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How Broadcast Media Presented the Economic Growth and Tax
Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001

By

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Abstract:

H.R. 1836, or, the 2001 Bush tax cut, contributed greatly to economic inequality in the United States. The bill cost the federal government trillions of dollars in lost revenue while simultaneously enriching the wealthiest Americans. Despite this fact, broadcast news networks portrayed the cuts favorably during the leadup to the bill's passage on June 7th, 2001. However, a systematic study of how the five largest broadcast news networks (ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, and NBC) portrayed the cuts has not yet been completed. This paper examines how these five networks portrayed the tax cuts from January 1st through May 31st by examining 586 news transcripts. This paper is split into three sections: Language used on the broadcasts, guests brought onto the broadcasts, and public polling results displayed on the broadcasts. The results show a clear favoring of the pro-tax cut argument on all five networks. For the section on language, 58 transcripts mentioned the criticism that the bill benefitted the wealthy, while 171 transcripts mentioned the bill's working-class benefits. The guest section was even more stark, with 246 transcripts featuring a supporter of the tax cut compared with 108 transcripts featuring a guest critical of the bill. A brief section tracking public polling results then concludes this paper. The findings of this paper support Bell and Entman's claim that broadcast news networks portrayed the 2001 tax cuts favorably, and calls into question the claim that the American public supported the bill.

Keywords: Broadcast media, Bush tax cut, economic inequality, public opinion

On June 7, 2001, President George W. Bush signed H.R. 1836 into law. The tax cut primarily benefitted the wealthiest taxpayers in the United States, and the proposal maintained low levels of public support both before and after it passed. As Bush's inauguration grew nearer, media coverage focusing on his tax proposal increased. Broadcast media provided the primary conduit for information about the tax cut and its journey through Congress to reach the public. Although several news broadcasts portrayed the pending tax bill in a neutral, or negative light, a significant majority of the broadcasts were decidedly in favor of the bill. This study systematically examines the news broadcasts of the five largest media channels circa 2001: ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, and NBC during the leadup to the passage of the Bush tax bill, a period from January until the end of May, to discover the specific methods used by the networks to portray the tax cut, and how that coverage changed over time.

Broadcast coverage of the Bush tax bill can be distilled into two distinct areas: language used and the guests brought on. In addition, the polling results shared on the broadcast networks, how they changed over time, and how anchors responded to polling results are also worth studying and have been included as a third section. Across the five networks studied, all shared a similarity in the types of phrases used, e.g., "death taxes", "tax relief", etc., while also inviting significantly more guests who supported the bill compared to those who did not, and revealed polling results with insufficient context to ascertain the validity of the polling conducted. When critics of the bill did appear on-air, they usually did so alongside a supporter of the bill and the network host often steered the conversation away from substantive arguments in favor of partisan talking points such as Democrats being opposed to any tax cut, or overemphasizing the bill's working-class benefits. Though the effect of the positive coverage of the tax bill on the public perception of the bill remains uncertain, the five broadcast media channels, whether

intentional or not, clearly highlighted aspects of the bill which would potentially give it broader public support at a significantly higher margin than outlining criticisms of the bill. Out of the 586 transcripts studied, 108 featured guests critical of the bill while 246 transcripts featured guests who supported the Bush tax cut.

Concern for the economy featured heavily throughout the five networks for the period covered. President-elect, and President Bush frequently mentioned his concern for the economy while simultaneously offering his tax legislation as the solution. Though Bush's tactics would shift in the months following January and February, ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, and NBC persisted in either mentioning the flagging economy, or interviewing guests who voiced concern about the short-term and long-term economic outlook. The next major shift came in the months of March and April, where the networks pushed the narrative that the current government stimulus was the people's money, not the government's money. Other, smaller pitches by President Bush appeared in several transcripts, such as his push to have the tax cuts in order to help working-class families pay for increased gasoline prices.

Until this study, there has been no attempt to systematically look at news reports covering the 2001 Bush tax cut during the leadup to its passage into law on June 7. Despite broadcast media broadly supporting the Bush tax proposal, much debate exists within the scholarship as to whether the American public actually supported the tax bill. According to polling results throughout the period covered, public support hovers around the 50% mark, occasionally rising above but never cresting much higher than 55%. The validity of such polling has been questioned, most convincingly by Hacker and Pierson in their article "Abandoning the Middle: The Bush Tax Cuts and the Limits of Democratic Control." In the article, Hacker and Pierson used other polling results which had the level of support for the Bush tax cut around 33% when

voters were given other options rather than a simple yes-or-no style question.¹ As will be discussed later on, this analysis by Hacker and Pierson was supported through the news transcripts from January through May.

Scholarship surrounding the media's specific influence on the 2001 Bush tax cut are sparse. One such study is "The Media's Role in America's Exceptional Politics of Inequality: Framing the Bush Tax Cuts of 2001 and 2003" by Carole Bell and Robert Entman. They write that the media "directed Americans' attention to the tax cuts' apparent *collective* benefits framed as economic growth, while deemphasizing the skewed *particularistic* benefits of Bush's tax cuts and the resulting augmentation of inequality."² They go on to argue that major news networks focused on particular aspects of the tax cut over others, thereby diminishing American citizens of the ability to properly evaluate the piece of legislation.³ Given that Americans broadly support a more equitable society akin to Sweden, Bell and Entman suggest that if Americans were more aware of the true nature of the 2001 Bush tax bill then they would not have been as supportive of it as they were.⁴ While this study made use of several news transcripts to bolster their analysis, there was no systematic research done for the entire period between January and May. This study is intended to further the research done by Bell and Entman by examining how major broadcast media networks portrayed the 2001 Bush tax cuts, and how that portrayal changed over time.

Although it is unknown how much effect broadcast media had on public opinion toward the 2001 tax cuts, what is known is that broadcast news networks reached a vast audience during

¹ Hacker and Pierson, "Abandoning the Middle: The Bush Tax Cuts and the Limits of Democratic Control", *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (4). (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 34.

² Bell, Carole M, Entman, Robert. "The Media's Role in America's Exceptional Politics of Inequality: Framing the Bush Tax Cuts of 2001 and 2003", *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 16 (4), 550.

³ Bell, Entman, "The Media's Role in America's Exceptional Politics of Inequality", 550-1.

⁴ Bell, Entman, "The Media's Role in America's Exceptional Politics of Inequality", 549.

the leadup to the bill's passage. According to one study, 57% of Americans consumed some form of television news during the day, numbering almost 161 million viewers per day.⁵ 22% and 23% of Americans watched CNN and FOX respectively, while 15% watched NBC, 14% watched ABC, and 13% watched CBS per night.⁶

As for the tax bill itself, President Bush and his appointees asserted the bill as a victory for the middle and lower classes while anchors and critics charged that it benefitted the wealthy. The tax cut indeed benefitted primarily the wealthy, with the top 1% saving on average a total of \$342,472 over ten years, while the bottom 60% saved \$3,251 over ten years.⁷ Critiques of the bill primarily benefitting the wealthy appeared well before the bill passed, and featured heavily in Democratic criticism of the bill. Minority Leader Tom Daschle made frequent mention when he appeared on broadcast news programs that 40% of the tax bill went to the top 1% of taxpayers. In actuality, 38% of the bill would end up going to the top 1%, while the bottom 60% received less than 20% of the benefit.⁸ Regardless, the bill's slant towards the wealthy was overshadowed by the broadcast news networks through their use of pro-cut rhetoric and language, the large number of pro-cut guests invited on, and the polling results given and the reactions to said polls. Given that the bill's primary beneficiaries were the top 1%, and that this fact was well known by the time the bill was passed, the media's role in propagating the benefits of the bill was unjustifiable regardless of intention.

⁵ PBS.org, *Where Do We Get Our News?*, *FRONTLINE*, (PBS.org, 2007), <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/newswar/part3/stats.html>.

⁶ PBS.org, *Where Do We Get Our News?*.

⁷ Bartels, Larry, "Homer Gets a Tax Cut", *Perspectives on Politics 3 (1)*. (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 19.

⁸ Fieldhouse, Andrew, *The Bush Tax Cuts Disproportionately Benefitted the Wealthy*, (epi.org, 2011).

Section 1: Language

Throughout the five broadcast media networks studied, all employed the use of subtle, and occasionally blunt, pro-tax cut language. Beginning in January, before the inauguration of George W. Bush, broadcast media began following the announcements from Bush that the economy was in peril. In an ABC broadcast on January 3rd, coverage followed President-elect Bush for a meeting with several business leaders where he pitched his tax bill proposal. Interspersed with voice overs from Democratic officials saying they also were onboard with some form of tax cut, the news highlighted how Bush didn't believe the Fed slashing interest rates was enough to save the flagging economy, and that his tax cut was needed as well. Anchor Terry Moran said the business leaders meeting with Bush were doubtless in support of Bush's proposal, he also uncritically recycled the business leaders' assertion that Bush had a grasp on the "real" economy, i.e., a recession was ongoing regardless of what economists were saying.⁹

The consensus on whether the US economy was actually in danger of going into a downturn or recession in January was debatable. Outgoing President Clinton claimed the economy was as strong as it ever was in one of his outgoing speeches.¹⁰ It is doubtless that Clinton wished to keep his legacy intact as he left office, but his claim is bolstered by a lack of agreement among economists around the state of the economy. Bush would later be accused in some media broadcasts of deliberately "talking down" the economy in order to create more momentum for his tax cut.¹¹ Bush responded to this criticism by tweaking his messaging, saying that the US economy was weak, but fundamentally strong.¹²

⁹ ABC, *World News Tonight*, 1/03/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁰ ABC, *World News Tonight*, 1/12/01, LexisNexis.

¹¹ ABC, *Good Morning America*, 3/28/01, LexisNexis.

¹² ABC, *World News Tonight*, 3/27/01, LexisNexis.

Concern for the economy continued to appear in nearly every transcript in the months of January and February, but still appeared with regularity throughout the bill's journey into law. Early on in the push for the tax cuts, the Federal Reserve began slashing interest rates which spurred renewed debate about the state of the economy. Alan Greenspan, chair of the Federal Reserve, came out in support of a tax cut of some form or another. Though he did not specifically support Bush's tax cut proposal, Bush nevertheless took Greenspan's words as an endorsement, and subsequent media broadcasts painted it as such.¹³

On January 25th, the Federal Reserve came out with a statement that said the economy was no longer growing. Whether this was a result of natural causes or because of a self-fulfilling prophecy resulting from President Bush's rhetoric, is not clear. While there was a short, mild recession from March until September of 2001, it is unclear what caused the economic downturn. Even more surprising, is that according to one study the majority of Americans didn't even notice a recession was ongoing. A question posited in the *Blue Chip Economic Indicators* (BCEI) titled "Has the U.S slipped into a recession?" had 5% of respondents answer yes in February of 2001, 7% in June, and 15% in August. It was only the 9/11 attacks which made the majority of Americans believe a recession was occurring, well after the period Bush and the media were focusing on the economy for the tax cut.¹⁴ However, broadcast news networks took this development to create further momentum for Bush's tax cut. Anchors such as ABC's Peter Jennings called this economic slowdown a "crisis", one where the public should turn to President Bush for an answer.¹⁵ There was only one answer. Bush argued here, and nearly every other

¹³ NBC, *Nightly News*, 1/25/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁴ Kliesen, Kevin, *The 2001 Recession: How Was It Different and What Developments May Have Caused It?*. (Review, 2003), 27.

