



Volume XVIII Number 5: September/October 2004

## Campaign 2004: The Summer

How the Media Covered the Presidential Campaign During Summer 2004

How did the media cover the presidential campaign during the summer? This report examines the 2004 election coverage from June 1 through September 2 on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows and in Time and Newsweek. In addition, we examine election coverage on the Fox News Channel "Special Report with Brit Hume" from August 1 through September 2. This study is based on CMPA's ongoing Election Watch collaboration with Media Tenor. We also update our tally of jokes about the candidates on the late-night TV talk shows.

### ***Major Findings:***

#### ***The Networks and News Weeklies***

Evaluations of John Kerry were positive by a two-to-one margin, while evaluations of George W. Bush were about 60 percent negative.

Among non-partisan sources, Kerry's evaluations were almost three-to-one positive; Bush's were over two-to-one negative.

Among the broadcast networks, the gap between the candidates was largest on NBC; the coverage was most balanced on ABC.

Based on our previous studies of primary and general election coverage, Kerry has gotten the best press on network news of any presidential nominee since we began tracking election news in 1988.

The coverage has focused more on the candidates' policies and personal characteristics than on the campaign horse race.

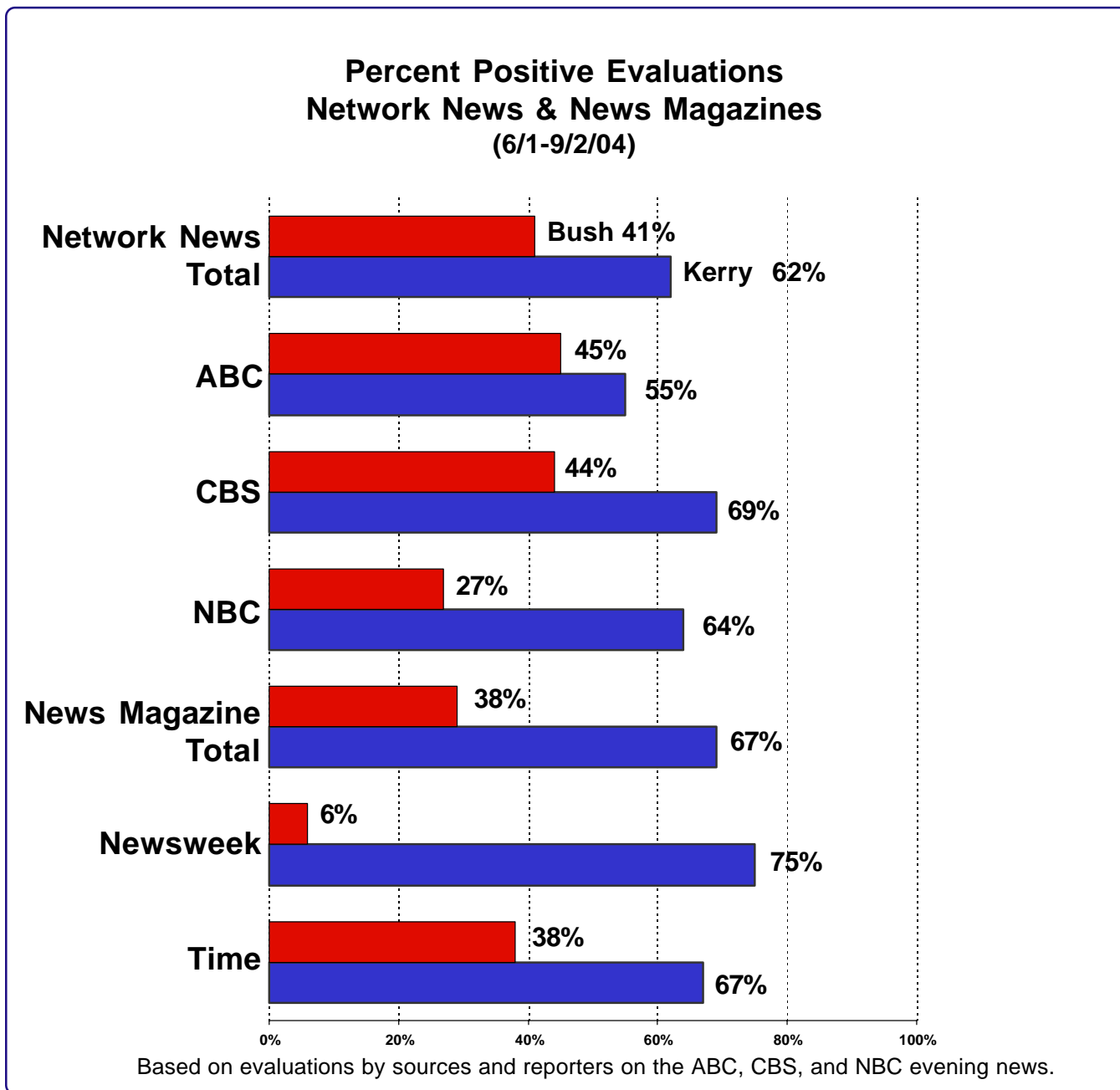
#### ***The Fox News Difference***

Fox News Channel was about as negative as the broadcast networks toward Bush, but Kerry's evaluations on Fox were negative by a five-to-one margin.

There was little difference in the evaluations of party- and campaign-based partisan sources; but Bush fared over four times as well as Kerry among non-partisan sources.

#### ***Political Humor***

George W. Bush has been the butt of over twice as many jokes as John Kerry this year.

