



# SPECIAL REPORT

## AN IN-DEPTH STUDY, ANALYSIS OR REVIEW EXPLORING THE MEDIA

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# The Liberal Media

## Every Poll Shows Journalists Are More Liberal than the American Public — And the Public Knows It

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Surveys over the past 25 years have consistently found that journalists are more liberal than rest of America. This MRC SPECIAL REPORT summarizes the relevant data on journalist attitudes, as well as polling showing how the American public's recognition of the media's liberal bias has grown over the years:

- **Journalists Vote for Liberals:** Between 1964 and 1992, Republicans won the White House five times compared with three Democratic victories. But if only journalists' ballots were counted, the Democrats would have won every time.
- **Journalists Say They Are Liberal:** Surveys from 1978 to 2004 show that journalists are far more likely to say they are liberal than conservative, and are far more liberal than the public at large.
- **Journalists Reject Conservative Positions:** None of the surveys have found that news organizations are populated by independent thinkers who mix liberal and conservative positions. Most journalists offer reflexively liberal answers to practically every question a pollster can imagine.
- **The Public Recognizes the Bias:** Since 1985, the percentage of Americans who perceive a liberal bias has doubled from 22 percent to 45 percent, nearly half the adult population. Even a plurality of Democrats now say the press is liberal.

# The Liberal Media

## Every Poll Shows Journalists Are More Liberal than the American Public — And the Public Knows It

BY RICH NOYES  
DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH

Over the next four months, the media establishment will play a central role in informing the public about the candidates and the issues. As the countdown to Election Day begins, it is important to remember the journalists who will help establish the campaign agenda are not an all-American mix of Democrats, Republicans and independents, but an elite group whose views veer sharply to the left.

Most journalists deny that their profession is stacked with liberals. “I’ve worked around reporters all my life,” CBS anchor Dan Rather declared in an appearance on *The Late Late Show with Tom Snyder* back on February 8, 1995. “Most reporters, when you get to know them, would fall in the general category of kind of common sense moderates.”

ABC’s Peter Jennings echoed Rather. “We are largely in the center without particular axes to grind, without ideologies which are represented in our daily coverage — at least certainly not on purpose,” Jennings told CNN’s Larry King on May 15, 2001.

“The idea that we would set out, consciously or unconsciously, to put some kind of ideological framework over what we’re doing is nonsense,” NBC’s Tom Brokaw similarly declared on C-SPAN just a few days later, on May 24, 2001.

But study after study shows that Rather, Jennings and Brokaw are wrong: the newsrooms of major media outlets are not filled with non-ideological “common sense moderates,” nor do they reflect a diverse range of ideological viewpoints. Surveys over the past 25 years have consistently found journalists are much more liberal than rest of America. Their voting habits are disproportionately Democratic, their views on issues such as abortion and gay rights are well to the left of most Americans and they are less

likely to attend church or synagogue. When it comes to the free market, journalists have become increasingly pro-regulation over the past 20 years, with majorities endorsing activist government efforts to guarantee everyone a job and to reduce the income gap between rich and poor Americans.

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**Numerous surveys over the past 25 years have determined that journalists do not reflect the American public. They overwhelmingly vote for Democratic candidates, their views on issues such as abortion and gay rights are well to the left of most Americans, and large majorities endorse activist government efforts to guarantee everyone a job and to reduce the income gap between rich and poor Americans.**

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## **Journalists on Election Day: Pulling the Democratic Lever**

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Between 1964 and 1992, Republicans won the White House five times compared with three Democratic victories. But if only journalists' ballots were counted, the Democrats would have won every single election.

In their 1986 book, *The Media Elite*, political scientists S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman and Linda S. Lichter reported the results of their survey of 240 journalists at the nation's top media outlets: ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*. When asked about their voting patterns, journalists admitted their preference for Democrats:

Of those who say they voted for major party candidates, the proportion of leading journalists who supported the Democratic candidate never drops below 80 percent. In 1972, when more than 60 percent of all voters chose Nixon, over 80 percent among the media elite voted for McGovern. This does not appear to reflect any unique aversion to Nixon. Despite the well-publicized tensions between the press and his administration, leading journalists in 1976 preferred Carter over Ford by the same margin. In fact, in the Democratic landslide of 1964, journalists picked Johnson over Goldwater by a sixteen-to-one margin, or 94 to 6 percent.

Lichter's team focused on journalists at the very top national news organizations. Other surveys of journalists have discovered that the whole profession shares the same liberal bent, although the media elite's liberalism is the most extreme:

■ **Journalists Picked Carter over Reagan:** In 1982, scholars at California State University at Los Angeles asked reporters from the fifty largest newspapers for whom they voted in 1980. The breakdown: 51 percent cast a ballot for President Jimmy Carter and another 24 percent chose independent candidate (and liberal Republican

Congressman) John Anderson. Only 25 percent picked conservative Ronald Reagan, who won 51 percent of the public's vote that year.

■ **Journalists Picked Mondale over**

**Reagan:** In 1985, the *Los Angeles Times* polled news and editorial staffers at newspapers around the country, weighting the sample so that newspapers with large circulations were more heavily represented. Once again, pollsters

discovered a heavy Democratic skew. When asked how they voted in the 1984 election, more than twice as many chose liberal Walter Mondale (58 percent) over the conservative incumbent Ronald Reagan (26 percent), even as the country picked Reagan in a 59 to 41 percent landslide.

