

Covering the Bases:
Patterns in news stories about ideological division in the Republican Party during the 2008
campaign*

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Introduction

The 2008 election failed to resolve a number of important political questions. Among these lingering questions was the direction of the Republican Party as an opposition force in American politics. As disparate elements of the party including former vice-president Cheney, former Secretary of State Colin Powell, commentator Rush Limbaugh and Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele competed for control of the party's governing message, it became clear that the 2008 election was a missed opportunity for elites and voters to engage in meaningful debate about the ideological direction of the party and the balance among different factions.

This paper represents an early attempt to assess the public conversation about intra-party ideological conflict through the analysis of media coverage. I collected a sample of media coverage of the Republican Party from February through October 2008, and developed a coding scheme for inclusion of intra-party ideological conflict in the articles. Analysis of the original dataset tests whether coverage about primary contests and running mate selection is more likely to refer to ideological divisions within the party.

Primary contests and running mate selection both have the potential to expose ideological rifts in the party; alternately, these institutions can also emphasize factors other than ideology, such as personality, experience, and demographic characteristics. The importance of the personal characteristics of potential candidates for vice-president has been demonstrated in several recent studies of running mate decisions (Sigelman and Wahlbeck 1997; Hiller and Kriner 2008). The ideas and policy preferences at stake in presidential nominations have been

identified as a driving factor of the McGovern-Fraser reforms to the nomination system (Polsby and Wildavsky 2008), as well as a key factor in determining elite preferences in post-reform nomination contests (Cohen, Karol, Noel and Zaller 2008). The forthcoming analysis attempts to test the impact of these institutions on media coverage of intra-party ideological conflict.

The quantitative component of the analysis measures whether references to ideological divisions within the Republican Party appear in coverage of primary contests and/or running mate selection more often than in coverage of other aspects of the party (such as funding and donations, stories about members of Congress, or biographical coverage of McCain after the nomination had been decided, to name a few). I find that the coverage of primaries and running mate selection was significantly more likely to include a reference to intra-party ideological division.

On the qualitative side, the analysis reveals two competing frames for intra-party ideological conflict during the 2008 Republican campaign.¹ Both frames were in use in the early months of 2008. One frame depicted the party as divided among several factions – social conservatives, moderates, economic libertarians – many of whom were critical of the Bush administration’s foreign policy decisions, and foreign policy hawks. The other frame expressed the assumption that social conservatives, rather than any of the other factions, constituted the party’s “base,” and

¹ Although media frames have come under question as a source of influence over public opinion (Malhorta and Krosnick 2007; Druckman 2004), the idea of media frames is used in the qualitative analysis as a means of understanding conceptualization of complex, elite-level debate. Literature on political communication about elite movements finds that media frames influence both broad perspectives on discourse (Callaghan and Schnell 2001) and individual-level perceptions (Terkildsen and Schnell 1997) of subjects concerning elite political movements, such as the gun control debate and the women’s movement. Similarly, media frames seem an appropriate starting point for conceptualizing public understanding of intra-party ideological divisions.

portrayed McCain as “out of touch” with this base. Coverage of the primaries was more likely to feature the “many factions” frame, which engaged with intra-party conflict in a way that was more nuanced and meaningful. Running mate selection coverage, on the other hand, was more likely to employ the “McCain versus the base” frame, rarely questioning the assumption that social conservatives constituted the party’s most significant “base.”

