

Campaign 2004 Final

How TV News Covered the General Election Campaign

How did television news cover the 2004 general election campaign? This report examines the 2004 election coverage from September 7 through November 1 on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows. In addition, we examine election coverage on the Fox News Channel "Special Report with Brit Hume." This study is based on CMPA's ongoing Election Watch collaboration with Media Tenor, an international media monitoring organization. We also update our tally of jokes about the candidates on the late-night TV talk shows.

Major Findings:

The Networks

John Kerry got the best press of any nominee CMPA has ever studied.
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Kerry's coverage was almost 60% positive; George W. Bush's was over 60% negative. *Page 3*

Campaign news airtime increased by one-third over 2000. *Page 2*

The coverage focused more on policy issues than the horse race. *Page 2*

Fox News

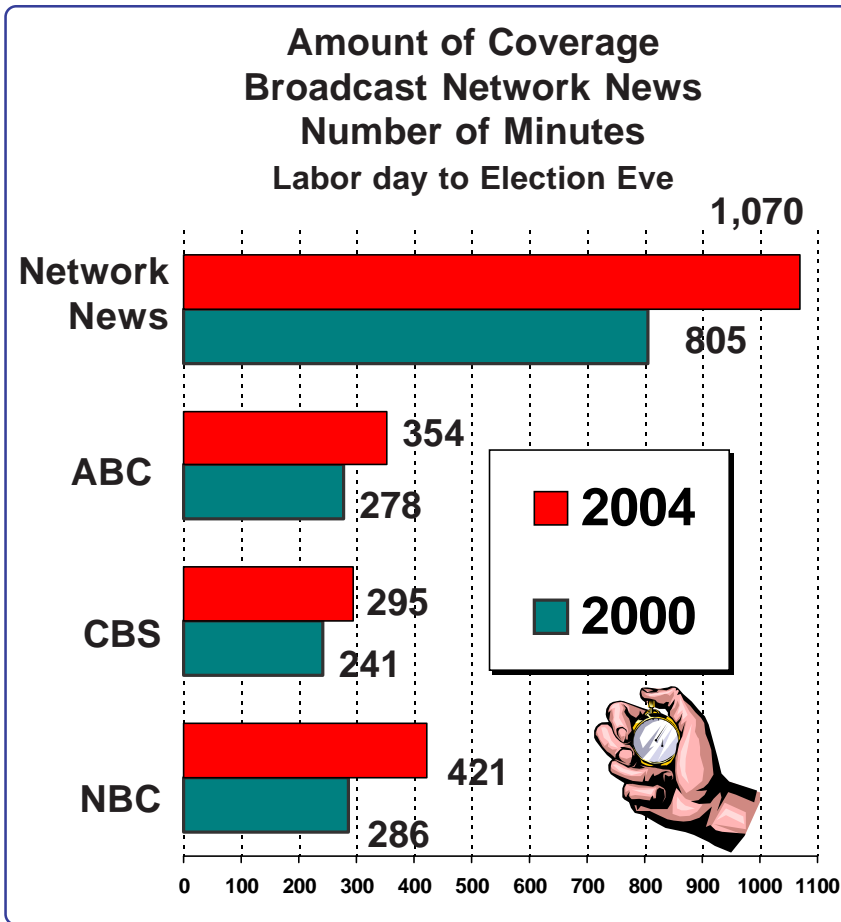
On Fox News Channel Kerry's coverage was 4 to 1 negative; Bush's coverage was balanced. *Page 5*

Political Humor

Bush was butt of nearly twice as many jokes as Kerry in monologues by late-night TV comedians. *Page 5*

