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MRC Study: Dean and Clark Get Most Network Airtime; Reporters' Questions Favor a Liberal Agenda

Morning Donations to Democratic Dreams

Every four years, ABC's *Good Morning America*, CBS's *Early Show* and NBC's *Today* open their doors to those who would be President. In theory, that's a good thing: While the evening newscasts offer only brief soundbites from the campaign trail, the weekday morning shows give millions of casual news watchers a chance to assess the candidates as they answer reporters' questions.

But do these programs give liberal candidates an advantage? As the 2004 primary season begins, Media Research Center analysts reviewed all 44 of the Democratic candidates' appearances on the ABC, CBS and NBC weekday morning news shows during the last six months of 2003, along with those of the Republican candidates for the same period in 1999.

The study found that Democrats got nearly twice as much airtime last year as the Republicans had in 1999. The questions posed by network interviewers in 2003 reflected a pro-liberal, anti-Bush agenda, but four years earlier the GOP candidates were rarely indulged with pro-conservative, anti-Clinton questions from their network hosts.

100 EXTRA MINUTES FOR THE DEMOCRATS

The ten Democrats running to unseat George W. Bush have collectively received 100 more minutes of airtime than the field of eight GOP candidates received four years ago. (See box.) Republicans were brought aboard the morning shows 20 times in the latter half of 1999. Those interviews totaled 2 hours, 16 minutes. Campaign regulation advocate John McCain received the lion's share of airtime — nearly 64 minutes in ten interviews, seven of which were on ABC. Front-runner Bush was interviewed four times (37 minutes), but not once on ABC during the study period.

Since July, CBS's *Early Show* has hosted 16 interviews

with the Democrats, including co-host Harry Smith's visit to Iowa for a profile of John Kerry that included an extensive Q&A. NBC's *Today* offered 15 interviews, but they lasted longer — more than 111 minutes, compared with 64 minutes on CBS. *Good Morning America's* 13 interviews gave the Democrats an additional 65½ minutes of broadcast airtime. Altogether, the Democrats were granted 4 hours of network morning airtime, or almost 10 minutes per week.

Most of that airtime went to just two candidates. Howard Dean has received nearly 70 minutes of network airtime in 13 appearances, slightly behind Wesley Clark, whose 13 interviews totaled 71 minutes.

Among the leading candidates, Dick Gephardt has been practically shut out, with only one appearance in the last six months (on *The Early Show*, November 10). That puts the former House Minority Leader on par with Carol Moseley Braun, Al Sharpton and Bob Graham, who has since dropped out of the race. Far-left, anti-war candidate Dennis Kucinich has yet to appear on any of the weekday morning shows.

Free Airtime for Democrats

Morning Show Interviews, 7/1-12/31 2003

Wesley Clark (13)	71 mins, 21 secs
Howard Dean (13)	69 mins, 58 secs
John Kerry (7)	46 mins, 3 secs
John Edwards (5)	24 mins, 4 secs
Joe Lieberman (2)	13 mins, 45 secs
Carol Moseley Braun (1)	4 mins, 40 secs
Dick Gephardt (1)	3 mins, 52 secs
Al Sharpton (1)	3 mins, 50 secs
Bob Graham (1)	3 mins, 8 secs

All Democrats 240 minutes, 41 seconds

All GOP (1999) 136 minutes, 7 seconds

Based on MRC analysis of all candidate interviews on ABC's *Good Morning America*, CBS's *The Early Show* and NBC's *Today*. The total number of interviews appears beside each candidate's name.

INVITING THE CANDIDATES TO BASH BUSH

The morning hosts posed 319 questions to the Democratic candidates, nearly one-fifth of which (58) were designed to get them to reiterate or amplify their condemnations of President Bush. The morning hosts often asked the candidates to repeat charges they had leveled elsewhere. Four years before, only 4 out of 179 questions similarly invited the GOP candidates to differ with Bill Clinton or Al Gore.

CBS's Rene Syler served up this softball to John Kerry on December 4: "You called President Bush's foreign policy arrogant, inept and reckless. Give us some specifics."

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MORNING TV HELPS THE DEMOCRATS (cont.)