¹⁵ ABC, *World News Tonight*, 1/25/01, LexisNexis.

instance over the subsequent months, that only his tax cut plan will solve this crisis. Though some broadcast segments would criticize Bush for being a one-trick pony for his response to future varying “crises”, the five networks usually repeated his messaging without any critical analysis beyond the occasional line or two about how critics of the bill accuse it of benefitting only the wealthy.

Anti-tax rhetoric appeared sprinkled throughout the different channels. Coincidentally, a few days following ABC’s diagnosis of an American economic crisis, the network aired a broadcast on January 27 where they discussed bureaucratic waste, among other things. Though mention of Bush’s tax cut proposal did not appear in the broadcast, the timing and ferocity of the anti-tax rhetoric cannot be overlooked. During the broadcast, host John Stossel described taxation as the government “stealing money”, and that the government represented a “greedy hand.” Furthermore, Stossel argued the government doesn’t keep track of tax money, leading to immense wasting of public funds.¹⁶ CNN and NBC also both hosted segments which came out against progressive tax policies which function as a lid on economic inequality.

Towards the end of January, new data came out suggesting that the projected surplus for the year 2001 would be a full trillion dollars more than was projected, coming out to 3.1 trillion dollars instead of 2.1 trillion. President Bush immediately seized on this opportunity to argue his tax cuts were even more affordable given this development, and each of the five news networks redelivered this message to the public. On CNN, anchors reported that the Democrats privately conceded that Bush’s tax cuts were inevitable.¹⁷ Although the GOP maintained a slim majority in the Senate and the tax cut had a fair chance of passing given Bush’s conviction, the media

¹⁶ ABC, *John Stossel Goes to Washington*, 1/27/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁷ CNN, *Newsroom*, 1/23/01, LexisNexis.

nevertheless perpetuated the sense of inevitability of it passing, further diminishing whatever chance of alternative outcomes. Though Democrats largely came out against Bush's proposal, many conceded that a tax cut was in fact necessary including Minority Leader Tom Daschle. This acquiescence to tax cuts gave President Bush momentum for the legitimacy of his plan, and left Democrats fighting an uphill battle from the start, for a number of reasons which will later be discussed.

Momentum for Bush's tax cuts continued into February. According to a CBS broadcast on February 1st, cohost Brian Finnerty asserted that the recent interest rate cut all but assured an incoming recession.¹⁸ A sense of urgency developed which intertwined with the doubt and uncertainty surrounding a developing recession. President Bush, GOP officials, and various news anchors pushed this message that the tax cuts needed immediate passage to prevent an economic tailspin. Even during broadcasts where anchors such as Charles Osgood doubted that a recession was imminent, he still argued a tax cut was a good idea and that it needed to be pushed through as soon as possible.¹⁹ The presence of this "rush" to get President Bush's tax cuts signed into law, with or without the threat of a looming recession, highlights the strong desire to create momentum for the bill.

Reductions in capital gains and dividends were also a major provision of the 2001 tax bill. Primarily the wealthy benefitted, and many corporations supported the bill. In a February 8th broadcast on ABC, host Peter Jennings said that a number of special interest groups were "clamoring" for the tax cuts. After the presentation of this claim, something which a number of Americans would likely find not to be a good thing, Jennings then justified the previous claim by

¹⁸ CBS, *The Early Show*, 2/01/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁹ CBS, *The Osgood File*, 2/14/01, LexisNexis.

asserting that everyone in America is an interest group.²⁰ This was a common occurrence in the coverage of the tax bill, i.e., a criticism was voiced concerning the bill which was then immediately followed with a counterpoint or obscuration of the original criticism. In this scenario, Jennings said a majority of interest groups wanted the tax bill passed, but was then followed by the assertion that everyone in the United States was in an interest group, thereby discrediting the implicit critique that interest groups supporting the bill is a bad thing.

The trend of offering a piece of information which viewers could construe as reflecting badly on the tax cut and then following that up with either a defense or conflicting piece of information that is decidedly pro-tax cut was common across all five networks studied. Although the point-counterpoint formula is routine in broadcast coverage, the specific media coverage of the tax bill was tilted heavily in favor of the pro-cut argument. For instance, in one ABC broadcast, the anchor Lisa Sylvester said that bipartisan criticism existed regarding Bush's proposal, but didn't go into detail regarding those critiques beyond one line about how some Republicans wanted more cuts in favor of businesses. Instead, Sylvester went over the working-class benefits of the tax cut for significantly more time before moving on to another topic altogether.²¹ In another example, a clip was played where a reporter asks President Bush if his tax plan was too big, to which he responded with there are claims that the bill was too small, and that he himself thought the bill was "just right".²²

No other topic riled the passions of news anchors more than "death" taxes. The elimination of the estate tax featured prominently on Bush's tax proposal, and was often included in the one-line soundbites about what features were in the bill. Around February 18th, the five

²⁰ ABC, *World News Tonight*, 2/08/01, LexisNexis.

²¹ ABC, *World News Tonight*, 2/09/01, LexisNexis.

²² ABC, *ABC News Special Report*, 2/22/01, LexisNexis.

networks aired broadcasts reacting to a number of America's billionaires coming out in support of the estate tax. People like Bill Gates Senior and a member of the Rockefeller family argued on-air that the estate tax assisted in keeping economic inequality down, and only affected 2% of Americans. In response to the pleas of the billionaires, anchors like John Donvan and Chris Wallace on ABC²³, Miles O'Brien on CNN²⁴ and Eric Enberg on CBS all responded by invoking small businesses and family farms which were purportedly being destroyed by the "death taxes".²⁵ In another broadcast, host Charles Osgood said that a lot of Americans are millionaires now, and so therefore many people are being burdened by the "death" tax, and compared it to grave robbing. Furthermore, Osgood argued that billionaires like Rockefeller only want to keep the estate tax because they have trust funds and are able to circumvent the tax altogether. In a catchy phrase which reoccurred throughout the period, it was argued that money was better left in people's pockets.²⁶ In a gross perversion of reality, a FOX broadcast stated the estate tax was designed "during feudal times to keep the rich rich and the poor poor."²⁷

Fears of a recession continued into March, continually fueling debates over how badly tax cuts were needed. Running parallel to the discussion about how to save the economy was the assertion of multiple economists that any implementation of a tax cut will take a year for its effects to be realized. A CBS broadcast on March 8th warned that the cuts would take a year to help the economy, but still assured the cuts were inevitable to become law.²⁸ The quickest timeline offered was a full six months before the impacts of the tax cut are felt.²⁹ Long-term

²³ ABC, *Nightline*, 2/15/01, LexisNexis.

²⁴ CNN, *Sunday Morning*, 2/18/01, LexisNexis.

²⁵ CBS, *Evening News*, 2/18/01, LexisNexis.

²⁶ CBS, *The Osgood File*, 2/19/01, LexisNexis.

²⁷ FOX, *Sunday*, 2/18/01, LexisNexis.

²⁸ CBS, *Evening News*, 3/08/01, LexisNexis.

²⁹ ABC, *World News Tonight*, 3/17/01, LexisNexis.

timelines did nothing to temper the daily forecasts for the immediate economic state. Bush, guests brought onto the broadcasts, and occasionally the anchors themselves pushed the assumption that passing Bush's tax cut quickly will result in economic salvation.

Around March 13th, economic concerns intensified with different networks using different reasons to prove that the economy was indeed faltering. On a short ABC program, co-anchor Rebecca Cooper covered government waste, described how inefficient government was and how millions of taxpayer dollars were going to unnecessary expenditures such as a 5-million-dollar dorm for government fish and wildlife workers. Cooper finished the report by saying the frivolous spending was raising questions about government efficiency, thereby heavily implying that the government didn't deserve the current surplus it was experiencing.³⁰ On CBS, sluggish retail sales were used as evidence that the country, and the economy specifically, needs the Bush tax proposal.³¹ On CNN, correspondent John King argued that elected officials should rush through Bush's tax cut, and should enlarge the bill to save people even more money. King pointed to consumer confidence being the lowest in four years, while others such as CNN senior political analyst William Schneider stated the tax cuts would take too long to take effect to have any noticeable difference.³² Meanwhile, FOX news criticized Bush for using his tax cut as an answer to every domestic issue which has cropped up since his inauguration.³³ FOX's criticism was not directed toward the tax cut itself, but more so as a critique of Bush falling back on the same answer regardless of the present issue. In the majority of cases concerning FOX, criticisms levied at Bush amounted to advice-giving, criticizing his

³⁰ ABC, *World News Now*, 3/14/01, LexisNexis.

³¹ CBS, *Evening News*, 3/13/01, LexisNexis.

³² CNN, *Inside Politics*, 3/13/01, LexisNexis.

³³ FOX, *The Edge*, 3/19/01, LexisNexis.

rhetoric and offering alternatives instead, such as saying his messaging needed to be clearer concerning his tax cut instead of muddying the waters by offering his tax cut as a solution for everything.³⁴ NBC loosely followed FOX, though NBC did not criticize Bush for his tax cut recommendation in the face of rising energy prices.³⁵

In one of the more blatant instances of pro-Bush tax cut rhetoric, a CNN broadcast on March 3rd asked why the media was allowing Democrats to play the “Class warfare card”.³⁶ This comes as a response to multiple Democratic guests on varying networks who argued that the Bush cuts primarily benefit the wealthy which directly contradicted the image President Bush was attempting to portray during the campaign trail and his first few months in office. Further in the March 3rd CNN broadcast, Bush’s tax bill was called bipartisan and that the cut needed to happen or else the government would get even more reckless with its spending.³⁷ While it is true that twelve Democrats supported the Bush tax bill in the Senate, it is worth noting that three of the twelve (Herbert Kohl, Diane Feinstein, and Ben Nelson) were multi-millionaires themselves. Four others (Baucus, John Breaux, Blanche Lincoln, and Torricelli) stood on the Senate finance committee, which had included other provisions so that they would be more likely to sign the final bill.³⁸ CNN also contributed to the growing momentum for Bush’s legislation on their broadcast on March 26th by saying the slowing economy was creating a decidedly pro-tax cut environment in Washington, and that its support was enjoying its highest levels to date without specifying what that level of support was.³⁹

³⁴ FOX, *The Edge*, 3/19/01, LexisNexis.

