

The Forum

Volume 6, Issue 4

2008

Article 2

ON THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Interest Groups in the 2008 Presidential Election: The Barking Dog That Didn't Bite

David C. Kimball, *University of Missouri - St Louis*

Recommended Citation:

Kimball, David C. (2008) "Interest Groups in the 2008 Presidential Election: The Barking Dog That Didn't Bite," *The Forum*: Vol. 6: Iss. 4, Article 2.

DOI: 10.2202/1540-8884.1282

Interest Groups in the 2008 Presidential Election: The Barking Dog That Didn't Bite

David C. Kimball

Abstract

Where were interest groups in the 2008 presidential election? In previous elections interest groups have played a crucial, often attacking, role in presidential campaigns. This essay compares the influence of interest groups in the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns in terms of financing election activities, shaping the campaign agenda, influencing candidate images and mobilizing voters. Interest groups represented the barking dog that didn't bite in the 2008 presidential election. I offer some explanations involving lessons learned from previous campaigns, strategic calculations by groups, and the challenging issue environment for many interest groups. Despite the muted impact of interest groups in the 2008 presidential campaign, the long-term prognosis is that interest groups will continue to be important in American elections.

KEYWORDS: interest groups, candidate image, campaign agenda

Author Notes: David C. Kimball is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. He is the co-author of *Why Americans Split Their Tickets*, with Barry Burden, and he has published articles in several academic journals. His research and teaching interests include voting and elections, political parties, and interest groups.

Where were the interest groups in the 2008 presidential election? The conventional view in the United States has been that interest groups play a crucial, often attacking, role in presidential campaigns. And in looking at previous elections, one can certainly find examples of important interventions by interest groups, from the Willie Horton ad in 1988 to the Swift Boat ads in 2004. Conservative groups have been particularly successful in leaving their mark on recent elections, and the case can be made that interest groups played a critical role in the 2004 presidential election.

However, it is much harder to find examples of interest group influence in the 2008 election. Before the full release of data on fundraising, ad buys, and surveys of 2008 voters, one cannot assess interest group activities as rigorously as one would like. Nevertheless, this essay compares the influence of interest groups in the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns in terms of financing election activities, shaping the campaign agenda, influencing candidate images, and mobilizing voters. It appears that interest groups had less bite in the 2008 election.

Financing Election Activities

A common rule of thumb in campaign financing is that each election breaks the spending records set in the previous cycle. With respect to candidate fundraising, and the Obama campaign in particular, the 2008 election cycle is no exception. Interest groups in 2008 continued this pattern in one respect but apparently not in two other categories of campaign finance. With the important caveat that the 2008 campaign finance totals may increase as final reports come in after the end of the year, Table 1 compares interest group campaign finance activities in federal elections in 2004 and 2008 for the categories of PAC contributions, soft money activities, and independent expenditures.

Table 1 indicates that PAC contributions continued to increase in 2008, even though the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002 did not raise contribution limits for PAC donations to candidates, as it did for individual contributions. Almost all PAC donations go to congressional candidates, so PACs have little impact on the presidential contest. Moreover, PAC donations tend to favor the majority party in Congress. 2008 was no exception, as PACs shifted in favor of the Democrats, contributing to the party's significant financial advantage over the GOP in congressional contests (Knott 2008).

While PAC contributions increased, independent expenditures and soft money activities by interest groups in 2008 apparently did not exceed 2004 totals. With the ban on soft money donations to political parties enacted in BCRA, some wealthy political donors have shifted toward 527 and 501(c) groups as a way to influence elections with unlimited contributions. Overall, soft money groups spent more than \$440 million dollars on federal races in 2004, primarily the presidential

campaign, an additionally hefty portion when compared to the \$655 million spent by George W. Bush and John Kerry in the same election cycle. Among the most expensive soft money efforts on the left, Americans Coming Together spent approximately \$78 million, the Media Fund spent over \$57 million, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) spent over \$47 million, and MoveOn.org spent over \$21 million during the 2004 cycle.¹ Soft money activity by liberal groups, such as the Media Fund, helped compensate for Kerry's financial deficit compared to the Bush campaign, especially in the spring of 2004 (Institute of Politics 2004, 213). There were important 527 groups on the right as well, including Progress for America (over \$35 million) and Swift Boat Veterans and POWs for Truth (\$22 million).

