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MRC Study: Networks Failed to Label California Congressman as a Democrat in 92% of Levy Stories

Avoiding Gary Condit's Democratic ID

On July 9, ABC's George Stephanopoulos confidently predicted on *Good Morning America* that "I don't think the rest of the Democratic Party is going to get tarred by Gary Condit" as a result of the California Congressman's adulterous affair with a young woman, Chandra Levy, who has been the subject of intense police activity since she ominously disappeared on May 1.

Probably not, and one reason may be that ABC and its broadcasting brethren have downplayed Condit's partisan affiliation throughout their coverage of the Levy story. Normally, a "Republican" or "Democrat" label is presented nearly every time a member of Congress is cited, as in "Rep. Gary Condit (D-CA)." But since May, the three broadcast networks have practically erased the "D" from Condit's political identity, detaching the scandal-plagued politician from the rest of his party.

From May 14, when Chandra's mother, Susan, appeared on *Good Morning America* to plead for her daughter's safe return, through July 11, ABC, CBS and NBC morning and evening news programs aired a total of 179 stories about Gary Condit — 121 full-length reports or interviews, plus 58 brief anchor-read items. MRC researchers reviewed each story, and found that Condit was labeled a "Democrat" only 14 times, or in fewer than eight percent of stories. Six of those labels, or almost half, came paired with adjectives such as "conservative" or "right-wing" which distinguished Condit from other members of his party.

"A political maverick who rides a Harley, Condit founded the Blue Dog coalition of conservative Democrats," Stephanopoulos himself reported on the June 25 *Good Morning America*, the program's first hint that Condit was a Democrat after 26 stories on the Levy case. Stephanopoulos then rued to host Charles Gibson: "He was the kind of guy, when you were working for Democrats in the House, you could never count on his vote." Two weeks later, ABC's Brian Rooney similarly described Condit as "a Democrat

who often votes with the Republican opposition."

NBC's George Lewis shoved Condit to the furthest fringe of the Democratic Party on July 2, branding him "a 53-year-old right-wing Democrat." Condit's ideological ratings, however, place him squarely in the middle of the spectrum: After 12 years in Congress, Condit gets a 48 percent rating from the American Conservative Union and a 52 percent score from the liberal Americans for Democratic Action.

Six additional stories conveyed Condit's affiliation without using a straightforward label. On the July 8 *CBS Evening News*, for example, Sandra Hughes didn't quite say that Condit was a Democrat but remarked that "the Republican Party also sees weakness and may focus on

gaining his congressional seat." But even adding those six stories to those that plainly labeled Condit leaves 159 network stories, or 89 percent of the total coverage, which offered viewers no clue that he was a Democrat.

In his first mention of the story on July 6, for example, ABC's Peter Jennings merely identified "Congressman Gary Condit of California." In contrast, on the July 9 *Nightly News*, Andrea Mitchell labeled Condit when she recalled that "when Bill Clinton was under fire for covering up his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, Condit was one of the first Democrats to speak out."

Before he became controversial, Condit's party label was normally presented on those few occasions he appeared on a network news program. But now that the Levy case has made him a household name, you have to listen for a long time to hear a network reporter acknowledge Gary Condit's membership in the Democratic Party. — Rich Noyes

Few TV Stories Called Condit a "Democrat"

ABC:	67 stories, 3 Democratic labels (4%)
CBS:	38 stories, 2 Democratic labels (5%)
NBC:	74 stories, 9 Democratic labels (12%)
Total:	179 stories, 14 Democratic labels (8%)

Based on MRC analysis of ABC, CBS and NBC morning and evening news programs, May 14 to July 11, including weekends.

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