On September 8, the morning after a Bush speech, NBC's Matt Lauer opened the door for Howard Dean: "You called his speech nothing short of outrageous and said the President was, quote, 'beginning to remind me of what was happening with Lyndon Johnson and Dick Nixon during the Vietnam War.' Explain that to me."

On September 24, ABC's Charles Gibson asked Dean to repeat one of his smarmiest claims: "You said the extreme right wing has shown nothing but a contempt for democracy. Do you think the extreme right wing is in control of this administration, and do you think it shows contempt for democracy?"

While it may seem natural to ask challengers to criticize the current administration or the other party's front-runner, that did not happen four years ago. Then, network reporters rarely asked Republicans candidates about either Clinton or Gore. A rare quote: "I know you've been critical of the Clinton presidency and what it's done to the office," Katie Couric prompted Dan Quayle on July 16, 1999.

Instead, reporters' questions highlighted GOP schisms: "Is the leadership of your party in Congress out of touch with the American public, and is the party too much a captive of the right?" Gibson asked McCain on October 12, 1999.

BOTH PARTIES FACED LIBERAL QUESTIONING

In 2003, reporters posed 54 questions that could be categorized as reflecting either a liberal or a conservative view. Nearly all of these questions (47) were based on a liberal premise, compared with seven that reflected a conservative agenda. But that's not just because the Democratic contest pits liberals against each other; reporters also posed far more liberal than conservative questions to Republicans four years ago. (See box.)

On November 16, 1999, Matt Lauer challenged Bush's proposal for a missile defense system by citing the standard liberal objections that it might not work, would violate the ABM treaty and could "only jump-start a nuclear arms war." ABC's Diane Sawyer reflected the liberal view on September 27, 1999 when she saluted McCain: "However brave a stand campaign finance reform may be, members of your own party have rejected it. What's the matter with them?"

Why don't they get it?"

But instead of asking this year's Democrats to respond to conservative arguments, the networks kept up their liberal approach. Unlike Dean, John Kerry would leave the middle class tax cuts intact, which earned him this rebuke from ABC's Sawyer on Sept. 2: "If you only repeal those above \$200,000, we calculate that it comes to some \$40 billion against a potential \$470 billion deficit. What does it gain?"

On October 1, Katie Couric demanded that Dean explain reports he once supported capping the growth of Medicare. She followed up with another question that doubted Dean's liberalism: "Are you sorry that...you described Medicare as one of the worst things that ever happened and a bureaucratic disaster?"

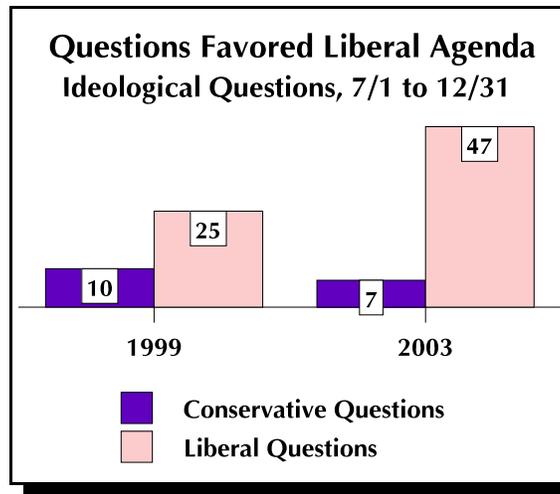
As for those rare conservative-oriented questions, Couric on December 16 asked the anti-war Clark whether "an Iraq with Saddam in charge is preferable to an Iraq with Saddam in custody." And on November 25, in an otherwise soft interview about the candidate's new book, ABC's Gibson challenged trial lawyer

John Edwards: "So many people feel that it's a system run amok, that there are frivolous law suits, that the litigiousness of our society has driven up the cost of everything."

TOUGH ON LOSERS, NOT ON LIBERALISM

While they hardly ever challenged the candidates' liberal beliefs, reporters did confront the Democrats with tough questions. On September 16, Diane Sawyer told Edwards he had little support in New Hampshire polls. "What are you doing wrong?" she demanded. CBS's Rene Syler point blank asked Kerry on December 4: "Is your campaign foundering?"

Plainly, the networks aren't shielding liberal politicians from all aggressive questions. But their performance over the last six months shows how rarely reporters question liberalism itself. — *Rich Noyes, Brian Boyd, Geoffrey Dickens and Jessica Anderson*



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