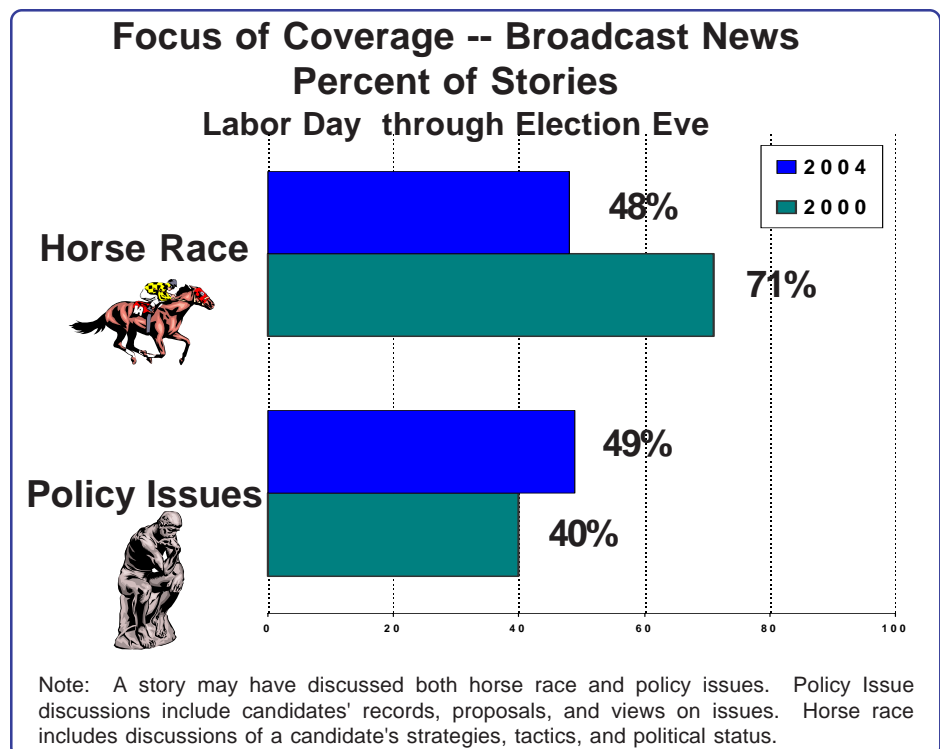
Post-Election Polls

More voters saw the media's coverage as unfair than in past elections.
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The amount of airtime devoted to the presidential election campaign increased 33 percent this year – 1,070 minutes vs. 805 minutes in 2000. The number of stories rose from 7.3 per night in 2000 to 9 per night in 2004.

The coverage was more substantive than it was in 2000, as 49 percent of stories covered substantive policy issues, compared to 48 percent that discussed the horse race and candidate strategies. In 2000, 71 percent of stories featured strategy and horse race coverage vs. 40 percent substantive coverage.



During the 2004 general election campaign, the networks aired 936 evaluations of the candidates' foreign policies, over 20 times as much foreign policy debate as they aired in 2000. Among domestic issues, the debate over the economy increased while debate over Social Security, education, and energy and the environment decreased in 2004.

