



# SPECIAL REPORT

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

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August 2007

# Rise and Shine on Democrats

## How the ABC, CBS and NBC Morning Shows Are Favoring the Democrats On the Road to the White House, 2008

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the 2008 presidential campaign season gets underway, wide-open primary races in both the Republican and Democratic parties are competing for the media's attention. So are the broadcast networks covering both sides equally, or are they tilting the campaign playing field in favor of liberal Democratic candidates?

To find out, Media Research Center analysts reviewed all 517 campaign segments on ABC's *Good Morning America*, CBS's *The Early Show* and NBC's *Today* from January 1 through July 31. Those three broadcast morning shows draw nine times the audience of their cable news competitors, and are geared toward everyday voters, not political junkies. These programs are therefore a prime battleground in each campaign's quest for positive media attention.

The results are astonishing: **Not only are the network morning shows overwhelmingly focused on Democrats, they are actively promoting the Democrats' liberal agenda.**

Among the major findings:

- The networks offered nearly twice as much coverage of the Democrats. More than half of all campaign segments (284, or 55%) focused on the Democratic contest, compared with just 152 (29%) devoted to the Republicans. The remaining stories either offered roughly equal discussion of both parties or did not focus on the major parties.
- All three Democratic frontrunners received more attention than any of the top Republican candidates, with New York Senator Hillary Clinton receiving the most coverage of all.
- Undeclared liberal candidates such as former Vice President Al Gore and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg received more network TV attention than many of the declared Republican candidates.

- The network morning shows doled out nearly three times as much airtime (4 hours, 35 minutes) to interviews with the various Democratic campaigns. In contrast, the Republicans received just 1 hour and 44 minutes of interview airtime.
- In their interviews with the candidates, the network hosts emphasized a liberal agenda. Of the substantive questions that could be categorized as reflecting a political agenda, more than two-thirds (69%) of the questions to Democrats reflected a liberal premise, and more than four-fifths (82%) of the questions to Republicans came from the same perspective.
- The top Democratic candidates received much more favorable coverage than their GOP counterparts, with Senator Clinton cast as “unbeatable” and Illinois Senator Barack Obama tagged as a “rock star.” The most prominent Republican, Arizona Senator John McCain, was portrayed as a loser because of his support for staying the course in Iraq.
- Not once did network reporters describe Senator Clinton and former North Carolina Senator John Edwards as “liberal,” while ABC only once labeled Obama as “liberal.” Yet the networks showed no hesitation in attaching the “liberal” label to Republican frontrunner Rudy Giuliani, who was so branded 12 times.

These early returns suggest that ABC, CBS and NBC are skewing their news in ways that will benefit the Democratic candidates in 2008. The broadcast networks have a responsibility to cover both parties in a fair and even-handed manner — not for the sake of the candidates, but for the voters. That means giving viewers a chance to hear from all of the major candidates in interviews, asking them similar questions, and balancing the day-to-day news coverage to keep both Democratic and Republican primary voters equally well-informed.

# Rise and Shine on Democrats

## How the ABC, CBS and NBC Morning Shows Are Favoring the Democrats on the Road to the White House, 2008

BY RICH NOYES  
MRC RESEARCH DIRECTOR

In the coming months, Democratic and Republican primary voters will gather to choose their nominees for President of the United States. Unlike most election years, no incumbent is on the ballot this time, leaving both parties with wide-open nomination contests. The large number of candidates in each race leaves voters with much to learn about the many competitors' biographies, records, stances on issues, and personal character.

But are the broadcast networks providing roughly equivalent coverage of both the Democratic and Republican races? Or are liberal journalists giving more broadcast airtime and more favorable coverage to the leading Democratic candidates, handing that party an advantage going into next year's campaign season?

To find out, a team of Media Research Center analysts examined all campaign stories on the three broadcast network morning programs from January 1 to July 31, 2007. Compared to cable news, ABC's *Good Morning America*, CBS's *The Early Show* and NBC's *Today* have a much larger combined audience – 13.7 million viewers during the first three months of this year, nine times as many as watch CNN, FNC and MSNBC combined at the same hours.

Unlike the networks' evening newscasts, the two- and three-hour long morning shows can spend far more time delving into a candidates' record (*Good Morning America*, for example, has already hosted two town hall-style meetings with candidates). And, unlike the networks' Sunday morning shows, the three morning shows are not geared toward political junkies, but rather the everyday voters that campaigns seek to reach. Consequently, the broadcast morning shows are a prime battleground in the candidates' competition for media attention and positive coverage.

Our analysts tabulated the total amount of coverage given to the two nomination races and each of the candidates, including all field reports, interviews and brief news items. Then the analysts conducted a more detailed examination of each interview with either one of the

MRC Senior News Analyst Geoffrey Dickens along with MRC News Analysts Scott Whitlock and Justin McCarthy provided valuable research assistance for this report.

candidates or a designated surrogate (usually the candidate's spouse), and tallied the airtime and whether the questions posed to the candidate represented a liberal or conservative agenda, or were ideologically neutral.

The results show that all three of the network morning shows are a favorable media forum for the Democratic candidates, and more forbidding terrain for the Republicans.

### ***TV's Morning Shows Throw Their Spotlight on the Democrats***

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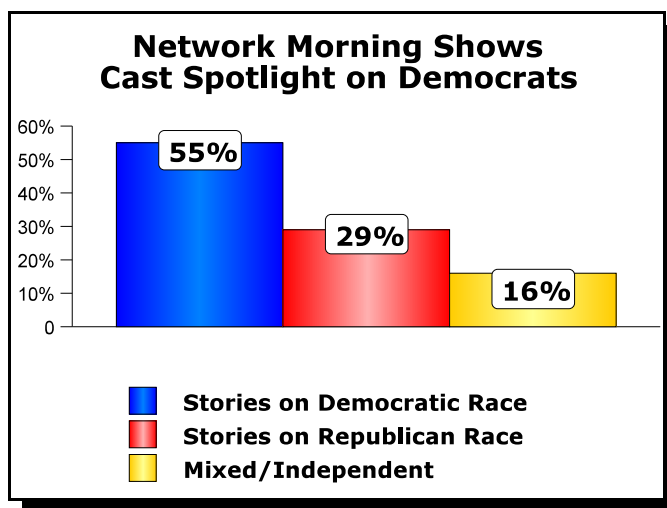
With Election Day well over a year away, the presidential campaign has already gotten off to a strong start on the Big Three morning shows. From January 1 to July 31, MRC analysts tallied 517 campaign items on the weekday editions of ABC's *Good Morning America*, CBS's *Early Show* and NBC's *Today*. About two-thirds of these items (345) were long segments — either full reports from field correspondents or interviews with candidates or analysts. The remaining 172 items were relatively brief discussions of the campaign, mainly short anchor-read news stories.