Summary of Findings

Systematic analysis of the frequency, content, and sources of news about internal divisions over ideology in the Republican Party revealed three major findings

1. Both the primary campaign and the process of vice-presidential nomination (including introducing the nominee to the electorate) contributed to media references to ideological division within the Republican Party.
2. Ideological “new media” sources were not more likely than major news dailies or the websites of major broadcast networks to mention ideological divisions.
3. Two distinct frames of intra-party conflict emerged during the 2008 campaign. The first, which dominated primary coverage, treated intra-party conflict as a multi-sided debate among contending factions within the Republican Party, including economic libertarians, social conservatives, and moderates, and encompassing a variety of perspectives on foreign policy. The second frame, which was more common in coverage of running mate selection, identified social conservatives as the party base, and depicted ideological conflict in the party as a struggle between the “maverick” nominee and the party’s core support base. Despite conventional wisdom that media reporting during elections, particularly primary campaigns, focuses heavily on the “horserace” and not on substantive issues and ideas, I find that media framing of the 2008

Republican presidential primary campaign engaged with nuanced ideas about the diverse ideological factions within the party and the relationships among candidates and party factions.

Institutions, Parties, and Ideology

This paper builds on a literature that posits the importance of ideology for the study of American political parties. The idea that parties are empty vessels that reflect little beyond a changing combination of allegiances among social or economic interests is defied by Gerring (1998) in a study of presidential candidate speeches and party platforms from 1828 to 1996. These texts suggest that American parties do have distinct ideologies – defined as consistent principles – over time, and reveal “the depth of commitment that the Whig, Republican, and Democratic labels have called forth among their principal followers” (Gerring 1998; 30). Recent scholarship has turned toward explaining and describing ideological polarization in American politics, producing strong evidence that elites, not citizens in the mass electorate, are the main source of polarized politics (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006; Hetherington 2001).

Changes to the institutional environment during the twentieth century have allowed for greater exposure of intra-party ideological divisions, and for increased input from the electorate on the attendant questions of party and ideology. The primary system demonstrated a limited but lively capacity to illuminate party squabbles involving both personalities and ideas, as Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft squared off in the Republican primary electorate (which existed in only a handful of states) in 1912 (Tichenor and Fuerstman 2008; Gould 2003; Chace 2004). The primary system continued piecemeal through the early 1970s, when the McGovern-Fraser Commission formed to implement changes in the nomination system to better reflect not

only the demographics of the party, but also the emerging division over the Vietnam conflict (Polsby and Wildavsky 2008).

Studies of primary coverage in the post-McGovern-Fraser era have suggested that while nomination campaigns are informative (Morton and Williams 2001), they also reflect preoccupation with the “horserace” aspect of nomination contests (Bartels 1988). Despite the emphasis on the horserace and on the politics of personalities at the expense of party foundations (Wattenberg 1998), primaries would seem a likely time for cracks in the ideological foundation of a party to be evident and appear as a major topic of news coverage. In 2008, parties had resurged and considerable ideological sorting had taken place (Fiorina 2006; Levendusky 1999), although personalities were not in short supply. The initial slate of Republican contenders for the 2008 nomination represented considerable ideological diversity as well as a range of issue priorities. On the conservative end of the spectrum, Mike Huckabee brought an overt emphasis on conservative social priorities to the table, while long-shot candidates Duncan Hunter and Tom Tancredo represented a conservative position on immigration issues, in opposition to the policies promoted by George W. Bush. Ron Paul gained traction with a small but vocal group of voters who espoused libertarian beliefs on economic as well as foreign policy issues. These voters supported tax cuts, but opposed the Bush administration’s policies on Iraq and the government spending they entailed. In the middle of the spectrum sat McCain and former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, both of whom sat uneasily with Christian evangelical wing of the party.

Conventional wisdom about running mate selection highlights the potential role of ideological conflict in political decision-making. Scholarly findings present a mixed picture. Baumgartner (2006) cites three running mate selections as obvious cases for ideological balancing in order to appease elite party factions and reach out to important segments of the

electorate: Carter's choice of the more liberal Mondale in 1976; Ford's choice of more conservative Dole in 1976; and Dukakis' choice of conservative Lloyd Bentsen in 1988. In a comprehensive quantitative study of running mate selection from 1940 through 1996, Sigelman and Wahlbeck (1997) find that ideological balancing is not a significant predictor of running mate choice. Hiller and Kriner (2008) find that governing experience serves as a better explanatory variable than ideology when considering choices since 1976. Despite these findings that suggest running mate ideology is less important than previously thought, I find that ideology is still a substantial component of media coverage of the running mate selection process, at least in the case of 2008.