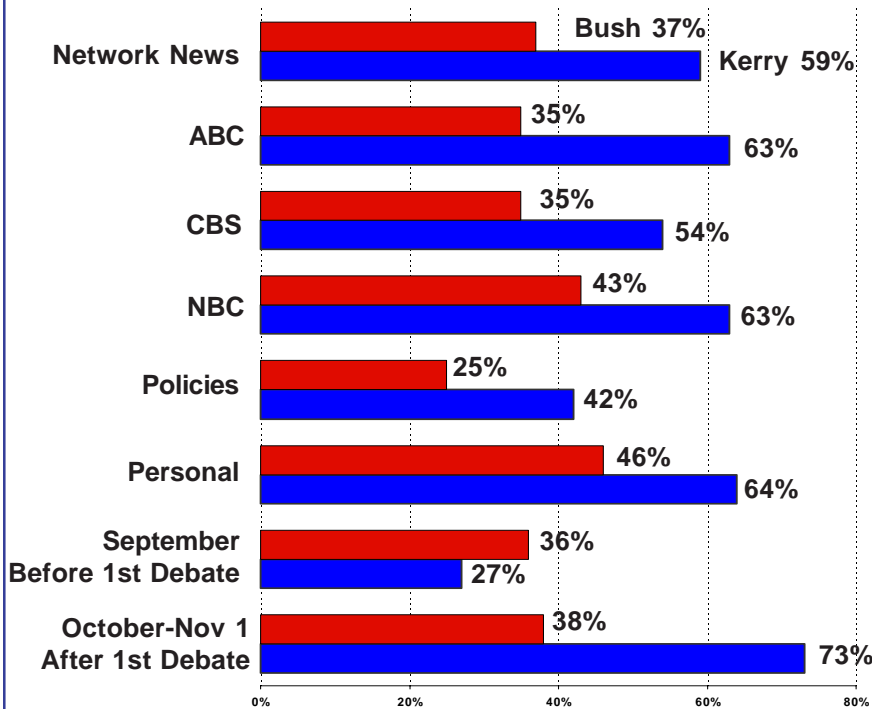
Leading Topics of Debate

Broadcast News --Number of Evaluations

Top Policy Topics	2004	2000
All Foreign Policy	936	41
<i>Iraq</i>	504	0
<i>Terrorism</i>	223	0
All Domestic Policy	877	709
<i>Economy</i>	374	215
<i>Health Care</i>	128	131
<i>Social Security</i>	46	100
<i>Education</i>	28	80
<i>Energy and Environment</i>	19	64
<i>Gun Control</i>	23	28
Leading Campaign Trail Topics		
<i>Leadership</i>	283	*
<i>Flip-flopping</i>	124	*
<i>Military Record</i>	83	*

* fewer than 10 evaluations on that topic.

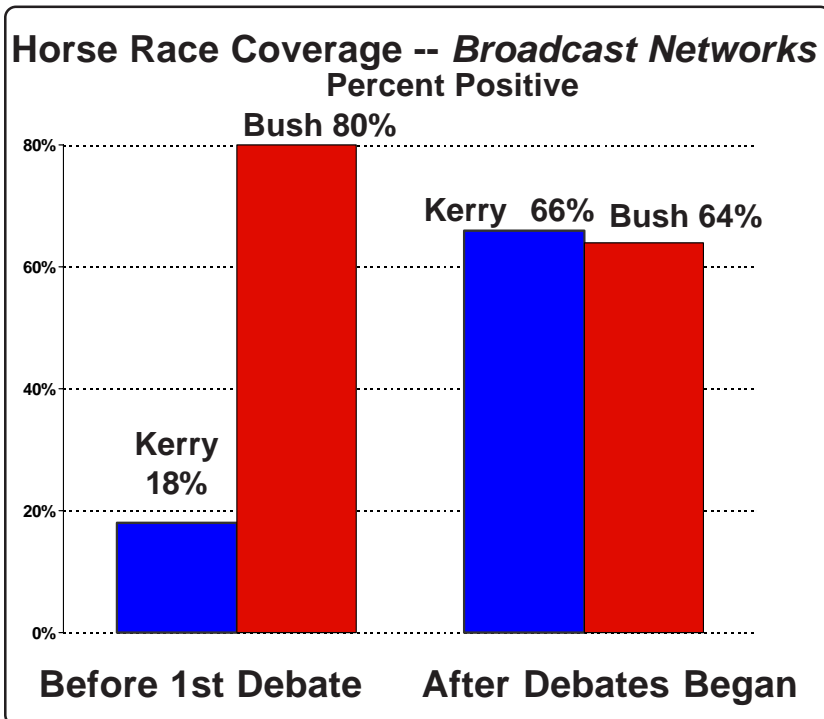
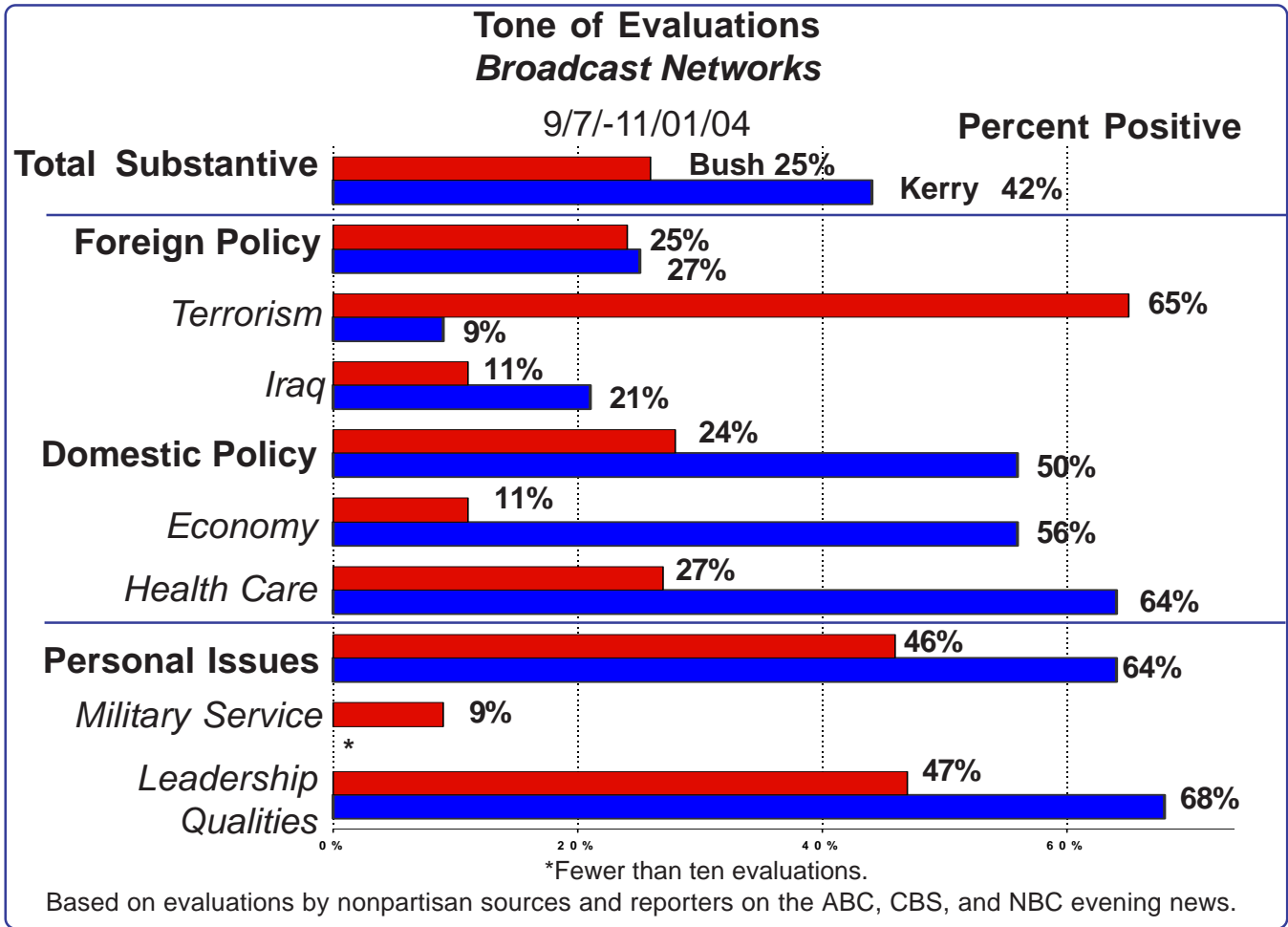
Percent Positive Evaluations Broadcast Network News (9/7-11/01/04)



