



*Center for Media and Public Affairs*

**Election Newswatch**  
**Campaign 2004:**  
**The Media Agenda**  
**Part III—The General Election (September)**

A Project of  
the  
**Center for Media & Public Affairs**  
at



in co-operation with



## Summary Findings

This study examines 2004 presidential election coverage from September 7 to October 1, 2004 on ABC's "World News Tonight", CBS's "Evening News" and NBC's "Nightly News" as well as "Special Report with Brit Hume" on the Fox News Channel. This is part of Election NewsWatch 2004, a joint project of the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University and Media Tenor, an international media monitoring organization that conducted the coding on which this report is based.

\* More News – Network news campaign coverage in September was up 40% over 2000 – 199 stories vs. 141.

\* More Beef – The proportion of stories covering the campaign horse race dropped from 62% in 2000 to only 23% this year, a decline of 57%. Meanwhile, the proportion of stories dealing with policy issues rose from 50% in 2000 to 53% in 2004.

\* More Beefs – Both candidates are getting more negative coverage than their counterparts in 2000. Evaluations were only 38% positive toward Kerry and 29% positive toward Bush, compared to 48% positive toward Gore and 33% positive toward Bush in 2000.

\* Bite Size News – Candidate sound bites averaged under eight seconds in length.

\* More Differences – All three networks gave Kerry 38% positive evaluations. But ABC gave Bush only 20% positive, compared to 30% at NBC and 35% at CBS.

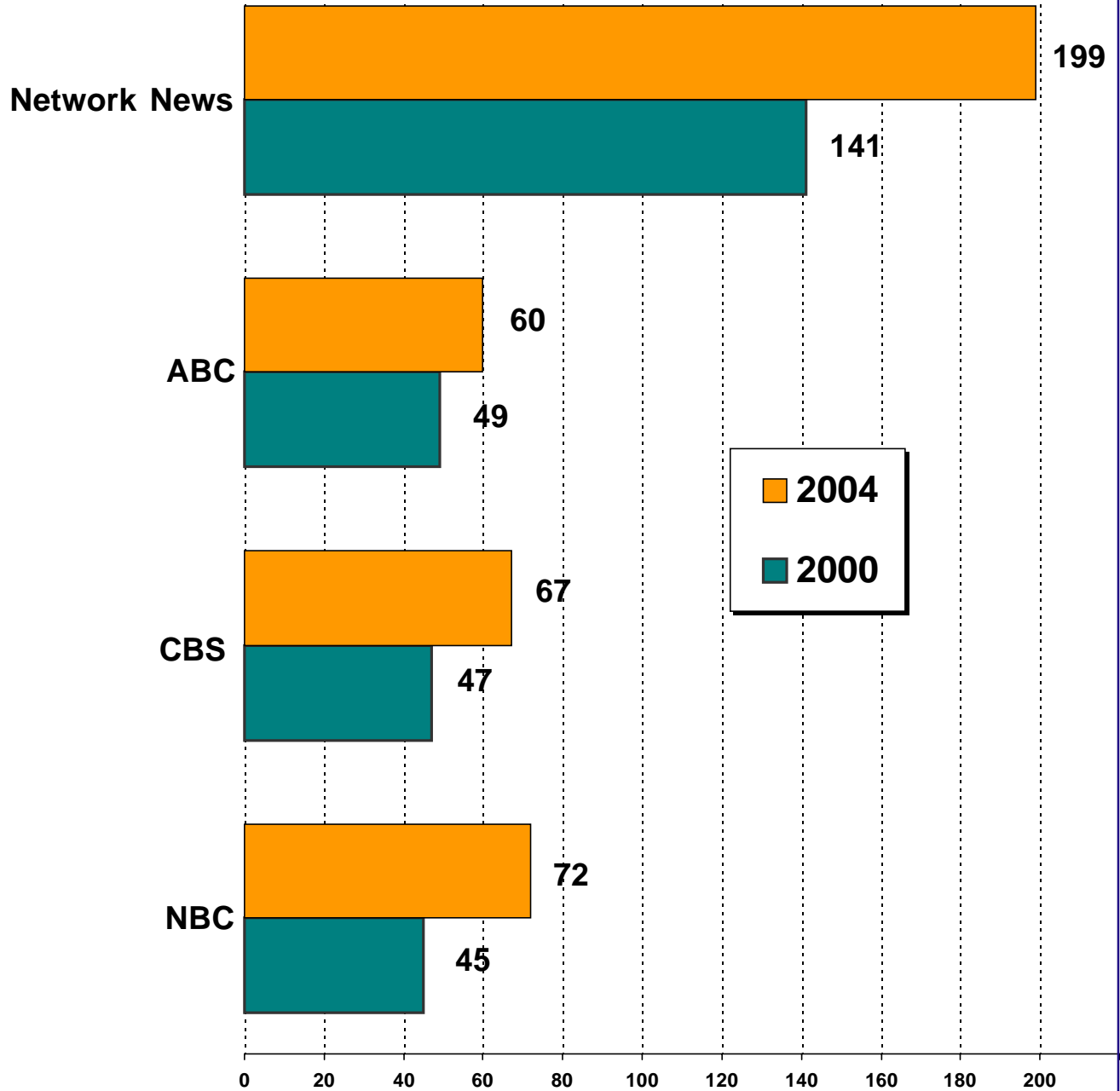
\* Bent Toward Bush? – Fox News Channel's "Special Report" featured 31% positive evaluations of Bush compared to 21% positive toward Kerry. And Fox panelists' comments favored Bush by 50% positive to only 13% positive toward Kerry.