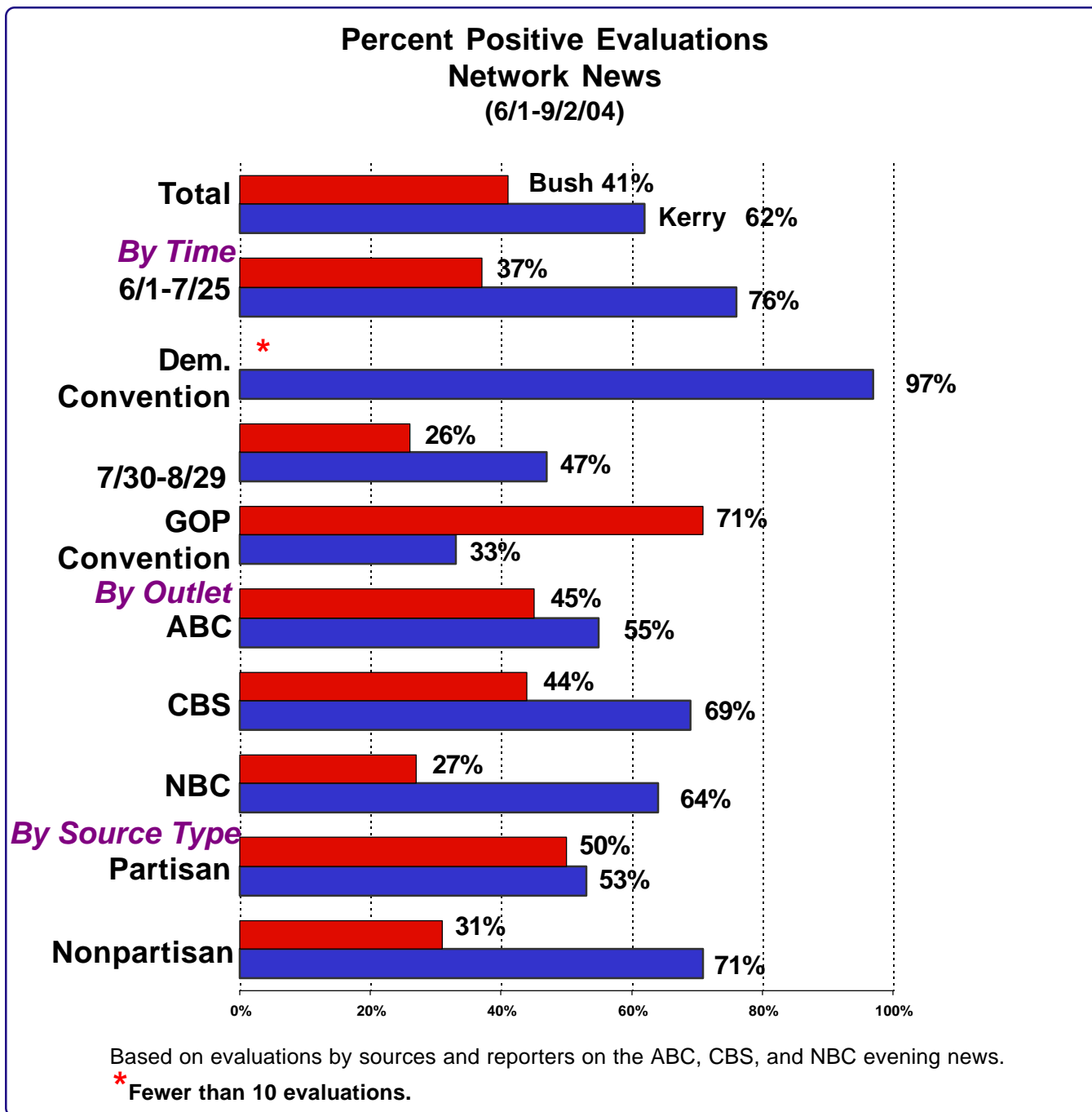


John Kerry received substantially better press than George W. Bush at every broadcast network and news magazine in the study. Among the networks, the gap between the candidates