Overall, the networks offered nearly twice as much coverage of the Democratic primary race than the Republican contest. More than half of all campaign segments (284, or 55%) focused on the Democrats, compared with just 152 (29%) devoted to the Republican candidates. Another 13 percent (66 stories) contained discussions of both parties, while 15 stories (3% of the total) focused on a possible independent candidacy of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

While all three networks gave more attention to the Democrats, ABC's *Good Morning America* was the most tilted, with more than twice as many segments on the Democrats (119, or 62% of their campaign stories) than on the Republicans (51 stories, or 26% of ABC's total). CBS's *Early Show* featured Democrats in more than half of their campaign news (75 stories, or 54%), compared to less than a third that featured Republicans (44 stories, or 31%). Meanwhile, just under half of the coverage on NBC's *Today* (90 stories, or 49%) featured Democrats, compared to 57 stories (31%) about the GOP.

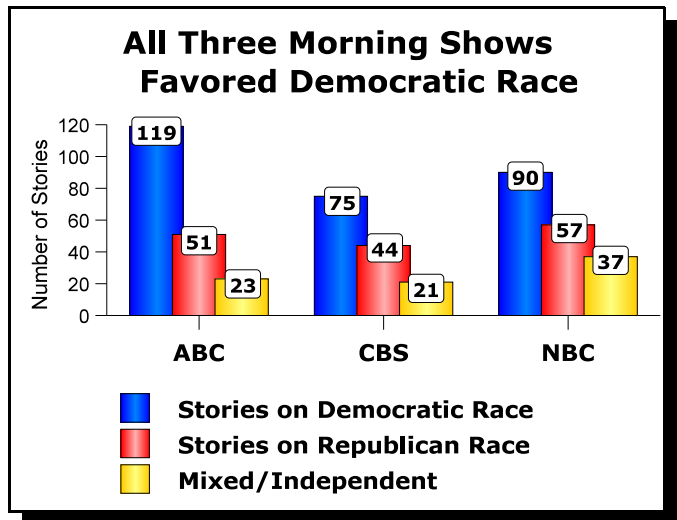
The skew in favor of the Democratic race has been evident all year. In January, the networks all excitedly jumped on the announcements that Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton would join the race, contributing to a total of 52 Democratic stories that month. In contrast, the GOP contest garnered just five stories that month, a ten-to-one imbalance.

As the chart at the bottom of page 3 shows, the networks' inordinate emphasis on the Democratic nomination contest continued in February and March, with nearly twice as many stories on the Democrats than on the Republicans. In April, the gap between the two parties actually narrowed, and in May — thanks to coverage of the first major Republican debate — the networks actually spent more time on the GOP, though not by much. In



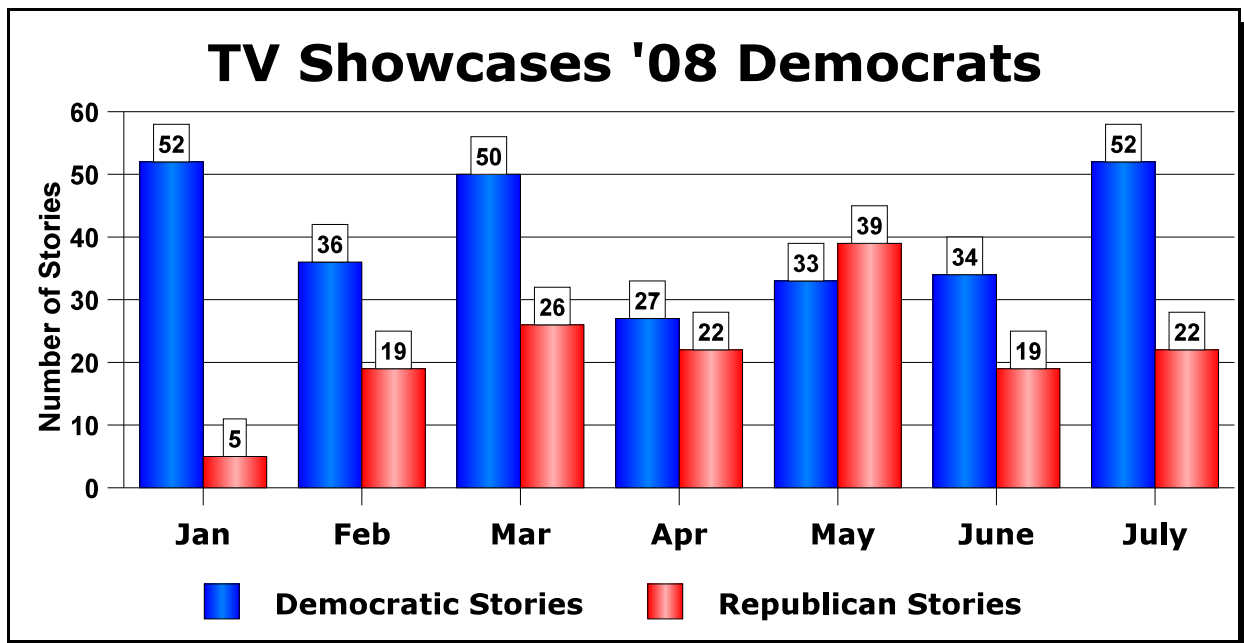
June and July, however, the gap between the two parties once again grew, with Democrats receiving more than twice as much coverage in July (52 stories vs. 22).

While about one-third of stories focused on more than one candidate – such as debate stories, or items about a verbal exchange between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, for example – about two-thirds emphasized a single candidate. Remarkably, all three of the Democratic frontrunners – Clinton, Obama and John Edwards – were each the subject of more of these single-candidate stories than each of the three of the Republican front-runners, Rudy Giuliani, John McCain and Mitt Romney. Interestingly, the networks also aired more stories about the never-declared candidacy of former Democratic Vice President Al Gore than the actual candidacies of Republicans Romney and Giuliani.



MRC analysts noted distinct themes in the coverage each candidate received. In general, they discovered that the top Democratic candidates have been treated like celebrities, while coverage of the top GOP contenders has emphasized their flaws and problems. Here’s a summary of how the top ten candidates have been portrayed:

**Hillary Clinton, President-in-Waiting.** Not only has Senator Clinton received more media attention than any other candidate from either party (61 stories), hers has been the only campaign where staffers have been welcomed on the morning shows as substitutes for the candidate, an indulgence normally reserved for sitting presidents or actual nominees. The June 28 *Good Morning*



America even featured a lengthy segment with 10 female staffers, what ABC's Chris Cuomo touted as "an ABC News exclusive look behind the scenes at the Clinton campaign, a campaign that's making history, not only for women but by women."