\* "Fair and Balanced"? – In "Special Report" news segments, the coverage was balanced – 27% positive for Bush and 24% for Kerry. Fox was also more balanced in its issue coverage (30% positive for Bush vs. 28% for Kerry) than the broadcast network (41% positive for Kerry vs. 23% positive for Bush).

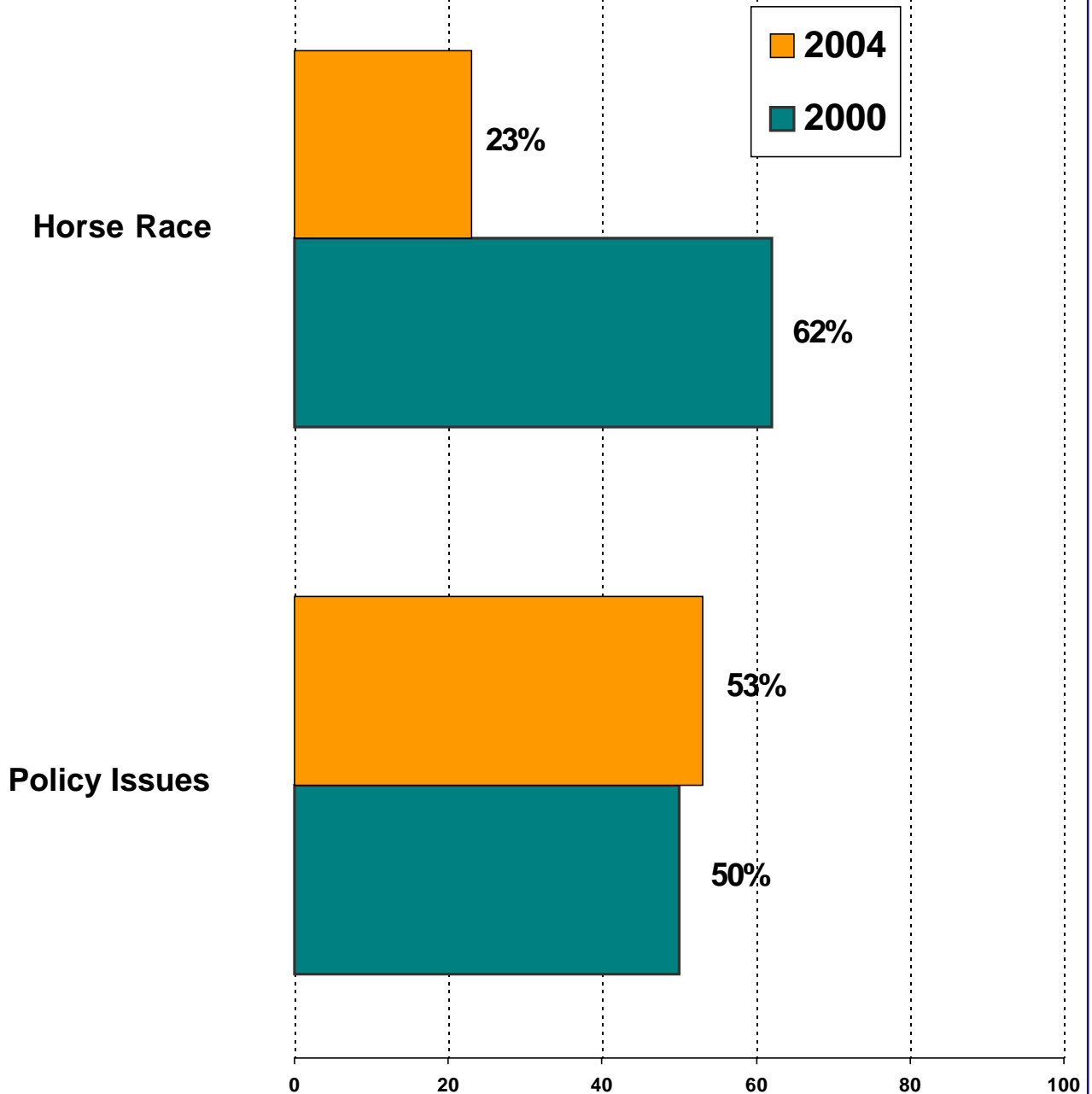
***Broadcast News Coverage of Campaign 2004  
September 7 – October 1, 2004***



**Amount of Coverage  
Broadcast Network News  
Number of Stories  
Labor day to October 1st**



**Broadcast News  
Focus of Coverage  
Percent of Stories  
Labor day to October 1st**



Note: A story may have discussed both horse race and policy issues. Policy Issue discussions include candidates' records, proposals, and views on issues. Horse race includes discussions of a candidate's strategies, tactics, and political status.

