

Covering Bush -- the Same Old Story

How the TV Networks Have Portrayed President Bush

How did network news cover President George W. Bush this year, as his poll ratings fell? And how did the coverage differ from other times during his presidency? This issue of *Media Monitor* reports how President Bush and his policies were depicted by the three broadcast network evening newscasts during March and April 2006.

Major Findings:

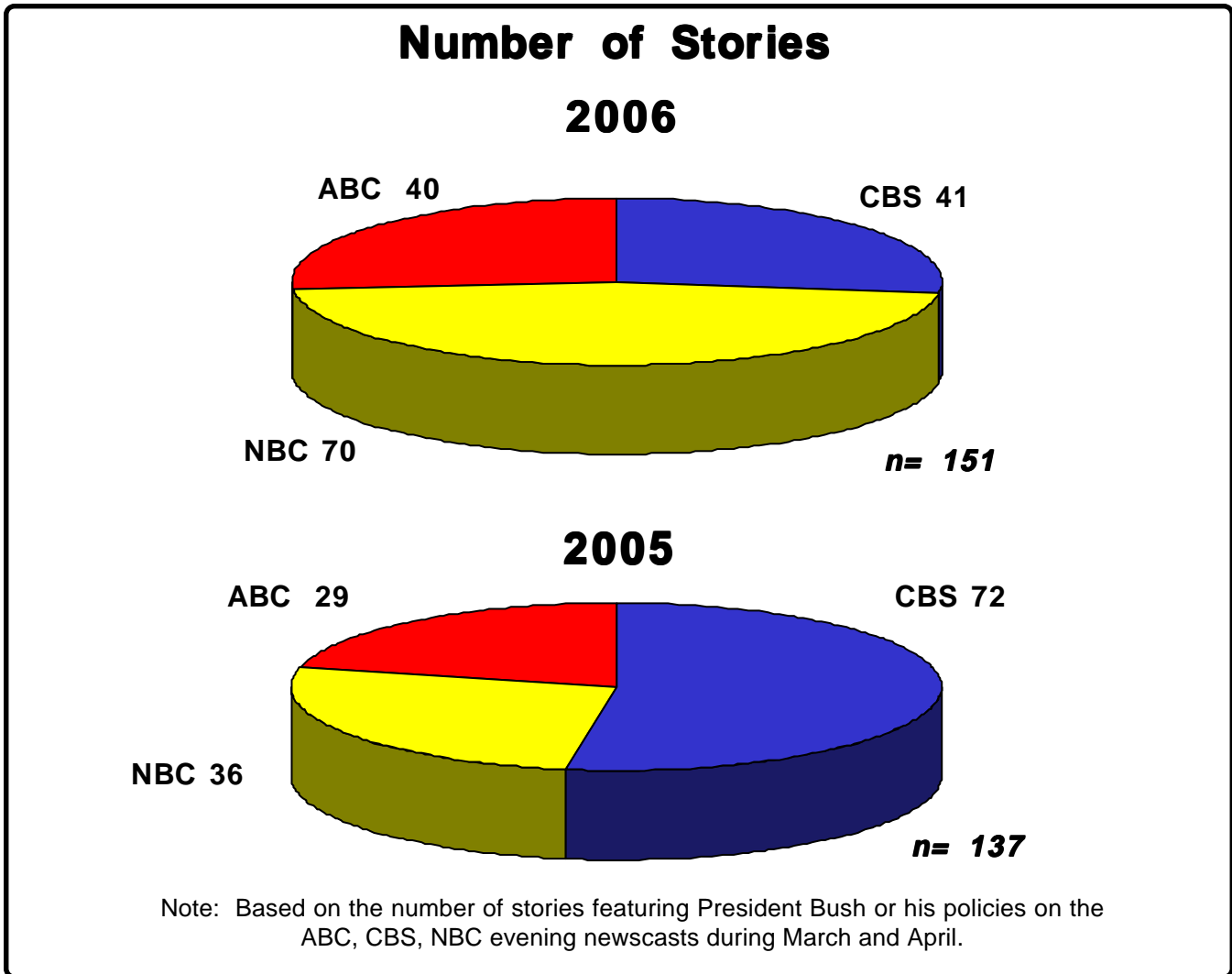
***From Bad...** Bush's coverage was 3 to 1 negative this spring. *Page 4*

***To Worse...** But it was even worse in 2005. *Page 5*

***Been Down So Long...** His only period of good press came in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. *Page 5*

