

AARP and the Politics of the Obama Election: “Tough Times, Tough Choices”

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Abstract

The 2008 election and first two years of President Barack Obama’s administration was the context for an analysis of AARP news coverage. This research examined how news coverage was presented in the *AARP Bulletin*. During the health care debate, AARP often mentioned President Obama over congressional leaders. However, after passage of the law and subsequent election of a new congress, the Republican perspective offered a balance to the president’s agenda. The *AARP Bulletin* may be an agenda setter on controversial issues. This study explored themes, such as “tough times, tough choices,” which appeared to influence the coverage of political issues.

Keywords: politics, elections, AARP, health care, president, congress

The historic 2008 presidential election and subsequent governing in the first two years of the Obama administration presented a unique opportunity to analyze the nature of news coverage of AARP – the largest “nonprofit, nonpartisan” advocacy group for older people (AARP, 2011). In the month following the election of Barack Obama *AARP Bulletin*, the organization’s monthly newspaper, placed the president-elect on the cover with sleeves rolled up and ready to work on “Tough Times, Tough Choices.” The purpose of this article is to examine how AARP framed news coverage of the issues around this main theme and sub-themes important to their constituents. Amid a changing political and media landscape defined by economic uncertainty, the framing of events before and after the election may assist in making predictions about AARP influence on 2012 political campaigns.

1. AARP and Election Content Research

AARP describes itself as a nonpartisan association targeting individuals 50 years of age and older. It promotes social welfare and education issues impacting older Americans (<http://www.AARP.org>). AARP was founded in 1958 and now has more than 30 million members. Research has found that topics of importance to older Americans, such as Social Security and Medicare, have been the focus of recent presidential elections (Hilt & Lipschultz, 2002). AARP has featured most prominently stories about political candidates and health issues in its two print publications: *AARP Bulletin* and *Modern Maturity*. Studies have found that AARP has a consistent pattern of viewing presidential elections within the context of ongoing concerns of older people. One theme emerging from content analyses of AARP publications suggests that readers needed to be realistic in expectations for reform.

Few studies have investigated aging policy and the role advocacy plays in maintaining support for those programs (Blancato, 2004). Likewise, program reform and promotion of new ideas is typically treated from a medical policy perspective rather than research into the nature of social change. For example, Rother (2009) has suggested that reform of payments to physicians should be seen from a consumer viewpoint rather than as “rationing” (p. 235). Moody (2010) predicted key 21st Century issues as: Social Security, Medicare and other concerns. These social problems are among those that have received AARP attention. One study of the AARP website in 2005 found that AARP discussion about Social Security was not limited to the concerns of baby boomers. Surprisingly, AARP’s partnership with Rock the Vote highlighted the interest of young people in the issue. At the same time, AARP did not abandon the concerns of its traditional core group – retirees over age 65 (Hilt & Lipschultz, 2006).

Mass media researchers have tended to focus on traditional newspaper and magazine reading, which has been highest among older people (Stemple & Hargrove, 2004), lower young adult readership compared to baby boomers (Lewis, 2008), and newspaper use of new technologies (Fontenot & Wigley, 2009). However, AARP's large circulation through membership and specialized publications offer a unique area of readership study.

2. Research Questions

RQ 1: Which salient political issues did the *AARP Bulletin* use to frame themes on the eve of the 2008 election, inauguration, and first two years in office of President Barack Obama?

RQ 2: How did the *AARP Bulletin* explore for its readers the political implications of the "Tough Times, Tough Choices" main theme?

RQ 3: How did *AARP Bulletin* content foreshadow the 2010 midterm election results? What themes emerged that had a potential to be influential in the 2012 presidential election and President Obama's second term?

3. Methodology

This study used qualitative research methods in a descriptive analysis of the *AARP Bulletin* from October 2008 through September 2010. The first filter in the analysis was to examine only those issues of the *AARP Bulletin* (n=20) for the presence of political content. *AARP Bulletin* published bi-monthly issues for January-February and July-August, and monthly for the rest. Once political content was identified, researchers explored salient themes and their context. This "textual analysis" builds upon previous studies of "rhetorical analysis" – specifically, description, interpretation, and evaluation of symbolic communication (Len-Rios, 2002, p. 892). Modern qualitative communication research methods for studying media from a "cultural studies" approach examine text within a broader context (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 24). Textual analysis may be seen as a "heuristic device to identify data consisting of words and images, which have become recorded without the intervention of a researcher" (Silverman, 2005, p. 52).