Table 1
Election Spending by Interest Groups and Presidential Candidates

	2004	2008
Soft money:	\$440 million	\$400 million
527 and 501(c) groups	(10%)	(8%)
PAC contributions to federal candidates	\$311 million	\$400 million
	(7%)	(8%)
Non-party independent expenditures	\$100 million	\$85 million
	(2.4%)	(1.6%)
Presidential candidate fundraising	\$880.5 million	\$1.7 billion
	(21%)	(32%)
Total Spending on Federal Elections	\$4.2 billion	\$5.3 billion
	(100%)	(100%)

Note: 2008 figures are author calculations based on available reports.

Sources: Rozell, Wilcox, and Madland 2006; Campaign Finance Institute 2008; Center for Responsive Politics 2008.

Soft money groups certainly did not vanish in 2008, as shown in Table 1. However, the roughly \$400 million in 2008 soft money spending fell short of the soft money totals in 2004, and it was dwarfed by the more than \$1 billion in combined spending by Barack Obama and John McCain. It appears that 501(c) groups constituted a much larger portion of soft money activity in 2008 than in 2004, perhaps due to the appeal of weaker disclosure requirements for these organizations than for the 527 groups (Campaign Finance Institute 2008). Even spending by the top soft money groups in 2008 looks small compared to 2004.

¹ The spending totals for individual groups come from The Center for Responsive Politics (<http://www.opensecrets.org/527s/527cmtes.php?level=C>, accessed December 4, 2008).

The top groups on the left in 2008 include SEIU (\$26 million), America Votes (\$21 million), and Emily's List (\$11 million), while the highest spending groups on the right include American Solutions Winning the Future (\$20 million) and GOPAC (\$8 million). Finally, while 527 groups helped make up a spending deficit for Democrats in 2004, soft money groups did not help Republicans overcome Obama's massive spending advantage over John McCain in 2008. In fact, soft money spending in 2008 also favored the Democrats. Perhaps the softening economy limited the ability of wealthy donors to finance 527 groups in 2008. Perhaps conservative soft money groups were unenthusiastic about spending money to help elect a campaign finance reformer who has tried to regulate them out of existence.

Shaping the Campaign Agenda

Another area of influence for interest groups involves the issue agenda in elections. The ballot initiative process, available in many states, provides one method for organized interests to shape the campaign agenda directly, provided they invest the resources to gather enough petition signatures to put issues on the ballot. The growing number of citizen groups devoted to post-material issues (Berry 1999) has coincided with a substantial increase in the number of ballot initiatives over the last thirty years. In particular, the ballot initiative process offers a way to bring cultural conflicts (over issues such as abortion, gay rights, and marijuana) directly to the voters. Ballot measures can then force candidates to speak about issues they might rather avoid, and ballot measures can prime voters to rely on certain issues when evaluating the competing candidates (Nicholson 2006).

In 2004, the Bush-Cheney campaign made no secret of its desire to get more religious conservatives to the polls. Opportunity knocked early in that year. First the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that the state constitution did not allow a ban on same-sex marriage. Then local officials in San Francisco and Oregon began authorizing same-sex marriages in defiance of state laws. Conservative groups helped to place constitutional amendments to ban gay marriage on the November ballot in eleven states in 2004. There is some indication that the salience of the gay marriage issue was heightened among voters in states with initiatives on the ballot (Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith 2008).

The result was that a fair number of voters were motivated by cultural issues (and gay marriage in particular) in the 2004 election, to the benefit of President Bush. The critical context in 2004 was a relatively wide-open issue environment. In a Pew survey in November of 2004 asking an open-ended question about the most important problem facing the country, 25 percent named the war in Iraq, 14 percent mentioned moral values, 12 percent mentioned the

economy, 9 percent mentioned terrorism, 2 percent named health care, and over 30 percent named an assortment of other issues (Pew Research Center 2004). Even though foreign affairs and economics were important, interest groups had opportunities to push other issues (such as gay marriage) onto the campaign agenda in 2004.