When she announced her candidacy in late January, all three of the morning shows followed up with heavy coverage, more than for any other candidate's debut. On January 22, NBC's *Today* featured her campaign chairman Terry McAuliffe while CBS's *Early Show* hosted campaign spokesman Howard Wolfson. CBS's Joie Chen even suggested that "it might be easier to get an audience with the Wizard of Oz than steal Clinton's thunder right now."

The next morning, all three shows featured the candidate herself, whom ABC's Diane Sawyer touted as the woman "who has single-handedly kicked this race into overdrive." CBS's Harry Smith cast the Clintons' scandalous past in the most sympathetic light. "You were under the glare of the spotlight for eight years," Smith told Clinton. "Many of those days had to have been horrible. Why go back? Why go back into the middle of the white hot glare of that light?"

As the campaign progressed, the networks were drawn to even the most minor events. In June, for example, all three morning shows played a goofy campaign spoof where Bill and Hillary Clinton parodied the last episode of HBO's *The Sopranos*. NBC's Matt Lauer declared it "a hit" and "clever," while fellow anchor Meredith Vieira exclaimed she "loved" it. On ABC, correspondent George Stephanopoulos (once a top aide to the Clintons) called it "effective" in "showing she's also a human being who can laugh at herself." And on CBS, Bob Schieffer called the spot "hilarious," claiming "it's one of the cleverest things I've seen in a long, long time."

Network analysts refuted the notion that Clinton is too liberal. "People think she's a liberal, even though she's hawkish," MSNBC's Chris Matthews argued on NBC on January 15. Two days later, NBC's Tim Russert echoed: "She seems to be yielding the left in the Democratic primary on the war issue to Senator Edwards, trying to carve out a broad center position."

On February 20, NBC's David Gregory explored whether Clinton could win support among conservatives: "Are the Clinton-haters mellowing?" he suggested, adding how "some conservatives credit Mrs. Clinton with working to shed her liberal image dating back to her push for universal health care. They also note her stand on the Iraq war has made her a target for liberals, not conservatives." Not once in seven months did a network morning show reporter or analyst label Senator Clinton as a "liberal."

The networks also touted the theme of Clinton's "inevitability." On June 18, NBC's *Today* led with a segment headlined, "Is Hillary Clinton Unbeatable?" Co-host Meredith Vieira wondered,

## Candidate Coverage

Network TV Morning Shows,  
January 1 to July 31

	<u>Number of Stories</u>
<b>Hillary Clinton (D)</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>John Edwards (D)</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Barack Obama (D)</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>John McCain (R)</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Al Gore (D)</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Rudy Giuliani (R)</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Mitt Romney (R)</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Joe Biden (D)</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Mike Bloomberg (I)</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Fred Thompson (R)</b>	<b>11</b>

“Why is she doing so well?...Could she possibly be the Teflon candidate?” The following month, CBS’s Bob Schieffer saw great importance in Clinton’s shot at Obama as naive. “I think it’s Christmas in July for Mrs. Clinton,” Schieffer enthused to co-host Harry Smith on the July 25 *Early Show*. “More and more, Harry, it looks to me as if this is going to be Mrs. Clinton's nomination to lose.”

**John Edwards, Elizabeth Edwards’s Husband.** While former Democratic vice presidential nominee John Edwards ranked second only to Hillary Clinton in overall coverage (44 stories), the morning shows seemed more interested in Edwards’s wife, Elizabeth, than his presidential campaign.

Edwards’s official announcement came in late December 2006, before our study period began, but like Clinton he was invited to appear on all three network morning programs. After that, Edwards was essentially eclipsed by Clinton and Obama, only returning to the spotlight with the unfortunate announcement in late March that his wife’s cancer had returned. The network reactions were appropriately sympathetic, with NBC’s Vieira calling Elizabeth Edwards “a lady of great optimism and true grit.”

ABC’s *Good Morning America* has been the most favorable to Edwards, uniquely profiling him in April as he spent a day as a nurse’s aide in a bid to win the endorsement of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). In July, *Good Morning America* hosted Edwards for a lengthy town hall meeting on poverty, a total of 38 minutes of morning show airtime. (The show conducted a similar event with Hillary Clinton in March, totaling 26 minutes; ABC has yet to host a meeting with a Republican candidate.)



Despite the fact that Edwards has taken strongly liberal positions in this campaign, not one network reporter labeled him as a “liberal” during the seven months we examined.

The network morning shows were more drawn to Elizabeth Edwards than her candidate husband. Two weeks after her cancer diagnosis was announced, ABC’s Cynthia McFadden offered a five-minute profile of Mrs. Edwards and her children, a longer version of which later aired on *Nightline*. Then in June, when Mrs. Edwards attacked conservative commentator Ann Coulter, all three networks quickly booked her as a guest. The questioning was decidedly friendly. “You decided to get involved with someone who is a professional provocateur,” ABC’s Chris Cuomo told Edwards, suggesting the candidate’s wife had lowered herself. “Why decide to call in and go toe-to-toe with someone like Ann Coulter?”

And on July 31, ABC celebrated the Edwards’s wedding anniversary. Co-host Robin Roberts cooed: “We have a very special picture of the morning. It’s an anniversary party of sorts at Wendy’s. That, of course, presidential nominee [sic] John Edwards and his beautiful wife Elizabeth. 30 years. Their 30th anniversary.” In case viewers at home were beside themselves with curiosity, Roberts explained how Elizabeth had a “Frosty and also some chili as well. He had a cheeseburger.” Co-host Diane Sawyer gushed: “That’s right. And they are going to renew their vows. Happy anniversary.”

**Barack Obama, Democratic “Rock Star.”** In the race for the network spotlight, the junior Senator from Illinois was close behind John Edwards, with 41 morning show segments featuring Barack Obama. The early coverage of his campaign was effusive. “He’s today the political equivalent of a rock star,” CBS’s Gloria Borger trumpeted on the January 17 *Early Show*, adding: “An appearance by Obama looks like a mosh pit.” The next day, NBC’s Matt Lauer agreed: “He’s got rock star buzz around him.”