The framing analysis used in this study relied upon the search for "discursive characteristics that makes frames powerful" (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010, p. 2). The story attributes may elicit or trigger salience and emotion in readers' minds. Examining framing through media themes can be seen as an "analytical approach" that "involves the dissection of the content of the frame" (Reese, in D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010, pp. 18-19). Falk (2010) advances the study of words as a method to understand social construction of reality. She argues that language leads people to categorize events and develop stereotypes.

4. Results

On the eve of the 2008 presidential election, the United States faced several key problems – the volatile stock market, two costly wars, continuing threats of terrorism, and meeting the needs of aging baby boomers. Against this backdrop, the *AARP Bulletin* offered two major choices to its readers. The first post-Labor Day references to the campaign appeared in the October issue.

4.1 *The General Context: Eve of the 2008 Election*

John McCain and Barack Obama were pictured in the upper right corner of the October 2008 cover with the words, "Election 2008: Your Issues, Their Words." The story (pp. 18-20) contained exclusive interviews on health care, social security, taxes, energy, spending, and Medicare. In response to the questions, both candidates also concluded with comments about aging – Obama mentioned his 87-year-old grandmother; the story said McCain's 96-year-old mother was a "role model" for the candidate who would be 76 at the end of his first term, if elected president. While the issue examined the campaign issues, AARP offered only online information in the days before the election. By the November issue, the only reference to the election was at the top of the cover. AARP guided readers to a "WEB EXTRA," which was titled "How the Election Will Change 50+ America." It went on to direct readers to its website, which has a Politics & Society section. Once the election was decided, AARP again focused on the issues and challenges facing the new president.

4.2 *Obama Agenda, Health Care and Main Theme Emergence*

The December 2008 *AARP Bulletin* had a caricature of the newly elected president on the cover. He had an unbuttoned collar, jacket off and wearing a blue vest, and he was rolling up his sleeves. The headline read: "Tough Times, Tough Choices." This main theme explained the overall AARP treatment of the Obama agenda during the first two years of his administration. Beneath the headline were for items with check-off boxes: Fix Health Care, Revive Economy, Manage Two Wars, and Everything Else. The story was titled, "What Now, Mr. President?" The story focused Obama's challenge on transforming "campaign themes of 'hope' and 'change' into action that will revive an ailing economy, expand health care coverage and redirect America's foreign policy" (p.

22). University of Virginia political scientist Larry Sabato foreshadowed the difficulties that lay ahead for the Obama administration:

I don't think people understand the degree to which we are broke. People are going to be unhappy. Obama's not going to be able to do what he promised: There's no money (p. 22).

On the lower third of each of three pages, there was a large word transposed over mostly blue sky: Crisis, Hope (Obama is shown with hand on his chin contemplating), and Action (Obama is seen seated and smiling) (pp. 22-24). The content reflected cautious optimism about the new administration by linking the Obama agenda to economic realities.

4.3 Sub-theme: Priorities and Politics

The headline cover of the January/February 2009 issue was titled "DAY 1." It depicted a broken egg with the White House inside of it saying, "Obama Promises Fast Action on: Solving the financial crisis; Launching a new New Deal; and Providing health care for all." The cover also had a bold-faced question: "Can Washington Deliver?" The story was titled, "Can Our New Leaders Fix the Health Care System? It featured interviews with a 55-year-old machinist and a 60-year-old former pre-school teacher and focused on five key health care issues: Cover children, Covering the uninsured, Preexisting conditions, Controlling costs, and Long-term and preventative care (pp. 12-13). On the next page, AARP discussed suggested Medicare changes: Cutting payments to private plans, Allowing buy-ins for people 55 to 64, and Doctoring Part D (the prescription component of Medicare) (p. 14).

