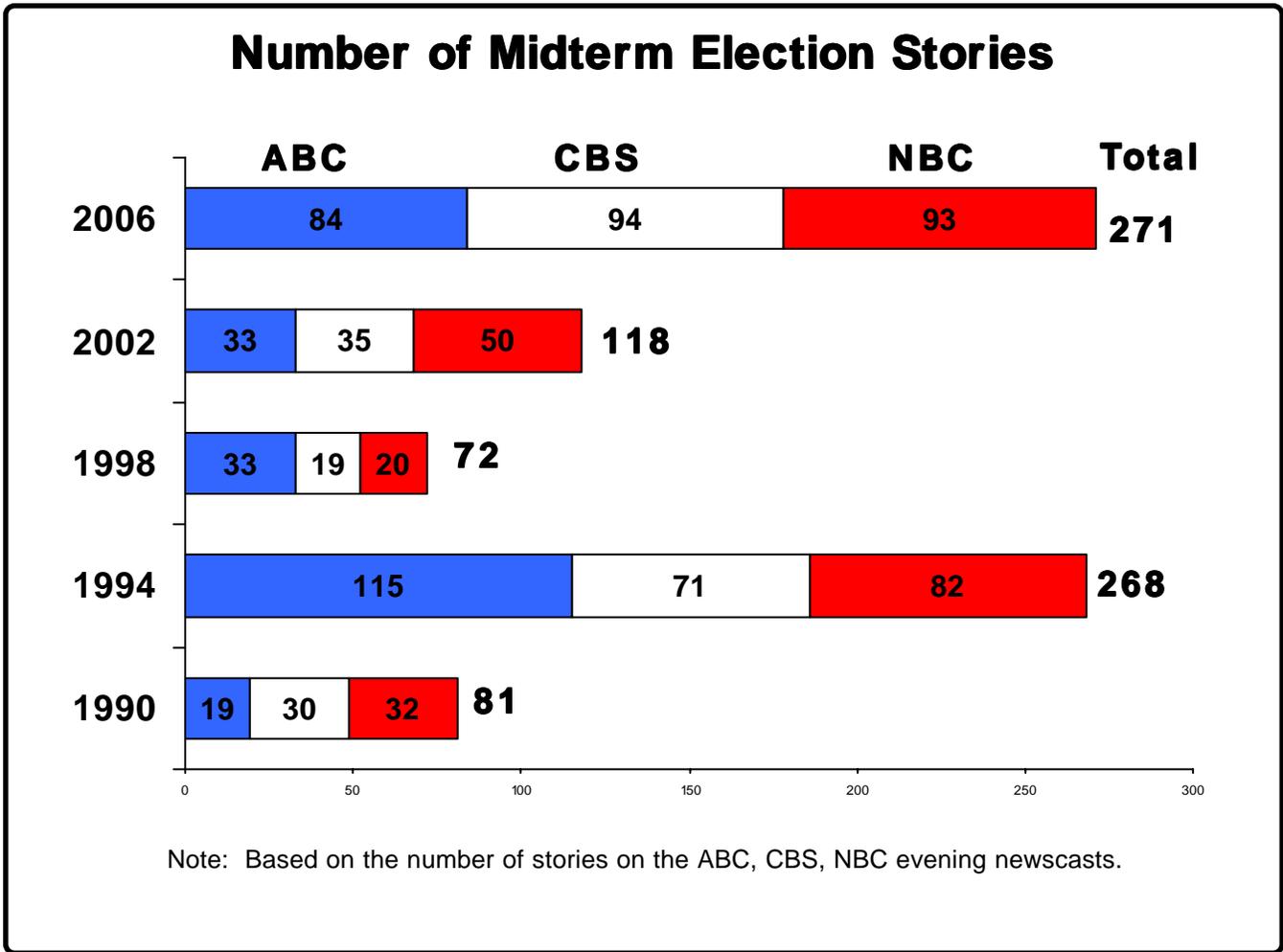


The Democratic Counter-Revolution TV News Coverage of the 2006 Midterm Elections

How did the broadcast networks cover the midterm elections? Which candidates and issues attracted the most attention? Were Democrats and Republicans covered differently? This issue of *Media Monitor* examines the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts during the nine weeks of the 2006 general election, from Labor Day to election eve. We also compare the coverage to our findings from the four previous midterm election cycles.