In the 2008 election, there were 59 citizen-sponsored initiatives on state ballots, only a slight drop from the 66 ballot initiatives in 2004.² In addition, several states had ballot initiatives in 2008 dealing with cultural issues, such as gay marriage, abortion, affirmative action, assisted suicide, animal rights, and medicinal marijuana. Interest groups also found other means to shape the issue agenda. A group named the Clarion Fund distributed DVD copies of *Obsession*, a documentary film about the threat of radical Islam, to millions of households in swing states in the fall of 2008. The political goal of the campaign was to raise the salience of national security and terrorism.

Yet surveys suggest that interest group efforts to shape the issue agenda had little impact in 2008. Relatively few voters rated cultural issues as most important in the 2008 election, and terrorism was rated as less important than it had been in 2004. The economic downturn in 2008 meant that economic issues came to dominate the agenda in the presidential campaign. National events, such as the collapse of major companies in the financial industry, meant that there was little room to bring other issues onto the agenda.

In surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center, respondents were asked to name the most important problem facing the country. Economic problems (either the economy in general or specific economic issues like unemployment or the financial crisis) were named by 34 percent of survey respondents in January of 2008, by 61 percent in July of 2008, and by 75 percent in October of 2008 (Pew Research Center 2008a). Economic concerns thus pushed most other issues to the fringes of the campaign agenda. This led to frustration for some social conservatives who insisted shortly before the election that cultural issues should still be important (Hillyer 2008). The 2008 campaign may be an extreme example, but it indicates that there are constraints on the ability of interest groups to increase the salience of post-material issues in elections.

Influencing Candidate Images

Since a significant amount of interest group activity involves campaign advertising that targets candidates, it is clear that organized groups also aim to shape the public images of those candidates. In 2004, there is substantial evidence

² Ballot initiative totals come from the Initiative and Referendum Institute (<http://www.iandrinstitute.org/>, accessed December 3, 2008).

that interest groups left their mark on the public images of the presidential candidates. Some of the most memorable ads of 2004 were produced by these groups. Swift Boat Veterans and POWs for Truth spent several million dollars on a series of ads that challenged John Kerry's war record in Vietnam and attacked his anti-war efforts in the 1970s after his war service ended. The ads were aimed to undermine Kerry's fitness as commander-in-chief. The Swift Boat ads began running in early August, the month in which Kerry suffered the most significant damage to his public image on several trait measures (Jamieson 2006, 11-20). Advisors to the Kerry campaign acknowledge that the Swift Boats ads contributed to the erosion in support for Kerry (Jamieson 2006, 64, 69, 112; Institute for Politics 2006, 226). The timing of the Swift Boat ads also coincided with the publication of a book by John O'Neill (spokesman for the Swift Boat group) and Jerome Corsi, *Unfit for Command*. The book, which elaborated on the critiques in the television ads, made it onto the bestseller lists. Overall, the group was so successful that its name has become a verb in campaign circles, as candidates now seek to avoid getting "Swift Boated" by their opponents.

Another memorable ad by an interest group came late in the campaign from Progress for America. The group spent several million dollars in October to air the "Ashley's Story" television ad. The spot, which included footage of President Bush hugging a girl from Ohio whose mother was killed in the 9/11 attacks, aired heavily in Ohio and was regarded by Democrats as a very effective ad at making a positive case for electing President Bush (Jamieson 2006, 69). An image of the hug featured in the ad was also part of a viral campaign promoting the president's reelection, appearing on a web site and in numerous emails (Jamieson 2006, 181).