■ **The White House Press Corps Voted for Democrats:** In early 1995, Ken Walsh of *U.S. News & World Report* asked his fellow White House reporters to fill out a survey for a book he was writing; 28 returned his questionnaire. He concluded that “the White House press corps is overwhelmingly Democratic, confirming a stereotype often promoted by Republicans.” Interestingly, he also learned how much reporters dislike being on the receiving end of personal inquiries: “Even though the survey was anonymous, many journalists declined to reveal their party affiliations, whom they voted for in recent presidential elections, and other data they regarded as too personal – even though they regularly pressure Presidents and other officials to make such disclosures,” Walsh related in his 1996 book, *Feeding the Beast: The White House Versus the Press*.

So what did the few forthright scribes reveal? As with larger, more scientific surveys, Walsh discovered “evidence of an overwhelming preference for Democrats in presidential elections. In 1992, nine respondents voted for Clinton, two for George Bush, and one for independent Ross Perot....In 1988, twelve voted for Democrat Michael Dukakis, only one for Bush....In 1984, ten voted for Democrat Walter Mondale, [and] no one admitted voting for Ronald Reagan....In 1980, eight voted for Democratic incumbent Jimmy Carter, two voted for Ronald Reagan, four voted for independent candidate John Anderson....In 1976, eleven voted for Carter and two for Republican incumbent Gerald Ford.” That adds up to 50 votes for Democrats and just seven for Republicans, a seven-to-one ratio in favor of the Democrats.

■ **Huge Majorities for Dukakis and Clinton:** In 2001, Stanley Rothman and Amy E. Black updated the *Media Elite's* survey of journalists, and learned that reporters

**The Media Elite's  
Presidential Voting Record**

1964-1976

	<u>Democrat</u>	<u>Republican</u>
1964	94%	6%
1968	87%	13%
1972	81%	19%
1976	81%	19%

Source: *The Media Elite*, page 30.

continued to select Democrats. “Three-quarters of elite journalists (76.1 percent)...voted for Michael Dukakis in 1988, and even larger percentages (91.3 percent)...cast ballots for Bill Clinton in 1992,” they reported in the Spring 2001 edition of *The Public Interest*. Voters were far less exuberant about those liberal candidates, as just 46 percent chose Dukakis and only 43 percent picked Clinton, who nevertheless won a three-way race.

**Between 1964 and 1992, Republicans won the White House five times compared with three Democratic victories. But if only journalists’ ballots were counted, the Democrats would have won every single election.**

■ **Nine Out of Ten Reporters Voted for Clinton:** Rothman and Black’s survey closely matched a Freedom Forum poll of Washington bureau chiefs and congressional correspondents, which found 89 percent had voted for Clinton in the 1992 election, compared with seven percent for President Bush and two percent for Ross Perot. “In no state or region, among no race or class, did support for Clinton predominate more lopsidedly than among this sample of 139 journalists who either cover Congress or head a Washington bureau,” summarized Minneapolis *Star-Tribune* media writer Eric Black in an August 18, 1996 article.

The Freedom Forum was not aiming to embarrass journalists by quantifying their liberalism. The report, on relations between Capitol Hill staffers and Washington, D.C. reporters, was released in April 1996, and the data on journalists’ voting pattern was buried in an appendix. The study’s director, former *Chicago Tribune* reporter Elaine Povich, gamely asserted that reporters’ heavy preference for Bill Clinton did not mean that journalists’ were incapable of being objective. “One of the things about being a professional is that you attempt to leave your personal feelings aside as you do your work,” Povich told the *Washington Times* on April 18, 1996.

Taken as a whole, these polls firmly establish the press’s pattern of preferring Democrats at the voting booth. During the eight presidential elections for which data on the media’s preferences are available, each Democrat won landslide support from journalists, sometimes by four-to-one or five-to-one margins. The percentage of reporters selecting the GOP candidate never exceeded 26 percent, even as the public chose Republicans in five of the eight elections, with margins of support ranging from a low of 38 percent (Bush in 1992) to a high of 61 percent (Nixon in 1972).

**Nine Out of Ten Reporters Picked Clinton in 1992**

	<u>Journalists</u>	<u>Voters</u>
Clinton	89%	43%
Bush	7%	38%
Perot	2%	19%

Source: Freedom Forum survey of 139 Washington bureau chiefs and congressional correspondents.

At a minimum, these statistics portray a media elite whose political thinking is to the left of most Americans. Hosting CNN's *Reliable Sources* on April 21, 1996, *Washington Post* media writer Howard Kurtz reacted to the Freedom Forum's poll: "Clearly anybody looking at those numbers, if they're even close to accurate, would conclude that there is a diversity problem in the news business, and it's not just the kind of diversity we usually talk about, which is not getting enough minorities in the news business, but political diversity, as well. Anybody who doesn't see that is just in denial."

