What Media Bias? Conservative and Liberal Labeling in Major U.S. Newspapers

Robert M. Eisinger, Loring R. Veenstra, and John P. Koehn

This article tests the hypothesis that major U.S. newspapers disproportionately label conservative politicians. We quantitatively analyze ideological labels of U.S. congresspersons and senators in newspaper articles. We then qualitatively review these articles, seeking to discern if any patterns exist, and if so, why. Disproportionate labeling of conservatives exists but not in a way that constitutes "bias," as newspapers often label liberals, at times more than they do conservatives. These labeling patterns may be explained by the rise of conservatives who entered Congress in 1994, the political pejorativization of the word *liberal*, and the increased conservative ideological tenor of the Congress during the past fifteen years. We conclude by discussing possible implications of our findings.

Keywords: *media bias; political labeling*

> Conservatives are extremely well represented in every facet of the media. The correlative point here is that even the genuine liberal media is not so liberal. And it is no match—either in size, ferocity, or commitment—for the massive conservative media structure that, more than ever, determines the shape and scope of our political agenda.
>
> *Eric Alterman*

> The old argument that the networks and other "media elites" have a liberal bias is so blatantly true that it's hardly worth discussing anymore.
>
> *Bernard Goldberg*

A national debate about media bias, specifically about ideological content in American journalism, currently saturates the cultural and political landscape (Alterman 2003; Goldberg 2002). Many outspoken conservatives (e.g., Bozell

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and Baker 1990; Buchanan 2003; Coulter 2002; Hannity 2002; O'Reilly 2000) claim that the media have a liberal bent when reporting the news, as liberals (e.g., Alterman 2003; Brock 2004; Conason 2003; Lee and Solomon 1990) contend that the media are inherently conservative. These passionate assertions of ideological bias in news reporting primarily consist of anecdotes and allegations, without any systematic analysis of data on which conclusions can be made (Niven 2003).

The issue of ideologically biased media need not be relegated to philosophical musings or talk show rants; ideological bias can and should be empirically tested. The purpose of this article is to test one theory of ideological bias in national U.S. newspapers, that of labeling of prominent politicians. Specifically, the primary goal of this article is to test a hypothesis first articulated by Goldberg (2002), who alleges that the label *conservative* is more frequently used than the label *liberal*. According to Goldberg, not only is the labeling more common among conservatives, but using the *conservative* label is a pejorative tag. Journalists who omit the *liberal* label to describe politicians do so, he argues, because the media implicitly believe that liberal public officials are in the mainstream and not deserving of a special label. Goldberg contends that this labeling is not conspiratorial but rather because many journalists perceive liberalism as part of the political mainstream.

This article attempts to test the first assumption routinely asserted by Goldberg and others—namely, that there is a preponderance of conservative labeling in various U.S. media. We produce a quantitative analysis of ideological labels of politicians. We then analyze newspaper articles qualitatively, seeking to comprehend and explain if any patterns exist, and if so, why. We conclude that among major newspapers over fourteen years, some disproportionate labeling of conservatives exists. We contend that this labeling pattern does not necessarily constitute an implicit or explicit bias, as it appears to be explained by a variety of factors, including the rise of conservatives who entered Congress in 1994 and the increased conservative ideological tenor of the Congress during the past fifteen years. We conclude by commenting on possible implications of our findings and by suggesting avenues for future research.

Ideological Bias

Ideologically biased reporting is considered to be a serious problem for journalists (Gans 2003). Not only is it considered to be poor journalism (Belsey and Chadwick 1992), but it is argued to be the primary reason why Americans do not trust the media (Niven 2002). According to a July 2003 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, "56 percent [of U.S. citizens] say media stories and reports are often inaccurate and 62 percent say the press generally tries to cover up its mistakes rather than admitting them" ("Strong

Opposition" 2003). Similarly, *USA Today* reports that trust in the media has fallen from 59 percent in 1989 to 32 percent in 2000, an unprecedented low (Johnson 2003). An October 2003 Gallup poll shows that only 54 percent of Americans trust the media to report accurately and fairly. Additionally, the same poll reports that 45 percent of Americans find the news media to be too liberal and 14 percent believe they are too conservative (Newport and Carroll 2003).