Based on evaluations by nonpartisan sources and reporters on the ABC, CBS, NBC evening news.

Evaluations by nonpartisan sources* favored John Kerry on all three broadcast evening newscasts. In fact, Kerry received the most positive press of any candidate since CMPA began monitoring election coverage in 1988. (see page 5 for comparisons over time).

**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.*



When discussing the horse race -- the political status or strength of the candidates or the likely outcome of the race -- 65 percent of Bush's on-air assessments were favorable, as were 55 percent of Kerry's. Before the debates, most on-air assessments favored Bush. After the first debate, sources rated both men about equally favorably.

Timeline at a Glance

General Election News: 1988 -- 2004

	2004	2000	1996	1992	1988
Amount of Coverage					
Number of Minutes	1,007	805	788	1,400	1,116
Number of stories	504	462	483	728	589
Average Number of Stories per Day	9	7.3	7.7	11.5	10.5
Average Sound Bite (seconds)	7.8	7.8	8.2	8.4	9.8
Focus of Coverage					
(Percent of Stories)					
Horse Race	48%	71%	48%	58%	58%
Policy Issues	49%	40%	37%	32%	39%
Tone of Coverage*					
(Percent Good Press)					
Democratic Nominee	59%	40%	50%	52%	31%
Republican Nominee	37%	37%	33%	29%	38%

*Based on evaluations by nonpartisan sources in election stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts.

SAMPLE EVALUATIONS

Mr. Bush ignored all the questions swirling around his own time in the Guard three decades ago. And instead, simply wrapped himself in the Guard's traditional service.