In another article titled, "A New Deal for Neighborhoods" the *Bulletin* interviewed a 65-year-old auto dealer and real estate broker who was "enthusiastic" about Obama's plan to stimulate the economy (p. 18). The story emphasized public works projects and rebuilding the nation's infrastructure. The next story was titled, "Please, Judge, Save My House." A 51-year-old Salvation Army caseworker who had declared bankruptcy was interviewed (p. 24). The story noted that in 2008, not including the last quarter, more than two million foreclosures had been filed (p. 28).

4.4 Sub-theme: Health Care as a Focus

The March 2009 issue picked up the discussion regarding reform of the nation's health care system in an inside article titled, "Lessons From Home," It referred to Obama's mother and grandmother and the challenges they faced: "Perhaps no president has taken office with such personal exposure to the critical aspects of American health care" (p. 3). In the next issue, the cover story was titled, "The New Face of Health Care," and it offered the Pennsylvania health system as one model for Obama and Congress, which it said had "the Herculean task of reforming the health care system" (p. 12). Both the cover and story used yellow smiley faces over the heads of a patient in a wheel chair, doctors and a nurse.

By the June 2009 issue, health care emerged as the centerpiece of the Obama agenda. "Health Care Reform, The Big Fix" made the cover of this issue. The first bullet read, "What the president wants." In both the cover and the story, a series of photographs depicting broken arms in casts focused the issues on the 50 states, universal health care a glossary of terms. The story said President Obama and Congress "vowed to have health care reform enacted as a priority by the end of the year" (p. 10). The story pointed out that the Obama administration was avoiding what they saw as "central mistakes that doomed the Clinton plan" (p. 10): (1) Taking too long to develop a plan in secret; and (2) Shutting Congress out of the process. AARP said there were "signs of discord" about a government-run public plan proposal that would have created a Medicare type alternative to private insurance (p. 12).

For the remainder of the summer (July-August 2009 issue), health care proposal dominated AARP coverage. The "Health Reform Puzzle" remained on the cover of this issue. Using a Rubik's Cube graphic, the title goes on to call this "Now the Hard Part." President Obama is pictured in the upper-left corner smiling with AARP CEO Rand teasing a separate story about lowering prescription costs. The pair was shown in the story about a joint press conference they held to announce plans to "slash the prescription drug expenses of Medicare beneficiaries who fall into the Part D coverage gap" (p. 4). The so-called "Doughnut hole" refers to mostly middle-income older people.

Continuing from the June cover story theme, another arm in a cast was shown offering an ok hand gesture within a box detailing "Key Areas of Agreement" in the health care debate (p. 11):

"The issue, health care reform, is not a luxury," President Obama told key Democratic senators recently. "Soaring health care costs are unsustainable for families, they are unsustainable for businesses, and they are unsustainable for governments" (p. 10).

AARP then said that there were, “Tough issues on the table” (p. 10). However, a \$1 trillion plan and its “questions camouflage wide area of agreement that would reshape the nation’s health care system” (p. 10). The need for new regulation, AARP said, included non-discrimination of applicants based on gender or preexisting conditions: “Those changes will be especially important to people ages 50 to 64, many of whom have been rejected because of chronic illnesses” (p. 11).

The health care debate remained on the cover of the September 2009 *AARP Bulletin*, although President Obama was not mentioned or shown: “THE HYPE, THE LIES, **THE FACTS.**” The headline was placed next to a doctor’s stethoscope. In a story titled “Stop Talking and Start Thinking,” the president is mentioned: President Obama and congressional advocates have been slow to highlight their innovations, namely features that are distinctly American, where employer-provided care is the essential building block” (p. 3). The cover story was titled, “The Assault on Truth” and summarized the state of debate as “getting down and dirty”:

As expected, the gloves are off in President Obama’s push for health care reform. Democrats and Republicans are battling over how to fix a system they all agree is broken – that’s how Congress is supposed to work. But this summer, something new has entered the political arena – a tsunami of rumors, myths, fear-mongering and misinformation about the proposals that surges around the Internet in nanoseconds. “I’m totally confused about what’s going on,” one reader wrote to the *AARP Bulletin*. “How do I know who to believe?” (p. 12).

