

2004 PRESIDENTIAL COVERAGE IN  
*THE DES MOINES REGISTER, USA TODAY, and THE NEW YORK TIMES*

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During every presidential election season there is as much arguing and debating over media coverage as there is discussion about the candidates. *The Des Moines Register* typically is criticized for being editorially liberal and opponents claim that bias seeps into its news coverage of the campaign. After a four-month study of *Register* coverage of the 2004 presidential race, both supporters and critics of the paper have legitimate reasons for their positions.

From a news standpoint the *Register* attempted this year to balance its coverage of the campaign. The amount of news space devoted to President George Bush alone was 22%, compared to 26% for John Kerry, and 36% of the stories involved both candidates. The numbers are almost identical to the 2000 election, when the Register gave Bush 21% and Al Gore 26%. This year Bush received more photo coverage with 42% of the picture space compared to Kerry's 39%. Combining the amount of news and photo inches, the Register balanced the two candidates with Kerry receiving only one percent more than the incumbent.

Even in the headlines used for the stories, Bush and Kerry matched with about half of their headlines giving them positive spin. However, over one-third of Bush's headlines were negative compared to only 18% negative for the Senator. Kerry was more apt than Bush to have neutral headlines for his stories.

The difference in the way the newspaper approached the two candidates came on the opinion pages where there was no doubt where the *Register* stood. The President was the subject of over two-thirds of the opinion pieces and letters over the past four months and most of what was printed was negative. Of the hundreds of inches of letters printed about Bush, 71% were negative while Kerry's letters were 55% positive. In editorials and opinion pieces, 63% of the space devoted to Bush was negative while Kerry's was 60% positive.

Averaging letters, editorials and opinion pieces, Bush's were 68% negative and only 28% positive, while the challenger had 55% positive and 44% negative. So while the paper may attempt balanced coverage in the news section, readers legitimately criticize the publication for lack of balance on the opinion pages. Editors had a choice as to which letters to print and which opinion pieces to include and they chose to dramatically favor Kerry and put down Bush. The repeated and consistent anti-Bush rhetoric

from opinion page columnist Rehka Basu was the most notable contributor to the perception that the *Register* is unbendingly liberal, while the more conservative local columnists made attempts at writing balanced articles.

As voting day drew closer, the paper became obvious in its attempt to favor a candidate. The *Register* ran negative Bush stories that included the President being voted the top screen villain, mistakes made on his web site, and anti-Bush comments from the Iowa poster woman for the 2000 Al Gore campaign, elderly can collector Winifred Skinner. Kerry received no similar negative stories from the paper. A story about four of the five major polls placing Bush ahead was put under the headline “Poll Puts Kerry Up,” focusing on the one positive Kerry poll instead of the four positive Bush polls.

On the other hand, the *Register* ran Kerry endorsements a couple times on the editorial pages, printed a full page question-and-answer session Kerry had with editors, and gave Kerry no negative headlines in the ten days before the election. The *Register* also twice ran its writer’s post-presidential debate analysis favoring Kerry on the front page as a news story and did not label it opinion. And two days before the election the front page trumpeted Kerry ahead in the Iowa Poll, though it was actually a statistical tie and the poll numbers ended up being dramatically wrong come election day.

Surprisingly, about once a month the presidential campaigns received no coverage at all from the *Register*, and on 47% of the days there was no mention of the vice presidential campaigns. During the four-month period before the election, there were also 20 days in which Bush received no separate story about his campaign, and 24 days in which Kerry received no story from the *Register*.

For comparison purposes this study included *USA Today* and the *Sunday New York Times*. *USA Today* was the most balanced publication, devoting equal amounts of news and photography space to the candidates. The paper’s headlines slightly favored Kerry but the editorial section was about as close as it could get to fairness: both candidates had 46% positive letters and opinion pieces while Bush had slightly more negative (45% negative to Kerry’s 37%).

*The New York Times* was dramatically different, devoting 20% more news space to Kerry than Bush, and making the majority of Kerry’s headlines positive (and only 8% of the Kerry headlines negative!). On the op/ed pages three-fourths of what was written was about the current President but a whopping 93% of it was negative while the letters and editorials about the Senator were 76% positive. Objective measurement of how the newspaper covered the candidates showed that the *New York Times* Sunday edition gave overwhelmingly positive spin on the Kerry campaign while using the opinion pages to condemn President Bush.

*USA Today* covered a wider variety of in-depth stories than the other publications. It included major stories on the election’s impact on health care, education and Wall Street, along with articles about fund-raising tactics (including sports donors), potential voter fraud and even the legitimacy of polls.

The *New York Times* included a variety of presidential stories that bordered on the absurd, with election stories about food, masculinity, beards, neck ties and even “why aren’t the candidates funnier?” Positive Kerry stories appeared in virtually every section of the newspaper, from Arts to Style, while the

front page proclaimed that world leaders endorsed Kerry and that Bush had failed in his war effort. A lengthy pro-Kerry piece was featured as the cover story of the Sunday *Times* magazine just three weeks before the election, followed the next week by a negative magazine piece about Bush leading a religious crusade (for which the President did not get a front page photo). The one *Times* story that received only a couple inches of space (and was overlooked nationally) was the finding that President Bush actually had high scores on intelligence tests than did John Kerry.