³⁵ NBC, *Today*, 3/19/01, LexisNexis.

³⁶ CNN, *Saturday Morning*, 3/03/01, LexisNexis.

³⁷ CNN, *Saturday Morning*, 3/03/01, LexisNexis.

³⁸ Bartels, Larry. “Homer Gets a Warm Hug: A Note on Ignorance and Extenuation”, *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (4). (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 787.

³⁹ CNN, *Ahead of the Curve*, 3/26/01, LexisNexis.

In April the Senate slashed the proposed tax cut from 1.6 trillion over ten years to 1.2 trillion over ten years. Mere days after CNN reported the likelihood for a tax cut had never been higher, ABC reported that the tax cut was hanging by a thread in the senate after the vote to reduce the bill by one fourth.⁴⁰ This sense of peril contradicted nearly every broadcast before and after this piece, all of which nearly guaranteed passage of a tax cut in some form or another. In this ABC broadcast, Bush was chastised for not fighting hard enough and that the Republicans were fracturing on the inside because a few moderate Republicans joined the Democrats in voting to decrease the size of the tax bill.

A media flurry developed surrounding the decision to reduce the size of the tax cut. CBS echoed ABC's worry about the tax cut's ability to survive in the evenly-divided senate. Bush's reaction to the deal had substantial air time where he claimed victory in the negotiations. Host Bob Schieffer of CBS was less sure, but still gave the victory to Bush as the Democrats were still acquiescing to more than they would have wanted otherwise.⁴¹ CNN correspondent Johnathan Karl claimed Bush had been defeated in one broadcast, continuing to advocate for abolishing the estate tax⁴², while in another broadcast a few days later host Stephen Frazier claimed the tax cut was still massive even though he and his guest Rick Dunham conceded that a family making 35,000 dollars a year would save a mere fifty dollars under the plan.⁴³ FOX news blamed Democrats for reducing the bill's size and argued that every reduction was bad for the economy. Further, they claimed Democrats will do anything to defeat President Bush regardless of the consequences.⁴⁴ NBC's Tom Brokaw and Lisa Myers focused less on the senate reduction and

⁴⁰ ABC, *World News Tonight*, 4/04/01, LexisNexis.

⁴¹ CBS, *Face the Nation*, 4/08/01, LexisNexis.

⁴² CNN, *Inside Politics*, 4/06/01, LexisNexis.

⁴³ CNN, *Sunday*, 4/08/01, LexisNexis.

⁴⁴ FOX, *The Edge*, 4/05/01, LexisNexis.

instead focused on the bad-faith argument that “death” taxes should be abolished in order to save small businesses and family farms.⁴⁵

In an ABC broadcast on April 13th, anchor John Stossel claimed Washington was spending the viewers’ money, and that government spending far outweighs any tax cut proposal while also chastising elected officials for “screaming” about all the proposed cuts.⁴⁶ While nine days later, cohost Cokie Roberts gave Democrats some advice for how to frame their arguments against Bush’s proposal for a broadcast on April 22nd. Following polling results which stated that the majority of Americans feel that Bush catered to big business and special interest groups over individuals, Roberts urged Democrats to focus their messaging by accusing Bush’s tax cut is nothing more than a favor to these interest groups and corporations.⁴⁷

Anchors did little to hide their displeasure with the Democratic party as the Bush tax bill neared passage in May. The broadcasts around May 22nd and 23rd covered the final deliberations in the senate, and many expected the bill to pass as early as that week⁴⁸. Democrats, devoid of clear leadership and cohesive strategy from the beginning, tried to delay the passage by introducing amendments to Bush’s bill which would, according to them, help the working class.⁴⁹ The Republicans subsequently defeated every amendment introduced. On ABC, anchor Vic Ratner accused the Democrats of ruining everyone’s plans by including doomed last-minute amendments onto the tax bill.⁵⁰ Anchors Natalie Allen and Johnathan Karl expressed their disbelief on CNN because of the Democrats needlessly stalling.⁵¹

⁴⁵ NBC, *Nightly News*, 4/04/01, LexisNexis.

⁴⁶ ABC, *20/20 Friday*, 4/13/01, LexisNexis.

⁴⁷ ABC, *News This Week*, 4/22/01, LexisNexis.

⁴⁸ ABC, *World News Now*, 5/22/01, LexisNexis.

⁴⁹ ABC, *World News Now*, 5/23/01, LexisNexis.

⁵⁰ ABC, *World News Now*, 5/23/01, LexisNexis.

⁵¹ CNN, *Live Today*, 5/22/01, LexisNexis.

Bush was not above criticism during this period as well, though the criticism was not universal across the networks. In the month of May, Bush responded to rising gas prices with a call for his tax cuts, arguing the savings people will get back will be enough to offset the rising prices for fuel.⁵² Both ABC and FOX criticized the President for using his tax cut as a solution to every developing problem in the country. ABC charged that Bush's argument changed each month as to why the country needed his tax cut, ranging from basic fairness, using the "faltering" economy, consumer debt, and rising gas prices.⁵³ FOX, on the other hand, cut right to the point and called Bush's tactic stupid and that he shouldn't be saying it.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, CBS, CNN, and NBC relayed Bush's tax cut solution without any analysis of their own.

The tone shifted, however, with the bill's passage in late May. ABC⁵⁵, CNN⁵⁶, and FOX⁵⁷ all stated the bill's passage was a huge victory for President Bush. On ABC, anchors praised Republican discipline in getting the bill passed, and proclaimed Bush's victory while admitting the public had placed the tax cut as a low priority.⁵⁸ One day later, the ABC broadcast on May 27th involved the hosts going over the working-class benefits of the bill. One member of the roundtable discussion, former Gore campaign manager Donna Brazile, criticized the bill, saying it was rammed through Congress along largely partisan lines, that it was a fiscally irresponsible bill which depended on a government surplus which was tenuous at best, and finally criticizing that even with the rebate checks which were included in the final bill, the working-class were only getting about 300-600 in savings depending on whether they were

⁵² ABC, *World News Tonight*, 5/11/01, LexisNexis.

⁵³ ABC, *World News Tonight*, 5/11/01, LexisNexis.

⁵⁴ FOX, *Beltway Boys*, 5/19/01, LexisNexis.

⁵⁵ ABC, *World News Tonight*, 5/26/01, LexisNexis.

⁵⁶ CNN, *Ahead of the Curve*, 5/21/01, LexisNexis.

⁵⁷ FOX, *Sunday*, 5/20/01, LexisNexis.

⁵⁸ ABC, *World News Tonight*, 5/26/01, LexisNexis.

single or in a family.⁵⁹ When confronted with this criticism, and how the 300-600 dollars in savings amounted to a negligible amount of aid compared with the savings of the very wealthy, the other hosts at the roundtable pushed back. Host Sam Donaldson immediately propositioned that Ms. Brazile should surrender their savings if they didn't like it.⁶⁰ This rhetoric of "be quiet and be grateful" was likely effective when much of the United States operates under the pretense of self-sufficiency, and the broadcast ended before any response could be levied against this pushback. On other broadcasts such as CNN⁶¹, FOX⁶², and NBC⁶³, anchors expressed excitement over the bill's passage, and argued that it'll jumpstart the economy.

A brief section of quantitative analysis will conclude the language section of this paper.

Figure 1:

Network	ABC	CBS	CNN	FOX	NBC	Total
Financially Irresponsible	13	8	9	3	10	43

One of the more prominent criticisms of the tax bill levied during the period between January and the end of May, 2001, was that the tax bill was financially irresponsible, reckless, etc. On ABC, this critique of the bill appeared in 13 transcripts out of 113 total ABC transcripts. As for CBS, the irresponsible critique appeared 8 times out of 118 total transcripts. On CNN, the critique appeared 9 instances out of 147 transcripts. FOX had the irresponsible critique appear

⁵⁹ ABC, *News This Week*, 5/27/01, LexisNexis.

⁶⁰ ABC, *News This Week*, 5/27/01, LexisNexis.

⁶¹ CNN, *Event/Special*, 5/26/01, LexisNexis.

⁶² FOX, *Beltway Boys*, 5/26/01, LexisNexis.

⁶³ NBC, *Nightly News*, 5/29/01, LexisNexis.

the lowest amount, with 3 times out of 113. NBC had the criticism appear with the second highest percentage after ABC, with 10 instances out of 95 transcripts.

Figure 2:

Network	ABC	CBS	CNN	FOX	NBC	Total
Benefits the Wealthy	17	11	14	7	9	58

The most prominent critique of the tax bill was that it benefitted the wealthy rather than the middle and lower classes. On ABC, the bill favoring the wealthy appeared 17 separate instances, regardless of time spent during the broadcast speaking about the critique. On CBS the number stood at 11 transcripts. CNN had 14 transcripts mentioning the bill favoring the wealthy. FOX meanwhile stated the wealth critique 7 separate occurrences. Lastly, NBC mentioned it 9 times.

Figure 3:

Network	ABC	CBS	CNN	FOX	NBC	Total
Mention of the Economy	45	46	50	30	29	200

Comparatively, the bill's projected effect on the economy featured much more heavily across all five broadcast news sites. On ABC, talk about the economy and the tax bill's projected beneficial impact on the economy stood at 45 instances. On CBS, the economy was mentioned 46 different times. As for CNN, the tax economy was directly or indirectly associated with the tax bill in 50 transcripts. On FOX, it was 30 transcripts. NBC had 29 transcripts mentioning the economy and the bill.

Figure 4:

Network	ABC	CBS	CNN	FOX	NBC	Total
Working Class Benefits	41	38	48	23	21	171

Throughout the media coverage of the tax bill the working-class benefits of the bill were highlighted. By working-class benefits, it is meant the marriage penalty reduction, the child credit increase, and the “death taxes.” Though the estate tax impacted only the top 2% of estates, “death taxes” were largely portrayed as negatively impacting family farms and small business owners, and so references to estate taxes were included. On ABC, working-class benefits appeared in 41 transcripts, while in CBS they appeared in 38 transcripts. Working-class benefits appeared the most on CNN, appearing in 48 transcripts. FOX had the benefits mentioned in 23 broadcasts while on NBC it was discussed 21 separate occurrences.

Figure 5:

Network	ABC	CBS	CNN	FOX	NBC	Total
Confidence Bill Would Pass	24	33	54	29	26	166
Anxiety About Bill's Prospects	3	2	0	1	1	7

Figure 5 displays the distribution of broadcasts where the tax bill was portrayed as having a near certainty of passing compared to when the bill was presented as being in danger of not passing. Only around the time of when the Senate reduced the bill's size in April did broadcast networks say the overall bill was in danger.

