

# ¡Si, se Puede!

*The 2008 US elections in the news in the US, Netherlands, Korea, and Egypt*

## Introduction

The election of the 44th president of the United States of America was already called historical early on in the campaign. Either a woman or an African-American would become the Democratic candidate to challenge the presumptive Republican candidate John McCain in the contest for the White House. The campaign was long but really gained momentum after both parties officially selected the nominees and they in turn chose their running mates, Joe Biden and Sarah Palin. Palin was chosen partly to attract disappointed Clinton followers to the Republican Party. Palin's selection initially helped the Grand Old Party with an increase in the polls. However, the increase in the polls did not last and the Republicans lagged behind in the polls. A situation that neither McCain, nor Palin could change in the debates to follow. Eventually, what numerous people thought unthinkable happened, as the *New York Times* stated on the day after the election on the front page: "OBAMA – Racial barrier falls in decisive victory."

In this research we look at the news coverage of the American presidential elections during the five weeks preceding election day in the following newspapers: The News York Times, USA Today, the websites of the Korean newspaper Chosun and the Egyptian newspaper Al Ahram, and nine Dutch newspapers.

## Method

The coding of the articles was conducted with the NET (Network of Evaluative Texts) method, a semantic network analysis method first described by Van Cuilenburg et al. (1986) and extensively applied to Dutch election coverage (eg Kleinnijenhuis *et al.*, 2007). The NET method divides a text into a number of so-called Nuclear Statements, describing the relations between objects such as actors and issues in the form of 'Source: Subject / Predicate / direction of the predicate / Object'. The AmCAT and iNet programs (Van Atteveldt 2008, ch. 10) were used for document management and coding, respectively.

## Conclusions

### Issue Agenda US media:

- Economy dominates
- Social/ethical issues only important in last week

### Foreign coverage of US elections:

- More horse race
- Attn. for foreign affairs
- More pro-Obama
- Democrats more personalized



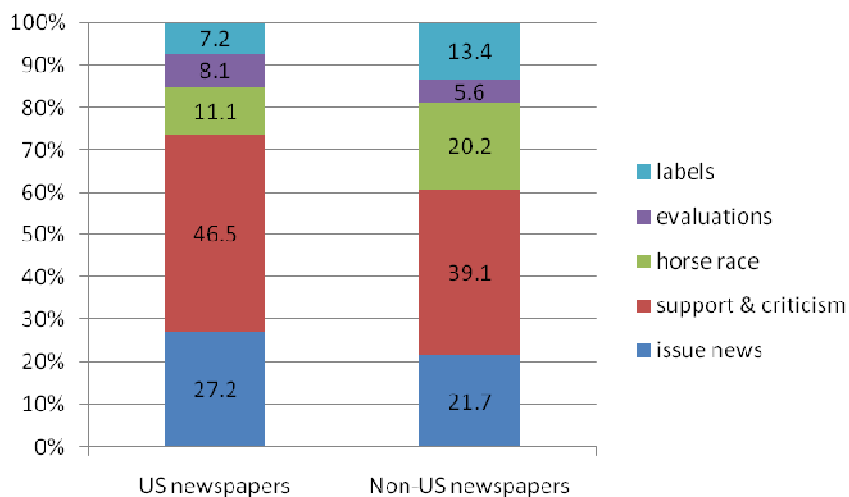
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## News types and topics

The first topic we investigate is how - and about what - the actors talk in the news. We distinguish the following types of news: *issue news* about points of view and developments with respect to issues, *support and criticism* about actors expressing support or criticism towards other actors, *evaluations* concerning judgements about an actor, news about the *success and failure* of actors or issues, and finally *labels* containing positive or negative nouns or adjectival nouns.



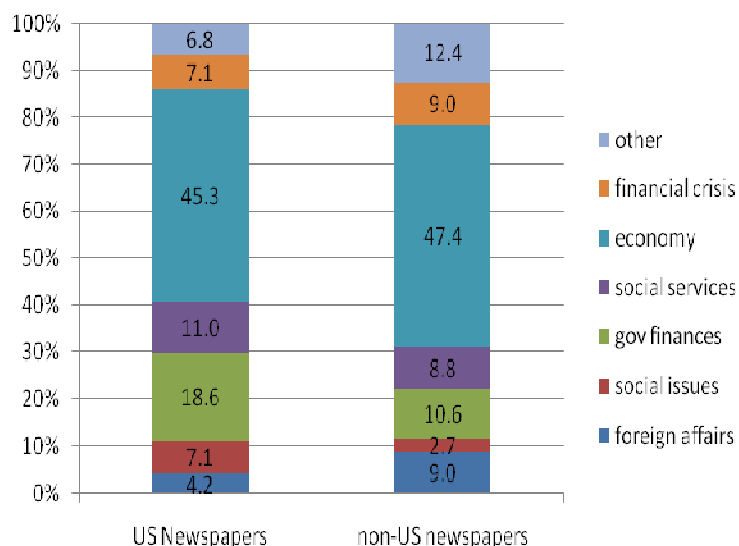
When we look at US and foreign newspapers we see that more substantive news coverage was found in US newspapers than non-US newspapers. Foreign newspapers focused more heavily on the horse race than their American counterparts. The news about support and criticism is found more often in the domestic newspapers than in the foreign newspapers. Also labels occur more often in the news coverage abroad than in the domestic newspapers. Interestingly the

American papers minimized this aspect prior to the election while foreign newspapers mentioned it quite a bit.