Trust in the media has been debated since America's founding. In 1807, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle" (Jefferson 1807). What distinguishes distrust of the media today from the distrust in Jefferson's era is that modern news outlets allegedly aim to be above the partisan fray of politics. Newspapers of early America were owned and operated by political parties, and it was understood that their reporting would reflect a particular ideology (Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Pasley 2001; Schudson 1978). Modern news media purport to be ideologically neutral and unaligned with any political party (Belsey and Chadwick 1992); the presence of systematic ideological bias would contradict claims of neutrality.

Journalists' reactions and opinions on the subject of media bias vary. Some adamantly deny the accusations of bias. *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman writes, "At least compared with their foreign counterparts, the 'liberal' U.S. media are strikingly conservative" (Krugman 2003). CBS News anchor Dan Rather calls the notion of bias "one of the great political myths" (Jacoby 2002: C11). Yet other journalists contend that bias and journalism intertwine, even if they disagree how. Fox News contributor and *Rollcall* editor Morton Kondracke asserts, "The American mainstream media are left of center." CNN senior political correspondent Candy Crowley admits, "We are a bag of biases. I know what my biases are and where they come from, and as a reporter it is important to know and be aware of your biases and factor in your own prejudices when covering a story. The problem is that many reporters won't do that."[1] Still others allege a liberal media bias based on the disproportionate number of reporters who are registered Democrats and self-identify as liberals (Kuypers 2002; Lichter et al. 1986; Okrent 2004).

While opinions abound about the strength and direction of media bias, the dearth of data to support these assertions is complemented by research that "lacks a baseline foundation from which to make fair comparisons" (Niven 2002: 118). Schiffer's (2006) work has mitigated some methodological misunderstandings, simultaneously elucidating the need for more rigorous work concerning one aspect of media bias—that of labeling.

Recognizing that media help shape political attitudes (see, e.g., Graber 2000) and more specifically that allegations of media bias fuel perceptions that

it exists (Watts et al. 1999), this article attempts to advance the debate about ideological bias in American news media beyond anecdotes and allegories by attempting to locate patterns of ideological labeling of politicians in major U.S. newspapers—and then, after identifying such patterns, we attempt to explain those patterns. Are Republicans labeled more frequently as conservatives than Democrats are as liberals? Do systematic ideological labeling patterns exist in major national newspapers, and if so, what do those patterns look like? What may explain them?

Literature Review on Media Bias

There is considerable disagreement among academics and pundits over the existence and ideological direction of bias in the media. Several studies suggest that there is limited evidence of bias (D'Alessio and Allen 2000), while others present data pointing to liberal (e.g., Brady and Ma 2003; Groseclose and Milyo 2005) or conservative (e.g., Nunberg 2002a, 2006) biases. These and other studies have used a wide range of qualitative and quantitative tools and methods to identify bias, with no clear consensus on what bias is or how it is measured.

In their meta-analysis of articles on media bias, Dave D'Alessio and Mike Allen find three general categories of media bias used by public opinion authors: bias that occurs when editors select certain news stories from a pool of potential news stories in a biased manner (gatekeeping bias), bias evidenced by unbalanced news coverage of an issue or event (coverage bias), and bias that occurs when members of the news media insert their own opinions into the text of coverage of an issue (statement bias; D'Alessio and Allen 2000). They aggregate the results of several quantitative studies on media bias, using a total of 132 measurements of bias. They find no significant evidence of gatekeeping or coverage bias but limited evidence of a pro-Republican bias in newsmagazines and a pro-Democratic bias in network television news (ibid.). The authors conclude, "there is no evidence whatsoever of a monolithic liberal bias in the newspaper industry, at least as manifest in presidential campaign coverage. The same can be said of a conservative bias: there is no significant evidence of it" (ibid.).