was largest on NBC; the coverage was most balanced on ABC.

*Examples:*

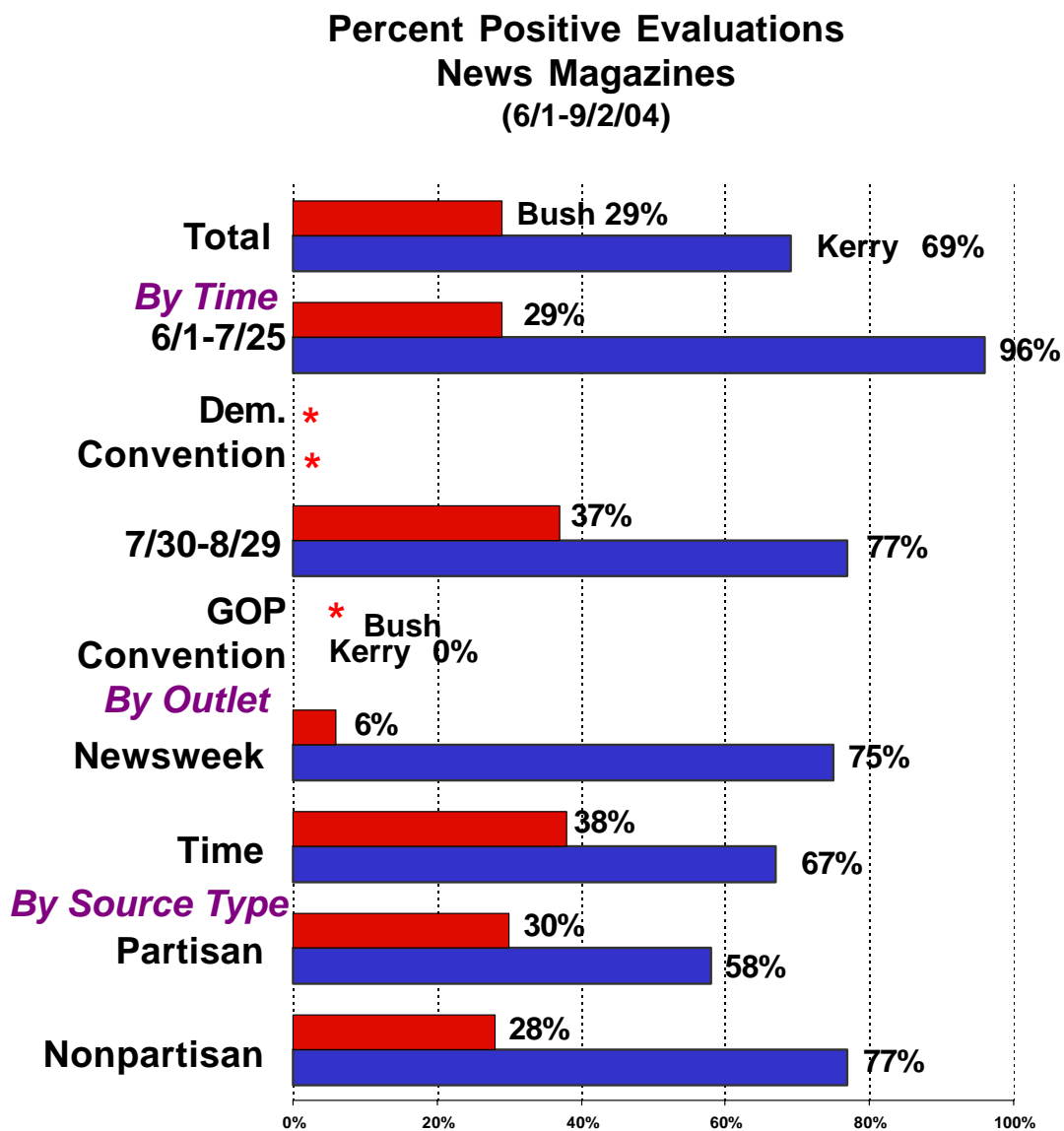
"I like what John Kerry's saying. I like the positive note that he is giving." *Voter, NBC, 7/30*