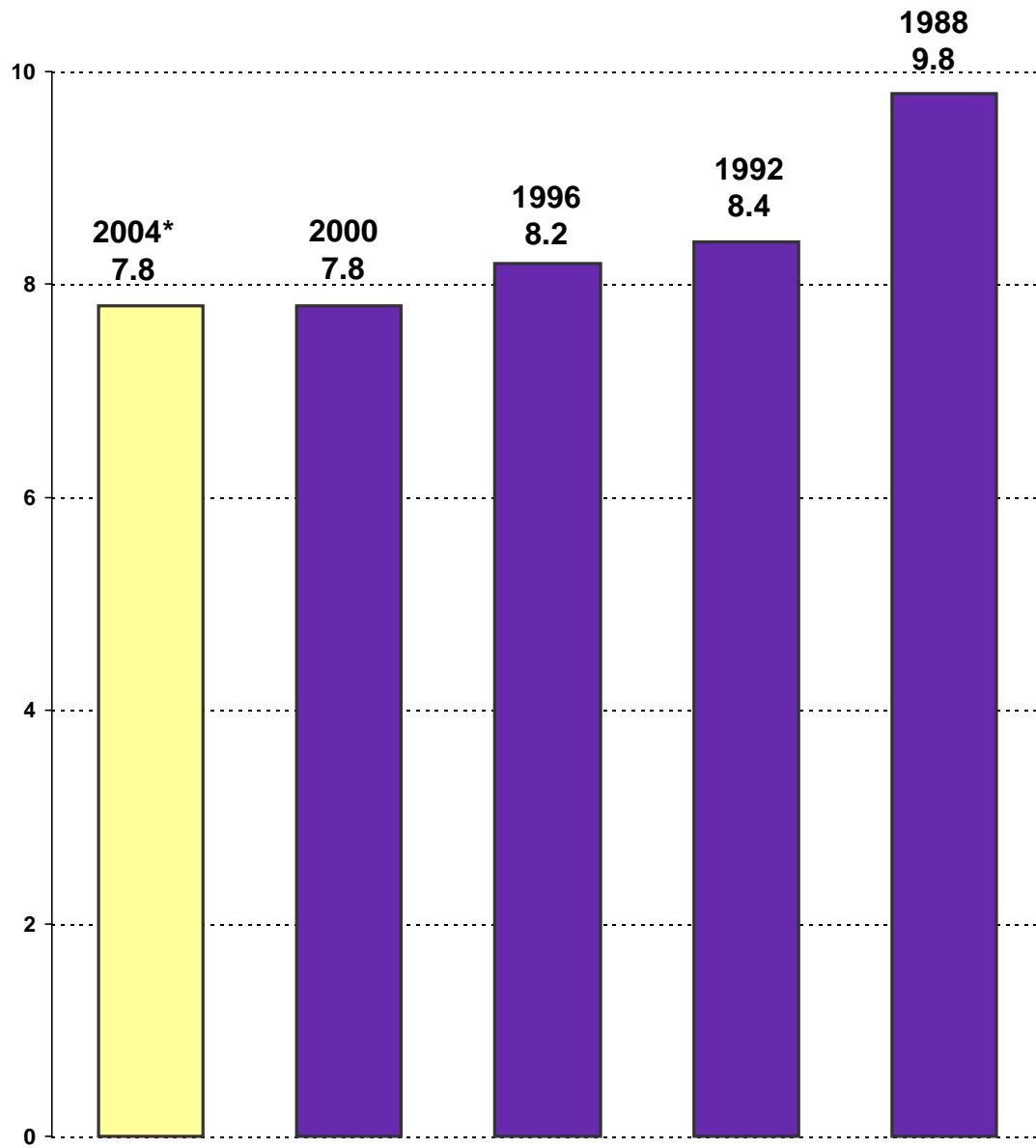
## Leading Topics of Debate

### Number of Evaluations

	2004 9/7-10/01	2000 9/4-11/6
<b>Top Policy Topics</b>		
<b>All Foreign Policy</b>	407	41
<i>Iraq</i>	261	0
<i>Terrorism</i>	90	0
 <b>All Domestic Policy</b>	 <b>239</b>	 <b>709</b>
<i>Economy</i>	68	215
<i>Health Care</i>	35	131
<i>Social Security</i>	*	100
<i>Education</i>	*	80
<i>Energy</i>	*	64
<i>Gun Control</i>	22	28
 <b>Leading Campaign Trail Topics</b>		
<i>Leadership</i>	90	*
<i>Flip-Flopping</i>	80	*
<i>Military Record</i>	78	*

