

# Breaking the agenda-cutting phenomenon

US media's coverage of the Democrats and its individual presidential candidates: January - July 2003

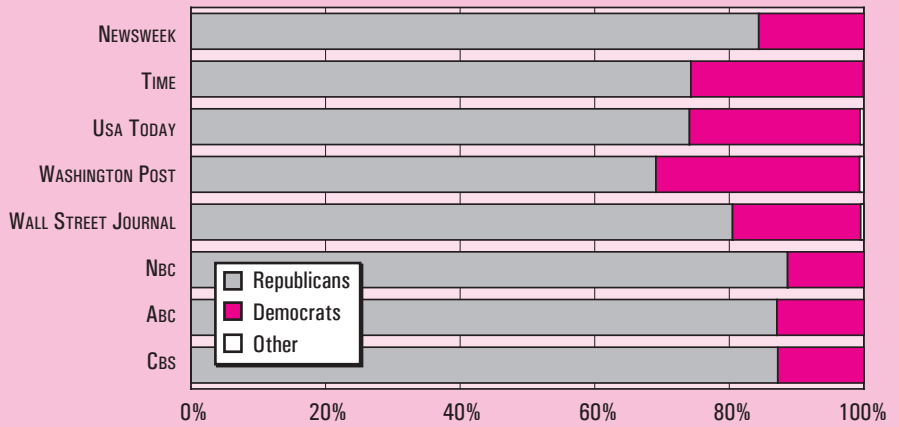
Until very recently, before the onset of the war against terrorism in Afghanistan and later Iraq, the thought of an actual challenge to a second term in office for US President George W Bush was almost unthinkable. Yet a 'terrible week' in August (to quote Republican party members) that saw the bombing of UN headquarters in Baghdad, as well as another suicide bombing in Jerusalem, politically damaged Bush's trump card – foreign (peace-keeping) affairs, more than ever thought. To steer clear of the issue, Bush chose to focus on US forestation and salmon quotas during his recent tour of the western states. But the power blackout, forcing everyday life to a standstill, raised questions about the vulnerability of the US to further terrorist attacks, clearly showing that the domestic affairs of the United States are in dire need of some attention. The population needs some serious convincing about the wellbeing of their own safety and infrastructure.

The political opposition in the United States is at last rising to the election challenge by heavily targeting Bush, his policies and his Government. US Senator John Kerry, now a Democratic candidate for the presidency, accused the Republicans of 'gross neglect and vision in its energy policy', according to German daily FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG. But the gross neglect and vision is as applicable to the Democrat's presidential media campaign, seemingly still in hibernation, as the content analysis by MEDIA TENOR as well as various polling results from US opinion institutes confirm.

### Little coverage for Democrats up to now

The task of getting more media exposure for the Democrats is extremely difficult. In the first seven months of this year, 106.847 statements made on political parties on ABC, CBS and NBC main evening news, as well as TIME, NEWSWEEK, USA TODAY and WASHINGTON POST show that the Republicans take a capital stake of political voice, with 73.49%, compared to the Democrat's 26.16%. Other parties (and, according to www.politics1.com there are a further nine parties plus numerous independent candidates) have a mere 0.35% share of the overall political voice. The US broadcaster NBC is particularly 'favourable' towards the Republicans, in terms of share of information, whose 4.876 political state-

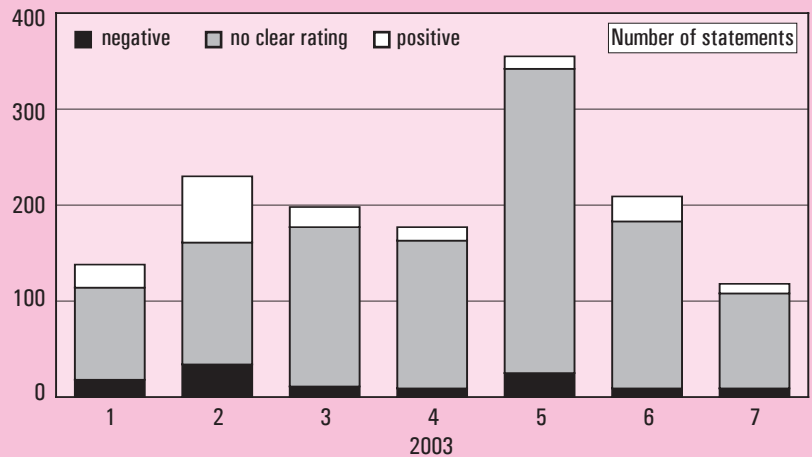
## Republicans receiving majority of coverage US media's reporting on political parties: Jan - Jul 2003



