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**The Weekly Update from *Media Matters for America***

**Media give McCain a pass while pouncing on Obama**

When Barack Obama announced yesterday that he was opting out of the public financing system for the general election and John McCain responded by attacking Obama for doing so, you didn't have to be Carnac the Magnificent to anticipate the media's reaction. In fact, it's hard to imagine a scenario that would more predictably result in skewed media coverage than a campaign finance squabble involving John McCain.

McCain [said](#) of Obama's decision: "This election is about a lot of things but it's also about trust. It's also about whether you can take people's word. ... [T]his is a big deal, a big deal. He has completely reversed himself and gone back, not on his word to me, but the commitment he made to the American people."

McCain's comments were widely reported -- but few news organizations bothered to [point out](#) that *McCain* has "completely reversed himself" and gone back on his word on public financing during this campaign.

John McCain said he would take public financing for the Republican primaries. Then he used the promise of that public financing to help secure a loan for his campaign. Then, after he wrapped up the Republican nomination, he abruptly decided he did not want to be bound by the limits on campaign fundraising and spending that accompany public financing, so he announced that he had changed his mind.

But Federal Election Commission chairman David Mason sent McCain a letter saying that he cannot unilaterally opt out of the public financing system without FEC approval -- a letter the McCain campaign ignored. If McCain cannot opt out of the system unilaterally, he has broken the law by raising and spending funds in excess of legal limits, and continues to do so each day. Even if McCain isn't breaking the law, he has already broken his word and "reversed himself" on the question of whether he would take public funding for the primaries.

That fact has gone all but ignored in news reports about Obama's decision, even those news reports that quote McCain's criticism of Obama. And McCain's own history is doubly significant: Not only does it suggest that McCain's criticism of Obama is hypocritical, it also indicates that it is impossible to trust McCain to follow through on his commitment not to raise money for the general election. Finally, if David Mason is right and McCain is found to have violated the law, as *The Washington Post* [noted](#), "Knowingly violating the spending limit is a criminal offense that could put McCain at risk of stiff fines and up to five years in prison."

I have seen no indication that a single reporter has asked McCain to reconcile his criticism of Obama with his own on-again, off-again relationship with the public financing system. And precious few news reports made any mention of the matter. (To their credit, the evening news broadcasts on both ABC and NBC mentioned McCain's public financing shift -- though both mentions were in passing, and both portrayed the matter as an Obama campaign assertion rather than clear fact. And neither contrasted McCain's actions with his words.) [As \*Media Matters\* has often noted, media have consistently ignored or downplayed McCain's controversial decision to forgo public funding.](#)

Instead of noting McCain's actions, many news reports have [portrayed](#) him as a virtuous reformer. This is entirely unsurprising, but it ignores the fact that McCain's actual history on campaign finance reform has been more than a little self-serving, [as I explained in March 2006](#).

Here's the short version: In 2002, McCain excluded 527s from his namesake campaign finance legislation, which was widely expected to benefit Republicans due to the Democrats' greater reliance on "soft money." As things turned out, McCain-Feingold did not benefit Republicans in the 2004 campaign as much as had been expected, due in large part to Democrats' use of 527s. Then, in 2006, McCain abruptly changed his mind about 527s and sponsored legislation that would limit contributions to such groups -- legislation that, once again, was widely seen as favoring Republicans.

Maybe John McCain has taken his various contradictory positions on 527s for sincere and virtuous reasons. But there can be little doubt that if he were anyone else, journalists would note that his history of campaign finance "reform" proposals have one thing in common -- they are widely seen as benefiting the political party to

which he happens to belong.

For that matter, given that McCain is running as someone with a commitment to "reform" and a record to back it up, the media should -- but do not -- examine the actual results of McCain's legislative efforts. There is broad consensus that one of the most significant problems with the current system is the role played by outside groups like the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth -- groups that can have enormous impact on an election and that have fewer disincentives than candidates or party committees to behave badly. The role played by these groups is a direct (and obvious) consequence of the McCain-Feingold legislation. And during debate over that legislation, McCain specifically ruled out including provisions restricting the actions of 527s.

Put simply: John McCain is as responsible as anyone for the rise of 527s, which much of the media treats as one of the most troubling aspect of modern political campaigns. But when was the last time you saw a news report or commentary bemoaning the influence of these organizations that noted John McCain's responsibility for them?

Barack Obama has said that one reason he chose to forgo public financing for the general election is so that he will have sufficient funds to compete with not only John McCain and the Republican National Committee, but with 527s and other outside groups that may attack him, as the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth smeared John Kerry in 2004.

In response, news reports have asserted that there are no 527s attacking Obama:

**Liz Sidoti, Associated Press:** "Obama blamed his decision in part on McCain and 'the smears and attacks from his allies running so-called 527 groups.' But he failed to mention that the only outside groups running ads in earnest so far are those aligned with Obama -- and running commercials against McCain. So much for being a straight shooter."

**Ben Smith, Politico:** "He [Obama] has complained that McCain said he couldn't control attack ads from outside groups -- though the only outside attack ads to run this cycle have been financed by Obama allies and directed at McCain."

**The Washington Post:** "To date, no conservative 527 groups have materialized."

Nonsense. Several conservative groups have already attacked Obama, using ads and other tactics. Freedom's Watch [has run ads](#) attacking Obama over taxes and health care. Vets for Freedom [has run two Internet ads](#) attacking Obama over issues related to the Iraq war. (Until recently, two key McCain surrogates -- Sens. Joe Lieberman and Lindsey Graham -- served on Vets for Freedom's Policy Board of Advisors.) Floyd Brown, creator of the infamous Willie Horton ad, has [released](#) an ad attacking Obama.

But more important: Even if it *were* true that no conservative groups have yet run ads criticizing Obama, that wouldn't mean that none *will* do so. Remember: The Swift Boat Veterans for Truth didn't run its first ad until August 2004. Conservatives haven't historically been skittish about attacking Democratic presidential candidates, and they haven't historically lacked for funding to do so.

That may change this year, but there is no reason to assume it will -- particularly when there are conservative groups that have already run ads attacking Obama. And when John McCain announces that he won't "referee" controversies over such ads. And when McCain strategist Steve Schmidt [says](#) McCain "wishes that 527s did not exist on either side. But he understands that they do. And he certainly isn't going to say that one side should have them and one side should not in the context of a presidential campaign."

But even if 527s and other conservative groups don't attack Obama, he may still need that extra money he can raise by opting out of the public financing system. As the past 36 hours have reminded us, he may need it to compete with the priceless favorable media coverage John McCain benefits from nearly every day.