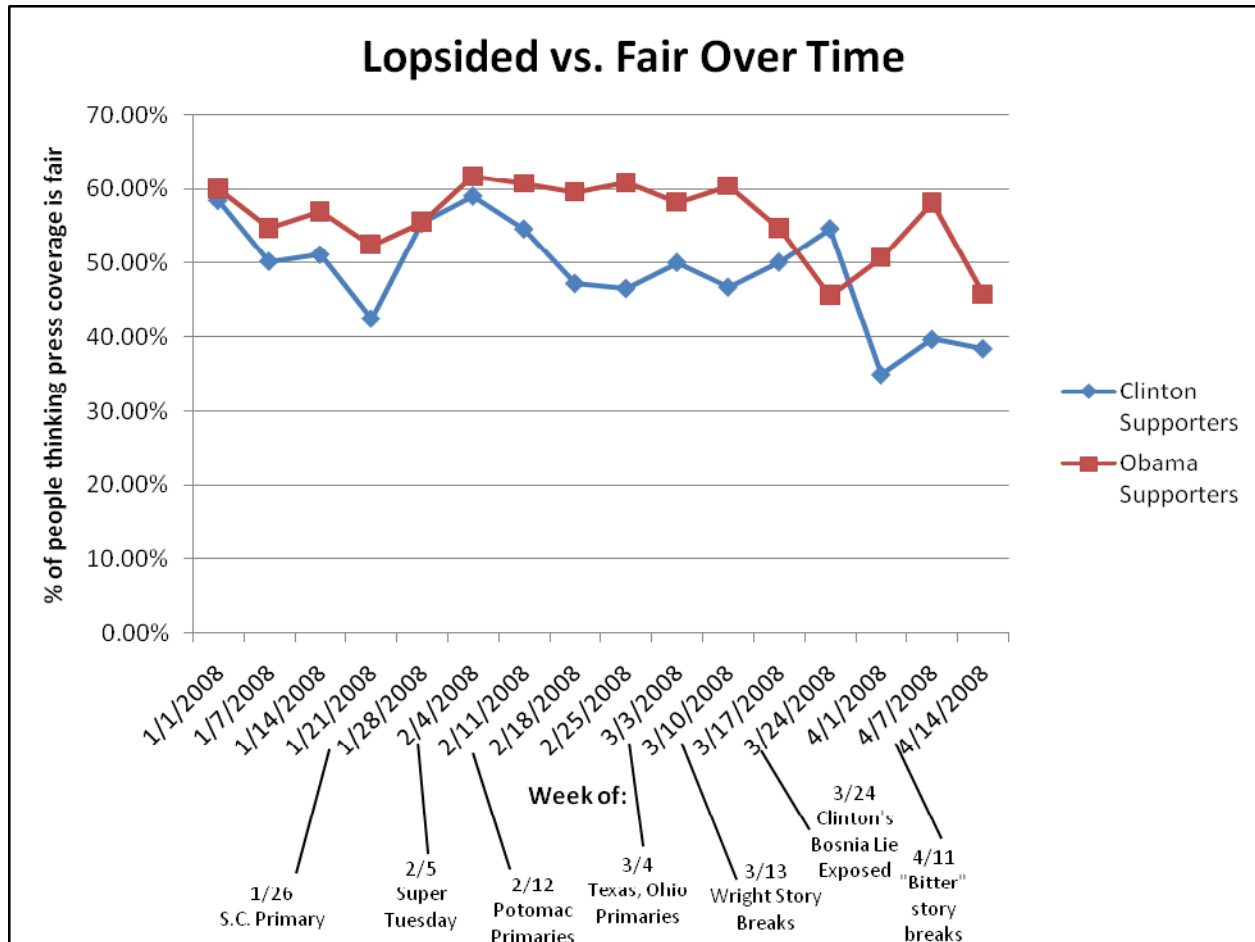


Table 3:



The analysis for this release was conducted by researcher Jason Miller.

**About the survey:** The National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) is a survey conducted each presidential election by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. It is the largest academic election survey being conducted during the 2008 campaign. It ultimately will include between 45,000 and 50,000 rolling cross-section telephone interviews (one interview per respondent) and almost 100,000 web interviews (including up to five interviews with the same person) as the campaign evolves. The first web wave began in October 2007; the final interviews will be completed following the general election, November 4, 2008.

National Annenberg Election Surveys also were conducted in 2000 and 2004. The 2008 survey, as with past NAES polls, will examine a wide range of political attitudes about candidates, issues and the traits Americans want in a president. It will also place a particular emphasis on the effects of media exposure through campaign commercials and news from radio, television, newspapers and the internet. Additionally, the survey measures the effects of other kinds of political communication, from conversations at home and on the job to various efforts by campaigns to influence potential voters.