## Issue news per newspaper: US versus non-US newspapers

In addition, we examine what types of issues were covered. Most of the issue news coverage dealt with the elections in general: almost 40% of the issues news discussed the debates, the strategies around the election etc. Excluding these issues we present the amount of attention paid to main issues described below:

- *Foreign affairs* deals with issues about national security, war in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, etc.
- *Social issues* concern issues such as abortion, euthanasia, gay rights, etc.
- *Government finances* are about taxes, the budget deficit, etc.
- *Social Services* are issues that include the pensions for elderly people, for unemployment, but also includes health care system, insurance for everybody for example.
- The *economy* is dealing with all general statements about the economy. It focuses especially on issues that normally everybody is in favor of, like job (creation), economic growth, etc.
- The *financial crisis* deals with the happenings on Wall Street, the bailout, the credit crisis itself, etc.
- *Other issues* include issues like immigration, minorities, but also infrastructure and energy policies.



One of the main news values is that of proximity. Issues that deal with the internal affairs of a country are covered more often in the country itself than in the foreign countries, such as governmental finances, social issues and social services. Foreign affairs on the other hand affects the nations abroad as well, increasing the importance of the news for those news papers. The same is true for the news about the financial crisis.

## News about Support and Criticism

News about the support and criticism that the protagonists receive in the news is the form of news coverage that appears most often in the different newspapers. This type of news coverage describes the positive and negative relations between actors. Criticism from an opponent can be beneficial for a candidate as it allows him or her to clearly distinguish him or herself from the opponent. However, when criticism comes from within the same party or from society, this can have a negative effect. In the following table we present the main groups that either support or criticize the candidates (in the rows). Hereby we make a distinction between three groups of actors: Democrats, Republicans and Societal groups (NGO's, civilians etc.). We distinguish between the US and non-US Newspapers.

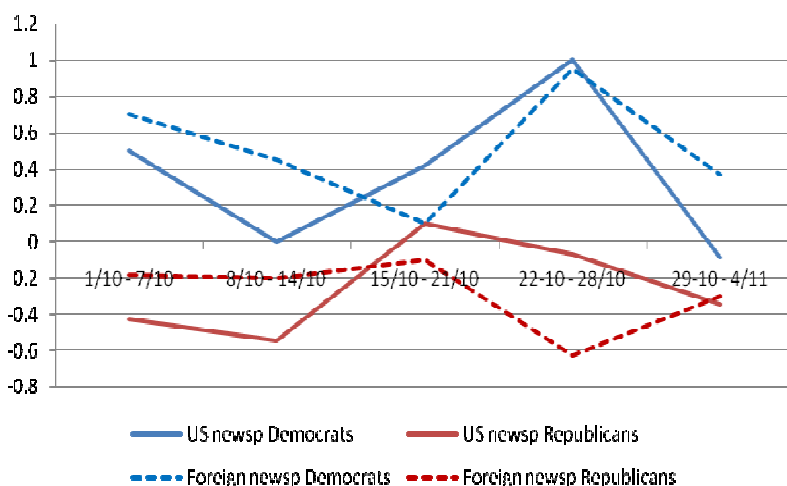
**Support and Criticism in the news**

	US Newspapers				Non US Newspaper			
	Democrats	Republicans	Soc. Groups	Total	Democrats	Republicans	Soc. Groups	Total
Democrats	0.8	-0.42	0.17	0.46	0.59	-0.69	0.28	0.36
Republicans	-0.23	0.59	0.15	0.36	-0.5	0.05	-0.12	-0.1
Obama	0.68	-0.38	0.45	0.13	0.72	-0.59	0.44	0.16
McCain	-0.58	0.56	0.34	0.1	-0.94	0.19	0.16	-0.1
Biden	-0.33	-1	0.56	0.14	1	-1	0.67	-0.57
Palin	-1	0.82	0.13	0.16	-0.9	0.42	-0.43	-0.28
Total	0.32	0.07	0.31	0.23	-0.08	-0.21	0.23	0.01

We see that Democrats and Republicans are positive towards each other and critical towards their opponents. However, the Democrats are more positive than the Republicans, especially in the non-US newspapers. This shows that according to the news coverage the Democrats closed ranks better than the Republicans. Moreover, it seems that the non-US newspapers focus more heavily on conflict than the US newspapers, in that their averages towards the Republicans are more negative. Social groups in the US news coverage state positive statements about the Republicans but in the non-US news coverage these statements were more negative.