"My biggest concern with Bush is I don't think he makes his own decisions." *Voter, ABC, 8/2*



Kerry's proportion of good press on TV news declined in August, as the Swift Boat ads took aim at his service in Vietnam and his anti-war activities after returning. But he still fared far better than Bush during August. Bush got better press than Kerry only during the GOP convention, which was also the only time he received a majority of positive evaluations.

Among non-partisan sources, Kerry's evaluations were almost three-to-one positive; Bush's were over two-to-one negative

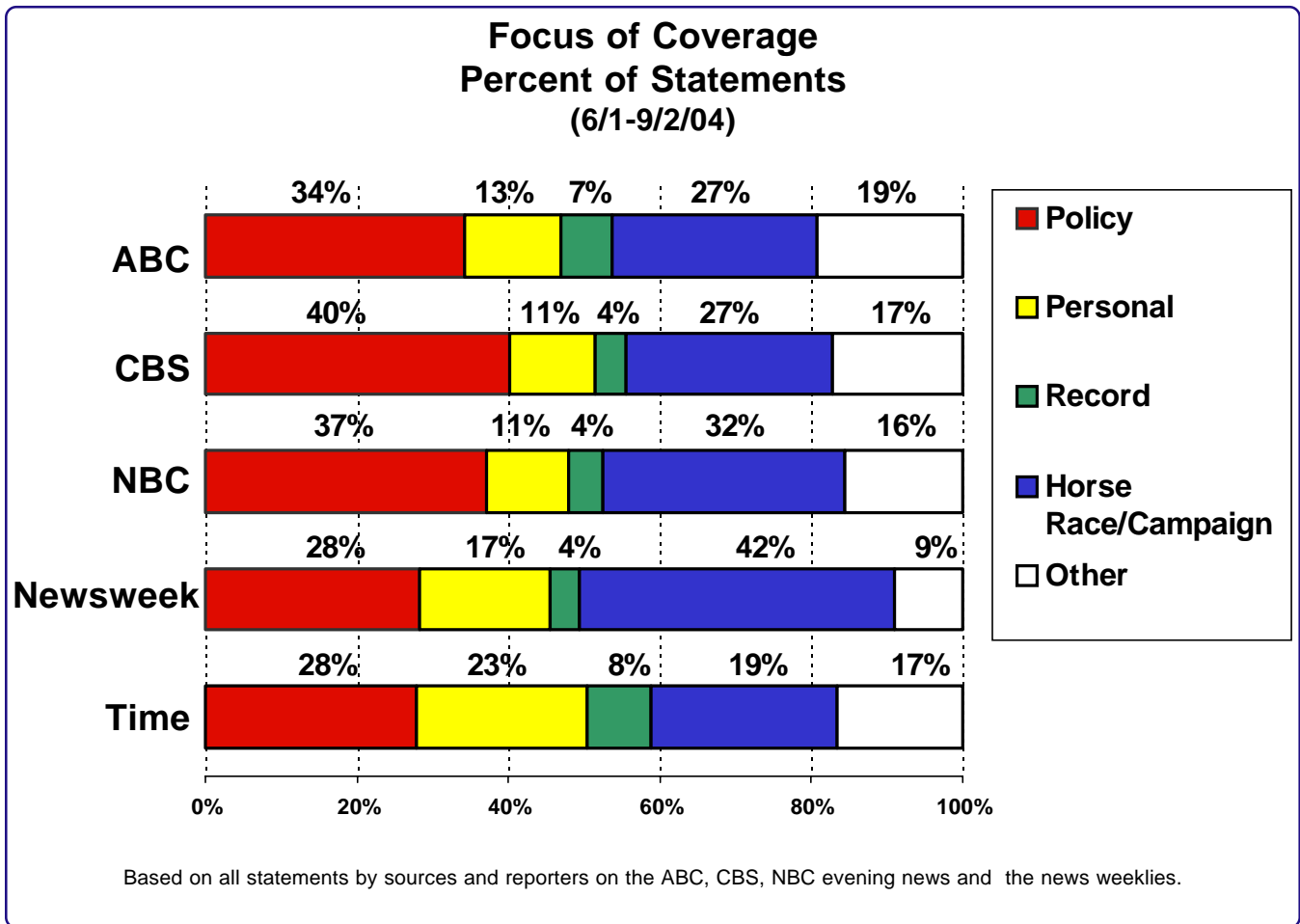


Based on evaluations by sources and reporters in Newsweek and Time.

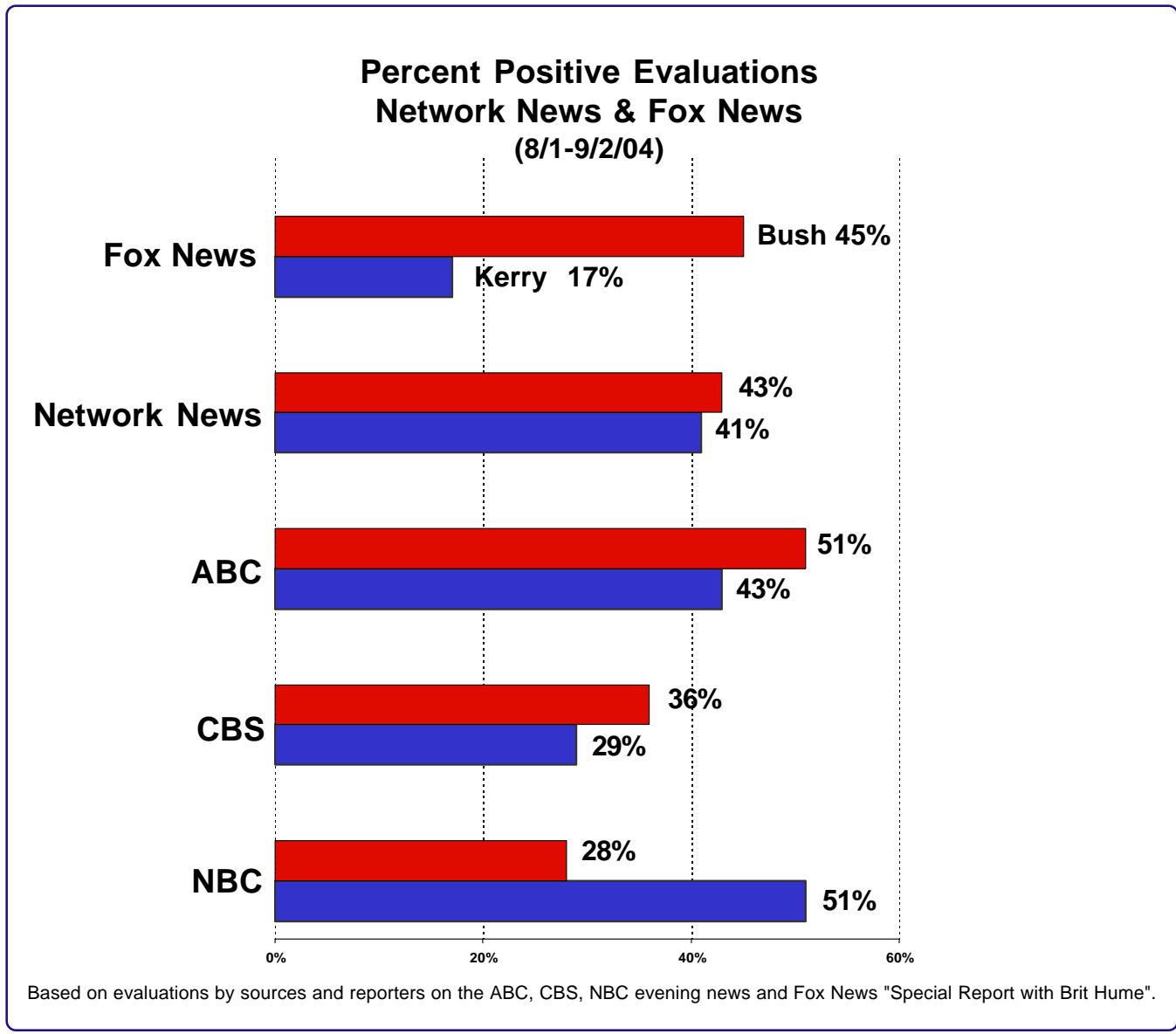
\* Fewer than 10 evaluations.