The Data

The findings presented in the following sections are based on an original dataset that was created using news articles from January through October 2008. This dataset is composed of 273 articles archived on Google News that came up in response to a search for "Republican Party." As such, the purpose of the study is not to gauge campaign coverage and its varying levels throughout an election year; rather, it is to understand the variation in the content of coverage of the Republican Party with respect to ideological divisions, during an election year.

Stories were coded as primary coverage if the primary contests were the main subject of the article, or if the primaries were mentioned in two or more paragraphs in the article. Coding for running mate coverage followed a similar process. On the dependent variable side, stories were coded as containing a reference to ideological conflict if they referred to divisions within the Republican Party using terms such as "conservative" and "moderate" as well as if they

referred to specific factions within the party such as “anti-abortion voters.” In order to be coded as a reference to ideological conflict, interests and ideological labels had to be depicted as part of the Republican Party or its support base.

The sample of media coverage spans the political spectrum, including Salon.com and Fox News Online, as well as the online version of major print dailies such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and the Wall Street Journal. Other local dailies, such as the Boston Globe and the San Francisco Chronicle, are included as well as sources such as CBS and ABC news online and cnn.com.

Findings: Coverage of Intra-Party Ideological Conflict

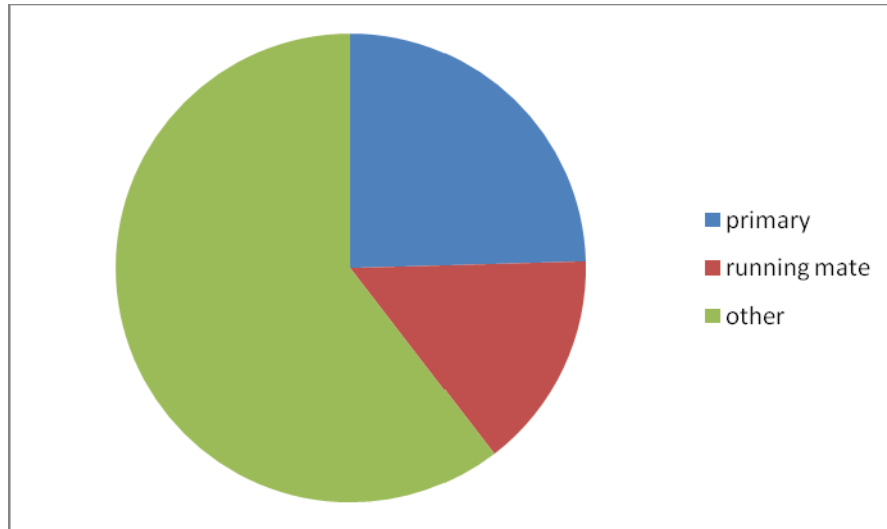
Two hundred seventy-three news articles were included in the analysis. Four were interviews and forty-one were opinion-editorial pieces. As illustrated in Figure 1, forty-one articles covered running mate selection, and sixty-seven covered the primary contests (six mentioned both running mate selection and primary contests). Figure 2 shows the relative proportions of references to intra-party ideological divisions accounted for by each kind of coverage. Table 1 breaks down the articles by subject matter and inclusion of intra-party ideological conflict.

Table 1 Types of Articles and Ideological Conflict

Topic	Number of Articles	Number of Articles Containing Ideological Division
Primary	67	39
Running mate selection	41	25
Other (funding, candidate biography)	165	38
Total	273	102

Slightly more than one-third of the overall coverage of the Republican Party from January 2008 through October 2008 concerned ideological division in the party. Table 1 breaks this coverage down by topic. Around sixty percent of the coverage on either the primary contests or running mate selection included a reference to ideological division in the party, while only twenty-three percent of Republican Party stories in the dataset that did not mention either of these topics contained a reference to intra-party ideological division.