***Big Story** Iraq got three times as much coverage in 2006 as any other issue. *Page 3*

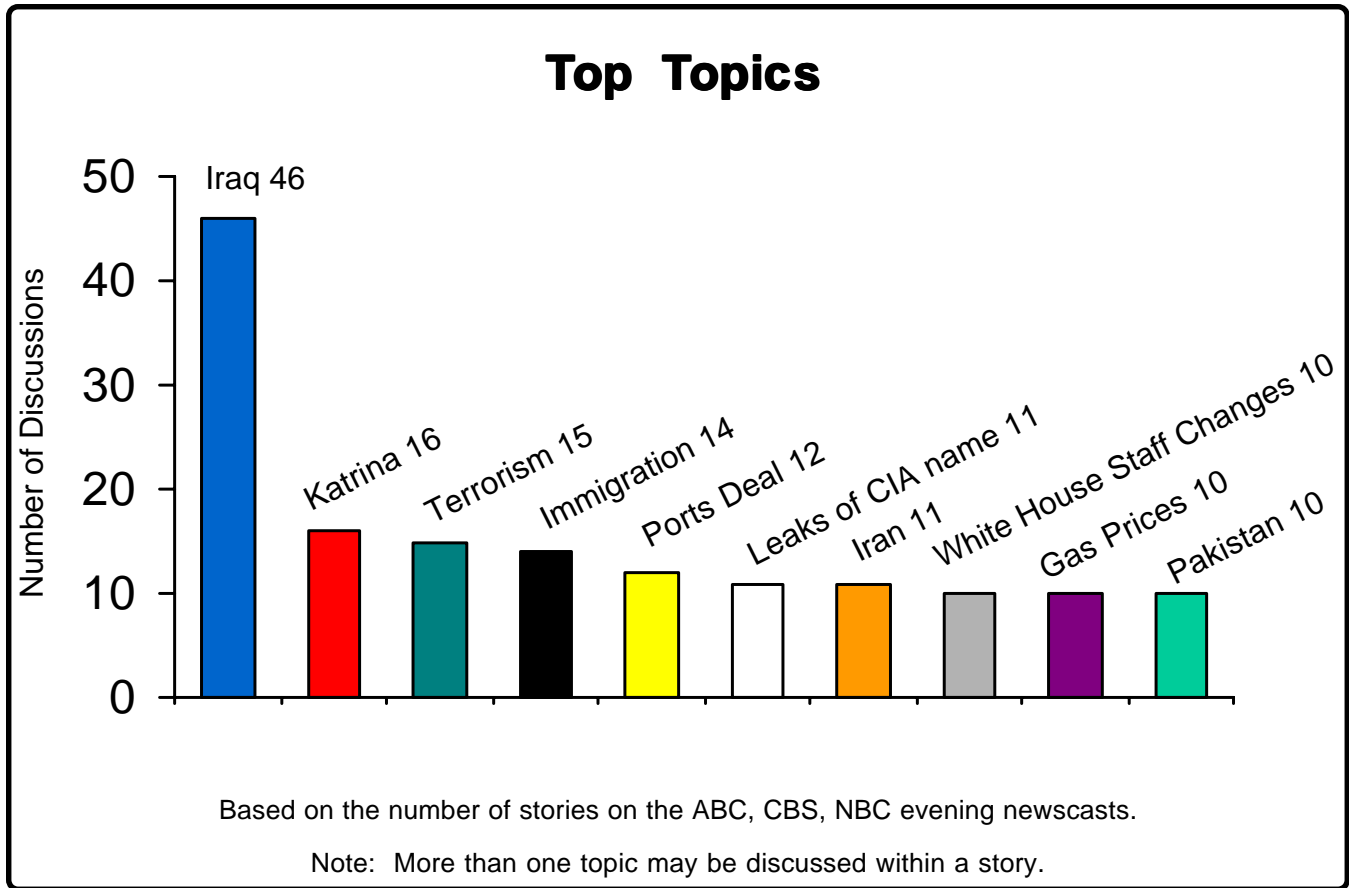
***Little Notice** The amount of coverage was light in both 2005 and 2006. *Page 2*



During March and April, the three nightly newscasts aired 151 stories about President W Bush and his policies. This represents a 20 percent decrease from the same time period in 2005. The average number of stories per night increased from only 1.25 in 2005 to 1.5 per night in 2006.