Kerry's lead over Bush in good press also declined slightly during August in the news magazines. Overall, Newsweek and Time treated Kerry about the same, but Newsweek was far more negative toward Bush.

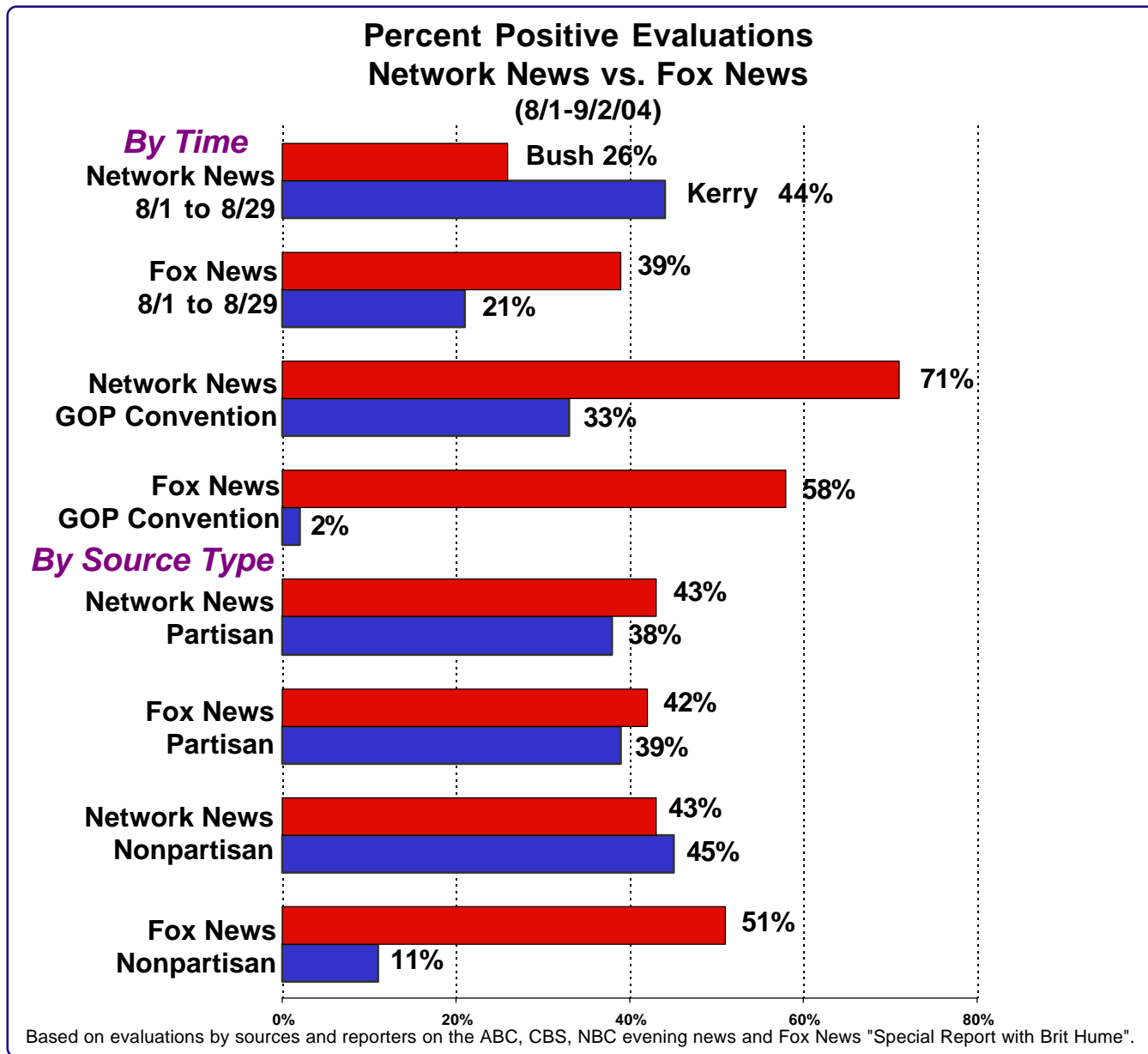
Among non-partisan sources, Kerry's evaluations were three-to-one positive; Bush's were over two-to-one negative