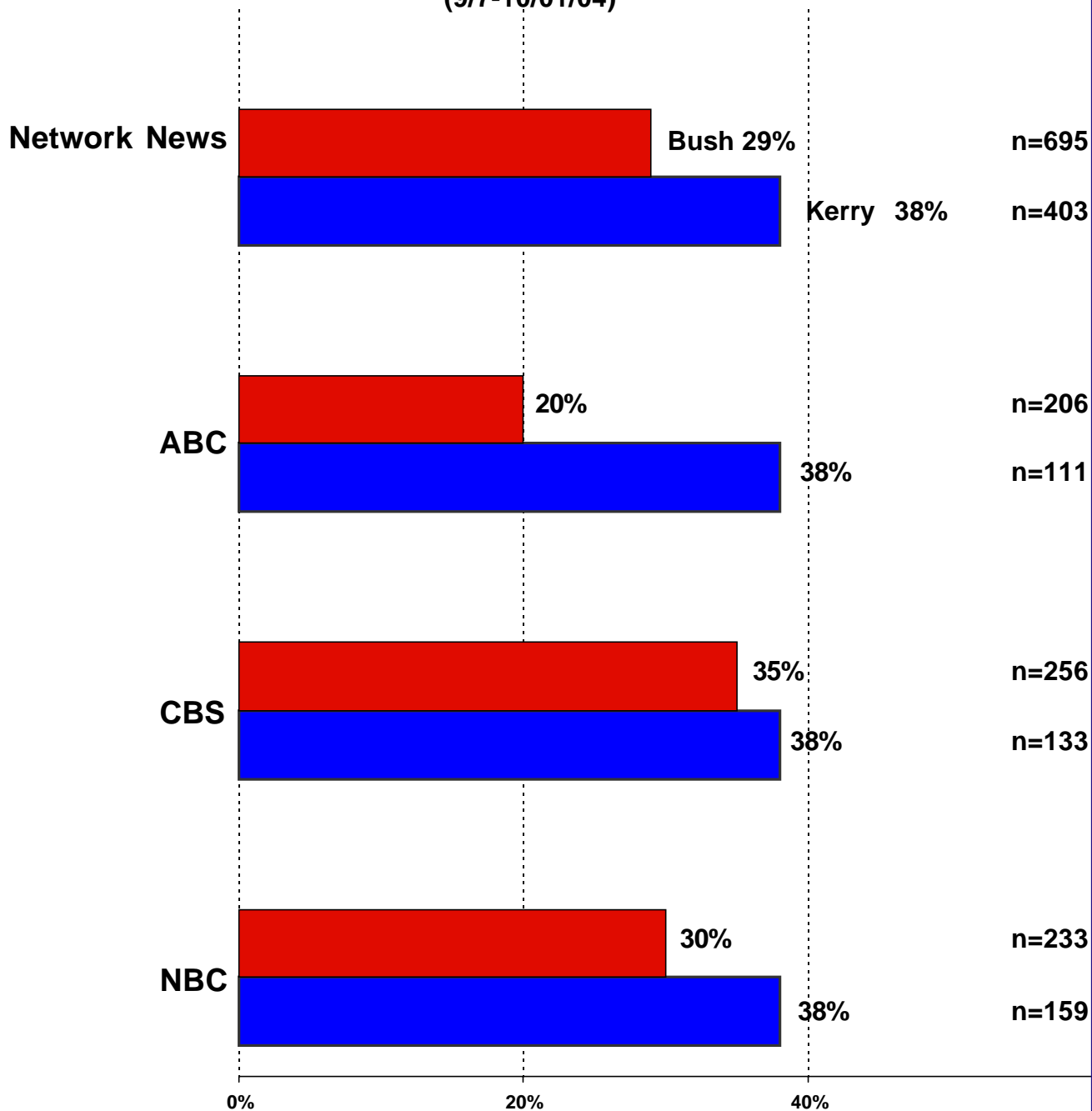
\* less than 10 evaluations on that topic.