Figure 6:

Network	ABC	CBS	CNN	FOX	NBC	Total
Bush's Words	32	43	43	22	21	161

The last section of quantitative analysis, and the last part of section one, concerns President George W. Bush himself. President Bush appeared on only two broadcasts within the transcripts researched, but video clips of him speaking directly were used far more often. On CNN in particular, entire segments of President Bush's speeches were broadcast live multiple times when other news networks rarely did beyond his inauguration speech. On ABC, Bush's own words were used in 32 broadcasts. On CBS, Bush's words appeared in 43 broadcasts and was only matched by CNN where 43 broadcasts was also the amount used. FOX and NBC had 22, and 21 instances respectively.

Section 2: Guests

Section two will also follow a loose chronological progression. Bush's economic advisor Lawrence Lindsay toured the major broadcast media networks in early January, 2001. He first went to ABC on January 4th, a day after Bush appointed him as economic advisor. While on ABC, cohost Charles Gibson grilled Lindsay about why Americans needed a tax cut when the Federal Reserve just cut the interest rate. Lindsay replied by framing the Bush tax cuts as having an immediate impact on the economy, and would subsequently reverse any economic downturn. Furthermore, Lindsay claimed that the tax cut would put 1600 dollars in the pockets of Americans who make 40,000 dollars a year, a figure which could only be reached if including the child tax credit as well as the marriage penalty reduction, not solely based off income rate

deductions as Lindsay implied.⁶⁴ Cohost Charles Gibson of ABC pushed back, saying that any tax cut would take years to be felt, while an interest rate cut is felt immediately.⁶⁵

Lindsay went next to CBS, where he echoed the need for a tax cut despite the recent interest rate cut. There he met less of a pushback from his interviewer, though the timeline for the tax cut having an effect on the economy was raised there as well.⁶⁶ Lindsay then appeared on CNN, where it was revealed that he was the “chief-architect” of the Bush tax bill.⁶⁷ On his first visit to CNN in the new year, Lindsay argued it was better to cut the rates of businesses instead of lower and middle-income Americans. He went further and advocated for trickle-down economics, saying that the top income tax brackets should be slashed in order to create more jobs.⁶⁸ Lindsay then went to FOX where he made a similar argument: that the rich should save more because they pay more.⁶⁹ This rhetoric appeared frequently in broadcast coverage of the proposal, yet it is unclear what effect, if any, this reasoning had on the 160 million Americans consuming this type of news source.

Lindsay reappeared on ABC on January 7th for a second interview. In this interview, Lindsay focused on saving the money of consumers with Bush’s tax cut. He then argued that elected officials needed to accelerate their efforts to pass the cuts and save the economy. Co-anchor Cokie Roberts asked about what will then happen to the government surplus, to which Lindsay responded by advocating that the surplus be destroyed in the short-term, with the healed economy recreating the surplus later.⁷⁰ Lindsay made one final appearance in January, appearing

⁶⁴ ABC, *Good Morning America*, 1/04/01, LexisNexis.

⁶⁵ ABC, *Good Morning America*, 1/04/01, LexisNexis.

⁶⁶ CBS, *The Osgood File*, 1/05/01, LexisNexis.

⁶⁷ CNN, *Evans, Novak, Hunt, and Shields*, 1/06/01, LexisNexis.

⁶⁸ CNN, *Evans, Novak, Hunt, and Shields*, 1/06/01, LexisNexis.

⁶⁹ FOX, *Fox News Sunday*, 1/07/01, LexisNexis.

⁷⁰ ABC, *News This Week*, 1/07/01, LexisNexis.

on CNN on January 28th where he presented working-class benefits in the bill while using charged terms such as “death taxes” and “tax relief” and advocating that the economy desperately needed this cut.⁷¹

Overall, CBS brought on the most guests critical of the tax bill in the month of January, with two. Democratic Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota appeared on January 7th where he argued that a tax cut will most likely be passed this year, but advocated for a bill which prioritized middle and lower-income Americans while also not jeopardizing the government surplus.⁷² The second critical guest was Professor Michael Dyson appeared on a January 13th broadcast to promote their new book on Martin Luther King Jr. When prompted by cohost Russ Mitchell about what advice MLK would have for George W. Bush, Dyson said that the taxes should instead be raised on the rich and the redistributive money raised from that tax hike should then be given to the poor.⁷³ In January, networks rarely interviewed guests who fully disagreed with Bush’s tax proposal without also having a pro-cut guest who was simultaneously interviewed. The two exceptions were CBS with the two guests mentioned above, and NBC with one guest in the form of Democratic Senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut on January 28th.⁷⁴

Even when Republicans and Democrats debated their respective views on Bush’s tax proposal, substantial criticism was only rarely levied against the bill. On a January 28th broadcast on CBS, Democratic representative Charles Rangel of New York and Republican senator Phil Gramm of Texas discussed the tax cuts. Representative Rangel focused on the timing of the bill, arguing that there was no rush to pass it since it would take too long to stimulate the economy to

⁷¹ CNN, *Late Edition*, 1/28/01, LexisNexis.

⁷² CBS, *Face the Nation*, 1/07/01, LexisNexis.

⁷³ CBS, *The Saturday Early Show*, 1/13/01, LexisNexis.

⁷⁴ NBC, *Meet the Press*, 1/28/01, LexisNexis.

have any noticeable effect on the current economic worries. In response, senator Gramm proclaimed the tax bill would be passed soon. In addition, he argued it was going to be a bipartisan bill, and questioned why wouldn't they give money back to the American People while using charged terms such as "death taxes".⁷⁵ The back-and-forth depicted in this broadcast was a feature of these TV policy debates, with the one "opposed" to the tax bill offering unsubstantial criticism of the bill while the guest "supportive" of the bill used largely similar anti-tax rhetoric regardless of who was speaking.

Sections of broadcasts featuring a Republican and a Democrat debating each other became more prominent in February. A February 11th broadcast on ABC featured Democrat Tom Daschle and Republican Tom Delay of Texas where they sparred over the viability of Bush's plan. Representative Delay accused Democrats of not wanting a tax cut, and assuring viewers that America could have a tax cut as well as Medicare, Social Security, etc. when faced with the prompt that the majority of Americans prefer social spending to Bush's tax cut.⁷⁶ Senator Daschle largely focused on the need to pay down the debt while also advocating for a modest tax cut targeted at the middle and lower classes. As the debate moved forward, anchor Cokie Roberts cut off Daschle as he was explaining why the Bush tax cuts favored the wealthy, and changed the conversation entirely. Roberts then focused on Senator Daschle, asking him if he supported the various parts of Bush's tax cuts without asking if he supported the entire package. When Daschle attempted to explain his position beyond a simple yes or no, Roberts cut him off and moved onto the next question. By the end of the questions, Daschle had supported every component of the Bush tax bill, including estate tax reform, which representative Delay also agreed with.

⁷⁵ CBS, *Face the Nation*, 1/28/01, LexisNexis.

⁷⁶ ABC, *News This Week*, 2/11/01, LexisNexis.

Compared to Delay, Daschle received a much colder treatment from Roberts during this broadcast, putting him into a defensive position for the majority of the interview and leaving the Democrats looking as though they only disagreed with the Bush cut purely because of partisanship.⁷⁷

Democrats continued their strategy of claiming to support a fiscally intelligent tax cut which preserves the surplus in another broadcast on CNN on February 4th. Democratic Senator Cristopher Dodd of Connecticut began the interview with Wolf Blitzer and was given substantial time to explain why people should want to preserve the surplus. Blitzer periodically interrupted Dodd, undercutting what Dodd was saying and playing clips of President Bush speaking. Afterwards, Republican Senator Phil Gramm reasserted that everyone can and should get a tax cut, and he unapologetically said that includes billionaires and millionaires.⁷⁸ The broadcast then switched to a section where viewers called in to ask questions. Callers asked about the tax cut benefitting the wealthy. Only Gramm was allowed to respond, which he said that everyone deserved a cut. The next caller asked about the state of the economy, only Dodd got to reply where he focused on the rich paying less in taxes now than ever. Then, a caller voiced concern about a deficit explosion occurring if the tax cut was passed, claiming that is precisely what happened in the 80s with Reagan's cuts. Only Gramm got to respond, and he lamented how Democrats believed anyone who got a tax cut is wealthy in their eyes, and therefore shouldn't get one.⁷⁹ Once again, Gramm reiterated that the cuts primarily focused on middle-income Americans, a blatant falsity. Blitzer abruptly ended the segment once Gramm was finished,

⁷⁷ ABC, *News This Week*, 2/11/01, LexisNexis.

⁷⁸ CNN, *Late Edition*, 2/04/01, LexisNexis.

⁷⁹ CNN, *Late Edition*, 2/04/01, LexisNexis.

leaving Gramm with substantial airtime without any rebuttal unlike Dodd who began the segment but was continually undercut by video clips and Wolf Blitzer.

On NBC, Republican Representative Bill Thomas of California and Democratic Senator Ernest Hollings of South Carolina met on February 11th to discuss the tax cuts. Representative Thomas repeated the same rhetoric about having the tax cuts and keeping the surplus, along with the cuts being fair and saving the economy. Senator Hollings, however, deviated from the previous instances already mentioned. Hollings argued that there wasn't a surplus at all, and that by 2011 there was going to be an additional 800 billion dollars in debt added to the US deficit. As a result, he argued that there shouldn't be a tax cut and the US government should continue doing as it has been for the last eight years under Clinton.⁸⁰ An argument between the two ensued about whether it was Clinton who paid down the debt or if it was the Republican congress which paid it down. Representative Thomas evaded the charge that over 40% of the tax cut benefits the wealthiest 1%.

Bush-appointed officials also made frequent appearances on the five broadcast networks during the five-month span, and February was no different. One such appearance was by Karen Hughes, counselor to President Bush. During her visit, anchor Jane Clayson told her that many Americans preferred to have a smaller tax cut than the one being offered, and that they preferred the cuts to be targeted toward middle and lower-income Americans instead of the rich. Hughes responded by emphasizing the Bush proposal was in fact targeting primarily poor Americans, but also added that it was unfair that the wealthiest were paying the amount they were currently paying.⁸¹ After Hughes reemphasized the cuts were across-the-board, Clayson gently pushed

⁸⁰ NBC, *Meet the Press*, 2/11/01, LexisNexis.

⁸¹ CBS, *The Early Show*, 2/27/01, LexisNexis.

back and asked doesn't the tax cut favor the rich? Hughes denied this, instead replying the Bush tax cut favored every American. It was clear that by February, there was a general awareness amongst both anchors and the general public that Bush's tax plan favored the wealthiest Americans. However, the trend of inviting Bush officials onto the networks, uncritical hosts, and the priority of playing Bush's speeches on-air continues throughout the leadup to the bill's passage.