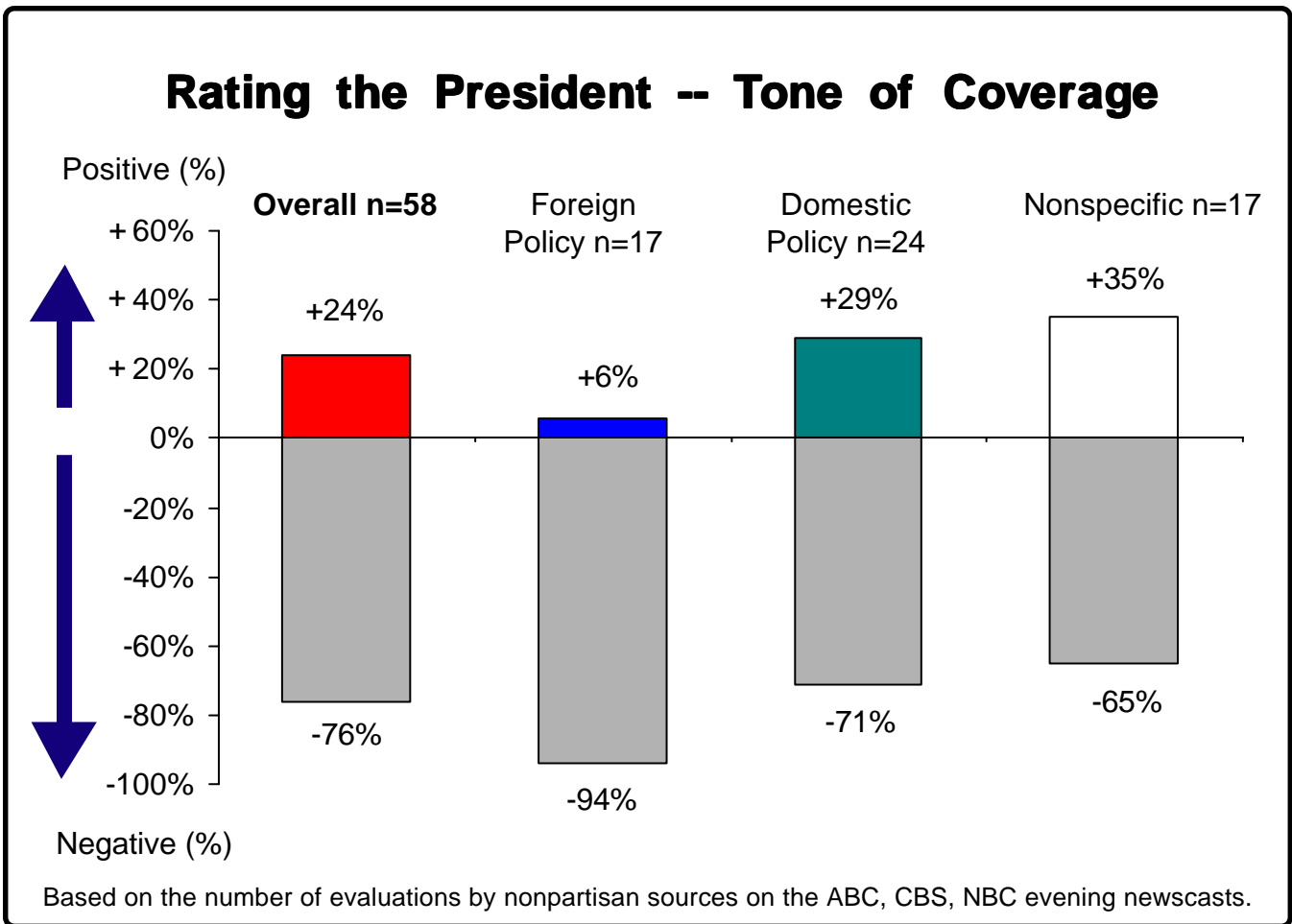
Historically, this amount of presidential coverage is lighter than normal. By contrast, there were 3.7 presidential stories per night in the same two months of 2001, Mr. Bush's first year in office.

The amount of coverage remained about the same on ABC, but on CBS and NBC there were drastic changes. Coverage on CBS decreased by 75 percent from last year, from 72 stories in 2005 to 41 stories in 2006. Conversely, coverage on NBC nearly doubled, from 36 stories in 2005 to 70 in 2006.



Iraq attracted the most attention during the two months we examined the coverage of Mr. Bush and his policies (46 stories). No other single topic came close, as Iraq received nearly three times as much coverage as any other issue. During this time period, tapes of preparation for disaster relief for Katrina damage came to light. Discussions of the president's role in this were covered in 16 stories. Mr. Bush's handling of terrorism and immigration policy followed close behind with 15 and 14 discussions respectively.

