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Study: ABC, CBS and NBC Morning Shows Promote Democratic Candidates, Push Liberal News Agenda

Slanted Morning TV Helps 2008 Democrats

A Pew Research Center poll released late last month found that while four out of five American adults (81%) could name one of the Democratic presidential candidates, far fewer (just 59%) could recall any of the GOP candidates. Even among self-described Republican voters, Pew found "Clinton and Obama are much more visible than Giuliani or any other GOP presidential candidate."

One reason may be that the big broadcast networks have treated the Democratic frontrunners like celebrities worthy of intense coverage, while the Republican candidates have received far less TV time. A new Media Research Center study of the ABC, CBS and NBC morning news shows has found that in the first 10 months of 2007, the networks spent more time covering the Democratic race and spent far more time interviewing the Democratic candidates than the Republicans. And those interviews were much friendlier to the Democrats, with the morning show anchors emphasizing a predominantly liberal agenda.

These results echo those presented in MRC's SPECIAL REPORT, "Rise and Shine on Democrats," which examined how TV's morning shows covered the presidential campaign from January 1 through July 31. For this new report, MRC analysts studied all 797 campaign stories that aired on NBC's *Today*, ABC's *Good Morning America* and CBS's *The Early Show* from January 1 through October 31. Key findings:

TV's DEMOCRATIC NEWS AGENDA

All three networks spent more time covering the Democrats' nomination race than the contest for the GOP nomination. Overall, 431 out of the total 797 campaign segments (54%) focused on the Democrats, compared to 247 (31%) devoted to the Republicans. The remaining 119 stories (15%) either dealt with both parties about equally, or dealt with a nonpartisan campaign topic, such as the growing use of YouTube by all candidates.

Of the three morning shows, ABC's *Good Morning America* was the most tilted, airing 167 Democratic stories (59%), vs. 83 about the Republicans (29%). CBS's *Early Show* and NBC's *Today* were nearly identical in emphasizing Democrats in just over half of all campaign stories (51% on NBC, 52% on CBS), with the GOP featured in less than one-third of stories (32% on each show. (See chart.)

The reason for the disparity: ABC, CBS and NBC have chosen to cover the top Democrats as celebrities, elevating them above the ranks of ordinary candidates. Back in

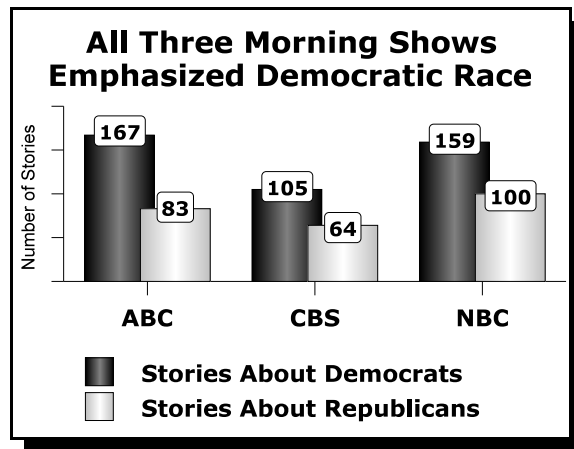
January, the networks excitedly jumped on Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama's official announcements with heavier coverage than any Republican received. Since then, the morning shows have covered the Democratic duo as "rock stars," providing national TV coverage for otherwise trivial campaign events.

In August, for example, NBC's Lee Cowan chronicled the day Obama spent posing as a home health care worker as demanded by the SEIU labor union. "Mr. Mom,

he's not. But on a day after some big rallies and high-priced fundraisers, Barack Obama seemed genuinely at home," Cowan warmly reported. A few weeks later, NBC's Andrea Mitchell similarly touted Clinton's day spent shadowing a nurse. Back at the nurse's home for dinner, Mitchell recounted, "[Hillary] pitched right in. She was clearing the table, washing the dishes....She got her hands wet."

In October, all three networks covered Clinton's 60th birthday fundraiser, with ABC's Kate Snow swooning the hardest: "On the eve of this birthday, Hillary is trumpeting the strength of their marriage....Clinton says she never doubted her decision to stay in her marriage, and she says Bill is romantic, buying impromptu gifts like a gift of a wooden giraffe from this shop in Africa over the summer."