## **Few Reporters Describe Themselves as Conservatives**

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It's not just on Election Day: many of these same surveys and others have asked journalists to describe their political attitudes, and each time the researchers detected the same liberal skew:

- **Washington Reporters, 2-to-1 Liberal:** The Brookings Institution's Stephen Hess surveyed the Washington press corps in 1978 for his aptly-titled book, *The Washington Reporters*. More than twice as many journalists told Hess they were liberal (42 percent) as said they were conservative (19 percent). As for the public, even back in 1978 self-identified conservatives outnumbered liberals by a 31 to 26 percent margin, according to the General Social Survey taken annually by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC).
- **The Media Elite, 3-to-1 Liberal:** Lichter and Rothman's *Media Elite* surveys were conducted shortly after Hess's; they, too, showed top reporters disproportionately described themselves as liberals. According to the authors, "a majority [of leading journalists] see themselves as liberals. Fifty-four percent place themselves to the left of center, compared to only 17 percent who choose the right side of the spectrum....When they rate their fellow workers, an even greater difference emerges. Fifty-six percent say the people they work with are mostly on the Left, and only eight percent place their co-workers on the Right — a margin of seven to one."
- **Prominent News Organizations Are the Most Liberal:** A pair of Indiana University journalism professors, David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, surveyed more than 1,000 journalists for their 1986 book, *The American Journalist*. Their poll included more than just top reporters, and, overall, they detected only a modest skew towards the liberal side of the spectrum — 22 percent of those interviewed called themselves liberal, compared with 19 percent who said they were conservative.

But among 136 executives and staffers at “prominent news organizations” — the three weekly newsmagazines, the AP and UPI wire services and the *Boston Globe* — the tilt was much more pronounced, with liberals outnumbering conservatives by a more than two-to-one margin (32 to 12 percent). Only six percent of this group identified themselves as Republican, compared with seven times as many (43 percent) who said they were Democrats.

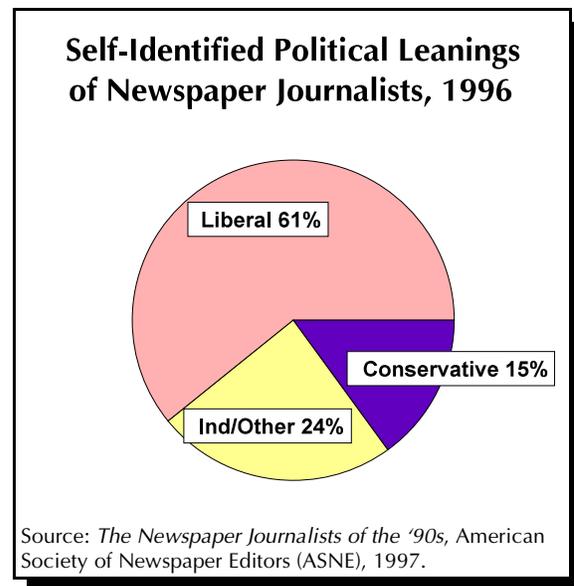
■ **Nationwide, a 3-to-1 Liberal Advantage:** When the *Los Angeles Times* polled journalists around the country in 1985, 55 percent were willing to call themselves liberal, far outstripping the 17 percent who said they were conservative.

■ **Becoming Even More Liberal:** In 1992, Weaver and Wilhoit conducted another national survey of journalists, and noticed the group had moved farther to the left. Writing in the Fall 1992 *Media Studies Journal*, they pointed out that 47 percent of journalists now said they were “liberal,” while only 22 percent labeled themselves as “conservative.”

■ **Six Times as Many Liberals as Conservatives:** The Freedom Forum’s 1996 poll of Washington bureau chiefs and congressional correspondents found 61 percent labeled themselves as “liberal” or “liberal to moderate,” compared with only nine percent who chose either “conservative” or “moderate to conservative.”

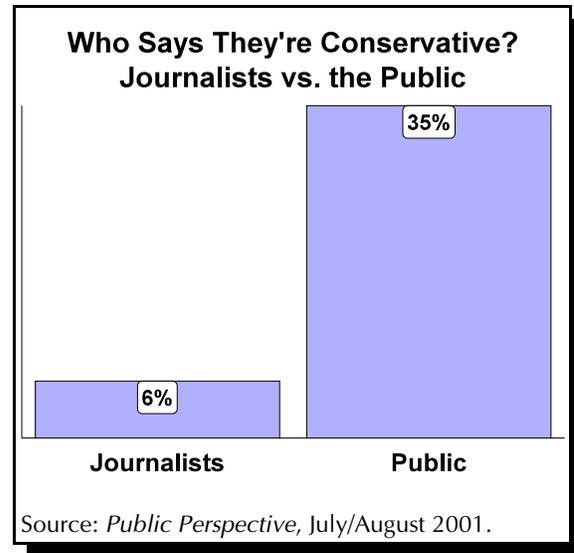
■ **Business Reporters Are Liberal, Too:** As for the notion that business reporters might be more conservative than their brethren on the political beat, that possibility was put to rest by a 1988 poll by a New-York based newsletter, *The Journalist and Financial Reporting*. The survey of 151 business reporters from newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *USA Today*, and business-focused magazines such as *Money*, *Fortune* and *BusinessWeek*, discovered six times as many self-identified Democrats as Republicans — 54 percent versus nine percent.

■ **Editors Group Noted the Growing Imbalance:** In 1996, the American Society of Newspaper Editors surveyed 1,037 journalists at 61 newspapers. They learned that newsrooms were more ideologically unrepresentative than they had been in the late 1980s: “In 1996 only 15 percent of the newsroom labeled itself conservative/Republican or leaning in that direction, down from 22 percent in 1988,”



when the ASNE last conducted a comprehensive survey. Those identifying themselves as independent jumped from 17 to 24 percent while the percent calling themselves “liberal/Democrat” or leaning left held steady, down one point to 61 percent.

The ASNE report, *The Newspaper Journalists of the '90s*, also revealed that bigger – presumably more influential – newspapers had the most liberal staffs: “On papers of at least 50,000 circulation, 65 percent of the staffs are liberal/Democrat or lean that way. The split at papers of less than 50,000 is less pronounced: still predominantly liberal, but 51-23 percent.”