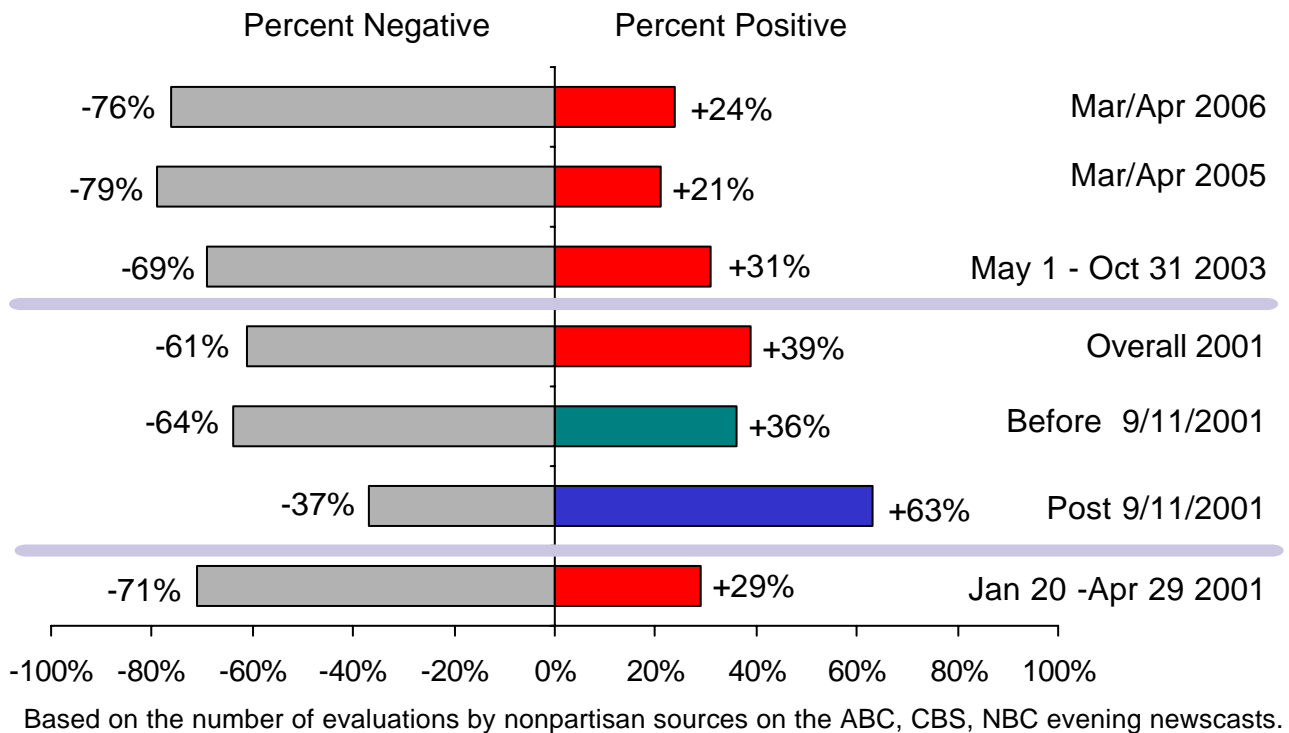
The focus on Iraq illustrates a decline in the president's ability to set the news agenda. A year earlier the presidential news was dominated by Mr. Bush's stated effort to use his political capital to reform the Social Security program. In March and April of 2005, there was over ten times as much coverage of the Social Security issue as there was of any other topic.



Evaluations of George W. Bush by nonpartisan sources* on the network nightly news during March and April were negative by a three to one margin. Only one nonpartisan source offered a positive assessment of Mr. Bush's foreign policy. The president fared better on domestic policy but still received negative ratings from seven out of ten sources.

**Note: Our analysis excludes sources who are identified as representing one of the political parties. Research shows that nonpartisan sources have greater credibility with voters, and reporters have greater discretion in selecting them.*

Coverage of President Bush Over Time



Among nonpartisan sources, evaluations of President Bush have usually been negative, with the exception of the months immediately following the attacks of September 11, 2001. In all other periods we have examined, in 2001, 2003, 2005 and 2006, the extent of media negativity toward his presidency was only a matter of degree.

Examples:

Many people mistrust his policies and think, rather than embracing Europe's way of thinking, he wants Europe to embrace his. [John Roberts, CBS, 2/23/05](#)

I'm in the working world, trying to make a living. Seems like he's [Bush] screwing it all up. [Georgia, reacting to State of the Union Address, NBC, 2/3/05](#)

In 100 days in office, this president has assembled one of the worst records on the environment of any president in history. [environmentalist, ABC, 04/19/01](#)

People come in and they want to tell us they're proud of how President Bush is doing and that they're behind him. [small town shopkeeper, NBC, 11/19/01](#)

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E-mail: Mail@cmpa.com • **On the Web:** www.cmpa.com • Phone: 202-223-2942 • Fax: 202-872-4014

Editors:

Dr. S. Robert Lichter

Dr. Linda S. Lichter

Research Director:

Daniel Amundson

Political Studies Director:

Mary Carroll Willi

Production and Graphics:

Mary Carroll Willi

Director of Administration and Publications:

Keith Bundy

Media Director:

Matthew T. Felling

**Center for Media
and Public Affairs**
2100 L Street, N.W. Suite 300
Washington, D.C. 20037



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