Liberal groups in 2004, particularly the Media Fund and MoveOn.org, aired ads criticizing the war in Iraq. These efforts probably fueled left-wing anger at President Bush. On the other hand, advertising by groups on the left did not do much to make a positive case for electing Kerry. The result was that Kerry voters were motivated heavily by antipathy to President Bush rather than positive feelings about Kerry. In the national exit poll, more than one-third of the Kerry voters said their vote for president was mainly against Bush rather than for Kerry. By comparison, only fifteen percent of Bush voters answered that they were voting against Kerry. In response to open-ended likes-dislikes questions about the candidates in the 2004 National Election Studies survey, personal trait references to Kerry featured significantly more unfavorable comments than favorable comments, and the most common favorable comment about Kerry was that he wasn't Bush (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 44-51). Interest groups likely contributed to Kerry's high unfavorable mentions.

While interest groups contributed to the narrative of the 2004 presidential campaign and the public image of the candidates, it is more difficult to find

evidence of a leading role for interest groups in the 2008 campaign. The most memorable ads of the 2008 cycle seemed to come from the candidates (such as the Obama infomercial, McCain's "Celebrity" ad, Clinton's "3AM" ad, and Huckabee's ads featuring Chuck Norris) rather than interest groups. Interest groups still aired television ads in the presidential campaign, particularly in the final weeks.

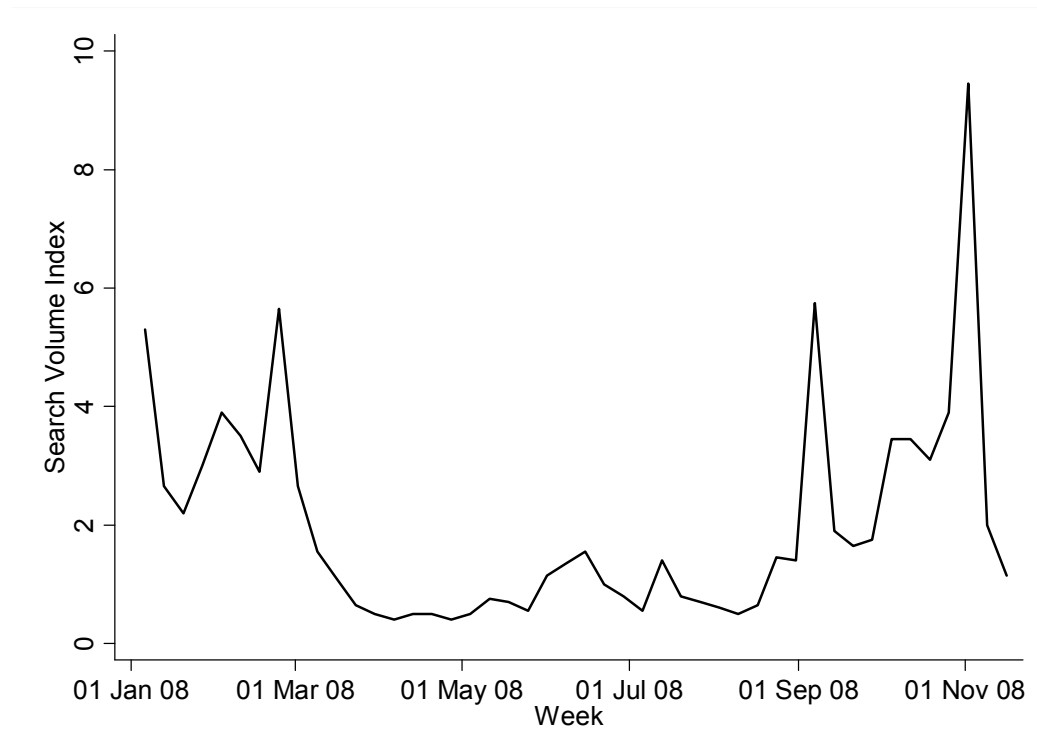
On the Republican side, for example, the National Republican Trust ran ads late in the campaign featuring Jeremiah Wright, Obama's former pastor; Vets for Freedom ran ads criticizing Obama's opposition to the surge policy in Iraq; and Let Freedom Ring put up a spot criticizing Obama as a flip-flopper. On the left, for example, SEIU ran an ad linking McCain to the policies of President Bush, MoveOn.org ran a spot criticizing McCain's support for the war in Iraq, and Defenders of Wildlife Action Fund aired a spot criticizing Governor Palin for a policy in Alaska to allow hunting wolves from airplanes. However, each of these advertising buys amounted to a pittance compared to candidate and party advertising in 2008 or even compared to interest group advertising itself in 2004 (University of Wisconsin Advertising Project 2008).