Supporters of Bush's tax proposal were much more likely to be given airtime without a simultaneous guest with an opposing opinion. One such occurrence happened on a February 10th broadcast on CNN where Republican Congressman Rob Portman of Ohio made a guest appearance. The meeting began with Portman saying that despite widespread support for Bush's tax cuts, there was going to be additional pressure to increase the amount of savings in the bill. Cohost Al Hunt then pivoted to Democratic criticism of the bill, saying it focused on the rich. Before letting Portman answer the question, cohost Robert Novak assisted Portman by asking: "Why aren't you all just more honest and forthright and say, hey, we're going to give more to the very wealthy because we think they're the most productive elements in society?"⁸² Portman then agreed but then still alleged the poor benefitted the most from the bill. Though this is just one comparison out of many, it is still worth noting that the subtle help during questioning during the CNN February 10th broadcast compared with the forceful "yes or no" line of questions in the February 11th ABC broadcast showed a bias toward those in support of Bush's tax cut.

Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, Lawrence Lindsay, and Dick Cheney all made appearances on broadcast networks during the month of March. Treasury Secretary O'Neill

⁸² CNN, *Evans, Novak, Hunt, and Shields*, 2/10/01, LexisNexis.

appeared twice on broadcast media channels during the month of March. His first appearance came on March 4th on NBC, where he said he wasn't sure if a recession was imminent. However, he did reaffirm the need for speedy tax relief, and that it was all but assured to pass in the coming months. He went on to push back against claims that Bush's proposal favored the rich by claiming the exact numbers for the cut weren't out yet, so any criticisms levied by the Democratic Party wasn't fair.⁸³ Finally, O'Neill came out against the "trigger" proposal being debated at the time, an implementation to only have the tax cuts take effect if there was a government surplus, thereby decreasing the risk for running a deficit. O'Neill justified his position on the trigger proposal by saying all the numbers in the tax cut add up, shortly after saying the numbers aren't out yet.⁸⁴

O'Neill's other appearance came on March 25th on ABC. During his stay, O'Neill again said the economy wasn't clearly in a recession, but it could be better. He claimed the tax cut focused primarily on the middle class, to which he received no rebuttal.⁸⁵ By this point, the anchors would have been aware of the criticism Bush's proposal was skewed toward the wealthy, yet O'Neill was given uncritical speaking time on air.

Meanwhile, Lawrence Lindsay made a singular appearance in March, this time going to NBC. While there, Lindsay once again advocated for speedy passage of Bush's proposal, and mentioned the need to abolish "death" taxes. However, he went further this time and accused partisans of coming up with false information about the tax cuts, and implied that NBC was biased against the cuts by using the projected cost of the Bush tax cuts over ten years, a sum of

⁸³ NBC, *Meet the Press*, 3/04/01, LexisNexis.

⁸⁴ NBC, *Meet the Press*, 3/04/01, LexisNexis.

⁸⁵ ABC, *News This Week*, 3/25/01, LexisNexis.

2.6 trillion.⁸⁶ In actuality, the Bush tax cuts added 5.6 trillion dollars to the deficit from 2001 to 2018, accounting for one third of the federal debt owed in 2018.⁸⁷

Vice President Dick Cheney appeared twice during March. One broadcast had a more critical interview with the Vice President, while the other largely was not. Beginning with the less critical interview, Cheney appeared on CNN on March 4th where he spoke of the working class benefits of Bush's tax cut as well as the assurance that the plan was responsible and all the numbers added up to prevent a deficit.⁸⁸ Host Wolf Blitzer offered little pushback, though they did mention brief Democratic criticism, thereby relegating critique of the bill to partisan talking points. Cheney also used the "rich make more so they should save more" argument, justifying the skew towards the wealthy by hiding behind a veneer of fairness.⁸⁹

On the other hand, another March 4th broadcast, this one on CBS, featured a much more critical interview with Vice President Cheney. In this interview, anchor Bob Schieffer told Cheney that Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan advocated for a more cautious approach than the full steam ahead strategy Bush was then employing, and instead do a phase-in tax cut approach. Cheney rejected this and said their tax cut was phased in already, but the conversation pivoted towards having the trigger component in the tax cut to preserve the surplus. Cheney focused on saying there was going to be a tax cut no matter what. Schieffer then brought up that there was around 20 billion dollars in "unspecified cuts"⁹⁰ in the bill, to which Cheney assured them that the 20-billion-dollar figure was in fact a good thing, as they are normally much larger

⁸⁶ NBC, *Meet the Press*, 3/18/01, LexisNexis.

⁸⁷ Horton, E. *The Legacy of the 2001 and 2003 "Bush" Tax Cuts*. (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017), <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/the-legacy-of-the-2001-and-2003-bush-tax-cuts>.

⁸⁸ CNN, *Late Edition*, 3/04/01, LexisNexis.

⁸⁹ CNN, *Late Edition*, 3/04/01, LexisNexis.

⁹⁰ CBS, *Face the Nation*, 3/04/01, LexisNexis.

in bills like this. This interview was one of the more critical of the Bush-appointees, and demonstrated that when the pro-cut rhetoric was sufficiently challenged, there was little answer besides restating the pro-cut rhetoric but in different words.

One particular segment on CNN stuck out compared to other broadcasts based entirely off the surprising language used by Greg Valliere, a guest political economist. Mr. Valliere called the 1.6 trillion-dollar tax cut “puny” and that it was “too little too late”⁹¹. He advocated the tax cut be made much larger, and that it be passed immediately. The hostility of Greg Valliere towards the tax cut was only matched by the opposition of the anchors during segments about the estate tax back in February.

A developing tactic used by President Bush and those who supported his legislation was bringing on small business owners and middle-class families to speak with and show off their support. While President Bush campaigned with some middle-class families to highlight the working-class benefits of his tax cut proposal, it was only a few months into his presidency when he brought some of them back to push for his bill. During a March 16th broadcast on CNN, Bush met with small business owners to discuss the merits of his tax cut⁹², while on a March 8th broadcast on NBC a “family business owner” named Fabiola Francisco appeared to say she was excited about the tax cut and that she would get a three-thousand-dollar tax break. Reporter Joe Johns went on to say many Americans were excited about the tax bill, and said that a family with two children who made 55,000 dollars per year would save \$1,953.⁹³ However, this number is only true if the child tax credit was included in the final number.

⁹¹ CNN, *Ahead of the Curve*, 3/12/01, LexisNexis.

⁹² CNN, *Live Event*, 3/16/01, LexisNexis.

⁹³ NBC, *Today*, 3/08/01, LexisNexis.

In an ABC broadcast on April 24th, host Ted Koppel praised Bush as a good leader following an airing of part of his speech. Later in the broadcast, former Presidential advisor David Gergen called the tax cut a bipartisan piece of legislation followed by saying he was flummoxed that a sizable portion of the public still wasn't onboard with Bush's program. Gergen said: "Here was a president elected with 48 percent of the vote, and that so far, he has not moved much beyond that 48 percent figure in bringing the public over to his side. And a lot of people are on the other side of that divide tend to be more dismissive of him than I think--than I think is warranted. But he's still facing that. The popular culture seems to encourage people to be dismissive. And I think that's unfortunate for him and, to a degree, frankly, it's unfair."⁹⁴ By April of 2001, the bill's slant towards the rich was well established, and so Gergen's plea for the public to "give Bush a chance" does not read as genuine.

Although the Democratic Party did not seemingly know how to respond to the Bush tax bill proposal, the critique that the bill was for the wealthy was well known by March. Despite this knowledge, news broadcasts did not mention this criticism as much as they could have, particularly in instances when supporters of the bill appeared without a counterpart who didn't support it. To be clear, broadcast media channels had no obligation to air both sides of the issue because of Ronald Reagan's repeal of the fairness doctrine in 1987, which "required licensed radio and television broadcasters to present fair and balanced coverage of controversial issues of interest to their communities, including by granting equal airtime to opposing candidates for public office."⁹⁵ In the face of a substantial difference in number of guests brought on who were for the tax cut compared to those against it, the least the networks could have done would be to

⁹⁴ ABC, *ABC News: Nightline*, 4/24/01, LexisNexis.

⁹⁵ Stefon, M. Fairness doctrine. (Encyclopedia Britannica), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fairness-Doctrine>.

make greater mention of the substantial criticism of the bill where it mostly benefits the top taxpayers.

On an April 16th broadcast on CNN, guest Frank Newport rationalized a poll showing 65% of Americans thought their taxes were too high by saying that anyone who doesn't think their taxes are too high must be low-income people.⁹⁶ Though Bush's tax cut is not directly mentioned, the implications are clear. If you didn't support the President's tax cut, you must've been a low-income person. In a country which prides itself on the image of economic mobility, many view the charge of being "low-income" despite having the opportunities to advance on the socio-economic ladder is seen as a poor reflection on their character.

Former governor Mario Cuomo gave a clear analysis of why the Democrats were losing the tax cut battle so thoroughly. On an April 30th broadcast on CBS, Cuomo appeared alongside former representative of New York Jack Kemp to discuss Bush's first 100 days. During the visit, Cuomo argued that the tax cut was the biggest issue facing America at that moment, and thus far the Democrats have largely failed at properly confronting it. The reasons he gave for this failure was a lack of Democratic leadership with the disappearance of Al Gore following his electoral defeat a few months ago, and the other reason being the Democrats weren't simply fighting hard enough against the partisanship in the bill and in the pro-tax cut rhetoric.⁹⁷ Former representative Kemp, meanwhile, poked fun at Cuomo for what he said before reasserting that the tax cut was going to be a triumph for America and that everyone in the country deserved tax relief.⁹⁸ While Cuomo's analysis of Democratic failure is deserving of analysis in its own right, it was also worth noting that on President Clinton's last day in office, he pardoned fugitive billionaire Marc

⁹⁶ CNN, *Live at Daybreak*, 4/16/01, LexisNexis.

⁹⁷ CBS, *Early Show*, 4/30/01, LexisNexis.

⁹⁸ CBS, *Early Show*, 4/30/01, LexisNexis.

Rich in a widely criticized move. Democrats had no answer to this pardon beyond reaffirming the President's constitutional right to pardon anyone they saw fit, and as a result many Democrats were hesitant to appear on broadcast media during the early months of 2001 to avoid having to answer a question they were ill-prepared to.

Another broadcast which stuck out, this time for offering a substantial debate between two figures was the April 22nd broadcast on CNN. The former Clinton Labor Secretary Robert Reich debated former representative Jack Kemp about Bush's tax cut. Though partisan talking points were present in the debate, e.g., Bush's cut is modest compared to Kennedy and Reagan's cuts, tax relief, etc., a substantive back-and-forth ensued about whether the tax cut was supply-side economics, to which Reich argued that the tax cut was not supply-side economics, and that supply-side economics didn't work at all following the deficit ballooning of the 1980s.⁹⁹ As a solution, Reich offered more money be directed toward consumers who drive the economy. Kemp muddied the waters by arguing Reich's proposal amounted to Keynesian economics after Reich had levied the same charge against Kemp earlier in the broadcast. The debate later focused on where the tax cuts should target, with Kemp arguing the cuts should come out of capital gains and death taxes and Reich arguing tax cuts should target social security tax so that middle and lower-income Americans save one thousand dollars the first year instead of one hundred or less under the current proposal, and thus leading to an economic revival.¹⁰⁰ The significance of this broadcast is clear. This was one of the few instances where a substantive, albeit still partisan, debate took place between two guests and the host did not cut anyone off nor forcefully steer the conversation.