In *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*, Bernard Goldberg alleges that there is a systematic, subconscious, liberal bias in newsrooms. He contends that journalists systematically use personal biases by labeling political officials in the news. "I noticed that we pointedly identified conservatives as conservatives, for example, but for some crazy reason didn't bother to identify liberals as liberals" (Goldberg 2002: 56). Specifically, Goldberg alleges that news reporters consistently label conservative political

figures as "conservative," "right-wing," or with some other identifying word or phrase but fail to identify liberals with the same frequency. Goldberg theorizes, "Conservatives are out of the mainstream and need to be identified. Liberals, on the other hand, *are* the mainstream and don't need to be identified" (ibid.: 59). Goldberg also contends that this bias exists because liberals envision their worldview as reasonable and mainstream, not because they are consciously engaging in a conspiracy to enervate conservative points of view (ibid.). However, Goldberg fails to conduct any research to verify or validate these assertions. "I have total confidence that the point here is accurate," Goldberg said when confronted about his anecdotal style (Goldberg, in Alterman 2003: 8).

Goldberg connects the ideological bias of the news to distrust of the news, which he believes is responsible for the decline in network news ratings. Citing a *Brill's Content* 2000 poll conducted by GOP pollster Frank Luntz and showing "at least a circumstantial link between viewers' noticing 'a liberal media tilt' and their defection to cable," Goldberg asserts that the future of the media will depend on their ability to regulate ideological bias and produce intelligent, objective news (Goldberg 2002: 195, citing Luntz 2000).

Prompted in part by *Bias*, David Brady and Jonathan Ma have attempted to locate labeling bias by studying how the ten most liberal and the ten most conservative senators were represented in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Brady and Ma conclude, "It appears clear that the news media assumes that conservative ideology needs to be identified more often than liberal ideology does" (Brady and Ma 2003: A18). They found that conservatives were given ideological labels more frequently than liberals. *The New York Times*, for example, applied labels to conservatives 12.73 percent of the time during the 106th congress, while liberals were only given labels 3.71 percent of the time (ibid).

Brady and Ma contend that the discrepancy in the frequency of labeling represents a general trend in American news media of giving negative treatment to conservatives while lauding liberals with praise. They write, "One can conclude fairly from this survey that conservative senators, consistently portrayed as spoilers, are ill-served by the political reporting in two of the leading general interest newspapers of the United States. Liberals, on the other hand, get a free pass. If this is not bias, pray, what is?" (ibid.: A18).

Counterarguments to claims of a conservative media bias have been articulated by Eric Alterman in *What Liberal Media? The Truth about Bias and the News* (2003). Alterman asserts that the media have consciously moved political discourse toward the ideological Right, declaring that Goldberg's allegations are "shoddily written and 'researched'?" and do not "stand up to more than a moment's scrutiny" (Alterman 2003: 3). He spends much of his book refuting

many of Goldberg's claims, offering a plethora of his own anecdotes as evidence of a conservative ideological bias to the news media in America.