Source: MEDIA TENOR  
01/01/2003 - 31/07/2003

Basis: 106.847 statements on political parties in 8 US media

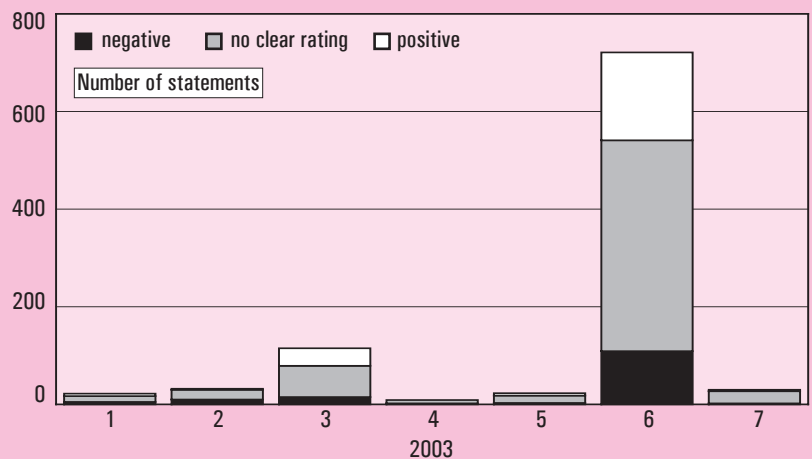
## Initially the favourite, rating now declining John Kerry's coverage in US media: Jan - Jul 2003



Source: MEDIA TENOR  
01/01/2003 - 31/07/2003

Basis: 1.718 statements on John Kerry in 8 US media

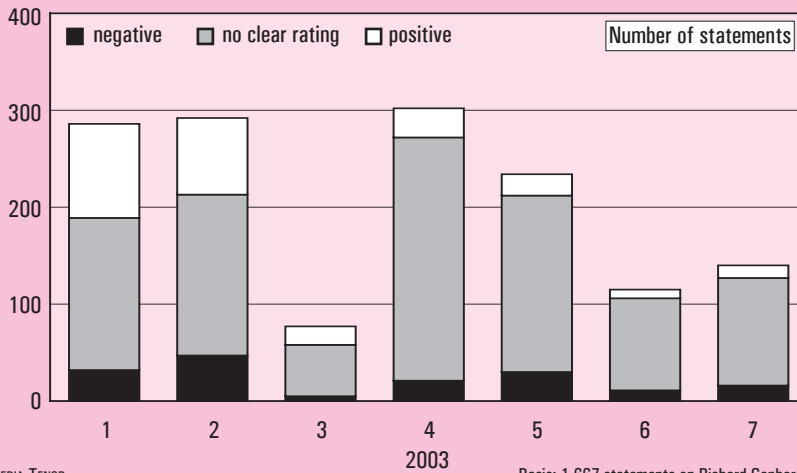
## Media positive, but candidacy not declared yet Hillary Clinton's coverage in US media: Jan - Jul 2003



Source: MEDIA TENOR  
01/01/2003 - 31/07/2003

Basis: 1.042 statements on Hillary Clinton in 8 US media

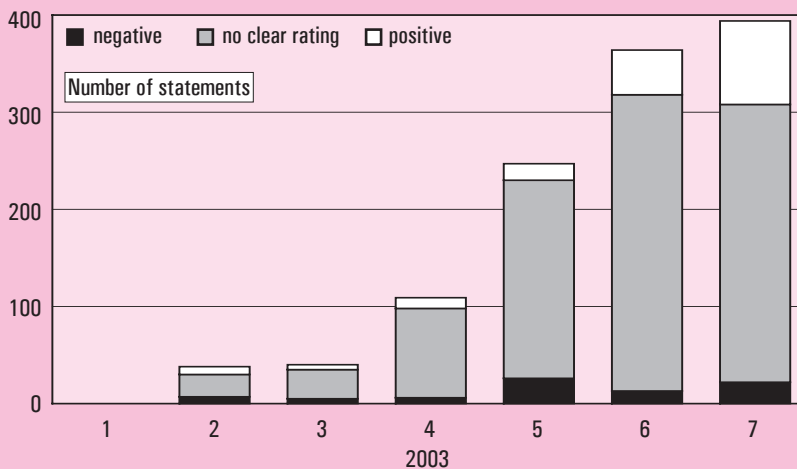
**Volume high, but without definite approval**  
**Richard Gephardt's coverage in US media: Jan - Jul 2003**