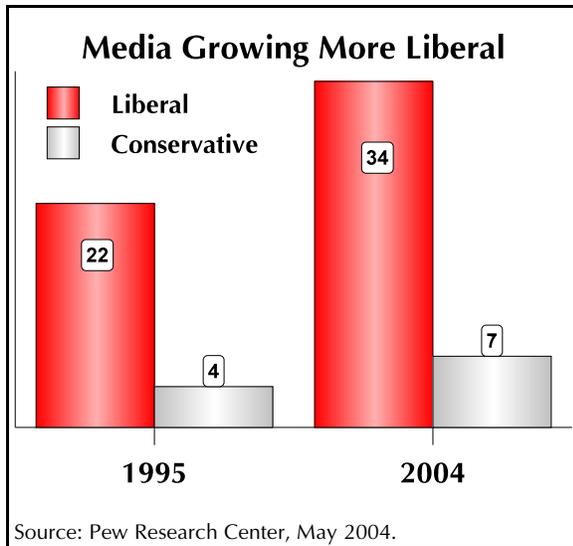


In a sign that the media’s desire for demographic diversity might result in even more solidly liberal newsrooms, ASNE also found that “women are more likely than men to fall into one of the liberal/Democrat categories,” as just 11 percent said they were conservative or leaned that way. Minorities also “tend to be more liberal/Democrat,” with a piddling 3 percent of blacks and 8 percent of Asians and Hispanics putting themselves on the right.

■ **Public Far More Conservative:** In the July/ August 2001 edition of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research’s journal *Public Perspective*, *Washington Post* national political reporter Thomas Edsall summarized the results of a poll of 301 media professionals taken earlier that year by Princeton Survey Research Associates (PRSA) and sponsored by the Kaiser Family Foundation. “The media diverge from both the public and from the policymaking community in terms of partisanship and ideology,” Edsall reported. “Only a tiny fraction of the media identifies itself as either Republican (4 percent) or conservative (6 percent). This is in direct contrast to the public, which identifies itself as 28 percent Republican and 35 percent conservative.”

■ **The Liberal Advantage Has Grown:** In May 2004, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press released a survey of 547 journalists and news media executives, including 247 who worked for national news organizations. The poll reprised many of the questions asked by the same group (then called the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press) back in 1995.

Pew found that the proportion of liberals in the national media had actually grown over the previous nine years, from 22 percent in 1995 to 34 percent in 2004. Meanwhile,



the percentage of conservatives remained minuscule: just four percent in 1995, seven percent in 2004. As for local reporters, liberals outnumbered conservatives by a nearly two-to-one margin (23 to 12 percent).

Pew also asked journalists to name a news organization that seemed to cover the news from an especially liberal or especially conservative angle. When it came to a liberal new outlet, most of the national journalists were stumped. A fifth suggested the *New York Times* was liberal; ABC, CBS, CNN and NPR were each named by two percent. One percent of reporters said NBC was liberal.

But journalists did see ideology at one outlet: “The single news outlet that strikes most journalists as taking a particular ideological stance — either liberal or conservative — is Fox News Channel,” Pew reported. More than two-thirds of national journalists (69 percent) tagged FNC as a conservative news organization, followed by the *Washington Times* (9 percent) and the *Wall Street Journal* (8 percent).

## Issue by Issue: Always Liberal

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If the media elite were the pragmatic non-ideologues that Rather, Jennings and Brokaw described, one would expect to find occasional support for a few conservative policy positions, even if their overall bent was still left of center. But none of the surveys find that the national media are populated by independent thinkers mixing liberal and conservative positions. Instead, most of the journalistic elite offer reflexively liberal answers to practically every question a pollster can imagine.

The most exhaustive study of journalists attitudes on specific policy issues was the poll conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1985, which asked a series of identical questions to more than 3,000 reporters and editors and nearly 3,000 members of the general public. The pollsters found journalists to be much more liberal than their audience. “Sometimes, the readers and the journalists take diametrically opposite positions — as on the question: ‘Are you in favor of the way Ronald Reagan is handling his job as President?’ Journalists say ‘No’ by a 2-1 margin; readers say ‘Yes’ by about the same margin,” the *Times’s* David Shaw reported at the time.

On issue after issue, a greater proportion of journalists chose the liberal option. “Sometimes, the public voted overwhelmingly on one side of a question, and the newspaper journalists were evenly divided – as on the death penalty question. On several other issues – handgun control, affirmative action, ‘withdrawing American investments from South Africa because of their apartheid policy,’ ‘allowing women to have an abortion’ and ‘hiring an employee regardless of whether he or she is a homosexual or a lesbian,’ – both the journalists and their readers say ‘Yes,’ but the Yes/No margin among journalists is always much larger than it is among readers,” Shaw explained.

“When the responses to all questions on social political issues are combined, the newspaper staffs provided ‘liberal’ answers 68 percent of the time and ‘conservative’ answers 22 percent of the time. Readers provided ‘liberal’ answers 43 percent of the time and ‘conservative’ answers 37 percent of the time – which makes the public much less liberal than the newspaper journalists,” Shaw concluded.

