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As Networks Prepare for 2004 Conventions, MRC Review Shows Liberals Get Kinder, Gentler Coverage

## Television's Biased Convention Coverage

Every four years, network reporters complain about the supposed lack of "news" at the two party conventions. During the 1996 Republican convention, ABC's Ted Koppel decided the event was not worthy of his time. "This convention is more of an infomercial than a news event," he decried on the August 13, 1996 *Nightline*. Four years later, on the July 30, 2000 *CBS Evening News*, Dan Rather scoffed that the GOP convention was just "a well-orchestrated, pre-scripted, week-long infomercial designed to sell the Republican presidential ticket and get corporate donors to pony up more for the fall campaign."

But when these journalists show up to cover the conventions they say are so irrelevant, they do so in ways that favor liberals and undermine conservatives, according to a review of 16 years of research by the MRC. And journalists are becoming a bigger part of the story. This year, the broadcast networks will offer just three hours of live coverage for each party. That means the average voter — one who doesn't spend the week watching cable — will hear far more from TV talking heads on the regular morning and evening news shows than from politicians giving prime time speeches.

That's not a neutral shift: As the coverage includes less of the actual convention, the liberally-skewed analysis of network reporters becomes even more dominant than in previous years. We've identified three themes from past convention coverage that are likely to make it onto your TV screens during next week's Democratic convention in Boston and next month's GOP convention in New York:

### **THEME #1: DISGUISE DEMOCRATS' LIBERALISM**

For sixteen years, network reporters have consistently labeled the Democratic Party — whether headed by Al Gore, Bill Clinton or Michael Dukakis — as moderate, while the Republican Party was always portrayed as more ideological, whether their nominee was George W. Bush, his father or Bob Dole.

From 1988 to 1996, MRC analysts counted the ideological labels applied by reporters during ABC's, CBS's, CNN's and NBC's prime time convention coverage. They found reporters used the "conservative" label for Republicans six times more often than a "moderate" label, while the ideological branding of Democrats was nearly balanced.

Even in 1988, when the Democrats nominated the liberal Michael Dukakis, nearly half of the 86 labels applied to Democrats called the party "moderate" or "conservative." That same year, nearly all of the 214 labels assigned to the

GOP called the party "conservative" or used even harsher terms like "hard right" or "far right." Reporter Mary Tillotson told CNN viewers she smelled a "conservative odor" in the New Orleans Superdome where the GOP convention was held.

In 1992, Tom Brokaw described the Democrats as having "moved to the center since the 1988 campaign," even though NBC had helped cast the Dukakis Democrats as "centrists." But reporters once again stressed how the

Republicans were "conservative" — 118 out of 131 labels.

The same disparity was evident in coverage of the 2000 conventions. During MSNBC's coverage of the Republican convention, Andrea Mitchell scolded New York Governor George Pataki: "You're talking here tonight about being more inclusive, yet 59 percent of the people here describe themselves as conservative." The next night, August 1, Tom Brokaw insisted that Republicans weren't really as moderate as they might seem: "This is the convention of inclusion, so-called. The platform, however, represents the ideology of these conservative delegates. It is very conservative, especially on issues like abortion."

While reporters disparaged GOP attempts to attract centrist voters, they worked to preserve the premise that Democrats were fielding a moderate, even conservative ticket. "This is the most conservative Democratic ticket in at least 50 years," claimed CNN's Bill Schneider.

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### **TV'S CONVENTION LABELING DISPARITY**

Labels Assigned by Reporters, 1988 - 1996

<b>Democrats: "Liberal"</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>Democrats: "Moderate/Conservative"</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>Republicans: "Conservative"</b>	<b>346</b>
<b>Republicans: "Moderate/Liberal"</b>	<b>58</b>

*Based on MRC analysis of ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN prime time coverage of both parties' conventions.*

TV's BIASED CONVENTION COVERAGE (cont.)