Terry Moran, ABC, 9/14/2004, Negative toward Bush

There were times [during the first debate] when both men exaggerated, oversimplified or simply got it wrong.

Byron Pitts, CBS, 10/01/2004, Negative toward both Bush and Kerry

The Bush campaign claims ten million more Americans would get coverage under their plan. But most experts say the number is far smaller, closer to six million, hardly a dent in the problem.

Terry Moran, ABC, 9/13/2004, Negative toward Bush

I do believe he [Bush] will send us on that journey to keep us safer, more so than his opponent.

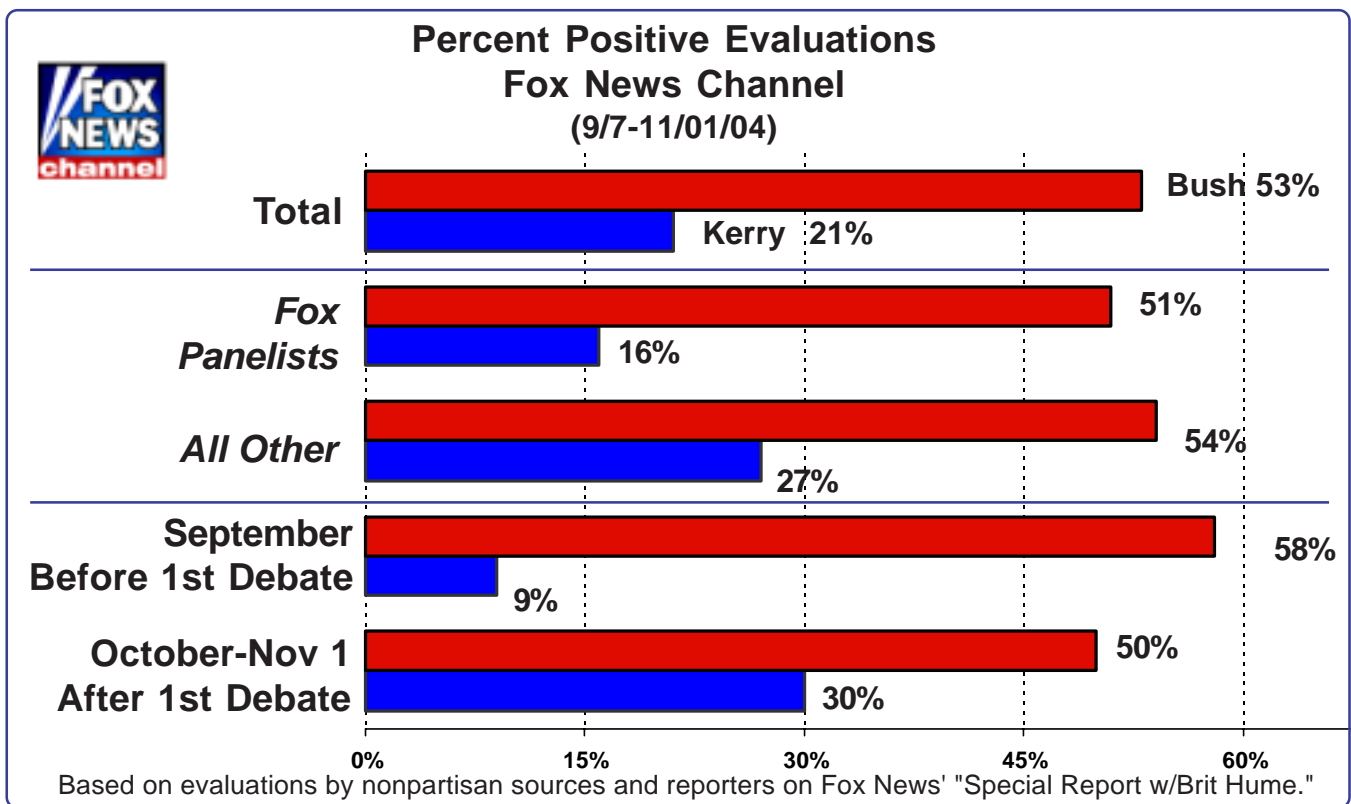
Liz Brasher, voter, NBC, 9/28/2004, Positive toward Bush

He's sharper, more precise, a light bulb seems to have switched on: That less is often more.