While some of the questions posed by the *Times* in 1985 – such as soliciting opinions about South African divestment – are not especially relevant today, many tap into the same liberal-conservative divisions that characterize today’s politics. Only once, when asked whether they favored “government efforts to make reductions in the income gap between rich and poor,” was the public’s response more liberal than that of the press – although on that question news staffs still supported the liberal stance by a 50 to 39 percent

<b><u>THE PRESS VS. THE PUBLIC</u></b>			
		<b><u>Journalists</u></b>	<b><u>Public</u></b>
Increase Defense Spending....	Support	15%	38%
	Oppose	80%	52%
Government Regulation of Business.....	Support	49%	22%
	Oppose	41%	51%
Government Should Reduce Income Inequality.....	Support	50%	55%
	Oppose	39%	23%
Prayer in Public Schools.....	Support	25%	74%
	Oppose	67%	19%
Legalized Abortion.....	Support	82%	51%
	Oppose	14%	42%
Death Penalty for Convicted Murderers.....	Support	47%	75%
	Oppose	47%	17%
Stricter Handgun Control.....	Support	78%	50%
	Oppose	19%	41%
Affirmative Action.....	Support	81%	57%
	Oppose	14%	21%
Hiring Homosexuals.....	Support	89%	56%
	Oppose	7%	31%

**Source:** February 1985 *Los Angeles Times* poll of general public and news and editorial staffers at 621 U.S. newspapers.

margin. On every other policy issue the *Times* asked about – including abortion, prayer in school, affirmative action, defense spending and the death penalty – journalists embraced the liberal position more readily than the public at large. (See chart.)

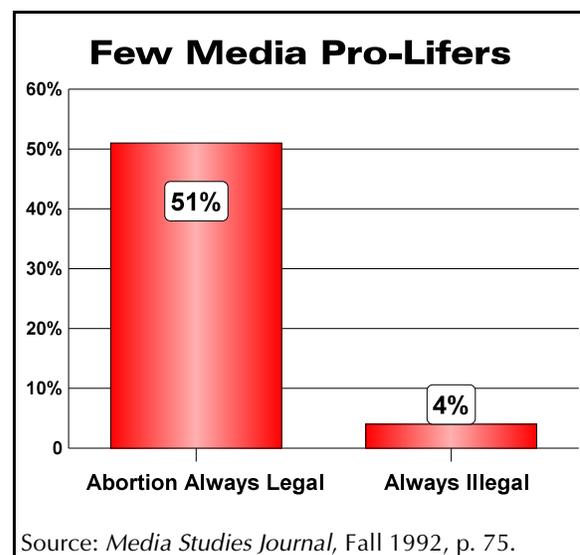
■ **Pro-Welfare State, Pro-Abortion:** The *Times* poll matched the findings of surveys conducted by Robert Lichter and his team for *The Media Elite*. One out of every eight reporters (13 percent) told the Lichters they supported public ownership of major corporations – a fairly remarkable percentage, although five times as many rejected such unvarnished socialism. A majority of journalists favored government activism in the economic arena to aid the poor and provide jobs.

“These attitudes mirror the traditional perspective of American liberals who (unlike many European social democrats) accept an essentially capitalist economic framework, even as they endorse the welfare state,” the authors concluded.

When it came to issues such as abortion, homosexuality and affirmative action, the media elite revealed solidly liberal views. Nine out of ten journalists believed a woman should have a legal right to an abortion and eight out of ten backed “strong affirmative action for blacks.” At the same time, Lichter’s research found that “75 percent disagree that homosexuality is wrong, and an even larger proportion, 85 percent, uphold the right of homosexuals to teach in public schools.”

Years before Bill Clinton’s scandals made adultery a top news story, the media elite were expressing tolerance on the subject: “54 percent do not regard adultery as wrong, and only 15 percent strongly agree that extramarital affairs are wrong,” the authors disclosed. “Thus, members of the media elite emerge as strong supporters of sexual freedom, and as natural opponents of groups like the Moral Majority.”

■ **Journalists Less Religious than Public:** In their 1992 study, Weaver and Wilhoit asked a broad sample of 1,156 journalists for their views on abortion, and found very few who outright opposed the procedure. “More than half (51 percent) of the journalists said abortion should be legal under any circumstance; 40 percent said it should be legal under certain circumstances, and four percent said all abortion should be illegal. The U.S. public at large appears to be much less likely than U.S. journalists to see unrestricted abortion as legal and more



likely to say it should always be illegal," they reported.

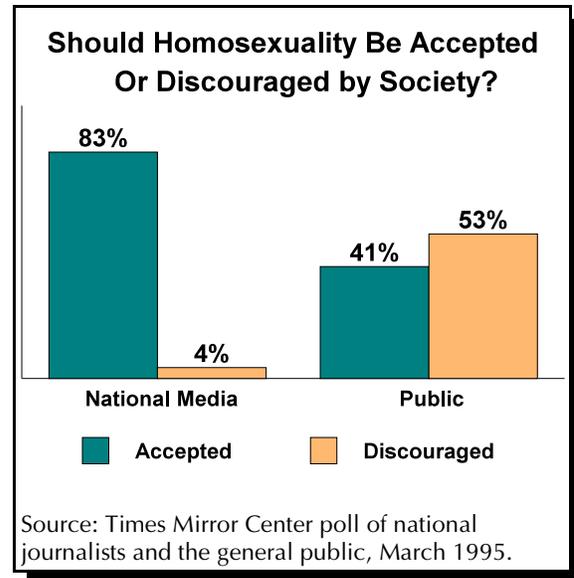
Weaver and Wilhoit also discovered that journalists and the public differed on the importance of religion: "Our survey results show that the percentage of journalists rating religion or religious beliefs as 'very important' is substantially lower (38 percent) than the percentages in the overall U.S. population (61 percent). But 34 percent of journalists say religion is 'somewhat important,' compared to 30 percent of the population."