Within days of Obama’s announcement, the networks began treating him as a top Democratic frontrunner. On the January 18 *Good Morning America*, correspondent Claire Shipman suggested Obama and Clinton were an embarrassment of riches for the Democratic Party, contrasting Obama’s “fluid poetry” with Clinton’s “hot factor.” (See box.) A few weeks later, reporter Jake Tapper touted a Hollywood reception for Obama: “The stars came out for another million dollar affair, honoring a thin, statuesque idol of color. No, not Oscar — Obama, Barack Obama.” In case anyone missed the point, ABC’s graphic department grafted the smiling face of Barack Obama onto a picture of a gold Academy Awards trophy.

### “Hot” Hillary, Obama the Poet

“Call it, ‘Obama wave collides with Clinton juggernaut.’... Next to [Senator Barack] Obama’s fluid poetry, Hillary Clinton’s delivery can seem overly cautious....In the glamour game? It would have to be a draw right now. Hillary Clinton has been the unparalleled star of the Democratic Party — her power hard-earned and palpable, her ‘hot factor’ given a substantial boost by her ever-popular husband. But Barack Obama, with his fairy tale family, has personal charisma to spare....As you can see, there will be a lot of jostling between these two white hot, likely presidential candidates.”

— ABC’s Claire Shipman, *Good Morning America*, January 18.



Unlike his competitors at CBS and NBC, however, ABC’s Tapper was the only network reporter to attach Obama to the “liberal” label. “Obama has drawn raves for presenting fairly traditional liberal views as fresh and inspiring,” Tapper noted in a January 17 story.

By summer, the Obama campaign had lost some of its shine, especially after a series of foreign policy comments that the Clinton campaign said illustrated the candidate’s naivete. CBS’s Bob Schieffer thought it showed Obama was too green: “Yes, Barack Obama’s raising money. Yes, he makes a good impression. But this Clinton machine is now really rolling,” he argued on the July 25 *Early Show*. But over on NBC’s *Today* that same morning, Tim Russert suggested Obama had gotten the better of Clinton: “He punches back by saying, ‘Hold on! You want naivete? You want irresponsibility? [Naivete] is voting for George Bush’s war!’”

Yet a few days earlier, when Obama suggested schools present “age-appropriate” sex education classes to kindergarten children, only ABC’s *Good Morning America* mentioned the matter — and then turned its fire on a Republican candidate who dared challenge Obama. ABC reporter David Wright did not cast Obama’s comment as controversial, but suggested former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney was a hypocrite for raising the issue, because “Massachusetts has one of the most progressive sex education curriculums in the country...[starting] during pre-school.” And “as governor, Romney never sought to repeal Massachusetts’ comprehensive sex education laws.”

**John McCain, Casualty of Bush's War.** A favorite of campaign reporters during the 2000 campaign, the network morning shows have given McCain more coverage than any of his GOP rivals (31 stories), but only about half as much as Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton.

But much of McCain's coverage has emphasized the sinking nature of his campaign — declining poll ratings and fundraising that has failed to meet expectations. And while during his last campaign the media celebrated McCain's courage for taking positions unpopular with the GOP base (such as his bill to regulate campaign speech and his opposition to large tax cuts), this time network reporters suggested McCain's problem was his failure to pander on the issue of the Iraq war. (See box.)

"John McCain has lost ground in the polls because of his support for the Iraq war," NBC's David Gregory stated flatly on April 9. "McCain's candidacy has stalled with his embrace of President Bush's Iraq war strategy," his colleague Kelly O'Donnell similarly argued on April 25. In reality, all of the top GOP contenders share McCain's support for staying the course in Iraq; what set McCain apart from the other candidates (and the base of the party) was his "maverick" history of supporting liberal initiatives (the trait reporters found so endearing eight years ago), and his vocal support of an immigration reform bill that most conservatives detested.

While most network reporters did acknowledge the damage caused by McCain's immigration stance, they still preferred to insist that it is the candidate's hawkish stance on Iraq that has damaged his standing with rank-and-file GOP voters. "The supreme irony," CBS's Jeff Greenfield suggested on July 9, is "that the person most hurt by President Bush's unpopularity is the guy who ran against him seven years ago."

**Al Gore, Savior of the Planet.** Like Republican Fred Thompson, the ex-Vice President was not an announced candidate during the seven months we studied, and unlike Thompson gave no strong sign that he even planned to run. Yet Gore was featured in 29 network stories casting him as a potential presidential candidate in 2008, more coverage than most of the actual candidates.

Gore's coverage consisted of praise for his work on behalf of a liberal global warming agenda and open pitches for a Gore candidacy. "The toast of the town in Hollywood is the talk of the town in Washington," CBS's Gloria Borger trumpeted after Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* won an Oscar. She praised the former VP's savvy and hipness: "Al Gore is now considered ahead of his time."

"Supporters say this is a new Al Gore, more confident than ever," NBC's Andrea Mitchell argued on March 21. "Some believe Al Gore would be the perfect choice, a mix of the rock star appeal of Barack Obama and the political experience and money-raising muscle of Hillary Clinton," NBC's John Yang enthused on May 18.

On May 30, CBS's Harry Smith tried to tease Gore into the race, ending an interview by holding a "Gore 2008" button up to Gore's lapel (see box on next page). Earlier in the year, Smith had

### Blame Bush for McCain's Fall?

"Arizona Senator John McCain has been one of the President's staunchest allies when it comes to the war in Iraq, and now that support may be partly responsible for dwindling poll numbers and a big shake-up among top campaign staffers on Tuesday."

— NBC's Matt Lauer, July 11 *Today*.



asked businessman Richard Branson, a partner with Gore in an environmental venture, "Is Al Gore a prophet?" During that February 9 interview, Smith also pleaded with Gore: "Would you not be better off trying to affect this change from the White House?"

If Gore does wind up joining the 2008 scrum, the months of flattering network coverage could be seen as a massive campaign contribution to his liberal cause.

**Rudy Giuliani, Scandal-Scarred Liberal.** In spite of his frontrunner status, the former New York City mayor has received surprisingly little coverage, just 26 items. In contrast to the heavy coverage of Edwards's, Clinton's and Obama's announcements, ABC and NBC offered only a quick anchor brief when Giuliani made it official on CNN's *Larry King Live* in February. Only CBS offered something approaching a full segment that day; on the February 15 *Early Show*, Politico.com's Mike Allen explained Giuliani's strategy to co-host Harry Smith. "He's trying to show that he is conservative, that he's not a liberal, without being someone he's not. That's a very tough line."

Interestingly, the networks used the "liberal" label 12 times to describe Giuliani's views, particularly on social issues. In contrast, the entire Democratic field has been termed "liberal" just twice during the same period (with one label for Obama and another for New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson).

"Giuliani stands atop the polls not because of his moderate to liberal social views, but in spite of them," CBS's Jeff Greenfield accurately noted on May 11. "Social conservatives don't trust Giuliani's liberal stand on social issues and his past personal behavior," NBC's Andrea Mitchell agreed on March 12.