It was amusing to read the week before the election that *Times* columnists were “no longer allowed to endorse” a candidate, yet Frank Rich (who called Bush a “sissy”) and Maureen Dowd single-handedly pushed voters to reject the President in every one of their columns about the election. The paper also defended its policy of allowing reporters to state opinion-based conclusions in their news stories, which often was a back-handed way of a reporter endorsing a candidate. But most hypocritical was the *Times* Ombudsman admitting in September that the newspaper was liberal because it was reflecting the values New York City readers, but weeks later claiming that in his review of *Times* articles he could find no anti-Bush, pro-Kerry news bias. In fact, the *New York Times* was the most biased publication studied and overwhelmingly used its news, editorial and feature pages to promote the Democratic candidate.

Two other subjects rarely surfaced in these publications over the past four months: Ralph Nader and the vice presidential candidates.

Nader received the most coverage from *USA Today*, with only 3% of the presidential coverage devoted to the third party candidate. *The Des Moines Register* gave Nader 2% of its coverage while the *Sunday New York Times* could give him only 37 inches in four months (less than one percent). Interestingly, most editorial pages split over Nader: the few opinion pieces that were printed were negative while the few letters were positive. In the end Nader’s news coverage amounted to whether he managed to get on ballots and he was not taken seriously as a candidate.

Little was written in all three papers about the running mates. *The Des Moines Register* had slightly more coverage of Dick Cheney and John Edwards, possibly due to the fact that they appeared in Iowa so often. Cheney garnered 44% of the vice presidential news coverage, compared to the challenger’s 28% (29% of the article space was given to both candidates). In photographs they were equal but in the headlines half of Cheney’s were negative and only 20% positive, while those numbers were reversed for Edwards. Again on the opinion pages there was little doubt about what the newspaper chose to publish—59% of Cheney’s letters and editorial space was negative and 12% was positive. For Edwards 57% was positive and 32% negative.

*USA Today* devoted less space to the vice presidential contenders but dramatically favored Edwards in the amount of news coverage (48% compared to Cheney’s 31%), photographs (52% vs. 30%) and headlines (over half of Edwards were positive while Cheney had no positive headlines in four months of coverage). *USA Today* slammed Cheney with 80% negative letters and opinion pieces while Edwards was given 84% positive coverage on the editorial pages. The *Sunday New York Times* printed only a few

inches a week on the vice presidential race and almost no letters or opinion pieces. The few items that appeared on the *Times* op/ed pages were 100% pro-Edwards and anti-Cheney.

These newspaper's anti-Republican editorial slant may be typical of the national press. A similar but much smaller study was conducted recently by Columbia University's Project for Excellence in Journalism. The two-week study compared national and regional newspapers to television and blogs. The study combined news coverage with op/ed pieces and concluded that "President Bush's newspaper coverage was more than twice as likely to be negative than his opponent's." They found 68% of the newspaper stories about Bush were negative and only 9% positive, while 29% of Kerry stories were positive and only 26% negative. When combining the results with other media, Kerry received more favorable coverage (Kerry 34% positive vs. Bush's 14%) and Bush consistently was given negative coverage (59% to Kerry's 25% negative). Of the media studied, newspapers were the most negative in dealing with President Bush.

So what readers find on the opinion pages of the *Register* reflects the trends in the national press. What editors often fail to comprehend is that even when news coverage of candidates attempts to be balanced, using opinion pages to dramatically support or oppose a certain candidate brings perceived bias to the paper. There are legitimate complaints that the *New York Times* used its news stories to make the Democratic candidate look positive, but the same can not be said with the same certainty of *USA Today* or even the *Des Moines Register*. Though the two Gannett publications were clear in their editorial page biases (*USA Today* against Cheney and the *Register* against Bush) and many readers may dislike the positions taken by the papers, *USA Today* attempted to present the most objective news coverage of the election and the *Register* made a somewhat balanced attempt at covering the race before it slightly skewed news coverage after the debates and as the election neared. Overall the *Register* attempted through much of the campaign to cover both parties on the news pages, while the paper continued its tradition of favoring the liberal presidential candidate in letters selected for publication, opinion pieces and staff editorials.

**DES MOINES REGISTER**

		<u>BUSH</u>	<u>KERRY</u>	<u>BOTH/OTHER</u>
NEWS		22%	26%	52%
PHOTOS		42%	39%	19%
HEADLINES	Positive	45%	48%	22%
	Negative	36%	18%	12%
	Neutral	19%	34%	64%
OP/ED	Positive	28%	55%	10%
	Negative	68%	44%	66%
	Neutral	4%	1%	24%

**USA TODAY**

		<u>BUSH</u>	<u>KERRY</u>	<u>BOTH/OTHER</u>
NEWS		22%	19%	59%
PHOTOS		33%	33%	34%
HEADLINES	Positive	39%	44%	27%
	Negative	35%	26%	32%
	Neutral	26%	29%	41%
OP/ED	Positive	46%	46%	10%
	Negative	45%	37%	51%
	Neutral	9%	17%	39%

**SUNDAY NEW YORK TIMES**

		<u>BUSH</u>	<u>KERRY</u>	<u>BOTH/OTHER</u>
NEWS		15%	20%	65%
PHOTOS		30%	49%	21%
HEADLINES	Positive	32%	54%	25%
	Negative	48%	8%	50%
	Neutral	20%	39%	25%
OP/ED	Positive	7%	76%	10%
	Negative	93%	24%	76%
	Neutral	0%	0%	14%