Those figures actually indicate a more pious press than Lichter and his team found in the early 1980s, when "exactly half" of top journalists did not identify with any religion and "only 8 percent go to church or synagogue weekly, and 86 percent seldom or never attend religious services."

■ **Journalists More Pro-Gay than Public:** In 1995, the Times Mirror Center found a values gap when they compared the views of 228 top journalists and media executives to other groups: "The public is divided as to whether homosexuality should be accepted (41 percent) or discouraged (53 percent), as are members of Congress, top business executives and local community leaders. But members of the national media feel it should be accepted by an 83 to 4 percent margin, and this view is almost as prevalent among the local media (75 percent to 14 percent)."

■ **Reporters Wish They Were Nicer to Clinton, Tougher on Bush:** The Times Mirror poll was conducted during the middle of Bill Clinton's first term in the White House. When it came to rating the media coverage, reporters were worried they had been too aggressive. More than a third of the journalists (35 percent) felt there had been too much coverage of the Clintons' Whitewater scandals, versus five percent who felt there had been too few Whitewater stories.

At the same time, about half of the national media (48 percent) said they felt there had been too few stories about Clinton's "achievements," compared with only two percent who felt the media had over-reported Clinton's achievements. But when the Pew Research Center tested journalists in 2004, 55 percent complained that the media were "not critical enough" of President George W. Bush, compared to only eight percent who thought the press had been "too critical."



The 2004 Pew report revealed how these assessments were based on the journalists' ideology. "Liberals who work in national and local news organizations overwhelmingly feel the press has not been critical enough of the Bush administration," Pew reported, "but most [of the media's] conservatives (53%) think the press has been too critical." That same poll found that the media's liberals outnumbered the conservatives by a five to one margin.

■ **Elite Journalists Pro-Abortion, Pro-Gay:** Rothman and Black's 2001 update to the original *Media Elite* surveys found that reporters continued to profess liberal attitudes on social issues. Nearly all of the news media elites surveyed (97 percent) agreed that a woman should have the legal right to choose whether or not to have an abortion, and 75 percent agreed that "homosexuality is as acceptable as heterosexuality."

On adultery, however, the media elite had become stricter over the years, as 78 percent now agreed that it is "wrong for a married person to have sexual relations with someone other than his or her spouse." (The earlier *Media Elite* survey showed a majority actually disagreed with this premise.)

When it came to economic issues, Rothman and Black expressed some surprise at the continued liberalism of reporters: "Despite the discrediting of centrally planned economies produced by the collapse of the Soviet Union and other Communist regimes, attitudes about government control of the economy have not changed very much since the 1980s," they marveled in their 2001 *Public Interest* article. "The cultural elite maintains strong levels of support for a more egalitarian society in which government plays a substantial role."

Indeed, the updated survey found the media's preference for government activism had grown over the years. "When asked if the government should work to ensure that everyone has a job," more than seven out of ten journalists (71 percent) agreed, up from 48 percent in the original surveys. Similarly, only 39 percent of reporters agreed that "less government regulation would be good for business," whereas 63 percent had expressed that view previously. Three-fourths of journalists (75 percent) agreed that "government should work to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor," a slight increase from the 68 percent who felt that way earlier.

The conclusion that liberals dominate the national media is unassailable. Every major survey of journalists from 1970s to the present day has found that reporters are more liberal on the issues, more likely to identify themselves as liberal, and more likely to vote for a liberal presidential candidate than the rest of the country.

## The Public Recognizes the Media's Liberal Bias

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Americans' perception of the national media as too biased and too liberal have grown significantly over the past two decades. In less than twenty years, since the 1985 Times Mirror polls began routinely assessing the public's perceptions of the national media, the percentage of Americans who perceive a liberal bias has doubled from 22 percent to 45 percent, nearly half the adult population. Even Democrats now generally regard the press as a liberal entity.

**In less than twenty years, the percentage of Americans who perceive a liberal bias has doubled from 22 percent to 45 percent, nearly half the adult population. Even Democrats now generally regard the press as a liberal entity.**

■ **In 1985, 22 Percent Saw Liberal Bias:** Back in 1985, the Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press surveyed 4,000 Americans to document their attitudes toward the news media. Generally, the results showed positive attitudes toward journalists, who were awarded high marks for “believability” and “likeability” by the public. “Network anchorpeople, correspondents and commentators all get higher believability scores than the President,” Ronald Reagan, the Times Mirror poll observed.

On the other hand, “although Americans like the press, the public also expresses serious reservations about press practices and performance,” the report noted. “Clear majorities feel the news media are too invasive and too negative. A close majority [53 percent] feels that the press tends to ‘favor one side’ in its coverage of issues. A plurality [45 percent] senses ‘political bias’ in reporting...Slightly over one-fifth of the sample (22 percent) believes news reporting is liberally biased.”

■ **In the 1990s, More Faulted One-Sided News:** Since that survey was taken, the gap between the media and the public has grown considerably. A dozen years later, the same research group – now the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press – found that “the American public is more critical of press practices, less enthusiastic about the news product and less appreciative of the watchdog role played by the news media than it was a dozen years ago when The People and The Press surveys were inaugurated.”