Critics have complained about the campaign's negativism and its focus on long-ago events rather than current issues. Nonetheless, reversing the trends of recent elections, all three networks carried more coverage of the candidates' policies than of the campaign horse race, including polls, predictions, strategies, and tactics etc.



For the period August 1 through September 2, we compared evening news shows on the broadcast networks with Fox News Channel. Fox was about as negative towards Bush as were the broadcast networks, but Kerry's evaluations were 83% negative on Fox, compared to 59% negative on the networks.

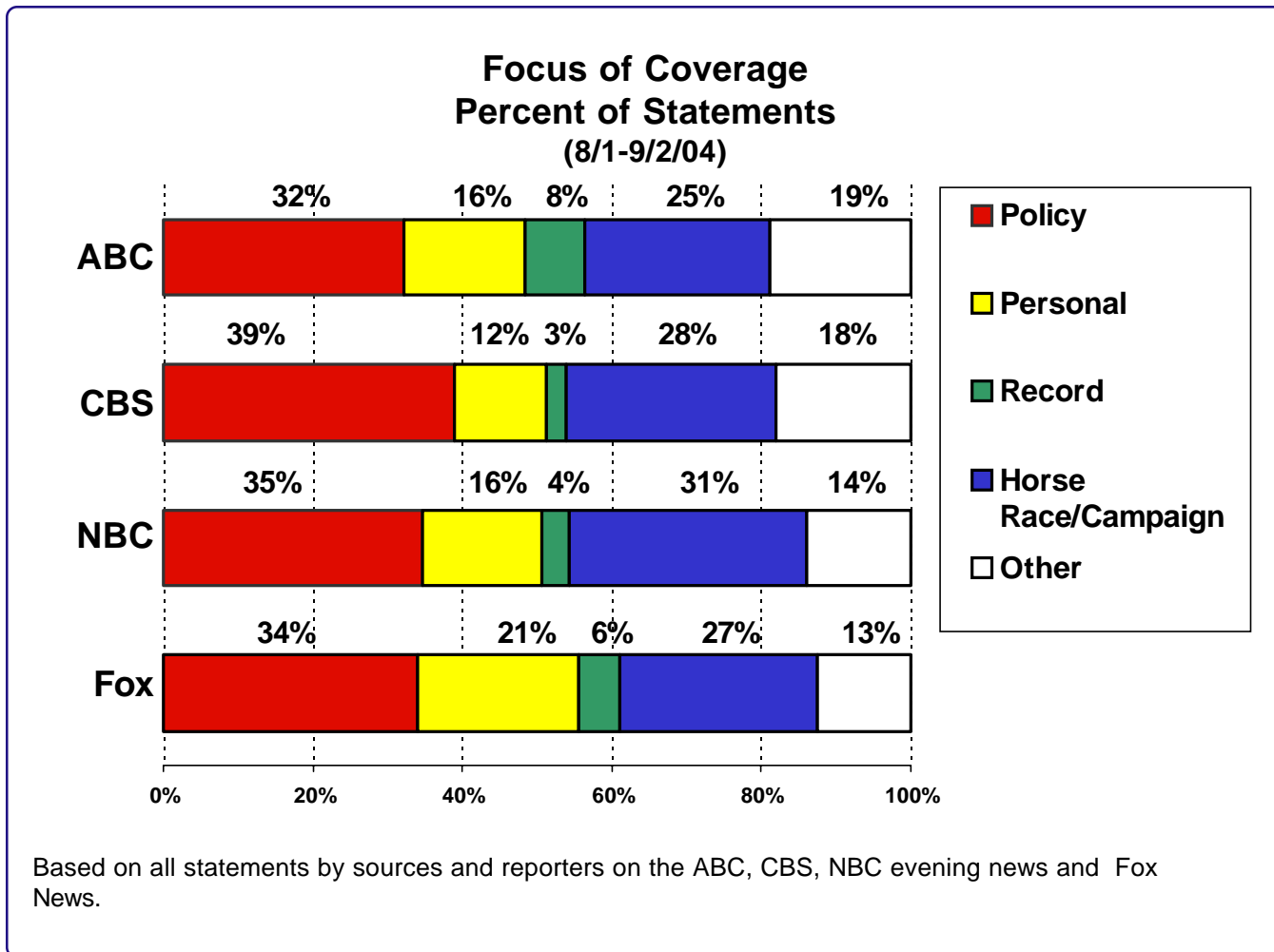


There was little difference between Fox and the networks in the evaluations of party- and campaign-based partisan sources. But Bush fared over four times as well as Kerry among non-partisan sources quoted on Fox. During the GOP convention, 98 percent of all evaluations of Kerry on Fox news were negative.

*Examples:*

"We need somebody who felt the sting of battle. Not someone who didn't even complete his tour stateside in the Guard." *Former Sen. Max Cleland (D-GA), Fox, 8/20*

"We believe based on our experience with him, that he [Kerry] is totally unfit to be the commander-in-chief." *John O'neill, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, Fox, 8/5*



Like the broadcast networks, Fox focused more on the candidates' policies than on the campaign horse race. The only distinctive aspect of Fox's topical focus was its attention to the candidates' personal characteristics, which was influenced by the debate over Sen. Kerry's Vietnam experience.



### Top Joke Targets

January 1 - August 24, 2004		June 1 - August 24, 2004	
	# of Jokes		# of Jokes
1. George W. Bush	778	1. George W. Bush	287
2. John Kerry	349	2. John Kerry	173
3. Bill Clinton	231	3. Bill Clinton	149
4. Dick Cheney	144	4. Dick Cheney	75
5. Martha Stewart	112	5. Martha Stewart	58
6. Howard Dean	92	6. John Edwards	56
7. John Edwards	82	7. Ralph Nader	33
8. Arnold Schwarzenegger	68	8. Teresa Heinz-Kerry	25