Other means of influence were used by interest groups in 2008 as well. Jerome Corsi, co-author of *Unfit for Command* in 2004, returned for an encore by publishing *Obama Nation*, a book critical of Obama in 2008. While *Unfit for Command* remained on the bestseller lists from August to November of 2004, *Obama Nation* only lasted on the bestseller lists from August until the end of September of 2008. It seems clear that the Obama campaign prepared for the book, and had a rapid response operation to rebut attacks quickly. A search of LexisNexis indicates that *Unfit for Command* received more news coverage devoted to the substance of its attacks than did *Obama Nation*. Or perhaps the news media were less willing to amplify interest group attacks in 2008.

A more modern interest group technique in 2008 involved the viral and whispering campaign to portray Obama as a Muslim and, more generally, as un-American. Figure 1 is an attempt to track this effort during the year. The graph shows Google Trends data on the volume of web searches each week that included the terms "Obama" and "Muslim." The graph indicates that the high-volume periods coincided with three important electoral events. There was a bump during the primaries and caucuses in the first three months of the year, a spike the week after the Republican national convention, and the largest increase in the week before the general election. However, it is unclear whether this effort had much effect on the election. A Pew survey in October indicates that twelve percent of Americans believed that Obama was Muslim, an amount similar to poll results from earlier in the year (Pew Research Center 2008b). Furthermore, Obama emerged from the general election campaign with higher ratings on several traits than during the spring of 2008 (Pew Research Center 2008c). Thus,

it appears that conservative efforts to hurt Obama's public image did little damage.

Figure 1
Google Trends Search Results for "Obama Muslim" in 2008



Why were interest groups so successful in 2004 but not in 2008? There are a number of explanations that deserve more careful analysis when additional data become available. One explanation lies in the fact that soft money and independent expenditure campaigns were directed more at congressional races in 2008, thus reducing their impact on the presidential campaign. In addition, interest group efforts succeeded in 2004 because of the confluence of two factors. First, the Swift Boat attacks hit Kerry when he was vulnerable after the Democratic convention, trying to save resources for September and October. As a result, the Kerry campaign was reluctant to respond immediately. Second, the conservative interest group ads in 2004 reinforced the Bush campaign's efforts to contrast the leadership abilities of the two candidates during a time of war.

These two factors were absent in 2008. The Obama campaign had the money and organization to respond to attacks at any time. Some of the interest group attacks on Obama did not appear until very late in the campaign. In

addition, the interest group attacks on Obama did not share a single theme—some dealt with Iraq, some with Obama's associations, and some with his issue positions—and they did not reinforce McCain's message, in part because the McCain campaign's main message seemed to change from one month to the next.

Voter Mobilization

In terms of mobilizing voters, there is some indication that interest group activity continued in 2008. In 2004, the most important interest group effort toward getting out the vote (GOTV) was organized by America Coming Together (ACT), a liberal group of former union and Democratic Party officials trying to make up for a voter mobilization deficiency compared to the Republican Party. ACT claims to have registered roughly 450,000 voters in 2004 (Institute on Politics 2006, 240). They followed that up with a large GOTV campaign with thousands of workers in several swing states.

In 2008, a coalition of liberal groups including Project Vote and Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) registered a similar number of new voters. In the process, they touched off a campaign debate about fraud, involving the legitimacy of some of the registration forms ACORN submitted to election officials. This debate over election procedures is likely to continue. Aside from getting new voters on the rolls, both parties and their candidates had large GOTV operations in 2008. Judging by crowds at rallies, it appears that Barack Obama and Sarah Palin did more to motivate voters than interest groups did in 2008.