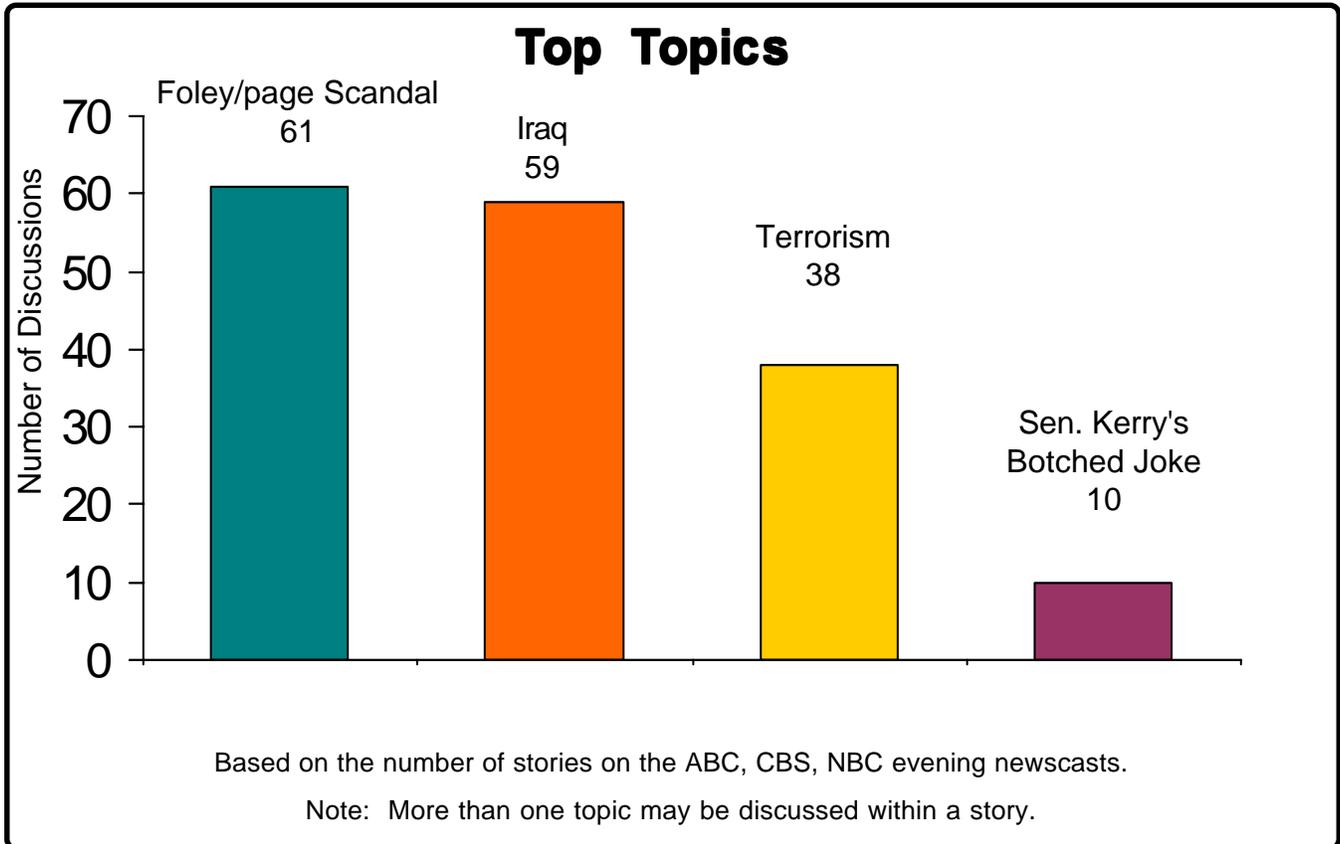
Major Findings:

- ***The Biggest Story** The 2006 elections attracted as much coverage as their counterparts in 2002, 1998, and 1990 *combined*. *Page 2*
- ***The Biggest News?** The Mark Foley/Congressional page got more coverage than the Iraq war or international terrorism. *Page 3*
- ***Paging Mr. Hastert...** House Speaker Dennis Hastert's handling of the Foley scandal made Hastert by far the most visible member of Congress. *Page 4*
- ***Which Election Is It, Anyway?** The most visible senators — Kerry and Obama — weren't running for anything this year. *Page 4*
- ***Media Landslide** The Democrats got 2 to 1 positive coverage; the GOP's coverage was 4 to 1 negative. *Page 5*
- ***Republican Referendum** Republican candidates were evaluated twice as often as Democratic candidates. *Page 5*

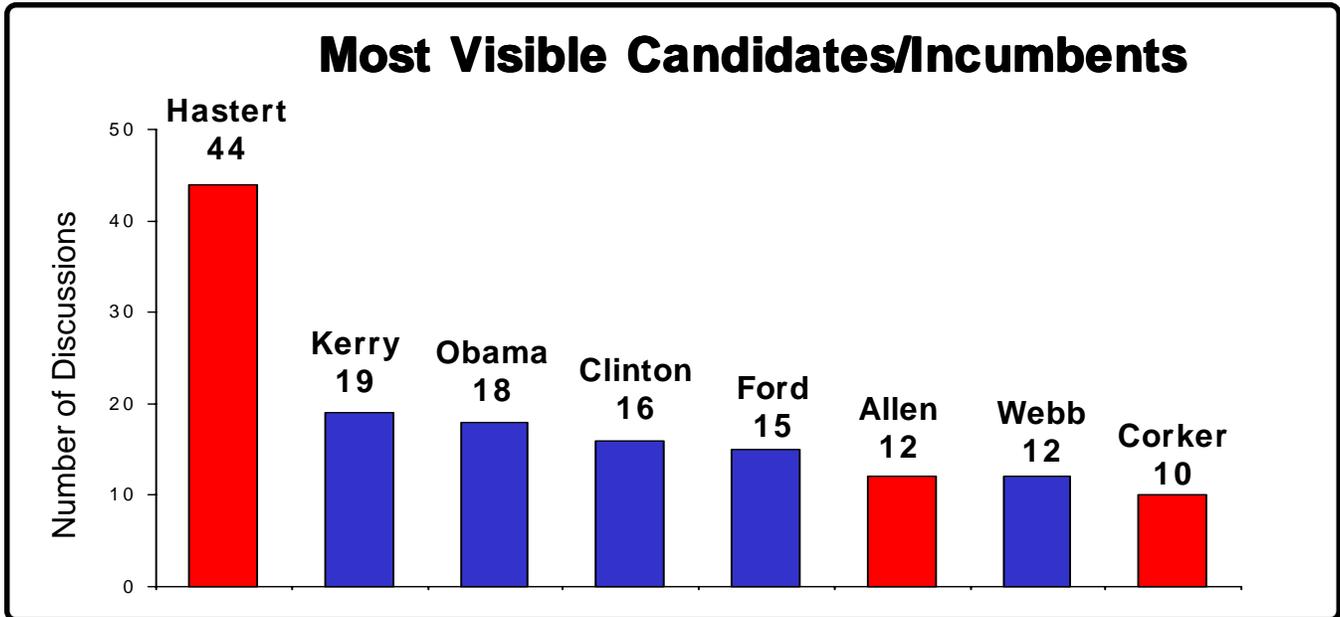


The network evening news shows devoted 271 stories to the 2006 midterm elections, the most we have logged in five such elections since 1990. Not only was the coverage more than twice as heavy as in the previous midterm elections (118 stories), it equaled the combined totals for 2002, 1998, and 1990. The only other midterm cycle to garner comparable attention was the “Republican Revolution” election of 1994 (268 stories).

The three networks were nearly identical in the amount of coverage they devoted to the election, with ABC slightly behind CBS and NBC. There has been then no consistent pattern in the three networks’ respective coverage over the years; each has aired the most stories in at least one midterm election campaign.