**THEME #2: ASK QUESTIONS FROM LIBERAL SCRIPT**

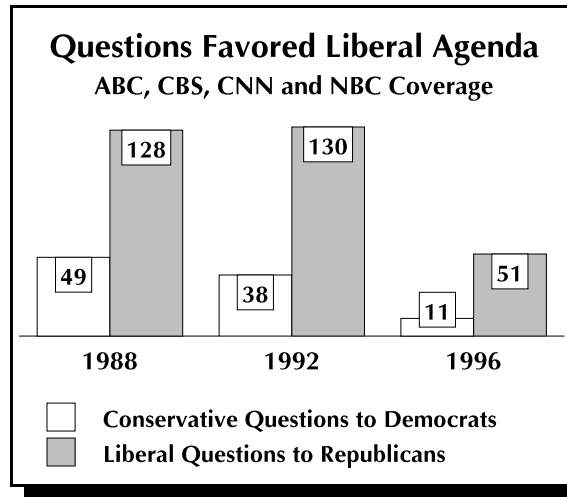
A tough interviewer would confront politicians of both parties with the best arguments of their opponents, letting viewers decide who made the best case. But MRC's content analyses of the 1988, 1992 and 1996 conventions showed network journalists were far more likely to pose liberal questions to Republican guests than ask Democrats to respond to a conservative agenda. (See chart.)

In 1996, for example, Tom Brokaw challenged a Republican speaker, a rape victim who advocated victim's rights: "This is a party that is dominated by men," Brokaw told Jan Licence. "Do you think before tonight they thought very much about what happens in America with rape?" But a few weeks later at the Democratic convention, Brokaw hit HHS Secretary Donna Shalala from the left for backing a welfare bill that he portrayed as mean-spirited: "If you were a poor single mother in a poor rural state in America, without many resources...wouldn't you be slightly terrified looking into the next two years?"

Coverage was similarly skewed in 2000. On the first day of the Republican convention, CNN's Candy Crowley asked New York's Pataki to attack his party from the left: "You and others who are for abortion rights...were frozen out of the platform. What does that say, if anything, about compassionate conservatism and the broad tent?"

Taking a similar tack, ABC's Peter Jennings suggested a speech by Colin Powell provided the GOP with an "unusual sense of inclusion," and asked the retired general: "Do you ever feel used by the Republican Party?"

But during the Democratic convention, reporters did not ask liberals to justify their policies. Instead, reporters worried that the ticket of Al Gore and Joe Lieberman wasn't liberal enough. "How do you feel about Lieberman?" NBC's Andrea Mitchell asked Senator John Kerry during MSNBC's live coverage. "He is certainly less liberal than you, and there's been some criticism of his positions....Do you think he can embrace all of the party?" Kerry vouched for Lieberman, calling him a "good Democrat."



**THEME #3: HYPE REPUBLICAN CONTROVERSIES**

In 1988, reporters greeted newly-named VP choice Dan Quayle with a frenzy of hostile coverage about his service in the National Guard and qualifications for national office. CBS's Lesley Stahl called it "the vice presidential pick that ate the Republican convention," as if CBS's editorial choices played no role in the deluge of negative coverage.

But even leaving the huge Quayle story aside, the MRC found TV reporters in 1988 raised other GOP controversies eight times more often than all Democratic scandals combined, including serious ethical charges against then-Speaker of the House Jim Wright, who later resigned.

In 1992, the networks pounded Republicans for rhetoric that was supposedly too negative, yet when Jesse Jackson compared Quayle to the Biblical baby-killing King Herod, none of the networks called that "mean" or "personal." That same year, as reporters castigated Republicans for a supposedly exclusionary message, neither ABC nor CBS mentioned that a pro-life Democrat, Pennsylvania Governor

Bob Casey, was barred from speaking at the Democrats' convention.

In 2000, allegations of misconduct involving his 1996 campaign fundraising hung over Al Gore (one of his fundraisers, Maria Hsia, had been convicted earlier in the year on five counts of money laundering), but the networks pretended otherwise. "Al Gore has been perhaps the most active Vice President in American history, and there's not a hint of scandal associated with Gore's personal behavior," ABC's Ted Koppel insisted on the August 14 *Nightline*.

Watch for this sort of bias over the next few weeks: Republicans are the ideologues, Republicans are embroiled in controversy, and conservative policies are questionable, while Democrats are utterly uncontroversial moderates with sensible (not liberal) policies. — *Rich Noyes*

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**Next week, read the Media Research Center's complete Conventions 2004 analysis at [www.mrc.org](http://www.mrc.org)**  
**To schedule an interview with an MRC spokesman, please contact Katie Wright at (703) 683-5004**