

# The New York Times

## On the Ground

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## On Media Bias

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**Conservatives are utterly convinced that the mainstream news organizations have been deeply unfair to the Republican ticket, and they have some points they can cite as evidence. For example, the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that there were twice as many favorable Obama stories after the convention as favorable McCain ones. Conversely, twice as many McCain stories were negative. The Center for Media and Public Affairs found that network TV coverage of Obama was 65 percent positive, compared to 31 percent positive for McCain. As Politico.com put it: “in the closing weeks of this election, John McCain and Sarah Palin are getting hosed in the press.” Indeed, one of the editors of Politico.com received a scolding note about bias from his own mother.**

Then there's also the well-known fact that national reporters for major news organizations are disproportionately likely to vote Democratic. Slate.com polled its staff and found that Barack Obama won 55 votes, and John McCain 1. That's partly because Slate's staff is composed of young, urban, highly educated techies, but still — that's some margin.

A few points to make here, although they will sound defensive and perhaps are. One is that the negative coverage of the McCain campaign was partly merited by a good deal of negative news to cover. McCain's campaign has made a series of mistakes, and so of course that's going to lead to critical stories. It may be that negative stories torpedoed Palin, but it's also plausible that she polls poorly because she's a weak, untested candidate who merits critical coverage. If Herbert Hoover is referred to negatively in the news media today, that may after all be attributable not to media bias but to his lousy performance as president (although the WS Journal tries to rehabilitate him on today's front page).

It can also be argued that any mainstream bias to the moderate left in the national newspapers and networks is balanced by an extreme right tilt at Fox News, local newspaper editorial pages and radio talk shows. But I'm deeply uncomfortable with that argument: We should aspire to be fair, not to be a counterweight to bias from the right.

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My own take is that media bias is less of a problem in political coverage than in coverage of social issues. In covering politicians, journalists tend to be professional and skeptical and tough on Democrats and Republicans alike — as Bill Clinton can attest. Lately we've been pursuing George W. Bush because he's in power, but if Obama wins then he'll be the object of tough scrutiny even by journalists who share much of his world view. But on the social issues — gun control, abortion, gay marriage, religion — I'm not sure we're that even-handed. The fact is that there are plenty of political conservatives in the Northeast, for example, but not nearly so many social conservatives. Journalists move easily in the world of business Republicans, less easily in the world of Evangelical Republicans. So that makes it easier to slip into caricaturing social conservatives at times, and we should try harder to avoid it.

Dan Okrent, when he was Public Editor of the Times, wrote a brave and wise piece that aroused tremendous comment and unease, but I think he was right. He wrote:

Is the Times a liberal newspaper? OF course it is....For now my concern is the flammable stuff that ignites the right. These are the social issues: gay rights, gun control, abortion and environmental regulation, among others. And if you think The Times plays it down the middle on any of them, you've been reading the paper with your eyes closed.

Since the word “liberal” is so freighted with political connotations, and these are more social issues, maybe “urban newspaper” or “urban values” is a better way to capture what goes on than “liberal newspaper.” But there does seem to me to be a built-in urban DNA in most national newspapers and network news coverage.

So what do you think? Do you perceive bias, either on political or social issues? If the problem is self-selection among journalists, then what if anything should be done about it, other than just...trying harder to avoid it?

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