⁹⁹ CNN, *Late Edition*, 4/22/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁰⁰ CNN, *Late Edition*, 4/22/01, LexisNexis.

Democrats friendly to Bush's tax cut proposal made appearances on broadcast news a handful of times during April as well. On an April 29th broadcast on CBS Democratic Senator John Breaux of Louisiana appeared without a Republican counterpart to speak about the pending legislation sitting before Congress. Breaux was on the senate finance committee and would later be one of the twelve Democrats who voted to pass the 2001 tax bill into law. While on the show, Senator Breaux spoke of the Democrats constantly giving ground in the size of the tax cut they're willing to accept, thereby implying that the 1.1 trillion-dollar tax cut the senate had just passed was more bipartisan than it actually was in the evenly divided senate.¹⁰¹ Senator Breaux mentioned the bill was being worked on by both moderate Democrats and moderate Republicans, that a bill was absolutely going to pass into law, and that the American people would emerge victorious from the Bush tax cut.¹⁰² Another similar instance happened on an NBC broadcast on April 15th, when another Democrat who would vote for the bill, Robert Torricelli, appeared alongside a handful of other guests to talk about the President's budget and larger tax cut battle.¹⁰³

As the tax bill neared total passage in May, fewer guests appeared than in previous months. Republican Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi appeared twice in May, once on ABC and once on NBC. During his appearance on ABC, Senator Lott, who appeared without a Democratic counterpart, was given free airtime to espouse the virtues of having less government and more freedom.¹⁰⁴ First on the discussion was the decision of Jim Jeffords to leave the Republican Party and become an Independent, thereby giving the Senate majority to the Democrats. Though

¹⁰¹ CBS, *Face the Nation*, 4/29/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁰² CBS, *Face the Nation*, 4/29/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁰³ NBC, *Meet the Press*, 4/15/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁰⁴ ABC, *News This Week*, 5/27/01, LexisNexis.

Jeffords was reportedly upset with how the Bush tax cut was rammed through the House and the Senate and was the catalyst for him leaving the GOP, he still voted to pass the tax cut. Further on in the same broadcast, Democratic Senator John Breaux and Republican Senator Olympia Snowe of Maine appeared to discuss both Jeffords and the results of the tax cut. Breaux, who voted to confirm the tax bill, defended the bill alongside Senator Snowe and defended his actions in playing a part in “punting” the bill’s permanence by having it set to expire after ten years.¹⁰⁵

Senator Lott also made his other appearance on NBC, also without a Democratic counterpart, where he highlighted Bush’s tax bill as bipartisan, and claimed it would pass “overwhelmingly” in the Senate.¹⁰⁶ Comparatively, Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts appeared on a CNN broadcast on May 4th where he discussed the tax cut and its near inevitability in passing the Senate. Kennedy did not attempt to hide his displeasure with the bill as it stood, taking issue with how the rich primarily benefitted from the tax reductions.¹⁰⁷ Host Wolf Blitzer shot back with the assertion that the rich saving more than everyone else is the fairest option since they pay more absolute taxes to begin with. Kennedy pushed back against this assertion, a rarity among those interviewed, and remained firm that over 40% of the bill’s benefits went directly to the top 1% who had already been disproportionately benefitting for the last eight to ten years.¹⁰⁸ Blitzer then abruptly changed the conversation by stating that everyone Kennedy had just said was irrelevant because the bill was about to be passed anyways. Blitzer then moved on to allege that the Democrats were at fault for increased spending, and said that Reagan’s trickle-down economics were successful. Kennedy once again pushed back, and the

¹⁰⁵ ABC, *News This Week*, 5/27/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁰⁶ NBC, *Meet the Press*, 5/20/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁰⁷ CNN, *Wolf Blitzer Reports*, 5/04/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁰⁸ CNN, *Wolf Blitzer Reports*, 5/04/01, LexisNexis.

conversation again abruptly shifted elsewhere.¹⁰⁹ The May 4th CNN broadcast highlighted yet another instance of pro-tax cut rhetoric and showcased how the broadcast hosts subtly influenced the flow of conversation to keep those who were against the tax cut on the defensive.

CNN was also unique amongst the broadcast news researched for its fixation on estate taxes during the month of May. Despite the estate tax being gradually phased out in Bush's tax plan, segments featuring the demonization of them still aired. One such broadcast occurred on May 5th. Republican Senator Charles Grassley of Iowa appeared to discuss the prospect of estate tax repeal and the reduction of the top marginal rates. An air of disappointment was apparent from the beginning as Grassley discussed how the tax cut was reduced from 1.6 trillion dollars to 1.35 trillion while still saying the cut was good tax policy.¹¹⁰ Robert Novak charged during the interview that the taxpayers are going to be really disappointed with the estate tax not being abolished immediately. Grassley responded by saying he thinks the tax was still going to be repealed, as it was important that small business owners and farmers be able to keep their businesses and farms for the next generation, making it seem as though the estate tax affected more people than it actually did.

Cohost Mark Shields of the May 5th CNN broadcast then asked Senator Grassley why the top marginal rate wasn't going to be slashed from 38% to 33% like Bush had wanted it to. Grassley used the evenly divided senate as his explanation, and said that the reduction was still going to be the largest in decades.¹¹¹ Shields then asked why Grassley was so adamant on reducing the top rates when it affected fewer than 4,000 of the people he represented, to which Grassley responded by saying that the top marginal rate was unfair and reducing it would create

¹⁰⁹ CNN, *Wolf Blitzer Reports*, 5/04/01, LexisNexis.

¹¹⁰ CNN, *Evans, Novak, Hunt, and Shields*, 5/05/01, LexisNexis.

¹¹¹ CNN, *Evans, Novak, Hunt, and Shields*, 5/05/01, LexisNexis.

jobs and economic growth. Reagan's tax cut was again invoked to establish greater legitimacy for Bush's proposal.

The other example of CNN talking about estate taxes comes on a May 7th broadcast. There, the president of the National Federation of Independent Business, Jack Faris, comes on to discuss Bush's tax cut. He began the interview by saying the most important thing the country can do to help small businesses is to decrease the tax rates across-the-board.¹¹² Afterwards, he went on to say "Secondly, for the long term -- for our families' sakes -- we need to get rid of this death tax once and for all -- not just raise exemption levels, but get rid of this death tax."¹¹³ Again, following the pattern of rhetoric used by tax cut supporters, the estate tax is made out to be a tax which directly impacts most Americans, when it only applied to the wealthiest 2% of estates in the country. In fact, in 2001 there were 109,600 returns filed, but only 50,500 of those returns ended up being charged the estate tax.¹¹⁴ Of that 50,500, 7.7% of them were male farmers and 2.9% of farmer decedents were women. Meanwhile, 30% of male decedents were in some kind of executive/managerial role while that percentage was 20% for female decedents.¹¹⁵

Public support for the abolishment of the estate tax also seems to have been overblown, in contrary to the rhetoric concerning the tax crippling small businessowners and family farmers. Author Benjamin Page and Lawrence Jacobs writes the following statement about public support for the estate tax:

¹¹² CNN, *Live This Morning*, 5/07/01, LexisNexis.

¹¹³ CNN, *Live This Morning*, 5/07/01, LexisNexis.

¹¹⁴ *How Many People Pay the Estate Tax?* (2020, May). <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/briefing-book/how-many-people-pay-estate-tax?>

¹¹⁵ Johnson, B., & Mikow, J. "Federal Estate Tax Returns, 1998-2000" (Review of *Federal Estate Tax Returns, 1998-2000*). Irs.gov, 137.

Despite all the fuss about opposition to the “death tax,” it turns out that only 14 percent of Americans (14 percent!) agree with proposals to altogether abolish the estate tax. Given a choice of possible rates including zero, the average American favors a tax of about 25 percent on estates worth \$100 million or more—not far from the actual level of the tax. Previous polls have also found large majorities in support of the estate tax (even when it is pejoratively described as the “death tax”), especially if reforms shield small businesses, family farms, and ordinary taxpayers. Some anti-taxers have tried to make it look as if a majority favored repeal of the tax; for instance, Frank Luntz jerry-rigged his results by combining the modest 35 percent who said they favored abolishing the estate tax with the 50 percent who favored keeping the tax but reforming it.¹¹⁶

Other significant figures who appeared as guests in May were Vice President Cheney, John McCain¹¹⁷, Bush advisor Karen Hughes¹¹⁸, and White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card who appeared both on CBS¹¹⁹ and ABC¹²⁰. All of those listed, with the notable exception of John McCain, were supportive of the tax cut. Economists also featured as guests on two separate occasions. In both instances, the tax cut was treated as an inevitability¹²¹, and that consumers needed to spend the money they were saving in order for the tax cut to actually help stimulate the economy¹²².

¹¹⁶ Page, Benjamin, Jacobs, Lawrence, *Class War? : What Americans Really Think About Economic Inequality*. (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 86.

¹¹⁷ ABC, *News This Week*, 5/20/01, LexisNexis.

¹¹⁸ CBS, *The Early Show*, 5/25/01, LexisNexis.

¹¹⁹ CBS, *Face the Nation*, 5/27/01, LexisNexis.

¹²⁰ ABC, *World News This Morning*, 5/28/01, LexisNexis.

¹²¹ ABC, *World News This Morning*, 5/15/01, LexisNexis.

¹²² CNN, *Ahead of the Curve*, 5/02/01, LexisNexis.

Figure 7:

Network	ABC	CBS	CNN	FOX	NBC	Total
Guests For	29	21	88	81	27	246
Guests Against	11	6	40	39	12	108

In the totality of the period between January and the end of May, there were 117 transcripts in total out of 586 which featured either a guest who was against the tax bill, or a sound clip of someone who was against the tax bill. Broken down, this came to 22 transcripts which featured someone against or saying they were against the bill on ABC. On CBS, the number of instances came to 26 different times, while on CNN it was 23. FOX had the fewest instances of guests saying they were against the tax bill with 18 occurrences. NBC meanwhile had the most, with 28 transcripts. On the flip side, 273 transcripts out of 586 featured guests who were in favor of the bill across the five networks. ABC made up 49 of those transcripts, while CBS made up 62. CNN had the most instances of a pro tax cut guest appearing with 71 separate transcripts. FOX again had the fewest with 42 different times, and NBC came in tied with ABC with 49 transcripts.