### Average Sound Bite Length (seconds)



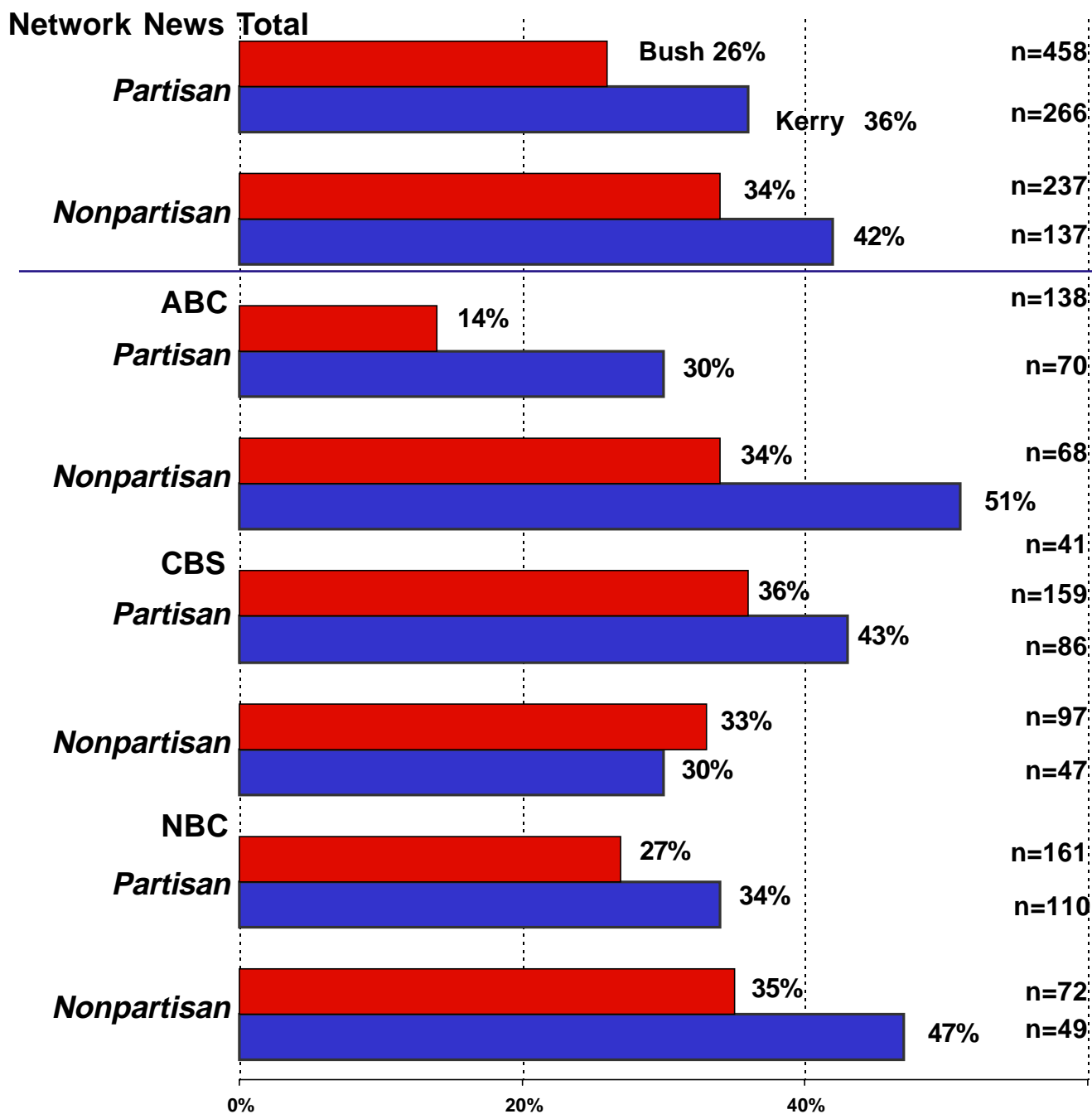
\*September 7 to October 1, 2004.