The issue signaled a rise in criticism about the president’s handling of the debate: “To add to the confusion, Obama, while talking up his overall goals for reform, has left it to Congress to work out the details” (p. 12). The article went on to answer questions referred to as “myths” by the AARP by using what the three leading bills proposed.

President Obama also held a “tele-town hall” meeting at the Washington AARP headquarters, which was reported in a story titled, “Obama Pitches Health Care at Tele-Town Hall” (p. 26). The 75-minute meeting was one of nine attracting nearly 500,000 registrants. In it, “Obama addressed opponents’ claims and emphasized that the cost of not enacting comprehensive reform would be far worse than the cost of the reform proposals” (p. 26). Obama was shown sitting with the AARP CEO and president against an AARP backdrop in a television studio.

As the legislative process grinds on, AARP coverage becomes less focused on the president and more on competing plans and impact on Medicare. Over the next two issues (October and November), AARP used its cover to highlight the problems with the current system. Medicare and health care reform were featured on the October cover with no mention of the president. Drawing upon historical references to plans offered by Ted Kennedy and Richard Nixon, AARP admonished current lawmakers “Don’t Miss This Opportunity, too” (p. 3).

Today, with control of Congress and the White House, Democrats are advancing Obama’s plan, a combination of private, employer-provided and individual-based coverage and care. It’s striking how closely that resembles the plan outlined by Nixon four decades ago” (p. 3).

The health care debate and the future of Medicare dominated the content in this issue, although there was no further mention of the president.

The focus of the November cover was on “crooks” who are “swindling the system” – WANTED FOR MEDICARE FRAUD showed photographs of what AARP called the top ten “fugitives” (p. 1). AARP used the example of a \$1,048 electric wheelchair that Medicare paid \$4,018 through a supplier lease. The story suggested that “billions” could be saved (p. 3).

4.5 Sub-theme: Health Care as an Economic Issue for the President

The December 2009 cover made no mention of the president, but the health care debate continued to dominate in what AARP called “Moment of TRUTH.” The cover story outlined seven “Critical Maneuvers” within the final construction of the legislation (p. 12). “To be sure, lawmakers and President Obama agree on the broad framework that expands coverage, tightens regulations on insurance firms and narrows the ‘doughnut hole’ for prescription drugs” (p. 12). The article identified seven “stress points,” which included funding, access and long-term costs. The publication made only the single mention of the president, instead emphasizing in its CEO column that, “AARP has been a strong advocate for health care reform for over 50 years” (p. 16).

The beginning of 2010 (January-February issue) reflected the economic impact on health care reform in the cover story (“Drug Prices UP, UP, UP”). President Obama is pictured with fourteen others answering the question, “When will the recession end.” He responded, “Digging ourselves out of the hole... is not going to be easy” (p. 20). The health care debate was termed as at “crunch time,” and the president was again mentioned:

President Obama and 535 members of Congress have tried, in fits and starts, to overhaul the nation’s

health care system and limit the growing costs. No one said it would be easy, and it hasn't been.

By March 2010, AARP turned its focus on the cover to the nation's economic problems along with individual struggles to save money (a spiked piggy bank was shown). With less emphasis than previous covers, AARP said "WHAT AMERICANS REALLY THINK, Why Health Care Reform Stalled – What's Next." The story featured the "HEALTH CARE EXPRESS" train that "jumped the tracks" (p. 10).

As the Obama administration and Congress go back to the drawing board on health care reform, experts are warning that they must not only focus on the process – how to get enough votes to pass any legislation this year – but also pay more attention to public opinion and do a better job of explaining the proposals to average Americans (p. 10).

AARP concluded that a majority of the public had "soured" on reforming health care (p. 10).

A month later, AARP's pessimism was replaced by legislative approval of the health care package. A banner across the top of the April 2010 cover page read: "HEALTH CARE REFORM BREAKTHROUGH," but there was no mention of the president. A story on the passage of the bill featured a timeline including a January 2009 photo of the president and Michelle Obama with the caption: "President Obama promises to 'raise health care's quality and lower its cost' at his inauguration (p. 3). On the next page of the summary, President Obama is shown with the Vice President Joe Biden from February: "Obama hosts seven-hour summit in last-ditch push for bipartisanship" (p. 4). The story referenced the president's historic success: "The landmark legislation represents an achievement for Obama that other presidents – Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton – sought unsuccessfully for nearly a century" (p. 4).