Figure 1 Primary and Running Mate Coverage as a Proportion of Overall Republican Party Coverage, January 1-October 31, 2008



As Figure 1 shows, primary contests and running selection constituted about forty percent of all articles about the Republican Party from January through October 2008. In other words, while coverage of these two institutions was a prominent part of overall media coverage of the party in 2008, neither institution dominated the media sources included in the dataset. Although stories about the primaries and about running mate selection did not crowd out stories about other topics, Figure 2 shows that coverage of primaries and running mate selection together accounts for about sixty percent of the stories that made reference to ideological divisions within the Party.

Figure 2 Primary and Running Mate Coverage as a Proportion of Overall Coverage of Ideological Division within the Republican Party, January 1-October 31, 2008

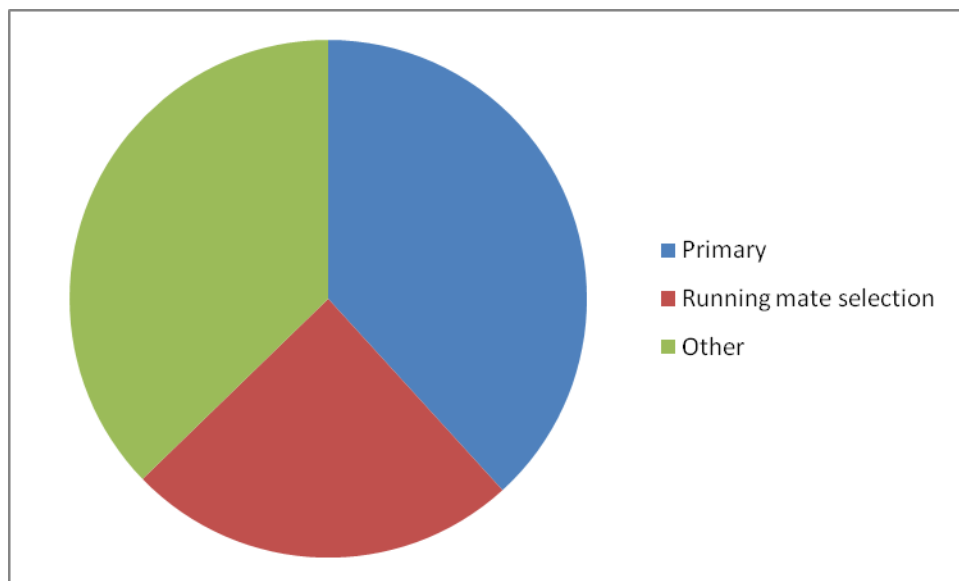


Table 2 shows the result of a multivariate logistic regression. Both primary and running mate selection were coded using an dichotomous variable. The regression model also includes a dichotomous variables indicating whether a piece was an op-ed and whether an article appeared in an ideological “new media” source, namely Fox News Online and Salon.com.

Both institutional variables are statistically significant and have nearly identical magnitude. The variable indicating whether a story was an opinion-editorial piece was significant, although the ideological source variable was not.

Table 2 Logistic Regression Analysis of Ideological Conflict Coverage²

Variable	Coefficient
Primary	1.52*** (.47)
Running mate	1.46*** (.46)
Ideological Source	.15 (.31)
Op-ed	.89** (.38)

*** p<.001, ** p<.01

Qualitative results

Two competing frames about ideological conflict within the Republican Party are evident in the 2008 coverage. The first frame is more prominent in stories about the primary contests, and depicts ideological conflict as a series of debates among different factions, with different issue priorities. The second frame is more prominent in stories about running mate selection, and conveys ideological conflict as a division between McCain, the “maverick” candidate, and the party’s base, which is treated as synonymous with social conservatives, particularly with the anti-abortion movement.