**Percent Positive Evaluations  
Broadcast Network News  
(9/7-10/01/04)**



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

**Percent Positive Evaluations  
Partisan vs Nonpartisan sources  
Broadcast Network News  
(9/7-10/01/04)**

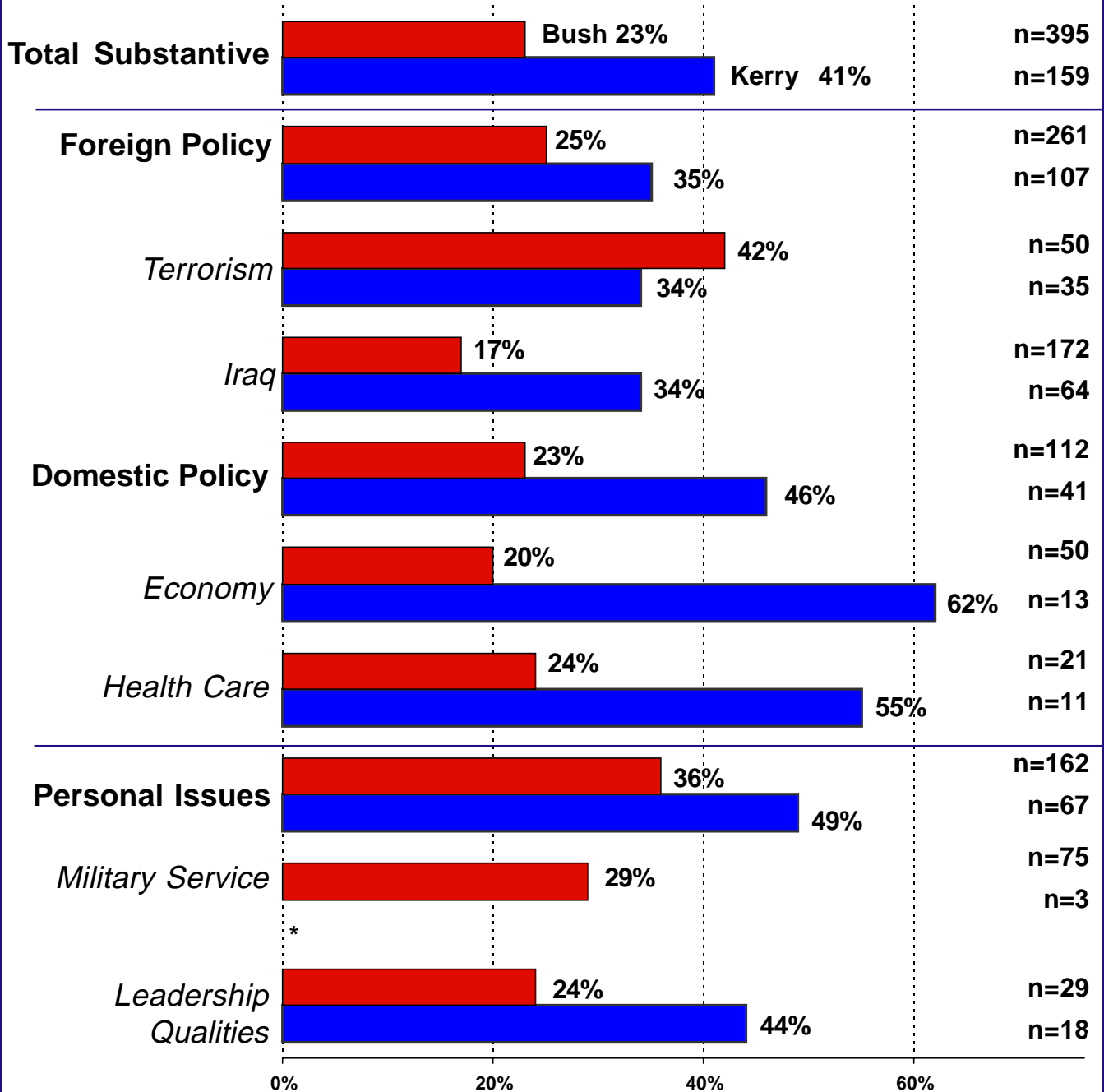