Only three topics received more than sporadic coverage, and scandal news was more prominent than any policy issue. The Mark Foley/Congressional page scandal led this year's election coverage (61 stories, including only those stories about Foley that also dealt with the elections). The war in Iraq was a close second with 59 stories. Finally, methods of how to defeat terrorism were debated in 38 stories. The only other issue to garner at least 10 discussions was the controversy over Sen. John Kerry's comments to college students about avoiding being "stuck in Iraq." This was criticized as an insult to American troops in Iraq and explained by the senator as a botched joke.



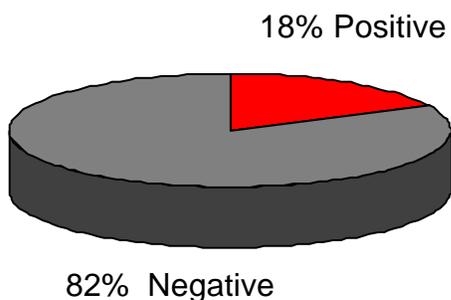
The paucity of issue coverage was also evident in the races the networks covered. The coverage focused less on candidates' policies and promises than on their personal behavior and presidential prospects. The most visible candidates either engaged in controversial behavior or were seen as possible candidates for the presidency in 2008.

Due to extensive coverage of the Mark Foley scandal, House Dennis Hastert (R-IL) was discussed in 44 stories, more than twice as many as any other candidate or member of Congress. The second and third most frequently discussed members of Congress weren't even seeking reelection. John Kerry's coverage mainly dealt with his self-described botched joke and its impact on his political future. Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) and Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY) were covered mainly from the standpoint of their possible presidential candidacies in 2008.

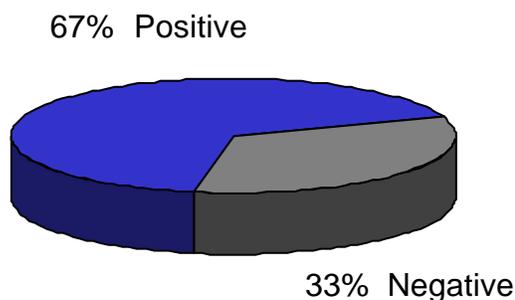
Other highly visible candidates included Reps. Harold Ford (D-TN) and Bob Corker (R-TN), whose Senate race was dominated by a GOP attack ad that critics perceived as racist. The only other two candidates to appear in 10 or more stories were Sen. George Allen (R-VA) and his opponent Jim Webb, whose prominence stemmed from Allen's verbal gaffs. (Note: More than one candidate may be discussed in a story.)

Tone of Coverage

Congressional Republicans and Candidates
n=93



Congressional Democrats and Candidates
n=46



*Based on the number of evaluations by nonpartisan sources on the ABC, CBS, NBC evening newscasts.

Two out of every three on-air evaluations of Democratic candidates and members of Congress were favorable during the general election campaign between Labor Day and Election Day (67% positive v. 33% negative). By contrast more than four out of five assessments of their Republican counterparts were unfavorable (18% positive v. 82% negative). Republicans were also evaluated twice as frequently as Democrats (93 to 46 times respectively.)

**Note: Our analysis excludes the candidates, their staffs, and party officials. Research shows that nonpartisan sources have greater credibility with voters, and reporters have greater discretion in selecting them.*

Examples

Positive evaluation of Democrats:

I'm gonna vote a lot more Democrat than I have in a long time.
Trina Handler (Ohio voter), ABC, 11/6/2006

Negative evaluations of Republicans:

I voted Republican nearly all my life. I'm very conservative, I'm still conservative. My hope is that the Democrats win the House. *Col. Van Riper, USMC (Ret.), CBS 9/7/2006*

Criticism of Ryun and other Republicans involves what is seen as what is a too close for comfort relationship with the religious right. *Dean Reynolds, ABC, 11/6/2006*

I think we need to get more morals in there [GOP controlled Congress], all the way around. *Voter (female), ABC, 10/30/2006*



The Democratic Counter-Revolution

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