



Campaign 2004

Media Reality ✓ Check

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Study: Networks Portray Kerry's Liberalism as a Partisan GOP Charge, Not a Well-Documented Fact

A Liberal Candidate Gets Media Makeover

Unquestionably, the Democrats have chosen a liberal candidate as their 2004 standard-bearer. John Kerry has associated himself with liberal groups and liberal causes for his entire political life, from his days as a Vietnam war protester to his career as an anti-defense, pro-abortion, high-tax, big-government Massachusetts Senator. The liberal Americans for Democratic Action reports that 92 percent of Kerry's career votes matched their left-wing agenda.

But since the January 19 Iowa caucuses made Kerry the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination, the longtime liberal has tried to obscure his record and deny his beliefs. At the CBS debate on Sunday, Kerry called the notion he's liberal "a laughable characterization." Back in January, he assured ABC's Linda Douglass the label just doesn't fit: "On some things I may be a liberal, on some things I'm very conservative. I mean, being fiscally responsible is conservative."

Reporters should have snickered at the idea that the big-spending Kerry is "very conservative" on any issue, and maybe they did in private. But on the airwaves, network reporters have not challenged Kerry's pretense. Instead, journalists painted Republicans as partisan manipulators for alleging the obvious.

An MRC study of every weekday morning and evening broadcast news show since Iowa found ABC, CBS and NBC reporters presented the "Kerry is a liberal" concept as a GOP charge 27 times, compared with just three occasions when reporters stated Kerry's ideology as a matter of fact. (Five other stories discussed Kerry's liberal bent, but didn't cite Republicans or present the idea as beyond dispute.)

As Kerry was winning New Hampshire January 27, *NBC Nightly News* reporter Kelly O'Donnell supplied one of the liberal labels as she assessed the race: "Kerry's down side: The view that a New England liberal may be a tough sale nationwide." The next night, CBS's Jim Axelrod noted how

Missouri voters will be "eyeballing the liberal, Yale-educated son of old money turned four-term Senator."

As Kerry's nomination seemed more likely, journalists got out the ten-foot pole. On NBC's *Today* show January 29, Ron Allen reported how "GOP leaders say" Kerry is liberal before he tried to blur the issue: "In Massachusetts, many people will tell you the state's liberal label does not always fit."

The networks made it seem as if calling Kerry a liberal could somehow not be true. On the February 4 *NBC Nightly News*, Campbell Brown argued that "Republicans...are hoping to paint Kerry as the liberal Senator from the only state in the country that allows gay couples to wed." Over on the *CBS Evening News*, Jim Axelrod hit the same theme: "Remember Willie Horton, an issue that made 'Michael

Dukakis,' 'Massachusetts liberal' and 'out of touch' synonymous? Clearly, John Kerry doesn't want another Mr. Bush using a different issue to paint the same picture."

Don't expect the networks to drop their bias now that Kerry has cleared the Democratic field. Today on CBS's *Early Show*, Bob Schieffer presented the ideological framing of Kerry as irrelevant. "We all know that one of the first things [Republicans are] going to do is not talk about the issues," Schieffer told Harry Smith. "They're going to define John Kerry, and they're going to try to paint him as a left-wing liberal who's out of touch with the rest of the country."

During Campaign 2000, network evening news reporters put the "conservative" label on George W. Bush 19 times, but never once called Al Gore a "liberal." This year, those same reporters seem ready to help John Kerry hide his liberal pedigree. — Rich Noyes

On ABC, CBS and NBC, the idea that Kerry is a liberal was cast as a partisan GOP charge 27 times, nine times more often than reporters applied the label themselves.

L. Brent Bozell III, Publisher; Brent Baker, Tim Graham, Rich Noyes, Editors; Geoffrey Dickens, Jessica Anderson, Brad Wilmouth, Brian Boyd, Ken Shepherd, Amanda Monson, Media Analysts; Kristina Sewell, Research Associate. For the latest documentation of liberal media bias, sign up for the daily *CyberAlert* at www.mrc.org.