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Study: Networks Stress Moderate Republicans, Not Centrist Democrats Who Think Liberals Go Too Far

## Using “Moderates” to Spank Conservatives

One of the news media’s favorite clichés seems to be that moderates are much more in tune with voters than ideologues of either the Right or the Left. But a new MRC study discovered that, while the three broadcast evening news shows frequently showcase “moderate” condemnations of conservative politicians and policies, it’s relatively rare for liberals to be unfavorably contrasted with “moderates.”

As a follow-up to an earlier labeling study (which showed how ABC, CBS and NBC reporters used the “conservative” tag four times more often than the “liberal” label), MRC researchers examined reporters’ application of “moderate” and “centrist” tags from January 1, 1997 to December 31, 2001, the same time frame as the earlier study (which can be found at [www.mrc.org](http://www.mrc.org)).

The researchers found 211 instances when reporters assigned “moderate” or “centrist” labels to Republican or Democratic groups or individuals (such as members of Congress, candidates, etc.) Four-fifths of these labels were of Republicans; references to moderate or centrist Democrats were fairly few (see box).

Does that mean the networks portrayed the GOP as the more “moderate” party? On the contrary: a detailed breakdown shows that journalists frequently (41 times) cited “moderate Republicans” castigating more conservative party members, but never highlighted conservative disagreements with moderates. Among Democratic ranks, only four references contrasted moderates with liberals — and three of those showcased criticism of party centrists.

■ **Using “moderates” to cast conservatives as intolerant:** “Moderate Republicans worry that presidential contenders may decide gay bashing is, if not politically correct, then at least politically smart,” ABC’s John Cochran declared on June 16, 1998. Two years later, CBS’s Bill Whitaker argued that candidate Bush’s message was “aimed at the heart of those important middle-class, middle-American moderates who found the old GOP mean-spirited.” (August 5, 2000)

■ **Using “moderates” to condemn conservatives policies:** “Environmental groups say less than one-fifth of the tax breaks [in Bush’s energy bill] are aimed at conservation. That worries moderate Republicans who fear their party is increasingly perceived as anti-environment,” ABC’s Linda Douglass lectured on August 1, 2001. On July 1, 1999, CBS’s Bob Schieffer used moderates to bash a tax cut: “House Republican leaders called for the biggest [tax] cuts yet, maybe \$1 trillion over 10 years....Moderate Republicans, who favor a smaller tax cut, say that’s unrealistic.”

■ **“Moderates” are the key to political victory:** On March 8, 2000, ABC’s Dean Reynolds argued Bush’s tilt to the right was self-defeating: “His primary race transformed Bush into a darling of arch-conservatives, when he really needs the backing of moderates who supported John McCain.” Even after Bush reached the White House, the media calculus remained the same: “From a political perspective, analysts think Mr. Bush needs to appear moderate,” CBS’s Bill Plante recommended on August 3, 2001.

All of the networks’ moderate vs. conservative contrasts showed

moderates in a superior light. But when it came to the Democrats, it was okay to poke at centrists: “Liberal Democrats would say you centrist Democrats sound a little bit too much like Republicans,” CBS’s Sharyl Attkisson scolded Virginia Rep. Jim Moran on November 16, 1997.

Watch for network reporters to repeat the “conservatives must move to the center to win” spin during this fall’s campaigns, and ask yourself: If “moderates” are so great, why don’t the media apply the same pressure on liberals to back away from their ideological principles? Or are conservative politicians and policies the only ones in need of moderation?

— Rich Noyes

### Use of “Moderate” or “Centrist” Label

1997-2001

	<b>GOP</b>	<b>Dem</b>
<i>World News Tonight</i>	83%	17%
<i>CBS Evening News</i>	84%	16%
<i>NBC Nightly News</i>	78%	22%
<b>Total (211 labels)</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>19%</b>

*Use of “moderate” or “centrist” label by network anchor or reporter on ABC, CBS and NBC evening news programs, January 1, 1997 to December 31, 2001.*

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