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TV's Tilted Campaign News (cont.)

Beyond the day-to-day coverage, TV's morning shows offer candidates a generally friendly forum to speak to millions of viewers. Once again, the networks have given the Democrats an advantage. Since January 1, MRC analysts counted 102 morning show appearances by an announced or prospective presidential candidate or one of their representatives. Of these, nearly two-thirds (64) featured Democrats, compared to just 36 for the Republicans and two for potential independent candidate Michael Bloomberg.

When it came to airtime, the Democratic advantage was even more pronounced. Interviews with the various Democratic campaigns totalled 6 hours 24 minutes, compared to just over three hours (184 minutes) for the GOP, a greater than two-to-one disparity. Top Democrats Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards all received more interview airtime than any Republican candidate. For the GOP, John McCain was granted the most airtime, but his 62 minutes amounted to less than half of the 2 hours 12 minutes received by Clinton's campaign.

LIBERAL QUESTIONS FOR BOTH PARTIES

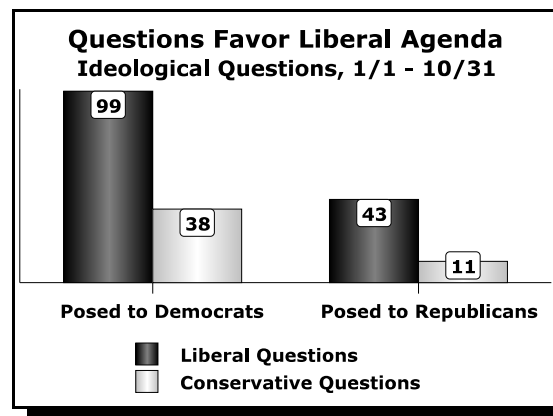
In addition to tallying the airtime each campaign received, MRC analysts also analyzed the questions posed by the network hosts. While most of the questions were about campaign strategy or the candidates' personal attributes, 191 were policy-oriented questions that could be categorized as reflecting a liberal or conservative view.

An even-handed approach would be to confront candidates of both parties with the best arguments of their opponents. But regardless of whether their guests were Democrats or Republicans, network reporters proposed questions reflecting largely liberal agenda. Of the 137 agenda questions posed to Democrats, 72 percent reflected liberal priorities, as were 80 percent of the 54 agenda questions posed to Republicans. (See chart.)

For example, NBC's Matt Lauer interviewed Hillary Clinton on September 18 and hit her from the left, suggesting her health care plan was too pro-industry and not aggressive enough. "Critics are saying that this in some ways

is the kind of plan you would have rejected back in 1993," Lauer scolded. "Have you watered down reform?"

Ten days later, ABC's *Good Morning America* framed a segment on government-mandated family leave in liberal terms. "There are paid leave proposals in Congress right now. So, what's stopping the government from making the law truly family friendly?" co-host Robin Roberts urged. She cued up Democratic candidate Chris Dodd. "I know you have been very passionate about this in recent years," Roberts told Dodd. "So why isn't Congress moving a little faster on this issue?"



While such liberal questions were a frequent gift to Democratic candidates, Republican candidates were seldom treated to friendly conservative questions. On September 25, after liberal PBS host Tavis Smiley claimed that GOP candidates who skipped his debate were insensitive, ABC's Robin Roberts adopted Smiley's outrage as her premise. "Why are Republicans so reluctant to talk to minorities?" she demanded of Newt Gingrich. On October 15, ABC's Diane

Sawyer confronted Iraq war supporter John McCain with the criticisms of retired General Ricardo Sanchez: "America is living in a nightmare with no end in sight."

As for the rare conservative-oriented questions, back on August 13 NBC's Meredith Vieira hit Mitt Romney with the charge that Romney's pro-life position was inauthentic. And as Clinton made the rounds to tout her health care plan on September 18, ABC's Diane Sawyer confronted her with the notion that her plan could be far more expensive than advertised. "Medicare is already \$16 trillion over what has been funded," Sawyer told Clinton, asking of her new program, "can you realistically keep it at \$110 billion?"

The broadcast networks have a responsibility to cover both parties in a fair and even-handed manner. These early returns suggest that ABC, CBS and NBC are instead using their airwaves to boost the Democrats in 2008.

— Rich Noyes and Scott Whitlock

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