Source: MEDIA TENOR  
 01/01/2003 - 31/07/2003

Basis: 1.667 statements on Richard Gephardt  
 in 8 US media

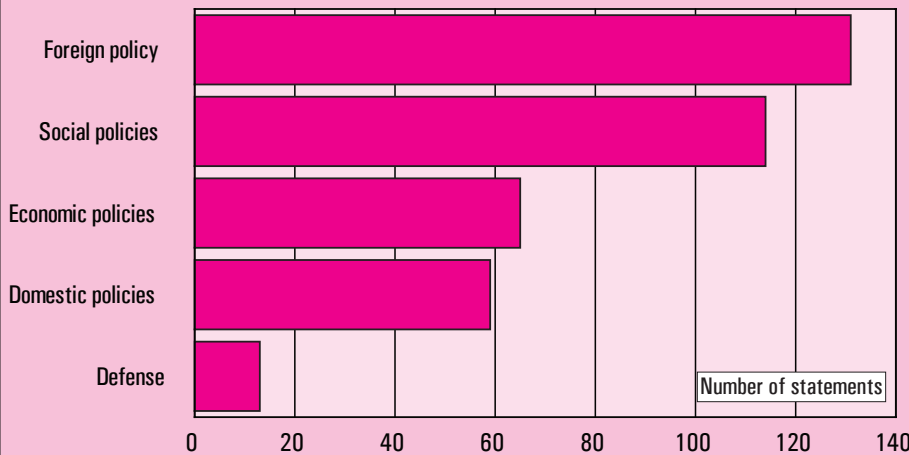
**Howard Dean – 'internet star'**  
**Howard Dean's coverage in US media: Jan - Jul 2003**



Source: MEDIA TENOR  
 01/01/2003 - 31/07/2003

Basis: 1.490 statements on Howard Dean  
 in 8 US media

**Dean attacking Bush's Iraq policies**  
**Main issues in coverage on Howard Dean (D): Jan - Jul 2003**



Source: MEDIA TENOR  
 01/01/2003 - 31/07/2003

Basis: 551 policy statements on Howard Dean  
 in 8 US media

ments are unequally divided with 89% to the Republicans and 11% to the Democrats. According to the Centre for Responsive Politics ([www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org)) the same NBC donated a total of \$2,6 million to political parties for the 2001/2002 election cycle – with a 60% share to the Republicans. Yet even CBS, having donated \$3,3 million to the elections – with 90% allocated to the Democrats, shows a similar picture: only 13% of its total political coverage (3.665 statements) focuses on the Democrats. Where print media is concerned the WASHINGTON POST assigns a share of 69% to the Republicans and 30% to the Democrats, and USA TODAY 74% and 26% respectively.

But the medium really reaching the masses and determining the outcome of elections in the United States is television. It is exactly here where the Democrats have a definite disadvantage currently, and thus have plenty of work to do. The biggest challenge the Democrats are facing is the fact that no one knows their candidates. At present, there are ten Democrats that have either officially or unofficially announced their candidacy. Carol Moseley Braun, former US Senator from Illinois, represents the only female candidate, but according to the latest FOX news poll, 56% of respondents have never heard of her. John Edwards, US Senator from North Carolina, is unknown to 68% of respondents of a TIME/CNN poll. In fact, only Joe Lieberman (Vice President Candidate from Al Gore's unsuccessful candidacy), John Kerry, the US Senator from Massachusetts, Dick Gephardt, former Minority Leader and newcomer Howard Dean are slightly familiar to the majority of Americans.