In March 1997, two-thirds of the public (67 percent) felt that “in dealing with political and social issues” news organizations “tend to favor one side.” That was up 14 points from the 53 percent who gave that answer in 1985. In an indication that media liberalism was to blame, conservatives were most likely to detect favoritism. According to the poll, Republican voters were “more likely to say news organizations favor one

side than are Democrats or independents (77 percent vs. 58 percent and 69 percent, respectively).”

Of respondents with an unfavorable view of network TV news, 50 percent did not give a reason for their dissatisfaction, leaving “news is biased” as the most cited reason at 14 percent. Another seven percent listed “give opinions not facts,” and three percent gave “too liberal” as their response. Those reasons totaled 24 percent; conservative bias did not make the list.

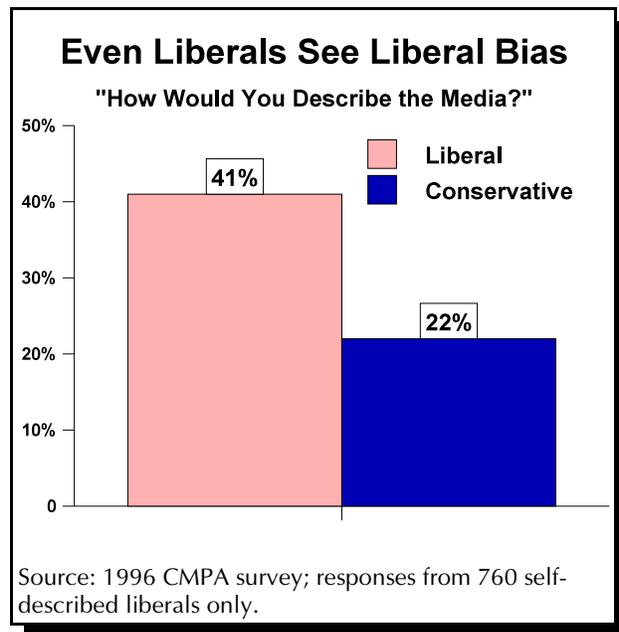
■ **Three in Four See Bias:** Pew’s pessimistic findings were matched by a 1996 Harris poll of more than 3,000 adults conducted for the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA). According to CMPA’s analysis, “nearly two-thirds (63 percent) believe one side is favored in presentation of the news; an even larger majority of 77 percent thinks that there is at least a fair amount of political bias in the news they see.”

“This bias is described as liberal by a plurality (43 percent) of all adults,” the report continued, while 19 percent described a conservative bias. CMPA discovered that “nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of all Republicans believe that the news media favor one side in their reporting...compared with only two of five (40 percent) Democrats.”

Interestingly, CMPA’s analysis concluded that while “complaints about bias used to come mainly from political conservatives, our survey indicates that this limitation no longer exists....Even self-described liberals agree: 41 percent see the media as liberal, compared to only 22 percent who find the news to be conservative. Among self-designated conservatives, of course, the spread is even greater: 57 percent say the media are liberal and 19 percent see them as conservative.”

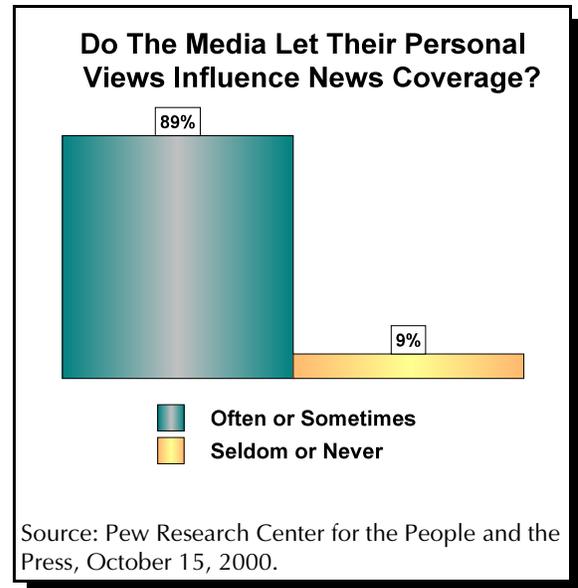
“These findings challenge the argument of some journalists that bias is purely in the eye of the beholder. Although conservatives are three times more likely to see liberal rather than conservative bias, moderates and liberals alike see liberal bias in the media twice as often as they see conservative bias,” CMPA concluded.

■ **Journalists Think They’re Doing Well; Public Disagrees:** A 1998 survey of 3,000 Americans sponsored by the American Society of Newspaper Editors



(ASNE) as part of a \$1 million project “to improve the credibility of newspapers and journalism” found three-fourths of the public (78 percent) agreed that the media are biased. When asked specifically about the slant of their hometown newspaper, nearly half (47 percent) said their local paper was more liberal than they were, with 34 percent perceiving the newspaper as more conservative.

As part of their credibility project, ASNE also surveyed more than 1,700 newspaper editors and staff, most of whom denied that biased news was a problem. When asked to grade their own newspapers on many of the different facets of bias, the majority of journalists tended to give themselves high marks, feeling “their paper does an ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ job,” ASNE stated in *Examining Our Credibility: A Report for the ASNE Journalism Credibility Project*.



That ASNE study also determined that a significant percentage of journalists disagreed with the public on whether it journalists’ principal duty was to analyze and interpret the news or to report the facts: “While 93 percent of average Americans express a desire to get their news ‘straight up,’ believing that ‘the major job of newspapers is to get the facts right, not to tell me how to interpret those news events,’ only 68 percent of journalists believe in this mission.”