Jim Axelrod, CBS, 10/04/2004, Positive toward Kerry

The Fox Difference

According to the Pew Research Center's post-election survey, 21 percent of those who said TV was their main information source indicated that most of their news came from Fox. By comparison, 15 percent listed CNN, 13 percent NBC, eleven percent ABC, and nine percent CBS. In contrast to the broadcast networks, the Fox News Channel gave Bush more evenly balanced press than Kerry. Panelists appearing on "Special Report" were much more negative towards Kerry than were other nonpartisan sources.



SAMPLE EVALUATIONS

The foreign leaders John Kerry doesn't show respect for... are those one who stand aligned with the United States... people want their president to be somebody who's rooting for America and for America's allies, and is not criticizing America's allies and treating them with contempt.

Michael Barone, 9/23/2004, Negative toward Kerry

A president shouldn't leap to politically motivated conclusions. But...John Kerry [is] doing exactly what he accused George Bush of doing.

Mort Kondracke, 10/28/04, Negative toward Kerry

I'm proud to be on the team... that's going to get George Bush re-elected.

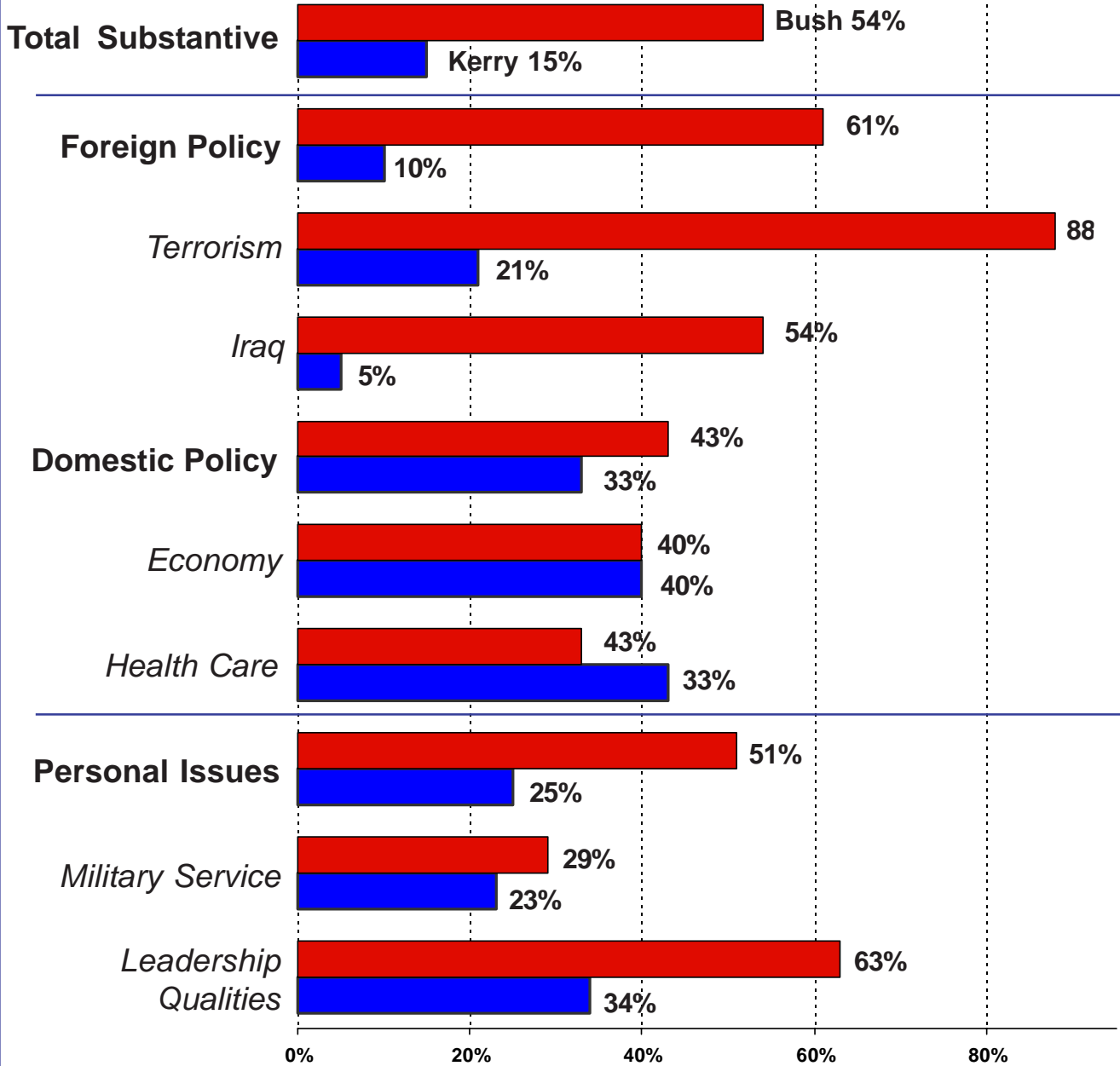
Curt Schilling, Boston Red Sox, 11/1/04, Positive toward Bush