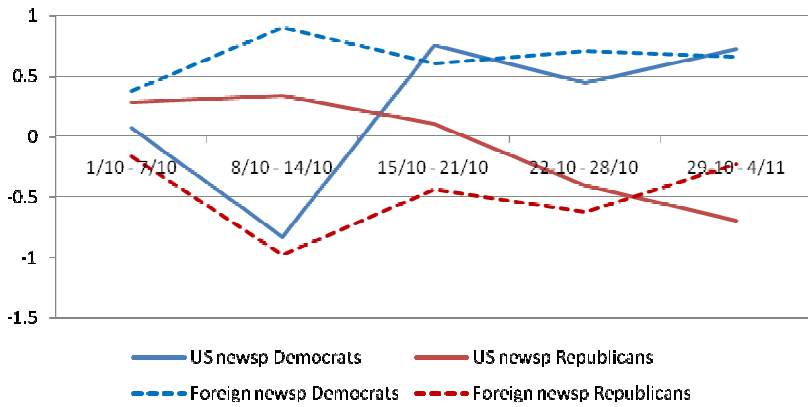
## Evaluation in US newspapers versus non-US newspapers

In the figure to the right we present the evaluations found in the US newspapers versus the foreign newspapers during the campaign. We see that both in the US and abroad Democrats are more positively evaluated than the Republicans. On the other hand it is interesting to see that the Republicans are evaluated more negatively in foreign newspapers than in US newspapers at the end of the campaign, while in the beginning of the campaign the US newspapers were more negative towards Republicans but became more positive half way.



## The Horse Race in the news coverage

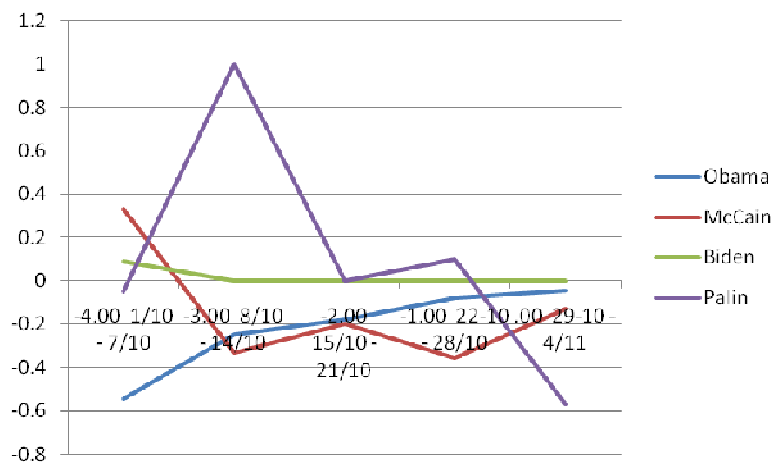
Horse race news coverage deals with successes and failures of the politicians and their parties. Very often this type of news coverage deals with polls presented in the news. In this section we look at this type of coverage and compare again the US newspapers with the foreign newspapers with respect to the successes and failures of both parties.



In the figure we see a clear distinction between the US news coverage and the newspapers outside of the US. In the US the polls show first a success for the Republicans during the first debates. However, after half of October this changes into a lead for the Democrats while the news coverage about the Republicans focus more on their failures than successes. The news coverage abroad is more stable over time, consistently portraying the Democrats as winning and the Republicans as losing.

### Labels

Labels refer to descriptions of people in the news, describing their characteristics, their habits, capacities etc. Often these labels are loaded with either positive connotations, such as 'beautiful', 'experienced' and 'presidential', others are loaded neutral, like 'black', 'man', 'female', and other labels are loaded with negative connotation, 'unexperienced', 'flip-flop', 'old'. In this section we look at these labels for the candidates during the campaign. The figure shows the average loading of the labels given to each candidate.



The figure clearly shows the rise and decline of Palin as McCain's running mate. At the beginning of the campaign, right after the debate the evaluations were rather positive about her performance. However, this declined strongly after some interviews on television. McCain was labeled positively at first but this declined after the first debate, while for Obama the pattern was reversed.

### Personalization

Finally we looked at the personalization of the news coverage. Hereby we calculate the percentage of the news coverage about either the Democrats or Republicans in which their leader is mentioned. We see

	US Newspapers		Non-US newspapers	
	Pers (D)	Pers (R)	Pers (D)	Pers (R)
Source in news	71%	60%	62%	53%
Support & criticism	36%	44%	83%	61%
Horse race	58%	41%	43%	46%
Evaluation	78%	56%	80%	58%
Total	52%	55%	80%	32%

that the personalization in the US newspapers is almost equal for both Democrats and Republicans. However, in the non-US news coverage we see that the personalization around the Democratic candidate is much stronger than the personalization of the Republican candidate. Apparently the news coverage abroad was focusing heavily on other Republicans, mainly Palin, while the running mate of Obama was not covered as extensively.

### References

Van Atteveldt, W. (2008), *Semantic Network Analysis: Methods for Extracting, Representing, and Querying Media Content (dissertation)*, Charleston, SC: Booksurge.

Van Cuilenburg, J.J., Kleinnijenhuis, J., De Ridder, J.A., (1986), *Towards a Graph Theory of Journalistic Texts*, European Journal of Communication 1:65-96

Kleinnijenhuis, J., et al., (2007) *Nederland Vijfstromenland: De rol van media en stemwijzers bij de verkiezingen van 2006*, Amsterdam: Bert Bakker