Figure 8:

Network	ABC	CBS	CNN	FOX	NBC	Total
Bill Supporter Without Counterpart	23	19	55	49	20	166
Bill Critic Without Counterpart	5	4	7	7	5	28

Figure 7 displays the number of times a guest appeared on a broadcast network without a counterpart alongside them. In several instances, one interview would take place which would be

followed by a commercial break. Then, a separate interview would begin where a guest critical of the bill was interviewed alone. However, the discrepancy between those who supported the bill and those who did not was quite wide and heavily favored those who supported the tax bill.

Section 3: Polls

The actual level of public support for the 2001 Bush tax cut will probably never be known for certain. Although, much like the true level of support for estate tax repeal, the general population's support for tax cuts in general may also be overestimated by the elite and media outlets. Page and Jacobs write "there is surprisingly little public sentiment in favor of general tax cuts. Most Americans would actually accept tax *increases* for certain purposes. Moreover, the public endorses progressive taxes – that is, taxes that fall more heavily on those most able to afford them."¹²³ The 2001 Bush tax cut, based on Page and Jacobs' assertions, ran against what the public would endorse which would imply the cut would have had low levels of support. Although polling results varied, there is enough evidence to bolster this claim of low public support for the 2001 bill.

Public support for the tax cuts varied during the period between January and May, and oftentimes depended heavily on the wording of the questions presented to respondents. When strictly given a choice between having a tax cut and not having one, the majority of respondents chose to have a tax cut. However, when given a choice between tax cuts and something else, respondents overwhelmingly chose the non-tax cut option.

¹²³ Page, Jacobs, *Class War?*, 81.

Sparse polling existed during the month of January. For instance, no polling data was found for CBS or NBC. An ABC broadcast on January 17th revealed that 55% of people believed the United States was headed into a recession.¹²⁴ Despite the majority of respondents believing a recession was in the near future, not many believed that cutting taxes was going to fix the issue. In the same broadcast, anchors said that respondents placed cutting taxes as the 12th most important issue out of 18 potential issues listed. Such a low voter priority for cutting taxes will become a consistent issue in the months following January, 2001.

For Bush's tax cut itself, both CNN and FOX had similar but slightly differing polls on the level of public support. On CNN, a January 24th broadcast had the level of support for Bush's proposal at 52%.¹²⁵ However, the same poll found the level of support for a tax cut in general to be around 75%. Frank Newport, editor-in-chief of Gallup Poll, explained this gap in support to be purely because of partisan politics, thereby implicitly dismissing any other reason for the gap. Further on in the broadcast, 41% of respondents favored an "across-the-board" style tax cut, while only 26% said tax cuts were their "top priority".¹²⁶

Comparatively, FOX claimed a clear majority supported the Bush tax cut plan according to a poll used on a January 9th broadcast, which had 53% of respondents expressing support for the cuts.¹²⁷ In future broadcasts showing polling results, anchors made sure to say the level of support for the cuts first, and then followed with levels of support when compared with another government expenditure. Since neither the CNN broadcast nor the FOX broadcast in January expressed this, it would be relatively safe to assume the polls revealed were of the simple "yes or

¹²⁴ ABC, *World News This Morning*, 1/17/01, LexisNexis.

¹²⁵ CNN, *Morning News*, 1/24/01, LexisNexis.

¹²⁶ CNN, *Morning News*, 1/24/01, LexisNexis.

¹²⁷ FOX, *Special Report with Brit Hume*, 1/09/01, LexisNexis.

no” variety regarding support for Bush’s plan. In the same FOX broadcast, the same percentage of respondents as the CNN results listed the cuts as being their top priority, at 26%. However, FOX continued by saying 39% of people said the tax cuts were a “high” priority while then saying only 26% listed it as a “low” priority.¹²⁸

In contrast, February saw support for the tax bill rise to its highest level during the stretch between January and May. None of the network broadcasts offered an explanation for why public support increased during this time. A few plausible possibilities exist that could potentially explain a sudden, albeit brief, rise in support for Bush’s tax plan. The first possibility is the type of questions given to respondents. As has been stated before, a simple “yes or no” type question regarding tax cuts could lead to inflated levels of support compared to how the public would answer if given alternative choices. Another possible reason for this support, and one equally as impossible to prove beyond any doubt, is that the level of support represented the American public not yet knowing the extent of the bill’s skew towards the top 1% of taxpayers.

On an ABC broadcast on February 11th, the levels of support for the Bush tax bill reached 67% support among respondents, up from the low 50s a month prior.¹²⁹ No indication was given about the type of questions given to respondents, and as a result it is unclear if the survey gave other options for surplus allocation instead of just the tax cut. Another ABC broadcast, this one on February 26th, gave the percentage of respondents who listed the tax cut as their top priority at 22%.¹³⁰ Despite the higher levels of support for the tax cut in the month of February, the percentage of people who listed the cuts as their top priority decreased from 26% to 22%. The falling level of prioritization among respondents contradicts the overall rising support of the cuts,

¹²⁸ FOX, *Special Report with Brit Hume*, 1/09/01, LexisNexis.

¹²⁹ ABC, *News This Week*, 2/11/01, LexisNexis.

¹³⁰ ABC, *World News Tonight*, 2/26/01, LexisNexis.

and seemingly lends credence to the explanation that the surveys given asked respondents if they wanted a tax cut in a “yes or no” styled format.

Similarly, CBS also listed the level of public support for the tax cut at 67% during a February 10th broadcast.¹³¹ While it is possible the same survey presented during the CBS broadcast was the same one used for the ABC broadcast, the 67% figure used by CBS also came with other figures beyond just public support for the bill. For instance, alongside the 67% public support, an identical 67% of respondents also expressed support for protecting Medicaid and social security.¹³² The shrinking level of priority given to the tax cut was not discussed on CBS, but was addressed directly on a FOX broadcast on February 27th. There, host Brit Hume and guest Mort Kondracke recommended viewers disregard the low priority given to the tax cuts on recent polling, and assured that everyone liked the tax cut.¹³³ No instances of public opinion polls were discovered for either CNN or NBC for the month of February.

Out of the transcripts studied for March, NBC released the first results of a poll on March 8th. In the span of roughly one month, support for Bush’s tax cut fell from the 67% figure to 57%, with 32% of people saying they were against the cut.¹³⁴ March would prove to be a volatile month in terms of polling results. For example, mere days later on a March 14th broadcast on NBC polling revealed that two thirds of respondents approved of the bill.¹³⁵ As noted above, it’s unclear how exactly the survey was structured, or how many respondents were asked.

¹³¹ CBS, *Evening News*, 2/10/01, LexisNexis.

¹³² CBS, *Evening News*, 2/10/01, LexisNexis.

¹³³ FOX, *Special Report*, 2/27/01, LexisNexis.

¹³⁴ NBC, *Today*, 3/08/01, LexisNexis.

¹³⁵ NBC, *Nightly News*, 3/14/01, LexisNexis.

CNN came out with related polling results on March 8th as well, tracking how many people believed the tax cut would benefit the upper, middle, or lower classes. In their findings, the amount of respondents who thought the tax cut would primarily benefit the wealthy stood at 79%, while 12% believed it would primarily assist the middle class, and the remaining 4% believing it would help the poor.¹³⁶ While in another broadcast on the same day, CNN tracked the support of the tax cut since January, claiming that their results charted the progression from 52, 56, 53, to 56% support since the beginning of 2001.¹³⁷ This trend had the noticeable absence of the 67% support the tax cut supposedly enjoyed one month prior.

Given the tax cut was listed as such a low priority among voters throughout the 2000 campaign in addition to the duration of the media blitz from January to May of 2001, it seems tenuous that the tax cut ever grew to a figure as high as 67%. This argument is made further clear by the FOX poll which was discussed on March 13th where 85% of respondents came out in support of tax cuts, and 79% were supportive of Bush's specific proposal.¹³⁸ Although the respondents in this poll could have been relegated to watching FOX as their primary news source, the respondents could have been largely conservative in comparison with other polls by other broadcast news networks, or the same issues as mentioned several times before could be a factor. The only other instance of a level of support well beyond other polling results during the same time period occurred on an NBC broadcast on March 14th. There, the alleged level of support for the tax bill stood at 66%, fitting neatly between the high level of support given by FOX and the levels given by the other networks which all hovered around the mid-50s.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ CNN, *Talkback Live*, 3/08/01, LexisNexis.

¹³⁷ CNN, *Live Today*, 3/08/01, LexisNexis.

¹³⁸ FOX, *The Edge*, 3/13/01, LexisNexis.

¹³⁹ NBC, *Nightly News*, 3/14/01, LexisNexis.

Both CBS and CNN also came out with their own levels of support for the tax cut on March 13th. On CBS, the results of their polling revealed that 18% of people said the tax cut was their highest priority.¹⁴⁰ Next, CBS contrasted the levels of support between President Bush's tax plan compared with the tax cut plan Democrats offered. The Democrat plan, which details were never covered in detail on broadcast media networks, were alleged by members of the Party to be for the working classes of America, not directed at the nation's top 1% as they claimed the Bush plan did. The level of support revealed by the poll had 49% of people preferring Bush's plan and 41% preferring the Democrat plan and the remaining ten percent presumably not having an opinion or not knowing.¹⁴¹ In contrast, CNN came out with a poll which said 61% of respondents supported Bush's bill without any alternative either in tax cuts or allocation of government surplus.¹⁴² Less than a third of people said reject the bill entirely, while 40% wanted the bill to pass without any modifications. However, the data presented did not come with the caveat that the 61% was a combination of people who wanted the bill passed and those who wanted to change the bill before wanting it passed.

Polling on the March 14th broadcast on CBS revealed that the majority of respondents knew the tax bill primarily benefitted the rich, at 56%.¹⁴³ A clear minority, 38%, believed the Republican talking point that the bill benefitted everyone. Cohost Bill Plante explained this phenomenon by claiming the Democrat criticism of the bill was working but didn't question why the support still stood at 57% according to the same polling results. Results further showed only 19% of people thought the government surplus should go to tax cuts, a surprisingly low number

¹⁴⁰ CBS, *Evening News*, 3/13/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁴¹ CBS, *Evening News*, 3/13/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁴² CNN, *News Site*, 3/13/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁴³ CBS, *The Early Show*, 3/14/01, LexisNexis.

given the attention President Bush and his congressional supporters spent claiming the surplus was the people's money and should be returned to them.

April saw a decrease in the amount of polling presented, and this trend would continue into May as the bill grew closer to final passage into law. The first substantial polling results concerning specifically the tax cuts came on an ABC broadcast on April 10th. There, 52% of respondents preferred to have no tax cuts and increased health services. Meanwhile, 30% supported cutting taxes without a subsequent reduction in healthcare, and only 10% supported cuts to both taxes and healthcare.¹⁴⁴ The polling results shown here fit with the larger picture of the American public having the Bush tax cuts as a low priority. Once another option was given for the allocation of the government surplus, polling respondents almost exclusively chose the non-tax cut option. Only when Bush's plan was offered as a yes or no type option did the level of support rise to a majority. Not once, however, did any broadcast network speak of, or even allege of this connection.