Based on evaluations by sources and reporters on the ABC, CBS, NBC evening news.

**Tone of Substantive Evaluation  
Broadcast Networks**

9/7/-10/01/04

Percent Positive



\*Fewer than ten evaluations.

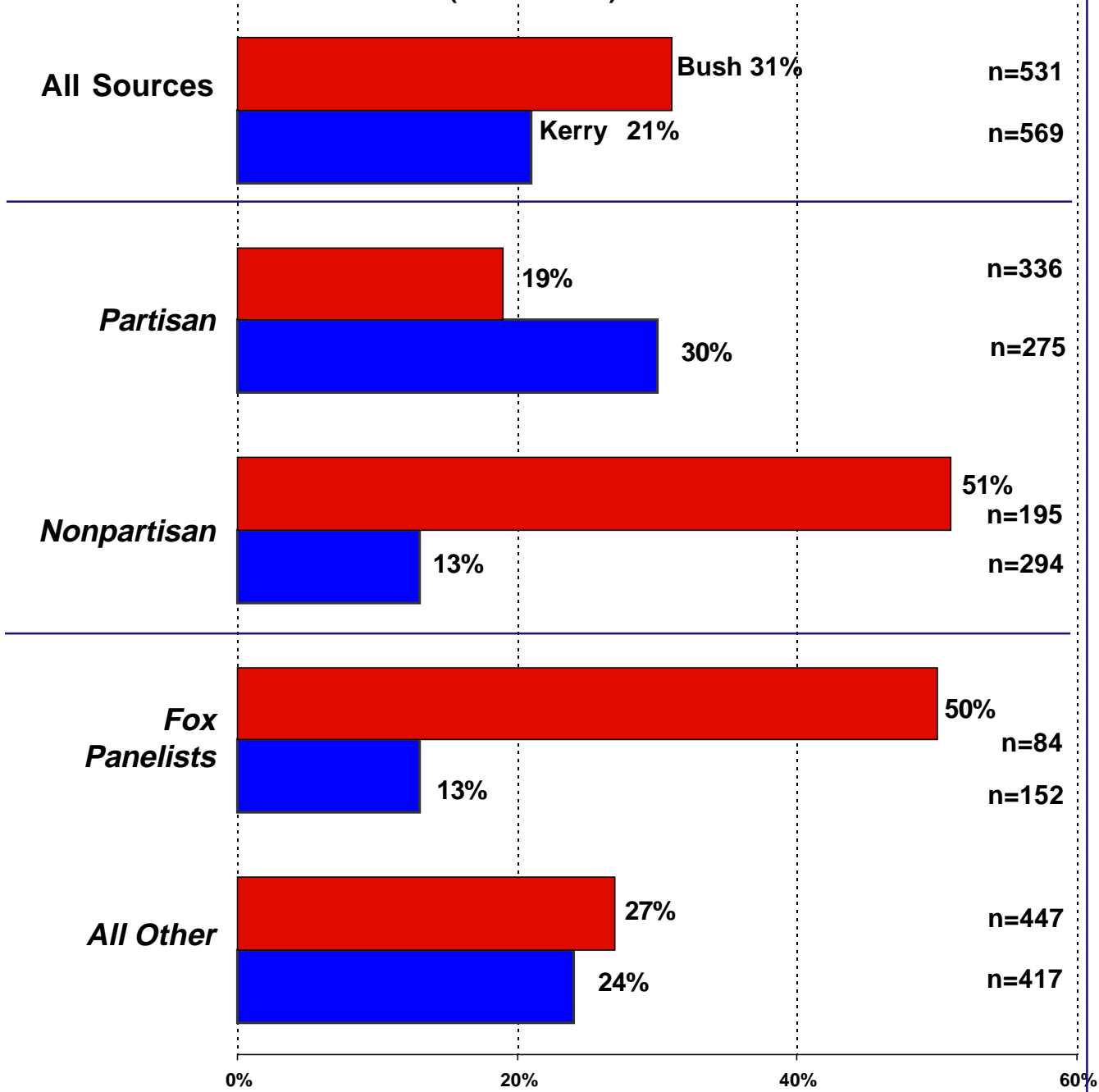
Based on evaluations by sources and reporters on the ABC, CBS, NBC evening news.