Conclusion

Overall, interest groups had a more muted impact on the 2008 presidential election than in previous campaigns. In part, this was a matter of fundraising. Aside from PAC contributions, interest group efforts to finance election-related activities did not increase after 2004, and they certainly did not keep pace with the massive increase in candidate fundraising from individual donors. In the areas of the issue agenda, the public image of candidates, and voter mobilization, there is plenty of evidence of interest group activity. However, the dominance of economic concerns limited any opportunity for organized interests to place other issues on the campaign agenda. It appears that many interest groups chose to focus on congressional elections in 2008, but in the presidential campaign, interest groups turned out to be the barking dog that didn't bite. Thus, it is not a foregone conclusion that interest groups will have a significant impact on election outcomes.

This is not to say that interest groups have become unimportant in American elections. Interest groups in the 2008 cycle continued to shape the long-

term outlook of American politics. Interest group efforts in 2008 mainly played the role of junkyard dog, attacking the other side's candidate. Thus, interest groups still served as a polarizing force in American politics. In addition, interest groups played an important role in several issues regarding how elections are administered. The ACORN voter registration controversy in particular has caused election officials and policymakers to look more closely at voter registration systems and consider how they can be improved. In the past two years, liberal interest groups have pushed to replace recently purchased electronic voting machines in California, Florida, and Ohio. These efforts are likely to intensify in other states using electronic voting machines. In general, a movement to reform election administration since 2000 is fueled by many interest groups.

Finally, Wisconsin Right to Life, with assistance from an effective conservative lawyer named Jim Bopp, successfully challenged BCRA's restrictions on issue advertising before the Supreme Court. The case appears to establish a blueprint for a series of legal challenges that could substantially weaken the regulatory system created by BCRA. Just after the election, Bopp and the Republican National Committee filed another lawsuit taking aim at BCRA's ban on soft money fundraising by political parties. When it comes to controversies over the rules of the game, interest groups are unlikely to let sleeping dogs lie.

References

- Berry, Jeffrey M. 1999. *The New Liberalism: The Rising Power of Citizen Groups*. Washington, DC: Brookings.
- The Campaign Finance Institute. 2008. "Outside Soft Money Groups Approaching \$400 Million in Targeted Spending in 2008 Election." October 31, 2008 (<http://www.cfinst.org/pr/prRelease.aspx?ReleaseID=214>).
- Center for Responsive Politics. 2008. "U.S. Election Will Cost \$5.3 Billion, Center for Responsive Politics Predicts." October 22, 2008 (<http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2008/10/us-election-will-cost-53-billi.html>).
- Donovan, Todd, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Daniel A. Smith. 2008. "Priming Presidential Votes by Direct Democracy." *Journal of Politics* 70:1217-1231.
- Hillyer, Quin. 2008. "It's the Culture, Stupid." *The American Spectator*, Oct. 9, 2008.

- Institute of Politics, Harvard University, editors. 2006. *Campaign for President: The Managers Look at 2004*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, editor. 2006. *Electing the President 2004: The Insiders' View*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Knott, Alex. 2008. "PACs Put House Democrats on Top for First Time Since 1994." *CQ Politics*, November 18, 2008 (<http://www.cqpolitics.com/wmspage.cfm?docID=news-000002987563>).
- Lewis-Beck, Michael S., William G. Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert F. Weisberg. 2008. *The American Voter Revisited*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Nicholson, Stephen. 2005. *Voting the Agenda: Candidate Elections and Ballot Propositions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Pew Research Center. 2008a. "Public Not Desperate About Economy or Personal Finances." October 15, 2008 (<http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=1398>).
- Pew Research Center. 2008b. "Obama's Lead Widens: 52% - 38%." October 21, 2008 (<http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/462.pdf>).
- Pew Research Center. 2008c. "Post-Election Perspectives." November 13, 2008 (<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1039/post-election-perspectives>).
- Pew Research Center. 2004. "Voters Liked Campaign 2004, But Too Much 'Mud-Slinging.'" November 11, 2004 (<http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/233.pdf>).
- University of Wisconsin Advertising Project. 2008. "Obama Outspending McCain 3 to 1 on TV." October 31, 2008 (http://wiscadproject.wisc.edu/wiscAds_release_103108.pdf).