In a move which could be interpreted as avoiding the low figures of support for Bush's proposal, CNN released polling results on April 16th which didn't directly mention the tax cut. Instead, their polling covered the percentage of people who thought taxes were too high which came out to 65%. Their next result showcased the percentage of respondents who thought taxes were unfair which stood at 46%. Frank Newport, editor-in chief of Gallup Poll, then concluded with the low figure of 29% who said taxes were neither too high nor unfair, to which they rationalized by saying that anyone who thinks taxes are fair and just right must be low-income people.¹⁴⁵ Though the broadcast didn't mention President Bush or his tax cut, the implication of

¹⁴⁴ ABC, *World News This Morning*, 4/10/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁴⁵ CNN, *Live at Daybreak*, 4/16/01, LexisNexis.

the poll was clear. The majority of people either think taxes are too high or unfair, so therefore they should want a decrease in taxes. Then, given the Democrat tax plan was receiving minimal coverage, the implied answer to this problem of crippling, unfair taxes would therefore be Bush's plan.

Both FOX and ABC came out with similar levels of support in the days following the CNN poll, although the results were presented in starkly different ways. The FOX broadcast came first, on the 20th, where anchors said the percentage of respondents who supported the Bush plan stood at 38% while 32% supported the Democrat alternative.¹⁴⁶ Clearly, the level of support decreasing to 38% is a result of the plan being offered with alternative options, and likely reflected the actual level of support among the public. However, ABC did not frame it this way, and is one of the few examples of broadcast media skewing their coverage in an anti-tax cut manner. ABC on April 25th said the Bush plan only had 33% support among those polled¹⁴⁷, representing one of the lowest figures during the time period studied. In almost every other case, support for Bush's plan only dipped that far below 50% when other options were presented to respondents. ABC did not mention whether their polling questions featured other options, or if it was a yes-or-no type question. Given polling results elsewhere during this time span, it seems likely that other options were given in the list of questions on the poll.

FOX had a poll released on April 24th that revealed 53% of respondents believed Bush's tax plan would primarily help upper income people.¹⁴⁸ They began by assuring their viewers that support for the tax plan still had a ratio of 3-to-1 while simultaneously discrediting other, lower polling results by saying levels of support depends on who is delivering the results, implying

¹⁴⁶ FOX, *Special Report*, 4/20/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁴⁷ ABC, *Good Morning America*, 4/25/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁴⁸ FOX, *Special Report*, 4/24/01, LexisNexis.

partisan bias on part of the Democrats and the “liberal” media.¹⁴⁹ As has been clearly demonstrated thus far, albeit with a few noticeable exceptions, the five broadcast news networks have been decidedly pro-tax cut rather than anti-tax cut.

The final two instances of significant polling results in April came from CBS and CNN. On a CBS broadcast on April 26th, the level of support for Bush’s tax cut came out at 52%. Comparatively, 37% opposed the bill outright. Although it wasn’t mentioned how the questions were worded in the poll provided, anchor Dan Rather went on to say how 38% of respondents believed that it was possible to both cut taxes as well as preserving social security and increase spending on public education. Conversely, 51% of people believed doing such a thing was impossible.¹⁵⁰ Meanwhile, CNN had a broadcast on April 29th which placed the level of support for the cuts at 54%.¹⁵¹

May had by far the least amount of polling results. In fact, of the five broadcast news networks studied, only CNN conducted polls for the final month before the tax bill became law. The first instance of polling results came in the middle of May, on the 15th. There, the level of public support for the cuts came in at 56%, an increase of 2% from the last poll CNN had come out with a few weeks before.¹⁵² By that point, the bill was awaiting final passage before heading to the desk of President Bush, and rebate checks were being added to the final bill to increase the amount of monetary support for middle and lower-income Americans.

The second, and final, poll for the 2001 Bush tax cut in the time studied came out on May 21st. Mere days before the bill was passed, CNN garnered the level of support at 67%, the highest

¹⁴⁹ FOX, *Special Report*, 4/24/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁵⁰ CBS, *Evening News*, 4/26/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁵¹ CNN, *Late Edition*, 4/29/01, LexisNexis.

¹⁵² CNN, *Inside Politics*, 5/15/01, LexisNexis.

level of support on a non-FOX affiliated poll since February.¹⁵³ Again, a number of plausible scenarios could explain the heightened levels of support. The wording of the questions, whether there was an alternative given could help explain why public support reached 67%. The fact that the tax cut was about to be passed and seemed inevitable could also be a reason for the increased support. Rebate checks also could be the culprit, as they increased the amount saved by middle and lower-income Americans by hundreds of dollars in some instances.

ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, and NBC extensively covered the 2001 Bush tax cut from early January to its final passage into law on June 7th, 2001. The true level of public support for the bill may never be known, but interesting patterns emerged during the several months before the House and Senate sent the bill to Bush's desk on May 25th. Polling results repeatedly showed that Americans recognized the bill primarily benefitted the wealthiest Americans, and whenever options were given to them as to how the government surplus should be allocated, Americans overwhelmingly rejected Bush's proposal in favor of public services. What was interesting was how broadcast networks either didn't recognize this, or ignored it.

Central to how the broadcast media networks portrayed the 2001 tax cuts was their use of language and the types of guests brought onto their shows. As for the former, the five news networks systematically used charged terms such as "tax relief", "tax cuts", "death taxes", etc. The fixation on the bill's predicted effects on the economy dominated news broadcasts from the beginning, and anchors often repeated the partisan talking points of President Bush and those who supported him with oftentimes little to no analysis of their own. Instances of outright hostility to facets of American tax law, first and foremost the estate tax, was stark and more

¹⁵³ CNN, *Ahead of the Curve*, 5/21/01, LexisNexis.

forthright than other proponents in the bill. In the face of criticism that the bill helped only the super-rich, pro-tax cut guests as well as anchors themselves argued the wealthy should save more money because that's what was only fair. Surrounding all this was a sense the Bush tax bill was going to be passed no matter what, lending an air of inevitability to the bill which was propagated by President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and other Bush officials and elected officials who appeared on news broadcasts.

In contrast, guests who appeared on broadcast news networks were largely Bush appointed officials, elected officials who supported the bill, or political scientists or economists who largely supported the bill. Those who opposed the tax cut plan, such as Congressional or Senate Democrats, overwhelmingly appeared alongside a supporter of the tax plan where they then would enter into a debate largely guided by the host. Substantial, specific criticism of the tax bill was avoided, albeit with a handful of notable exceptions, and the pro-tax cut guest was usually given either more speaking time or less critical questioning by the network broadcast host. In other, similar instances, anchors were aware of the substantial criticisms of the tax bill, yet failed to voice those concerns when given an opportunity to do so when a Bush appointee, such as Lawrence Lindsay, gave misleading information regarding the bill's components. Yet, despite the widespread angling of the broadcast news media networks, the American public still remained tepid, at best, during the final five months leading up to the passage of the 2001 Bush tax cut.

Appendix:

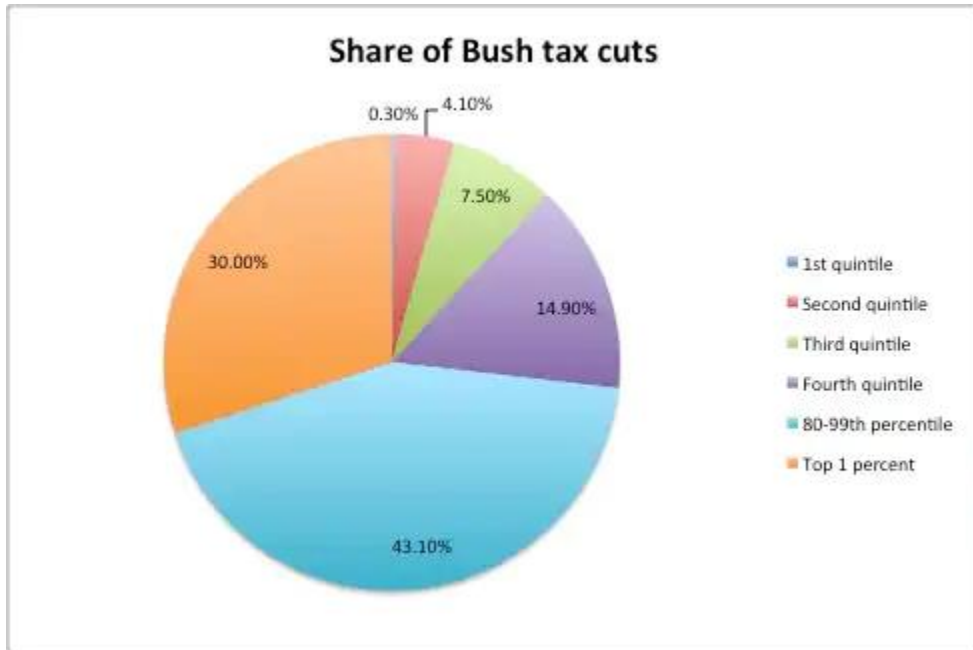
Quantitative analysis results:

Network	ABC	CBS	CNN	FOX	NBC	Total
Financially Irresponsible	13	8	9	3	10	43
Benefits the Wealthy	17	11	14	7	9	58
Mention of the Economy	45	46	50	30	29	200
Working Class Benefits	41	38	48	23	21	171
Confidence Bill Would Pass	24	33	54	29	26	166
Anxiety About Bill's Prospects	3	2	0	1	1	7
Bush's Words	32	43	43	22	21	161
Guests For	29	21	88	81	27	246
Guests Against	11	6	40	39	12	108
Bill Supporter Without Counterpart	23	19	55	49	20	166
Bill Critic Without Counterpart	5	4	7	7	5	28

Polling results:

Network	ABC	CBS	CNN	FOX	NBC
January Poll	x	x	52%	x	x
February Poll	67%	67%	53%	x	x
March Poll	55%	57%	56%	79%	57%
April Poll	33%	52%	54%	x	x
May Poll	x	x	56%	x	x

Who benefitted from the Bush tax cuts:



154

¹⁵⁴ Goldfarb, Z. *The legacy of the Bush tax cuts, in four charts.* (The Washington Post, 2013), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/01/02/the-legacy-of-the-bush-tax-cuts-in-four-charts/>.

Income Tax Rate Reductions Under the 2001 and 2003 Tax Cuts

Taxable Income	Previous Rate	New Rate
Below \$17,000	15%	10%
\$17,000 — \$68,000	15%	15%
\$68,000 — \$137,000	28%	25%
\$137,000 — \$209,000	31%	28%
\$209,000 — \$374,000	36%	33%
Above \$374,000	39.6%	35%

155

¹⁵⁵ Horton, E. *The Legacy of the 2001 and 2003 "Bush" Tax Cuts*, 1.

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