The next month, the *AARP Bulletin* emphasized the impact of the new law on the cover: New Health Care Law, WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU, 8-Page User's Guide." The publication featured frequently asked questions about the impact of the law on individuals, small businesses, the uninsured and others. With the passage of health care reform, AARP moved to the next most important issue: the economy.

4.6 Sub-theme: The Economy and the Looming Midterm Election

The June 2010 issue presented a marked shift away from health care and toward economic issues, such as the "Property Tax REVOLT" prominently displayed on the cover. In a sidebar, however, AARP warned that: "Watch Out! Scam Artists Are Exploiting The New Health Law." In the story, readers were told about con artists who will call, email or show up at the door selling "ObamaCare Insurance" (p. 4). The story makes it clear that "there's no such thing as ObamaCare coverage" (p. 4). Later, in the monthly Where We Stand column, the president was again mentioned: "When President Obama announced the bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, we applauded his efforts to address our nation's long-term fiscal challenges" (p. 26). AARP urged lawmakers to address the growing budget deficit.

The economy continued as the July-August 2010 cover story. In large type, *AARP Bulletin* splashed, "99 GREAT WAYS TO SAVE." The only mention of the president came much later in the publication. In an article entitled, "Social Security, a Target for Reducing the Deficit," the lead was: "Social Security is in the spotlight as President Obama's fiscal commission searches for ways to trim the burgeoning federal debt" (p. 34). Red ink was dropped on a social security card.

Although mid-term elections were weeks away at the time of the September 2010 issue, AARP shifted from politics to feature stories on the cover: A potential breakthrough in Alzheimer's disease, hidden costs of smart phones, identity theft prevention, and a list of banned books. Even the Where We Stand column took a bland approach: "We Champion 50+ Workers" (p. 30).

4.7 AARP Editorials and Opinion

Throughout the health care debate, AARP was a strong voice in support of reform. The AARP CEO used the monthly editorial as a political platform. For example, in the December 2008 issue, AARP CEO Bill Novelli recommended immediate action in six areas: job assistance, health security, retirement security, homeowner assistance, energy assistance, and nutrition assistance based upon the conclusion that "these are hard times" (p. 30). In doing so, he helped set discussion on health care and the economy. Likewise, in the next issue, Novelli again emphasized the tough choices theme in his column:

We need to make some tough choices... We can't fix the economy without an overhaul of our broken health care system... I am an optimist, as are most Americans. I believe we'll move from this crisis toward a better America (p. 34).

In the same issue, David Walker, president and CEO of the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, wrote an opinion piece

labeled, “Making tough choices in hard times.” After addressing issues, such as the federal stimulus package, social security, the health care system, and the tax code, Walker concluded: “Americans must reward rather than punish those who make tough choices and hold others accountable for their failure to act, if we want our future to be better than our past” (p. 30).

Even with a change at the very top of AARP, the emphasis on health care remained. Throughout the summer, new AARP CEO A. Barry Rand reinforced support for the change needed in health care because costs will rise astronomically (May 2009). He emphasized that the economy could not be fixed without restructuring health care delivery, access expansion and cost-cutting: “It’s also why health care reform is AARP’s top priority” (July-August 2009, p. 26). In Rand’s September 2009 *Where We Stand* column, he and AARP President Jennie Chin Hansen support health care reform: “While America’s health care system is known for research and innovation, it unfortunately costs too much, wastes too much, makes too many mistakes and gives us back too little value for our money” (p. 8). Later in the year, Rand’s column was titled, “A Call to Action,” and reminded readers of AARP’s “firm” position on health care: “We believe that Americans need health care reform now... Contact your senators, your representative and the president” (November 2009, p. 34). Rand’s column ended by asking readers that they should remind elected officials of constituent support for health care reform.