Reporters also delved into discussions of Giuliani's personal life. "Does his personal life turn out to be a kind of Achilles heel?" ABC's Diane Sawyer wondered on March 30. "He is reportedly estranged from his children, on his third marriage to a woman we haven't met before." A few minutes later, viewers saw a clip of Barbara Walters asking Giuliani, "Do you think that we have gotten to the point in this country where divorce, or the number of divorces, is not important in electing a president?"

"Our papers here in New York have been filled with this stuff about him being estranged from his children. He doesn't talk to his daughter," CBS's Harry Smith suggested on March 5. Referring to Giuliani's frontrunner status, Smith wondered, "Once all of this comes out, are conservatives going to be likely to embrace him?"

But when it came to the Democratic frontrunner's dirty laundry, reporters seemed much more hesitant. In a June 4 interview, ABC's Chris Cuomo seemed troubled when he heard authors Jeff Gerth and Don Van Natta describe how the Clintons had decades ago made a pact of ambition, scolding, "It's a heavy charge to judge a marriage that way." And ABC's Claire Shipman on January 22 dismissed the various Clinton scandals as relevant only to a few Hillary-haters: "It

### CBS's Smith Joins Team Gore

**Co-host Harry Smith:** "President Bush getting ready to go to Europe for the G-8. The folks in the European Union want to do emissions reductions. The President said yesterday we're not going to participate....If you were president, you would have probably signed on?"

**Former Vice President Al Gore:** "Yeah, yeah."

**Smith:** "Do you mind if I-? [holds up a 'Gore 2008' pin]...There you go. You can hold it. [laughter]....Here, let's see what it looks like." [holds pin to Gore's lapel]...All right, all right. Save that in a freeze frame."

— CBS's *The Early Show*, May 30.

certainly seems a smaller matter now, but the taint of those days still drives some anti-Hillary sentiment.”

**Mitt Romney, Flip-Flopping Mormon.** Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney and Democrat John Edwards seem to occupy about the same tier in their respective parties. Both trail in national polls by significant margins, but are at or near the top in the earliest states — Edwards in Iowa, Romney in both Iowa and New Hampshire.

Yet Romney was featured in just 19 morning show segments, less than half the coverage given to Edwards. Romney has fared best on NBC, which included an interview on the day he announced his campaign (Matt Lauer apologized on the air for not being able to fly to Michigan for the event), and a May 30 “*Today on the Trail*” segment in which Lauer shadowed Romney during a New Hampshire campaign swing.

Every profile of Romney included discussion of his Mormonism, with reporters suggesting voters would reject a Mormon candidate. “A recent survey found that 38 percent of white evangelical Protestants say they would have serious doubts about voting for a Mormon,” Lauer told Romney on May 30. “Should you just come out with a ‘Kennedy moment’ and say, ‘Look, folks, here’s the deal. Here’s my faith, here’s what it’s all about, here’s what I stand for?’”

Appearing on ABC’s *Good Morning America* in April to tout his fundraising success, Romney got hit with the same question from Robin Roberts: “Many are wondering if you will take a page from former President Kennedy, who had addressed the nation about his Catholic upbringing. Do you anticipate doing the same?” Romney griped: “There’s probably not a single interview I do with you guys that doesn’t raise the issue, so of course we talk about it.”

In June, ABC wondered if Romney’s candidacy was jeopardizing other Mormons. “Fairly or unfairly,” ABC’s Dan Harris intoned, “Romney’s Mormonism is coming in for increased scrutiny. This has some Mormons nervous about a resurgence of the type of bigotry the church has faced since it was founded 177 years ago.”

Reporters also challenged Romney over his shifting stance on abortion. NBC’s Lauer confronted Romney on the day he announced: “It doesn’t take a huge cynic to say, ‘Wait a minute, in 2002 he said what he said and did what he did because he was currying the favor of liberal voters in Massachusetts. And now he’s doing what he’s doing and saying what he’s saying to curry the favor of conservative voters he’s going to need for the nomination.’”

Comparing Romney’s problems to those of Rudy Giuliani, ABC’s David Wright asserted that “to win the GOP nomination,” Romney “has to get past his own liberal baggage.” Wright then played a soundbite from political analyst Ken Rudin: “The fact is that he ran for Senate in 1994 as pro-choice, pro-stem cell research, pro-gay rights. When he ran for governor in 2002, he was also liberal on these issues.” Wright: “Romney is now running as a born-again conservative — a tough sell.”

**Joe Biden, Gaffe Machine.** Delaware Senator Joe Biden, a frequent morning show guest over the years, received more coverage than the other bottom-tier Democrats (16 stories), but nothing like the warm reception given to his party’s three frontrunners. Soon after his announcement, Biden was forced to apologize for calling Barack Obama a “clean” and “articulate” candidate, comments seen as racially insensitive. “On Capitol Hill, Senator Biden is known for two qualities — foreign

policy expertise and for talking too much," ABC's Jake Tapper told co-host Robin Roberts on the February 1 *Good Morning America*. "It's the second one, Robin, that got him in trouble."

In May, CBS's Bob Schieffer highlighted another Biden remark, this one about Democrats' plans to capitalize on the President's veto of a bill. "We're going to shove it down his throat," Biden railed. Schieffer sounded downright sorrowful: "Although he's one of the most informed people in the Congress, on foreign policy especially, he has had this habit of making these boners."

**Mike Bloomberg, the Great Liberal Hope.** Amid suggestions that the billionaire mayor of New York City might run as a self-financed independent, the networks saw great significance in Bloomberg's decision in June to leave the Republican Party that he'd joined only to run for mayor in 2001. "This morning, who needs Washington?" ABC's Diane Sawyer exclaimed on June 20. "The hugely popular mayor of New York City ditches the Republican label and declares independence, asking if other Americans are ready for a change. Has the presidential race just been thrown a giant curve ball?"

The media boomlet for Bloomberg generated 15 stories in June and July, giving the non-candidate more coverage than many of the announced contenders. ABC's Robin Roberts interviewed Bloomberg on the July 24 *Good Morning America*, where she touted him as "a fiscal conservative but social liberal who supports gun control and doesn't take a conservative line on immigration." She pleaded with Bloomberg: "You're very passionate about certain issues. Is there anything that could change your mind and make you run for President?"

**Fred Thompson, Conservative Actor.** After his name surfaced as a potential, if not likely presidential candidate, the networks made it clear that they thought former Tennessee Senator Fred Thompson had the potential to win it all. "[Thompson] has not even declared his candidacy for president, and already he has vaulted to second place among Republicans in a new poll," ABC's Jake Tapper marveled in a June 13 report.