■ **2000: Nine in Ten Say Views Affect News:** A Pew survey conducted in the final weeks of the 2000 campaign showed further deterioration in the media’s public image. According to the report, “over the past eight years, there has been an increase in the number of voters who say that reporters often allow their political preferences to shape news coverage. Fully 57 percent of voters hold that view now, compared to 49 percent in September 1992. Nearly nine in ten (89 percent) say that journalists at least sometimes let their political views affect coverage, while just 9 percent say this seldom or never occurs.”

As the earlier surveys had shown, much more of the public detected a pro-liberal tilt than a pro-conservative skew in the press. “Twice as many voters [47 percent] say the media is pulling for a Gore victory compared to those who think the media is hoping for a Bush win [23 percent],” the survey revealed, although, paradoxically, the Pew poll also found that a wide majority of the public believed both candidates had been treated fairly by the press.

■ **Six in Ten See Political Bias & Inaccuracy:** After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the public's approval of the news media increased along with other institutions, but that increase proved short-lived. Another Pew survey, this one conducted in July 2002, found that "public criticism of the news media, which abated in response to coverage of the 9/11 attacks, is once again as strong as ever." That poll showed nearly six out of ten Americans (59 percent) agreed that news organizations "are politically biased," while almost the same percentage (56 percent) agreed that "their stories and reports are often inaccurate."

■ **Three Times More See Liberal Bias than Conservative Tilt:** A Gallup poll conducted in February 2003 asked whether, "In general, do you think the news media are – too liberal, just about right, or too conservative?" As the other polls had discovered, far more respondents identified liberal bias as the problem (45 percent) as worried about a conservative tilt (15 percent), while just 36 percent said coverage was about right.

■ **Plurality of Democrats See Liberal Bias:** In a July 2003 survey, Pew found that twice as many Americans (51 percent) believed news organizations have a liberal bias than a conservative bias (26 percent). Not only did a majority of Republicans and independents hold this view, but a plurality of Democrats (41 percent) thought the media had a liberal bias, compared with 33 percent of Democrats who saw a conservative bias.

The public is not wrong: news organizations are, in fact, disproportionately liberal, and far too many reporters approach their stories with a liberal mindset. Every study of the past 25 years has proved this point. The only question is when will the media elite recognize that a liberal bias erodes their credibility with mainstream and conservative audiences, and make ideological diversity in their newsrooms a goal?

## **Conclusion: A Double-Standard on Diversity**

For years, enhancing the diversity of newsroom staffs has been a central priority for reformers both outside and inside the news media, particular within the rarified media elite. Of course, when they talk about more "diversity," media chiefs almost always mean increasing the percentages of women reporters, African-American reporters, Asian-American reporters, Hispanic reporters, or representatives of other demographic minorities. Their argument: a newspaper or television station cannot be fair and balanced if its staff does not reflect the community they serve.

The media have taken the need to improve their demographic diversity very seriously. The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) each year categorizes more than 50,000 individual newsroom employees to determine the precise percentages of minorities and women who work at the nation's newspapers. The editors' October 1998 statement on diversity insisted upon the following goal: "The nation's newsrooms must reflect the racial diversity of American society by 2025 or sooner. At a minimum, all newspapers should employ journalists of color and every newspaper should reflect the diversity of its community."

**All of these studies show the news media are far more liberal than the public, and the most elite news organizations — the networks, big newspapers and newsmagazines — are the most liberal of all. The Media Research Center's documentation of media content over the past two decades shows this liberalism does skew the news.**

But when it comes to the political and ideological make-up of newsrooms, the media's pro-diversity logic breaks down. On the one hand, those who wish for more demographic diversity say reporters are not interchangeable — a white male reporter and an Hispanic female reporter, for example, would make different decisions about how to cover a news story as a consequence of their different backgrounds and experiences. Thus, a diverse news staff would help a news organization remain sensitive to all sides, resulting in better and fairer news coverage.

But few in the media acknowledge the corresponding requirement for ideological diversity. While it seems obvious that audiences would benefit if the news, especially political news, was reported and edited by a diverse mixture of liberals, conservatives and moderates, most influential media figures deny that journalists' political views affect the news. Either journalists are so lacking in ideology, or their professional norms are so strictly enforced, that it makes utterly no difference whether newsrooms include more liberals — and far fewer conservatives — than the communities they cover.

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Journalists, after all, are not robots — their profession requires them to make choices. Liberal journalists often choose story topics that represent a liberal agenda, they choose to interview liberal-leaning policy experts, and they question officials from a mainly liberal perspective. At the same time, they rarely choose to focus on issues representing the conservative agenda, they choose to minimize the number of

conservative policy experts they interview, and they rarely challenge public officials with questions representing a conservative point of view.

Individually, such decisions may be entirely defensible, but collectively they push news content to the left. And while conservative journalists may make entirely different choices, introducing a rightward bias, it is an indisputable fact that liberals in the media vastly outnumber the conservatives.

It's not a vast left-wing conspiracy, but the effect is the same. The media elite would like us to believe that their news is impartial, objective and non-partisan. But the news they produce is slanted – titled in favor of liberal policies and liberal politicians and against conservative policies and conservative politicians.

If news reporters were as ideologically diverse as their readers and viewers, it follows that much of the bias that tarnishes the media elite would disappear. If executives, editors and producers insisted on equal treatment of conservatives and liberals, much of the public's confidence in the news media ability to be fair and objective would be restored.

The public clearly sees the media's bias. It is up to the media to acknowledge it.

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