

Campaign Attack Blowback: McCain's Seen as Off the Issues

The McCain campaign's more aggressive tone is prompting pushback from the public: Registered voters by a broad margin now believe John McCain is more focused on attacking his opponent than on addressing the issues in the 2008 presidential election.

Barack Obama, by contrast, is perceived even more widely as sticking to the issues, this new ABC News/Washington Post poll finds – a striking point of differentiation between the two. More differences will be reported in the full release of this ABC/Post poll on ABCNews.com at 12:01 a.m. and Good Morning America on Monday.

While McCain's image as the more negative of the two is not new, it's sharpened considerably, coinciding with his campaign's more pointed criticisms of Obama in the last few weeks, including Sarah Palin's accusation that Obama's been "palling around with terrorists."

Registered voters by a 24-point margin, 59-35 percent, now say McCain is more focused on attacking his opponent rather than addressing the issues. That's grown from a roughly even 48-45 percent split on this question in late August.

There's far less criticism of the tone of Obama's campaign: Registered voters by 68-26 percent say he's mainly addressing the issues, not attacking his opponent, a slightly more positive rating than in August.

	Candidate is mainly:	
	Addressing the issues	Attacking his opponent
Now:		
McCain	35%	59
Obama	68	26
8/22:		
McCain	45%	48
Obama	64	29

PARTISAN – It's noteworthy that Republicans, despite their general antipathy toward Obama, don't broadly see him as running a negative campaign; they divide essentially evenly on the question, 44-46 percent. Democrats, by contrast, overwhelmingly say McCain's going negative, 80-16 percent.

The deciding factor, as ever in presidential politics, is independents. They see McCain as mainly attacking his opponent, by 61-33 percent, but Obama as mainly addressing the issues, by 68 -26 percent.

	Obama is mainly:	
	Addressing the issues	Attacking his opponent
Democrats	87%	12
Independents	68	26
Republicans	46	44

	McCain is mainly:	
	Addressing the issues	Attacking his opponent
Democrats	16%	80
Independents	33	61
Republicans	62	32

GROUPS – Nearly 9 in 10 African-Americans say McCain’s been attacking Obama more than addressing the issues, but likely of greater concern to McCain’s campaign is that 54 percent of whites say so as well. So do a majority of men (57 percent), as well as six in 10 women and nearly two-thirds of moderates.

Among swing voter groups, beyond independents, 58 percent of white Catholics and 59 percent of married women alike say McCain’s been mainly attacking his opponent rather than addressing the issues. So do 56 percent of non-evangelical white Protestants and 57 percent of veterans, a natural affinity group for McCain.

Far fewer in any of these groups say Obama’s been mainly on the attack – a quarter of men and women alike, including married women; fewer than three in 10 whites, white Catholics and non-evangelical white Protestants; two in 10 moderates; and a quarter of veterans. Even among core McCain groups such as conservatives and evangelical white Protestants, more say Obama is mainly addressing the issues than attacking his opponent.

For McCain, finally, among the biggest changes is the result among onetime supporters of Hillary Clinton against Obama – the sought-after Clinton Democrats. In August 59 percent in this group said McCain was mainly attacking Obama, not addressing the issues. Today, 74 percent of Clinton Democrats say so.

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone Oct. 8-11, 2008, among a random sample of 945 registered voters including oversamples of African Americans and 18- to 29-year-olds (weighted to their correct share of the population), for a total of 134 black respondents and 142 18- to 29-year olds. Results among registered voters have a 3-point error margin. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS of Horsham, PA.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com at <http://abcnews.com/pollingunit>

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Full results follow (*= less than 0.5 percent).

1-10 held for release.

11. (ASKED OF REGISTERED VOTERS) So far during this campaign, do you think [NAME] has been mainly (attacking his opponent) or mainly (addressing the issues)?

10/11/08 - Summary Table

	Attacking his opponent	Addressing the issues	No opinion
a. Obama	26	68	6
b. McCain	59	35	6

Trend:

a. Obama

	Attacking his opponent	Addressing the issues	No opinion
10/11/08 RV	26	68	6
8/22/08 RV	29	64	8

b. McCain

10/11/08 RV	59	35	6
8/22/08 RV	48	45	7

12-34 held for release.

END