**Dean 'internet star'**

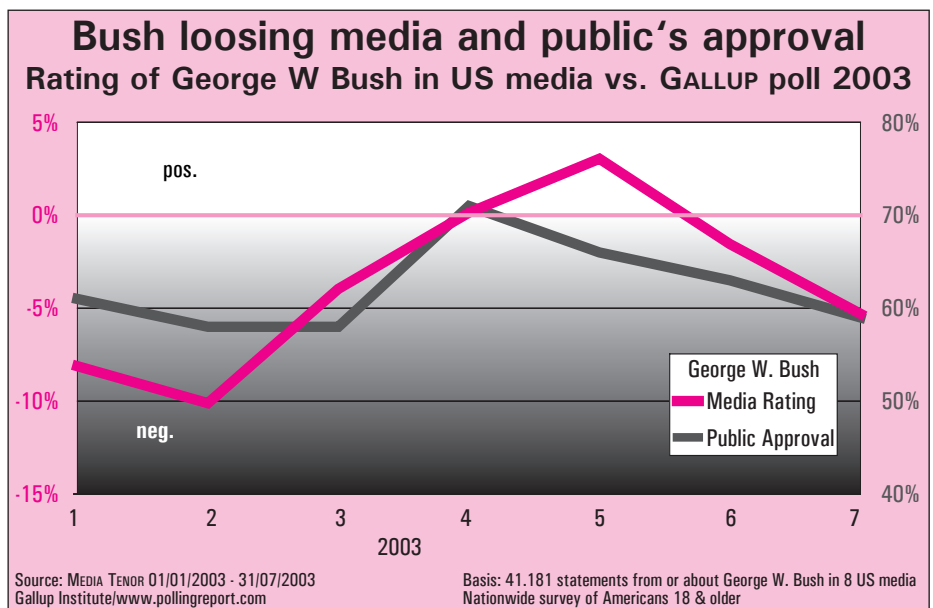
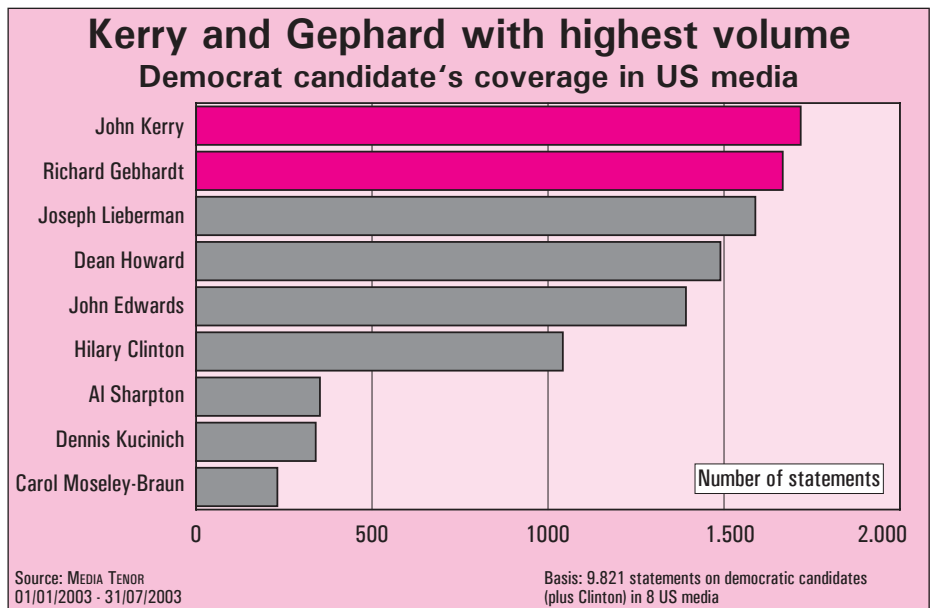
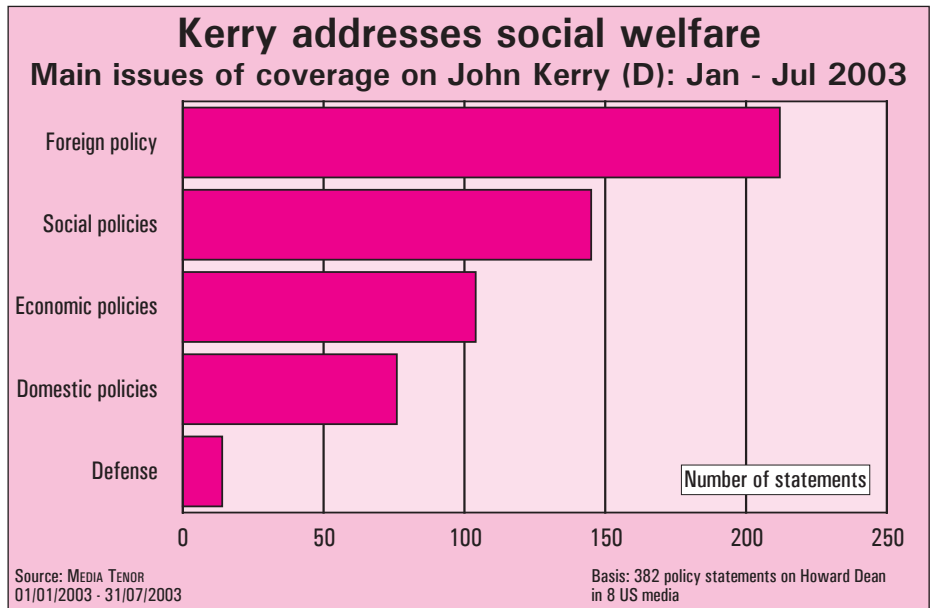
Dean has been hailed nationally and to a certain extent internationally, as the only candidate that might just do damage to George W Bush's campaign because of his 'Clintoness-'like political manner. And he is not shy to build parallels with the former President. In a recent interview with the NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE when questioned on the fact that he governed Vermont as a 'budget-balanced centrist,' he replied that he was 'a triangulator before Clinton was a triangulator'. And according to MEDIA TENOR's research, he is indeed the only candidate with an increase in coverage in the US media with his image continuously improving. Most other candidates, such as