Yet for all of the *Law & Order* star's potential political heft, the networks have spent less time on Thompson (11 stories) than more liberal possibilities such as Gore and Bloomberg. Reporters generally cast interest in Thompson as a rebuke of the rest of the GOP field. "There is room because there's such disappointment among Republicans," political analyst Amy Walter opined on CBS's *The Early Show* back in March.

Alone among the top GOP contenders, network reporters unequivocally tagged Thompson as a "conservative" four times. On March 12, ABC's Claire Shipman reported how the "popular conservative" was considering a presidential bid; over on NBC, reporter Andrea Mitchell saw Thompson as "against gun control and gay marriage, and just possibly the answer for restless conservatives." And on the June 13 *Good Morning America*, ABC's Tapper similarly cast Thompson as "the man conservatives see as the answer to their presidential prayer."

If and when Thompson takes the plunge, he's unlikely to receive a honeymoon from reporters, who've already engaged in some sniping. On May 31, ABC's George Stephanopoulos recounted "questions about whether he has fire in his belly, whether he's been too lazy a campaigner....[and] about his one term in the Senate, whether it's a thin record or not."

And on July 10, NBC's *Today* relayed smarmy charges about Thompson's wife. "At 40, Jeri Thompson is beautiful, fashionable and 24 years younger than her husband," reporter Michael

Okwu pointed out. “Even the *New York Times* is wondering, is America ready for a president with a trophy wife?”

### ***Morning TV Interviews: Much More Time for Democrats...***

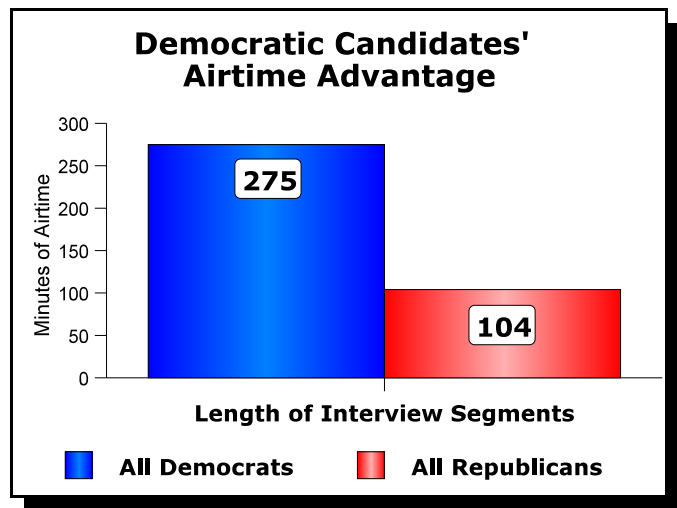
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Even more than day-to-day news coverage, the candidates covet invitations to appear on the networks’ morning shows. As previously noted, the audience for these shows is far larger than the typical cable show, and the questioning is usually not rigorous, especially compared to the politically-oriented Sunday morning talk shows.

Campaign strategists are keenly aware of the value of these appearances, as the *Washington Post’s* Howard Kurtz noted August 13: “The top candidates have been more receptive to the network morning shows, where the questioning is often limited to six minutes rather than a sustained cross-examination about their records.”

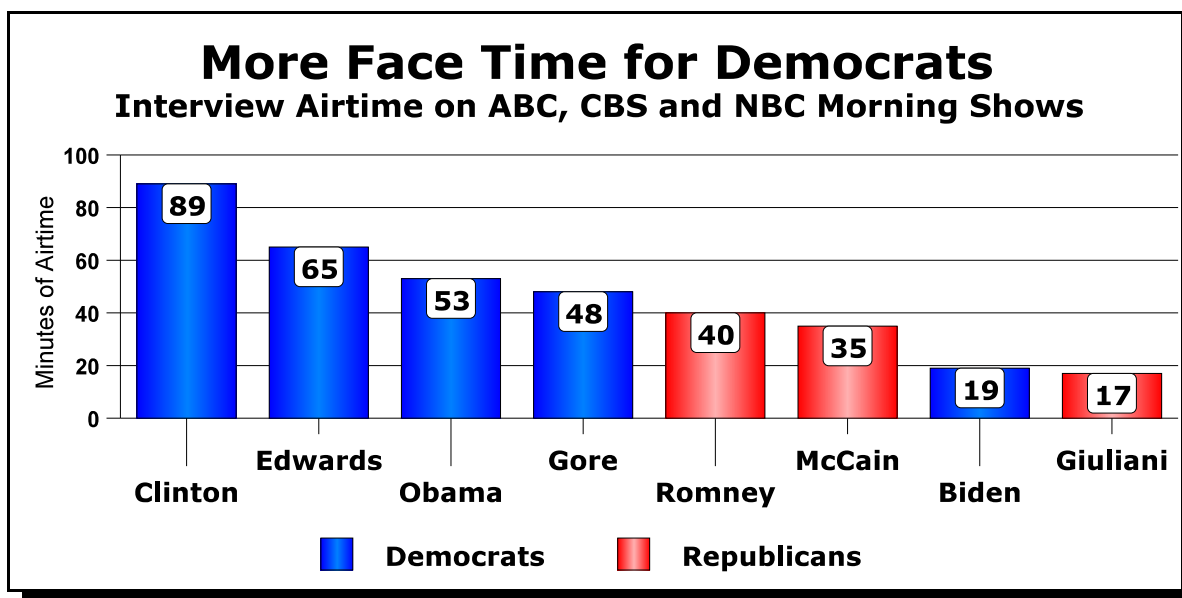
During the first seven months of this year, these network morning shows have been far more hospitable to Democrats than Republicans. MRC analysts analyzed 67 morning show appearances by either an announced or prospective presidential candidate or one of their representatives. Of those appearances, two-thirds (43) featured Democrats, compared to just 22 for the Republicans. Potential independent candidate Michael Bloomberg was interviewed twice.

When it came to airtime, the Democratic advantage was even more pronounced. Interviews with the various Democratic campaigns totaled 275 minutes of coverage, or roughly four and a half hours. In contrast, the Republicans garnered only 104 minutes of morning show airtime (1 hour, 44 minutes), a greater than two-to-one disparity. (The two interviews with Bloomberg totaled just over nine minutes.)



When one looks solely at interviews with the candidates themselves (excluding their husbands, wives or other spokesmen), the gap shrinks only somewhat. The Democratic candidates still commanded more than three and a half hours of airtime (214 minutes), while the Republicans received just over an hour and a half (97 minutes).