**Tone of Evaluations by Subject
Fox News Channel**

9/7/-11/01/04

Percent Positive



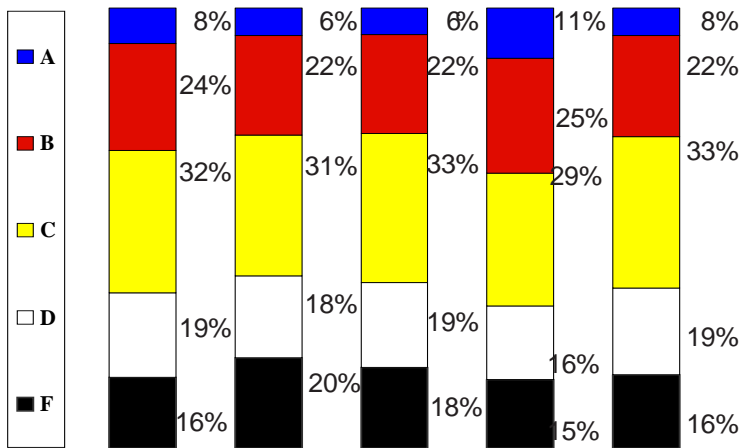
Based on evaluations by nonpartisan sources and reporters on Fox News' "Special Report w/Brit Hume."

On Fox News Channel nonpartisan sources gave Bush's policies about four times as much praise as Kerry (54% to 15% positive). On foreign policy, the difference was even greater (61% positive for Bush to only 10% for Kerry.) On domestic policy however, the proportion of positive press was only slightly higher for Bush.

Grading Election News

(Percent Who Gave the Media Each Grade)

2004 **2000** **1996** **1992** **1988**
GPA 1.9 **1.7** **1.8** **2.0** **1.9**



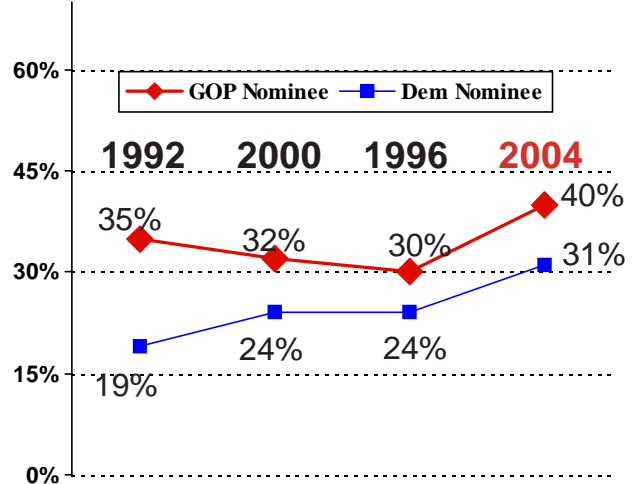
Note: National surveys by Times Mirror Center in Nov. 1988 and 1992; 1996, 2000, and 2004 by Pew Research Center. Excludes "don't know" responses.

Voters' opinions of the media have not changed much over the years, according to the Pew Research Center's post-election surveys. While voters gave the media slightly higher grades than in the past two presidential campaign cycles, they continued to rate the media below political parties, the candidates, the campaign consultants, and even talk show hosts.