9. Michael Jackson	66	8. Arnold Schwarzenegger	25
10. Ralph Nader	52	10. Tom Ridge	24
10. Dennis Kucinich	52		



Based on the number of jokes in the monologues of Jay Leno, David Letterman, Conan O'Brien and Jon Stewart.

George W. Bush leads the joke race, attracting more than twice the number of jokes by TV comedians than John Kerry since the beginning of the year. Sen. Kerry's wife made the top ten for the first time this summer, as the target of jokes about her controversial comments to reporters and her Heinz family connection.

### Examples of Jokes:

The U.S. Army is now offering cash bonuses to try and attract new recruits. Some recruits getting as much as \$15,000 extra. Today Bush said, "man, for that kind of money even I would have showed up for duty." *Jay Leno, 8/7*

President Bush is inviting Lance Armstrong to the White House. Not to congratulate him. To teach him how to ride a bike. *Jay Leno, 7/27*

Top 10 signs Bush Might Be Getting Ready To Dump Cheney  
2. As with all major decisions, he's asked Cheney to figure out the best way to terminate the Vice President. *David Letterman, 7/15*

John Kerry told Tom Ridge... he was too busy to have a briefing on homeland security. And I thought that was odd because you're not supposed to ignore terror threats until after you become president. *David Letterman, 7/12*

John and Teresa, or as they now call them, "Cash and Kerry." *Jay Leno, 8/11*

*more-*

***More Jokes:***

The Bush doctrine: "Holding regimes that harbor terrorists to account", a doctrine, of course, also carrying the Bush asterisk, which simply states: "Doctrine not valid in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria..." *Jon Stewart 6/17*

Yesterday, Vice President Dick Cheney said John Kerry lacks deeply held convictions. And Kerry shot back today, "Hey, that's not completely true." *Jay Leno, 8/13*

Can you imagine when Kerry and Bush debate? One guy can't make up his mind, the other can't speak his mind. *Jay Leno, 8/9*

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