Once again, the networks lavished the most attention on the three Democratic front-runners, with New York Senator Hillary Clinton leading the pack with nearly 90 minutes of airtime. Clinton herself accounted for about two-thirds (62 minutes) of her campaign’s exposure on the morning shows, but the networks also hosted her campaign chairman Terry McAuliffe, her spokesman Howard Wolfson, a group of her top female staffers, and her husband, former President Bill Clinton.



The networks gave Clinton’s Democratic rival John Edwards’s campaign more than an hour of airtime this year (65 minutes), with more than two-thirds (45 minutes) going to the candidate himself (with the rest going to his wife, Elizabeth). Illinois Senator Barack Obama’s campaign gained 53 minutes of face time with morning show viewers – 40 minutes for the candidate, and the rest for his wife, Michelle.

Former Vice President Al Gore was a network guest eight times, getting more than 48 minutes of airtime. (MRC analysts only counted interviews in which a potential Gore presidential campaign was discussed.) Once again, the non-candidate Gore eclipsed the major GOP candidates, as the networks gave less airtime to the campaigns of former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney (40 minutes) and Arizona Senator John McCain (35 minutes).

The networks hosted second-tier Democratic candidate Joe Biden four times (19 minutes), making him a more visible morning show presence than GOP frontrunner Rudy Giuliani, who was interviewed three times (17 minutes). Interestingly, Giuliani has yet to appear on CBS’s *Early Show* this year, a show on which Al Gore has appeared four times.

Rounding out the field, potential GOP candidate Newt Gingrich, and declared Republicans Tom Tancredo and Mike Huckabee have each been interviewed once this year. None of the other Republican or Democratic candidates has made an appearance on a network morning show through July 31.

### ...And Softer Questions, Too

In addition to tallying the airtime each campaign received, MRC analysts also analyzed the questions posed by their network interlocutors. In all, the candidates and their surrogates faced 498 questions, or about seven per interview. Just under half of those questions (228, or 46%) were about substantive policy issues, with most of the rest focusing on the politics of the moment, along

with some of the notorious softballs that make morning television such a desirable venue for candidates.

“Do you have a weakness on the campaign trail, anything that you have to have with you at all times?” NBC’s Meredith Vieira asked Senator Barack Obama. “A stuffed animal?” she suggested.

ABC’s Diane Sawyer posed this question to John Edwards: “Do you listen to an iPod? Does it relax you on the road?”

ABC’s Chris Cuomo probably thought he was going to gain an insight when he asked Republican Senator John McCain about the Democratic frontrunners: “Who would you rather see in the White House, Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama?” McCain just laughed at Cuomo: “I don’t contemplate that seriously.”

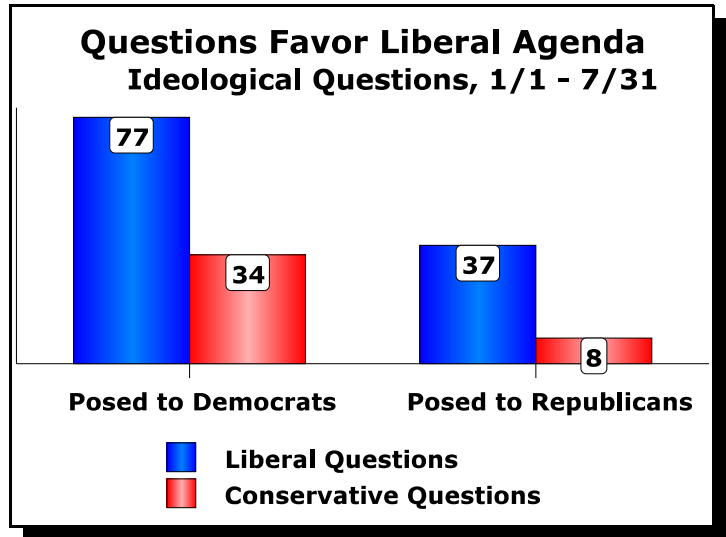
When it came to substantive questions, journalists heavily emphasized liberal talking points over questions that reflected a conservative agenda. About two-thirds of the substantive questions (157, or 69%) could be categorized as reflecting either a liberal or a conservative view. (The remaining 31% were either mixed or neutral.) Reporters gravitated to a liberal agenda regardless of whether they were challenging a liberal Democrat or a Republican with more conservative views.

Of the 111 agenda questions posed to Democrats, more than twice as many reflected liberal priorities (77, or 69%) as confronted the candidate with a conservative point (34, or 31%). But while journalists were relatively shy about hitting the Democrats with conservative questions, they routinely tossed liberal questions to the Republican candidates. Of the 45 agenda questions posed to the GOP candidates, 37 of them (82%) were predicated on liberal ideas, compared to just eight questions (18%) that reflected a conservative agenda. These findings mirror what MRC found four years ago when it conducted a similar study of questions to the Democratic candidates on the same morning shows and found 87 percent based on a liberal agenda, compared to just 13 percent showing a conservative agenda.

As in 2003, the Democrats were generally subjected to questions that matched their own point of view. On January 17, NBC’s Matt Lauer cued up Hillary Clinton with a Democratic talking point on the war in Iraq: “When one U.S. military official said in Baghdad, quote, ‘We are implementing a strategy to embolden a government that is actually part of the problem. We are being played like a pawn,’ you would agree with that?”

“I certainly would agree with that,” Clinton quickly answered.

The same day, ABC’s Diane Sawyer also interviewed Clinton, along with 15 other female U.S. senators. Sawyer sounded as if she was pitching a Clinton presidency: “Do you believe that if there were more women presidents in the world, there would be less war?”



The softballs weren't confined to foreign policy. Referring to the firing of U.S. Attorneys, NBC's Vieira on March 15 invited Obama to slam Attorney General Alberto Gonzales: "He also says that he did not know the extent of what his chief of staff was doing with the White House counsel. If that is true, what does it say about the Justice Department to you?"

When Al Gore was on NBC's *Today* on July 5, Vieira treated him as a scientific expert: "Mr. Gore, can you explain some of the science behind global warming?" She also pleaded with him: "If this is the number one moral issue, and the President is the key player here, then why wouldn't the man whose face is the face of this issue be running for President?"

At the *Good Morning America* town hall-style meeting on March 26, co-host Robin Roberts indulged Clinton: "A lot of people feel like they're rolling the dice every morning about their health care. They can't afford it. And two-thirds – did you realize this? – two-thirds of Americans who do not have health insurance are working!"

On February 5, NBC's Lauer patted Edwards on the back: "I'll applaud your honesty. You basically have come out and said, 'Look, I want universal health care for everyone in this country, and I'm going to raise taxes to accomplish it.' Senator Obama, Senator Clinton also would like to see universal health care. What's the main difference in your plan versus theirs?"