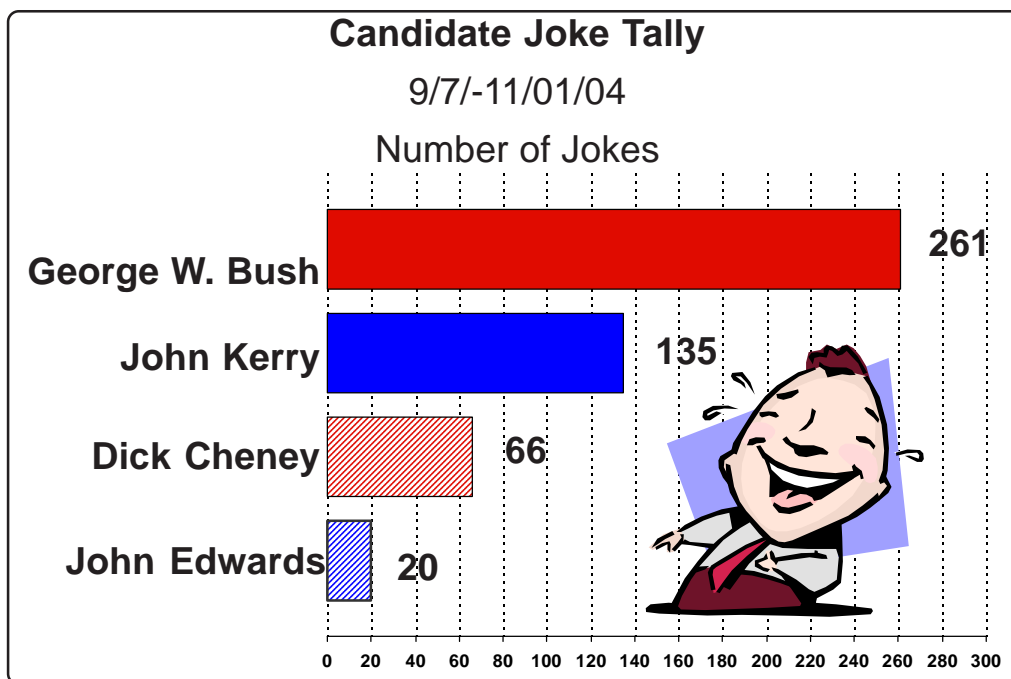
In contrast to the slightly improved overall grades they gave the press, voters rated the media's treatment of both candidates as less fair than they did in years past – 40 percent saw the media as unfair to Bush, and 31 percent as unfair to Kerry.

Rating the Fairness of the Press

(Percent Who See the Press as Unfair)



(Source: Pew Research Center post-election surveys.)



A Pew Research Center survey conducted in January 2004 found that 28 percent of Americans, including nearly half of those under age 30, learned about the presidential campaign from late night TV comedians. George W. Bush led the late-night joke tally during the general election campaign with 261 jokes, nearly double the number aimed John Kerry (135 jokes).

Examples of Late Night Political Humor

According to the latest poll, if the election were held today, the Supreme Court would re-elect Bush 7-2. *Jay Leno, 9/06/04*

No Republican has ever won the White House without winning Ohio. Of course, before Bush, no Republican ever won the White House without winning the election. *Jay Leno, 9/06/04*

In an interview, former First Lady Barbara Bush says she tries to avoid news coverage of world events. So apparently, it's hereditary. *Jay Leno, 9/06/04*

A woman that was caught trying to pass a counterfeit \$200 bill that had a picture of George Bush on it. Turns out there's also a John Kerry bill. Pretty realistic. He's on both sides. *Jay Leno, 9/06/04*

Today, John Kerry vowed to tell the truth if he's elected president. ... That's when you know a candidate is really desperate. *Jay Leno, 9/06/04*

The anesthesiologist said they had a little problem using the gas on Bill Clinton. They couldn't get him to inhale. Luckily, John Kerry called, spoke to him for ten minutes, he was out like a light. *Jay Leno, 9/06/04*

Today, Kerry campaigned in three states — anger, denial, and brooding indecision. *Jay Leno, 9/06/04*

At the debate, Bush appeared confident, he appeared relaxed, he appeared calm. That's right, he's drinking again. *David Letterman, 9/30/04*

Note: Joke texts may be altered slightly for brevity.

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