***Fox News Coverage of Campaign 2004  
September 7 – October 1, 2004***

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**Percent Positive Evaluations  
by Source Type  
Fox News  
(9/7-10/01/04)**

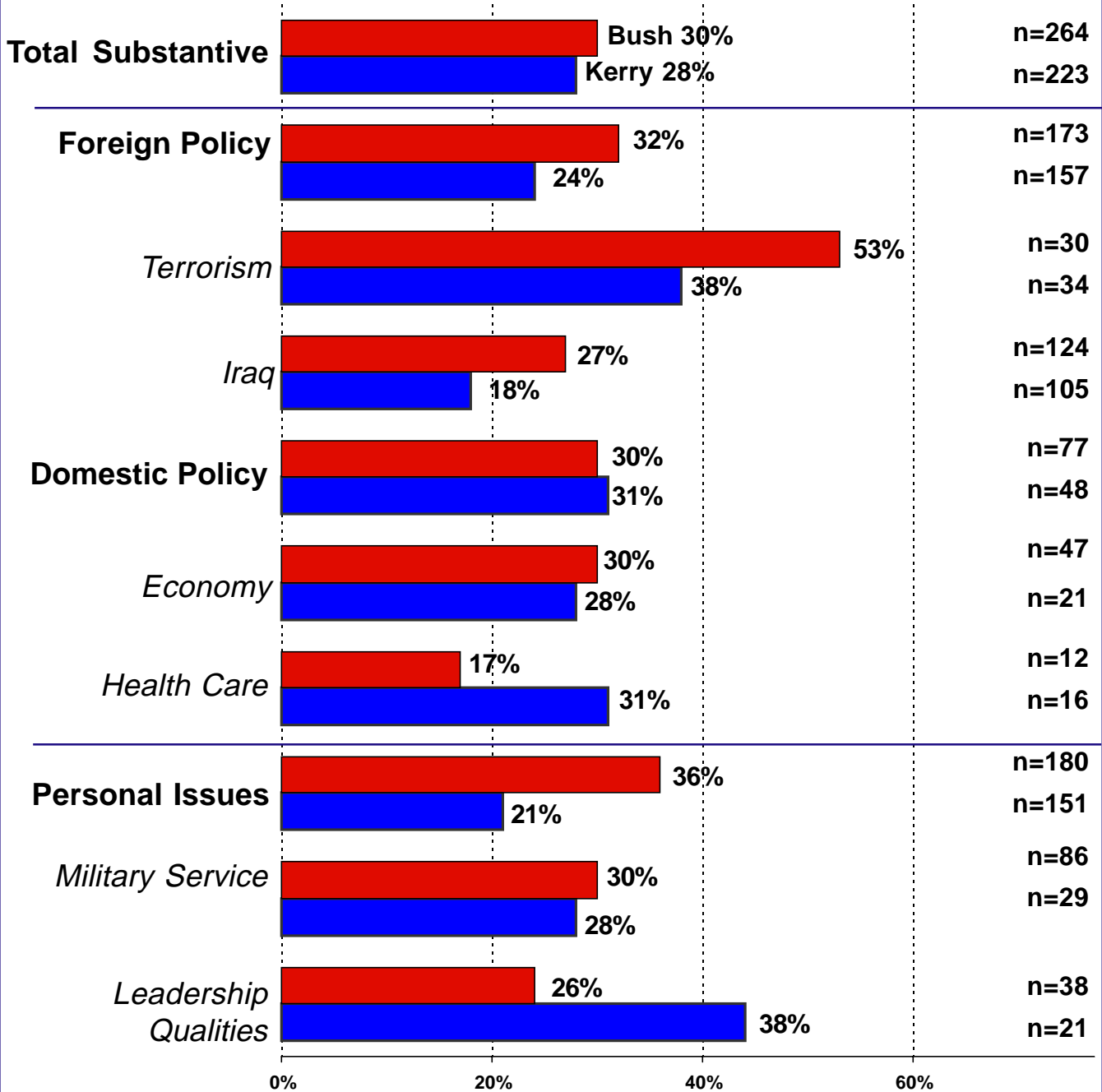


Based on evaluations by sources and reporters on Fox News' "Special Report w/Brit Hume."

**Tone of Substantive Evaluation**  
***Fox News***

9/7/-10/01/04

Percent Positive



\*Fewer than ten evaluations.

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

## APPENDIX A: CONTENT ANALYSIS

This study employs content analysis, a social scientific method for producing an objective and systematic description of communicative material. In order to be scientific, such analysis requires explicit rules and procedures that minimize a researcher's subjective predispositions.

Categories and criteria are rigorously defined and applied consistently to all material. Each system must be reliable, meaning that additional researchers using the same criteria should reach the same conclusions. Because it is both systematic and reliable, content analysis permits the research to transcend the realm of impressionistic generalizations, which are subject to individual preferences and prejudices.

For example, in determining that an evaluation of a candidate is positive or negative, researchers look for overt judgments, ignoring statements of fact that may indirectly reflect well or poorly on the candidate, unless they are specifically linked to his performance, e.g., Congress signed a bill supported by the president, economic indicators improved, etc. Researchers also ignore comments about a candidate's standing in the horse race, unless this is attributed to his political abilities. Such rules are established at the outset, taught to coders, and applied systematically to the sample.

CMPA researchers have conducted over 100 content analysis projects since 1987, and our studies have appeared frequently in peer-reviewed academic journals. Our researchers examine news stories on a statement-by-statement level, recording all overt opinions expressed by either the reporter or other sources cited in the story. Each opinion is catalogued according to the source of the comment, the target, and the topic of discussion.

This procedure produces greater precision and reliability than attempts to make overall judgments about entire stories. Results are logged into a computerized database, allowing statistical analyses to describe the relationships among news sources, time periods, the focus of coverage and the tone of coverage.

Coding for Election NewsWatch 2004 was done under the direction of CMPA senior staff members by experienced full-time coders at Media Tenor, an independent affiliate of CMPA, which has conducted content analyses since 1994. Reliability checks determined that all categories met or exceeded a 90 percent reliability rate, i.e., two coders independently examining the same material reached the same conclusion at least 90 percent of the time.

## APPENDIX B: 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*

CBS has exclusive information, including documents... that indicate Mr. Bush may have received preferential treatment in the Guard after not fulfilling his commitments.

*Dan Rather, CBS, 9/08/2004, 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*

The economy, health care, poverty, and the war in Iraq are all problems for the president. And polls show more than half the country believes Bush is leading the nation in the wrong direction. *(Negative toward Bush)* Yet, with so many avenues of attack, Kerry seized none convincingly, muddled his message, and failed to make this race more about Bush than himself. *(Negative toward Kerry)*

*Dean Reynolds, ABC, 9/7/2004*

I think it's one thing to oppose the president to try to tear him down. But to oppose our biggest ally in that region [Prime Minister Allawi] who gives a speech at the risk of his life, on behalf of America and democracy, and his own country... who stands for everything that's at stake on our behalf in Iraq, I think is disgraceful.

*Charles Krauthammer, Fox Panelist, 9/23/2004, Negative toward Kerry*

The foreign leaders John Kerry doesn't show respect for... are those one who stand aligned with the United States. And I think ultimately 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, Fox Panelist, , 9/23/2004, Negative toward Kerry*

Of Bush's [National Guard] performance, [General Walter] Staudt said "I'd say he was in the upper 10 percent or 5 percent or whatever we ever talked to about going to pilot training."

*Fox, 9/17/2004, Positive toward Bush*

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

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

I'm leaning towards Kerry because we need jobs.

*Jerome Sefcik, voter, ABC, 9/15/2004, Positive toward Kerry*

There was a lot of broken crockery and hurt feelings surrounding the manner in which the war originally unfolded. Kerry would have an opportunity to start over without, without that baggage.

*James Dobbins, Rand Corporation, ABC, 9/29/2004, Positive toward Kerry*