Brown and even Gephardt, receive far less, and also far less enthusiastic coverage. Joe Lieberman, although better known to the population, is fighting declining space in the media as is John Kerry and even Hillary Clinton, although Clinton has neither officially nor unofficially announced possible candidacy. If she does decide to run however, she would certainly have the best likelihood of being successful amongst the Democrats, according to various polls. 40% of likely democratic voters, according to a COOK POLITICAL REPORT POLL would prefer her over any other candidate. The time is certainly right for any strong Democrat to challenge Bush. MEDIA TENOR'S research from 1990 - 1992 shows that Bush senior's popularity was at an all time high during the first Iraq war, but quickly declined and not even the introduction of economy as a 'new issue' saved him from losing to 'nobody' Bill Clinton.

If Hillary decides not to run, the firm favourite seems to be Howard Dean. Behind Kerry, Gephardt and Liebermann, he draws the majority of statements on the Democrats. And contrary to his fellow party colleagues, the issues he raises in the media are not focused on just one theme. 60% of statements on Joe Lieberman focus on his policies on foreign affairs and the economy. A similar picture in the media is visible for John Kerry where 33% focuses only on foreign affairs issues. In the case of Howard Dean, the 382 statements received are evenly distributed amongst issues of foreign, internal, social and public policies. Howard Dean, 'Internet star' (FAZ 18 July 2003), utilizes the internet to draw supporters and put himself on the front seat of the Democrats – apparently the only option left when taking the agenda-cutting effect of the US TV media into account.

**Agenda-cutting phenomenon apparent**

The German FAZ doubts that Dean will be able to keep up with his digital advantage, considering that all the other candidates, including George W. Bush are busy upgrading their online presence. But a more pressing question of political success not only for Dean but any candidate wishing to oppose the President, will remain the matter of limited mainstream media platform. According to Prof Mallory Wober from the London School of Economics, one of the world's leading scholars in the field of



**Most candidates 'unheard of'**  
**FOX News/Opinion Poll: August 12-13**

Candidate	favourable	unfavourable	can't say	never heard of
Dean	19	16	23	42
Edwards	14	12	22	52
Gephardt	30	27	21	22
Kerry	31	13	23	24
Lieberman	42	28	18	12
Brown	11	16	17	56
Kucinich	6	12	15	67

Source: WWW.POLLINGREPORT.COM  
 08/2003

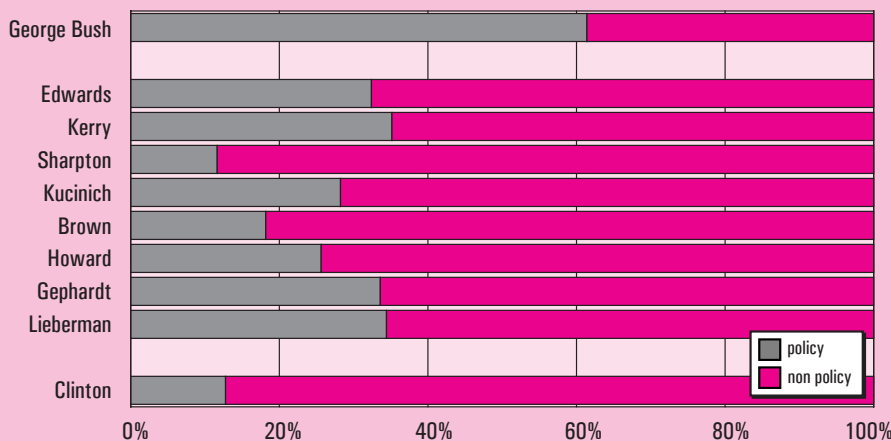
Basis: 900 registered voters nationwide,  
 MoE +/- 3