Postscript: As the midterm elections came and went, AARP offered a voter’s guide in October. By the December issue, AARP analyzed the elections results impact on key issues, such as the deficit, taxes and social security in a page 16 story. It was not until March 2011 that the *AARP Bulletin* showed President Obama and new Speaker of the House John Boehner as cartoon figures on the cover with the title “Shall We Dance?” Obama has a red rose in his hand, and Boehner is putting tango record on an old phonograph. The story asked, “Will they wrestle, or will they waltz?” and showed the pair in an ambiguous hold (pp. 28-29).

In terms of the research questions for this study, the publication advanced health care reform as the most salient issue during this time frame. President Obama was frequently connected as the primary advocate for the legislation. The “Tough Times, Tough Choices” main theme, although offered early in the Obama presidency, was not emphasized as the health care debate produced a bill that was eventually passed and signed by the president. The theme only re-emerges in a prominent way after the new law was approved and Republicans regained control of the House of Representatives. At this point, the tough choices were connected to the federal deficit and debt.

This study revealed that there were important sub-themes: 1) priorities and politics; 2) health care as a focus of discussion; 3) health care as an economic issue for President Obama; and 4) the struggling economy, as the mid-term elections were looming. Each sub-theme allowed both support of the president’s plan to pass health care reform, but also Republicans’ desire to use “Obamacare” as an election issue in 2010 and 2012. The focus on “tough times, tough choices,” however, did not address the worsening deficit and debt. Instead, these emerged as central issues after the health care debate.

Previous studies of AARP publications and websites during presidential elections found an emphasis on Social Security, Medicare and other 50+ issues, such as health care. However, in the 2008-10 period, the advancement of health care atop the president’s agenda, the debate and the ultimate passage of legislation pushed other issues impacting aging Americans to the background. In other words, the president and AARP focused on passage of health care at the expense of most other issues of importance to older Americans that could have been placed on the agenda.

AARP Bulletin content did not foreshadow the midterm election results. Instead, the heavy emphasis of health care reform discussion centered on the contents of the legislation and its impact. In doing so, AARP sidestepped health care as a contentious political issue. At the same time, however, after passage and the Republican win, AARP’s acknowledgement of economic problems may turn out to be a foreshadowing of the 2012 presidential election.

5. Discussion

AARP Bulletin throughout the health care debate frequently referenced President Obama over congressional leaders, such as former Speaker Nancy Pelosi. She had been a lightning rod for conservative criticism of those who had tagged it “ObamaCare.” After passage of the health care law and the election of the new congress, though, Republican Speaker John Boehner emerges as a challenge to the president’s plans. The publication mentioned the nation’s wars only after the presidential election, and then they were again ignored in favor of the health care focus. Likewise, economic news – including a huge dip in the stock market and the subsequent fallout in housing sales and rising unemployment – was rarely mentioned during the period under study. The exception was when the economy was related to the health care debate. In part, this could be explained because *AARP Bulletin* lies somewhere between mainstream daily news coverage and the timeless features offered in AARP’s sister bi-monthly publication called, *AARP, The Magazine*. It frequently shows entertainers on the cover

with stories about their work and family life.

The present study looked only at covers of *AARP Bulletin*, cover stories, and references to President Obama. As part of the analysis, this study was limited to discussion of images, photos and depictions of the president, art work linked to political issues, and other cover graphics. It did not attempt comprehensive or in-depth research on visual communication in the publication. The analysis was limited to the two-year period leading up to midterm elections.

As AARP was using the print publication to drive traffic to their online site, future research should address aging American use of the Internet and social media to engage in the national discussion of issues that directly impact them (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003). Asenthusiastic consumers of online information, the “growing reliance on Web-based information exchange leaves little doubt as to the importance of the Internet as a source of news information” (Yang & Oliver, 2004, p. 733).

AARP continues to be an influential voice for older Americans. As this group becomes populated by aging baby boomers, we may see additional debates about use of scarce resources. The *AARP Bulletin* has an opportunity to be an agenda setter on controversial issues when the political climate is ripe for social change. Likewise, a sitting president or congressional leaders could use AARP advocacy to advance legislation. The alignment of political and AARP support in a specific direction for social policy can be seen as a powerful force within an aging population (Estes, 2001).

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