Sometimes the Democrats were challenged as not liberal enough. Reminding Edwards of his multi-million dollar house and work at a hedge fund, Diane Sawyer put him on the spot during the July 16 town hall-style meeting: "Can you be among the privileged in this country and really make a difference in poverty, really in your heart be committed to solving poverty?"

In a February 22 interview, Vieira hit Edwards with condemnation from the even more liberal Dennis Kucinich: "He said, quote, 'We had an audition for President in October 2002,' and that the President must have, again his words, 'the clarity of vision, the judgment to make the right decisions on life and death matters.' The implication being that those who voted for the war failed the audition. People like you failed the audition. Do you agree with that, sir?"

But reporters did press the Democrats to respond to some conservative arguments. On January 11, Vieira asked the anti-war Obama: "What if the President is right and, if he were to remove the troops, redeploy them, that that country, Iraq, would fall into total chaos, we would lose control of that country? Are you willing to face that possibility?"

In July, ABC's Sawyer similarly hit Edwards over his plan to quickly withdraw U.S. troops: "What does that say to the Iraqi people? Where does that leave them? What if ethnic cleansing begins? Do you send the troops back in? What do you do?" She followed up: "What is the plan to control civil war, except going back in?" Edwards replied, "Well, it's not an easy thing...."

For the Republican candidates, it was much more common to be forced to respond to liberal arguments. In a March 28 exchange, ABC's Chris Cuomo lectured the pro-surge John McCain on the war in Iraq: "Your friend Senator Hagel calls the position you were putting forward 'arrogant' and 'self-delusional.' ...Do you have to be looking at Iraq through rose-colored glasses to see progress?"

That same day, CBS's Hannah Storm also confronted McCain about Iraq: "Why shouldn't we have a deadline for pulling out of Iraq?...The violence and bombings continue and American soldiers and Marines and Iraqi civilians are dying nearly every day here. Why do you think we're succeeding?"

Interviewing GOP Representative Tom Tancredo, a staunch opponent of illegal immigration, ABC's Cuomo was contentious. Referring to the defeat of a compromise Senate bill that would have legalized millions of illegal immigrants, Cuomo demanded to know: "Why did you feel the need to rip a bill like this down?" The ABC anchor kept up the hostile tone throughout the interview. (See box.)

In July, NBC's Lauer suggested to former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee that conservatism might not matter to GOP voters: "Let me make sure people know where you stand, pro-life, pro-gun, anti-gay marriage. If you're the authentic conservative, why aren't you being embraced more in the polls in states that generally embrace conservatives, early primary states? And why are guys who've been questioned about their standing on certain social issues, like Giuliani and Mitt Romney, why are they leading the pack?"

And in an interview with Mitt and Ann Romney, CBS's Storm seemed baffled at their opposition to embryonic stem cell research, even though Mrs. Romney suffers from multiple sclerosis. "The Multiple Sclerosis Society has been very clear, they say that embryonic stem cell research has the potential to be used to protect and rebuild the tissues damaged by MS," Storm told Romney. "Can you explain why you are against federal funding?"

It was rare that one of the Republican candidates was interrogated from the right, but NBC's Vieira did challenge former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani back in January: "How are you going to get nominated, sir?...You're pro-choice, pro-gay civil unions, pro-gun control — not exactly the kinds of positions many Republicans favor."

There's certainly journalistic merit in confronting a Republican candidate with liberal arguments, so that potential primary voters can evaluate the candidate's ability to explain and defend his positions. But by tilting their interviews with GOP candidates away from the conservative issues that matter most to primary voters, while simultaneously emphasizing a liberal agenda for Democratic guests, the morning shows steered the debate in both parties toward the left.

That's great news if you're a liberal activist hoping to draw more voters to your side on Election Day. But it's bad news for those who expect the networks to cover all sides in a fair and balanced way.

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### ***Conclusion: The Networks Must Find Their Balance***

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In spite of the heavy activity seen thus far, Campaign 2008 is far from over. If history is an accurate guide, the networks will provide their heaviest coverage of the primary campaigns in

#### **Opposed to "Humane Solution"**

"You have the President and Ted Kennedy on the same side trying to compromise on this bill. You have the polls showing early on that people were behind what it was fundamentally about. Why did you feel the need to rip a bill like this down?"

"The numbers are in favor of giving some type of amnesty to these people. Isn't that the humane solution? Why are you so adamantly opposed to it?"

"Do you think if your mentality that you have right now existed when your ancestors were trying to get into this country, do think you would even be here right now?"

— ABC's Chris Cuomo to Republican candidate Tom Tancredo, *Good Morning America*, June 8.

January and February; then a long campaign between the two party nominees will commence, with the heaviest news coverage of the two party conventions and the fall debates.

Yet the first seven months of this campaign already provide evidence of a disturbing tilt in network news coverage. It's long been established that most of the top network reporters and other members of the media elite hold mainly liberal policy views and vote overwhelmingly for Democrats on Election Day. This study shows that the networks are focusing much more of their time and energy covering the Democratic nomination race than the Republican contest, and are more frequently opening their airwaves to the Democratic candidates. Add to that the fact that the coverage of the major Democratic candidates has been more favorable, and that the agenda of network news interviews has reflected the liberal priorities of the Democratic Party, and the case for the networks showing partisan favor in this election cycle begins to sharpen.

One potential rebuke to this thesis is the possibility that the skew we have documented is the result of the GOP candidates shunning the networks, rather than the networks being stingy in opening their airwaves to the Republicans. If true, however, it would still not explain the differences in the tone of each party's coverage, nor would it explain reporters emphasizing a liberal agenda.

Indeed, if the Republican candidates are more wary of appearing on ABC, CBS and NBC (and it should be pointed out that all of the top declared GOP candidates have made multiple appearances on those networks), what would it be about the networks' past coverage that has made them so apprehensive? By their nature, presidential campaigns are publicity-seeking machines. For a candidate to eschew an opportunity to reach millions of voters on a given network, it follows that there is some rational basis for believing that they would not receive a fair shake. The candidates may merely be recognizing and reacting to the bias we have found.

The broadcast networks have a responsibility to cover both parties in a fair and even-handed manner — not for the sake of the candidates, but for the voters. That means giving viewers a chance to hear from all of the major candidates in interviews, asking them similar questions, and balancing the day-to-day news coverage to keep both Democratic and Republican primary voters equally well-informed. It's obviously going to be a long campaign. The networks have an obligation to make it a fair campaign as well.

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