



Campaign 2000

Media Reality Check

Expert Documentation of the Latest Liberal Media Bias  Thursday, September 7, 2000

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Vol. 4, No. 55
www.mrc.org

FMP Analysis: No Economic Experts Quoted as Network Newscasts Portray Bush Tax Plan as a Loser

You Don't Want a Tax Cut, Voters Told

When tax cut fever sweeps the nation, network news reporters always reach for the aspirin. Dazzled by polls showing Al Gore with a tiny lead, network reporters are telling voters that George W. Bush's tax cuts have failed as a campaign issue.

But a review of evening news coverage by the MRC's Free Market Project (FMP) shows audiences have been told almost nothing about either Bush's or Gore's tax programs, other than the political analysis that Bush's plan "hasn't caught fire," in the words of reporter-turned-firefighter Bill Whitaker on the August 30 *CBS Evening News*.

Since July 24, one week before the Republican Convention, through Labor Day (Sept. 4), the ABC, CBS and NBC evening broadcasts only mentioned one or the other tax plan in 21 stories. Only seven of those (about one per week) offered more than 30 seconds of discussion; the other stories contained only brief throwaway lines that offered no real information to viewers.

■ **Labels.** Just as FMP found in a similar study of tax coverage during the GOP primaries, Bush's plan was frequently tagged by reporters as either "big," "huge" or "massive" — labels that reinforce Gore's message that Bush's program is somehow "risky."

No reporter called it a "\$483 billion" cut, the preferred term during the primaries. Instead, by projecting the total over a lengthier time period, correspondents referred to the "\$1.3 trillion tax cut." In contrast, Gore's plan was given a dollar value only once, by NBC's Claire Shipman on August 18, who assured viewers that "Gore does intend to fully flesh out the \$1.4 trillion worth of tax cuts and new policy proposals that he outlined" in his convention speech.

■ **Experts.** None of the 21 network news stories quoted any economists or tax experts. The only sources were the

two candidates, a handful of voters, and political experts. Democratic pollster Geoffrey Garin, for example, asserted on the August 24 *Nightly News* that "the reality is there's no broad audience for the kinds of large-scale tax cuts that George W. Bush is proposing."

Have the Networks Done a Good Job?

The Vanishing Voter project, run by Harvard's Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, surveyed citizens about how much they know about the candidates' main issues. Their latest poll (August 23-27) shows only 43% can correctly state whether Bush favors or opposes a large cut in personal income taxes.

The missing piece of the puzzle was any informed comment on whether either tax plan is smart policy on the merits. Experts aren't tough to find — CNBC's Larry Kudlow offered useful context in a Sept. 1 column: "While income has jumped \$504 billion," Kudlow wrote, "tax payments have risen \$138 billion. So 27 percent of the

income gain has been absorbed by taxes....Instead of transferring these taxpayer surpluses to wealthy bondholders and foreign governments through debt redemption and bond repurchases, the Administration would be better advised to return the tax over-payments to working folks through across-the-board marginal tax-rate relief."

■ **Politics.** Here, correspondents were unanimous: Bush was "scrambling" (NBC, 8/24) and "rattled" (ABC, 8/23). "Gore's fact-laden campaign has taken some wind out of Bush's sails," concluded CBS's Whitaker on August 24. While no newscast put Gore's plan under a similar political microscope, the agreed view was that voters weren't being won over by Bush's plan. Maybe those voters were really being failed by the networks' lightweight coverage of an important issue.

— Rich Noyes, Director
MRC's Free Market Project

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