agenda cutting, the phenomenon of agenda cutting of which the American selective coverage is just one, appears primarily when events and issues become 'mainstream' and are supported by the majority (so becoming fashionable). Wober identifies two syndromes, one where the journalistic profession and public may agree on what does or does not interest both parties, and the second where the mainstream of opinion among journalists may not match that in the public. In the case of the United States, previous MEDIA TENOR research has clearly shown that public opinion and media image on Bush and his government are similar. Nevertheless, a mainstream phenomenon occurs in US television as indicated in the high volume of coverage on the Republicans. Media might claim that the Democrats have just not been vocal enough in the past few years or months to justify more airtime or discussion on their policies, but this is where the cycle starts.

**US media's independence at stake**

Without more airtime to the opposition, a critical voice – essential for any real democracy, cannot be established and discussions are then not encouraged. It is not entirely the responsibility of the opposition party to press its view and opinion in the media, but also the responsibility of the free media to create such an opportunity – currently not the case on US television. Without the proportional support by the leading media in the United States, the opposition will not be able to mobilize the votes it is looking for when challenging the Republicans. Following the way US media have covered the war on Iraq and the international criticism it received, a further blow to the image of US media – usually propounded as a primary example of the free press – could be on the way they report on not only the opposition, but also the remaining political parties in the United States. An election will never be won, it can only be lost and the media will play a crucial role in deciding who will run the country in the next few years.

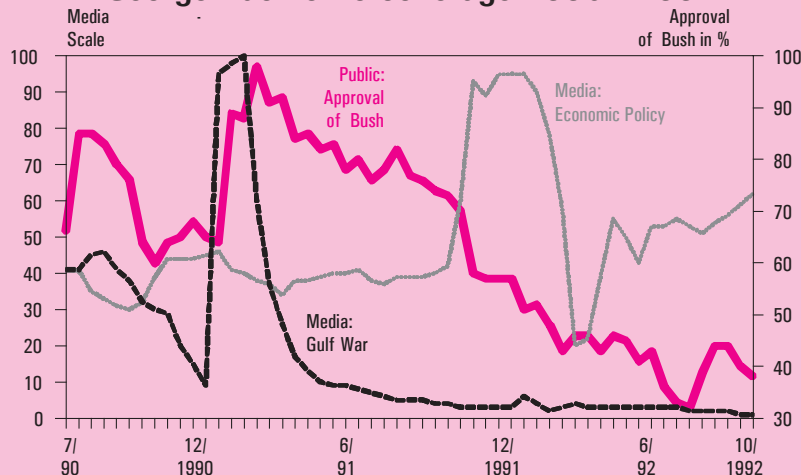
**Coverage on candidates not policy focused**  
**US media's coverage of candidates: policy vs. non-policy**



Source: MEDIA TENOR  
 01/01/2003 - 31/07/2003

Basis: 9,821 statements on democratic candidates  
 (plus Clinton) in 8 US media

**Bush jr. following fathers trend?**  
**George Bush sr.'s coverage 1990 - 1992**



Source: Pan, Z. & Kosicki, G.M. (1997). Priming and media impact on the evaluations of the president's performance. COMMUNICATION RESEARCH 24, 3-30

Basis: Coverage of respective topics in NEW YORK TIMES (100 equals the greatest number of stories for one topic per month)

**Basis**

Media: ABC WORLD NEWS TONIGHT, NBC NIGHTLY NEWS, CBS EVENING NEWS; WALL STREET JOURNAL, USA TODAY, TIME, NEWSWEEK, WASHINGTON POST  
 Time: 01.01. - 31.07.2003  
 Analysis: 106.847 statements on political parties  
 Other sources: pollingreport.com; politics1.com, opensecrets.org.