Early Coverage

The distinction between coverage that depicted ideological conflict as “McCain versus the party base” and coverage that framed the division as one among competing groups within the

² In order to account for the effects of timing and sequencing of different kinds of coverage, cluster fixed effects for each month were used.

party was evident in the early months of 2008. A *USA Today* story features former Senator Fred Thompson's comments about the beliefs of conservatives and the direction of the Republican Party, "calling the primary contest a fight between the ideals of Ronald Reagan and populist appeals that blame others for problems." A story on National Public Radio, broadcast January 30, 2008, acknowledges McCain's "front-runner" status and explains that McCain did well among primary voters whose issue priority was the economy, while rival Mitt Romney "was the favorite among those who opposed abortion and illegal immigration." This early frame identified multiple party "bases" and suggested a fragmented party with no clear dominant faction.

In February, when the nomination remained contested (despite McCain's emergence as a strong front-runner), the *U.S. News and World Report* reported criticism of McCain by conservative leader James Dobson, and commentator Rush Limbaugh, over McCain's stances on stem cell research, campaign finance reform, and immigration. Fox News coverage of Huckabee's victory in the Kansas primary refers to the "lingering rift" in the party and emphasizes Huckabee's support among conservative Kansas voters, including the pro-life community. Ross Douthat of the *New York Times* questioned Rush Limbaugh's judgments against McCain's conservative credibility, and criticized the criteria used by Limbaugh and Sean Hannity to discredit the Republican front-runner. The op-ed piece, which ran on February 10, 2008, pointed out that both Huckabee and McCain had received support from self-described conservatives.

Unlike many of the other stories about the Republican Party throughout the 2008 campaign, the Douthat piece questions the frame in which McCain's high-profile opponents like

Limbaugh and Hannity are depicted as spokespersons for the party base, and instead engages more seriously with questions about the direction of the party.

Mid-Campaign

While coverage during the first months of 2008 frequently featured topics related to the primaries, by April the nomination had been decided and subject to several rounds of commentary, and the topics covered in conjunction with the Republican Party had become considerably more idiosyncratic. In May, McCain hosted a barbecue for colleagues that prompted widespread speculation about potential running mate choices. In an op-ed in the *Washington Post*, veteran political journalist David Broder speculates that McCain will need to avoid “antagonizing the conservative base” with his running mate selection. Similarly, a piece in *Fox News* on May 24, 2008, suggested that McCain would need to “shore up” the less moderate side of the party, a factor that would count against potential running mate Florida governor Charlie Crist. A May 17 *Washington Post* story about McCain’s speech to the National Rifle Association also employed the maverick candidate versus conservative base frame. “It is a delicate and deliberate balancing act that aides say is designed to reinforce the maverick brand that separates McCain from the rest of his party without angering the traditional core of conservative Republicans. McCain's top strategists say that their candidate will not win in November merely by rallying the GOP base but that he cannot win without it, either,” reported *Post* writer Michael Shears.

Late Stages of the Campaign

In the summer of 2008, news stories about running mate issues again directed media frames toward ideological divisions in the Republican Party. Similar to coverage of the primary

contests, coverage of running mate selection – leading up to the selection as well as after Palin was chosen – had a significant effect on the use of references to ideological divisions in the party. Intra-party divisions were framed differently from earlier coverage, however. While the dominant frame in the earlier coverage was one of many contending factions and multiple party bases, the later frame identifies social conservatives, namely the anti-abortion movement, as the party's key base.

An article in the *Los Angeles Times* from August 21, 2009, depicts this division in a report on the politics of McCain's possible running mate choices: "The Arizona senator has been a consistent opponent of abortion rights in Congress, but he has never been fully embraced by social conservatives because of his deviation from party orthodoxy on other issues." The alternate frame was evident during the later part of the campaign, as in a September 1 Associated Press story that appeared on msnbc.com. The story, titled "Republican Party at a Crossroads," chronicles the struggle for a unifying Republican Party philosophy in the face of diverse factions, and quotes Rep. Tom Davis (R-VA), a "respected political strategist" asserting that social conservative support had become insufficient to win national elections.

However, in the late summer and early autumn, media coverage largely shifted to a frame that emphasized the dynamic between McCain and social conservatives is further reflected as the campaign continued. After Alaska Governor Sarah Palin was selected as the vice-presidential nominee, the base versus nominee frame continued to dominate news coverage. This frame transcended the ideological orientation of news sources; it was common in liberal news outlets such as salon.com, conservative outlets such as Fox News (online version), and moderate sources such as *USA Today*.

A *USA Today* story from August 29, 2009, describes Palin as a favorite of the socially conservative party base, and quotes David Keene, president of the American Conservative Union, as saying that Palin would change the minds of any conservatives who had been “lukewarm” toward McCain.

In an October op-ed piece for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* arguing that the Republican Party is insufficiently invested in governing, Jay Bookman wrote, “With less than four weeks to Election Day, polls today suggest that Democrat Barack Obama will sit in the White House come January, enjoying enhanced majorities in both the House and Senate. And if that's how things play out, John McCain is doomed to be cast as the scapegoat by his fellow Republicans, in part because they never really liked him much in the first place.” On the other side of the political spectrum, an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* argued, “Conservatives - the base of the Republican Party - have grudgingly accepted Mr. McCain. But to win, he must mobilize the base as President Bush did in 2004. With Mrs. Palin, he now has a better chance of doing that.”

While the quantitative analysis reveals that the primary contests and the running mate selection process show a similar statistical relationship with ideological references in media coverage, the qualitative analysis reveals another pattern. During the primary, conflict in the Republican Party was framed as complex and nuanced, with several party bases. During the later months of the campaign, especially as running mate issues became increasingly salient, the media frame shifted, presenting social conservatives as the definitive party base, and depicting ideological conflict as a struggle between this base and the party's “maverick” nominee.

Conclusion

Events in 2009 have indicated that ideological conflict within the Republican Party has not been resolved. The findings here suggest that this is not for lack of publicity of these issues in media coverage during the election year. Furthermore, my findings suggest that two institutional arrangements with the potential to resolve or manage intra-party divisions, primary contests and running mate selection, contribute significantly to media coverage of these divisions.

Some equivocation is in order about the normative significance of these findings. The framing of intra-party conflict during the primary season seems encouragingly nuanced, and acknowledged the difficulty inherent in maintaining a coalition of diverse interest and issue priorities, particularly in light of divergent underlying ideologies – such as libertarianism, religiously-based social conservatism, and international power politics – rather than just divergent interests. Contrary to previous studies that find that media coverage of primaries is singularly focused on the “horserace” aspect of the exercise, the findings in this paper demonstrate that the primaries can shed light on more serious and meaningful issues. More generally, the increase in coverage of ideological divisions in conjunction with stories about primary contests and running mate selection suggests that these institutional arrangements provide an opportunity for different ideological factions to contend over the party’s future.

The shift to a simpler, more assumption-ridden frame during the later stages of the campaign reveals a less encouraging side of the process. The adoption of the “base versus the candidate” frame suggests that the nature of running mate selection may lend itself to a media approach that conflates an ideological appeal that the candidate lacks with the party’s main base of support. It also tends more toward the “horserace” model of coverage by emphasizing

reactions to different potential running mates, and offers less discussion of the other qualities relevant to a running mate, or the potential tasks performed by a running mate during and after the campaign.

Finally, further research is needed in order to determine whether these findings are specific to the 2008 context. If studies of previous election coverage produces similar findings, we may conclude that media coverage of parties takes ideological issues more seriously than previously thought; however, the inclusion of ideology in media coverage does not always produce a more nuanced or meaningful discussion of the state of the party.

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