Alterman relies on research by Geoffrey Nunberg, who concludes that Goldberg's labeling hypothesis is wrong (Alterman 2003). Using "a big online database," Nunberg looked at how thirty major newspapers labeled the five most liberal and the five most conservative U.S. senators from 1982 to 2002.[2] He searched for the number of instances that the senator appeared within seven words of the label *liberal* or *conservative*. Nunberg says that his study "picks out the labeling of political views with better than 85 percent accuracy" (Nunberg 2002a). Nunberg asserts that there is a tendency to label liberal senators more frequently than conservatives. "The average liberal legislator has a better than 30 percent *greater* likelihood of being given a political label than the average conservative does," Nunberg claims (2002a). Nunberg believes that political labels are not borne out of a desire to inform the reader of a politician's ideology, but rather, "they're a way of reassuring us that the writer and publication are comfortably in the center, at a safe distance from the extremes on either side" (Nunberg 2002a). Well-known conservatives and liberals such as Jesse Helms and Edward Kennedy are labeled far more frequently than their lesser known contemporaries, Nunberg explains, as a result of their popularity, not their ideology. "For the most part," he writes, "Goldberg's book is a farrago of anecdotes, hearsay, and unsupported generalizations. But at one point he strays into territory that can actually be put to a test. That's when he claims that the media pointedly identify conservative politicians as conservatives, but rarely use the word 'liberal' to describe liberals" (Nunberg 2002d).

Finally, some scholarly research about ideological labeling in the media suggests that no such liberal or conservative bias exists. In his study of politicians who switch political parties, David Niven finds that allegations of a liberal bias are not borne out in the data. "The data suggest members of Congress who leave the Democratic Party can expect coverage that is quite similar to coverage of members who leave the Republican Party. In short, when Democrats and Republicans engage in the same behavior, they get the same coverage" (Niven 2003: 322). Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman write, "Scholarly attempts to identify bias have not borne out the conservative critique" (Jamieson and Waldman 2003: 169). The lack of data, they allege, has not stopped the accusations of media biases because they exist as a self-perpetuating cycle. "Perceptions of media bias may be driven in part by assertions that the creature is real: The more discussion there is of media bias, the more people believe that such bias exists, regardless of whether the news at a particular moment is more favorable to Democrats or Republicans" (Jamieson and Waldman 2003: 169). Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) suggest that slanted

news is more a product of market forces than deliberate intent. "Firms slant their reports toward the prior beliefs of their customers in order to build a reputation for quality" (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006: 280). Because liberals prefer National Public Radio (NPR), the NPR editors and writers are more reluctant to disseminate information that contradicts the liberal point of view. The same holds true of conservative media outlets. Gentzkow and Shapiro's argument complements Goldberg's in that they argue that various media biases exist, and that these biases may be motivated by market-driven factors.

Methodology

Herbert Gans defines bias as "when not telling the whole story is viewed as inaccuracy" (Gans 2003: 33). Ideological bias is the preference or demeaning (intentional or unintentional) of one ideology over others. Ideological bias can manifest itself in the stories that are selected for reporting, the stories that are selected for publishing, the "angle" of or tone for reporting different stories (positive, negative, etc.), the amount of space dedicated to different sources, and the sources used in a particular media story (see Niven 2002; Patterson 1993). Biased language, specifically related to ideological labeling, is the systematic, imbalanced use of identifiers or descriptors to denote the ideological or partisan affiliation of individuals, organizations, or movements. This study focuses on one such bias—the labeling bias—that has been discussed above.

Labeling bias demands more research. The paucity of such studies has generated more questions than answers, with claims from ideological extremes remaining in the forefront of popular journalistic discourse. A systematic, comprehensive, methodologically pluralistic examination of labeling bias will provide answers to the puzzles surrounding bias, specifically, whether it exists and why. Niven notes that while there is a dearth of scholarship concerning labeling, increased charges of bias have produced increased coverage of alleged bias (Niven 2002; also see Morris 2005). A multiyear analysis of labeling will enhance the scholarly and journalistic discussion, providing further insights and studies about how and why the media function, with special emphasis on the role of labels as heuristics in how citizens process news.

The phrase *media bias* includes innumerable television, radio, Internet, and print sources. This article concentrates on the print media. Two national newspapers (*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*) and eight major newspapers with large circulations (*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Boston Globe*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, *Houston Chronicle*, Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*) are studied to test the labeling hypothesis.[3] Our study reviews articles published from January 1, 1991, through December 31, 2004—fourteen years during which the United

States saw Republican- and Democratically controlled Senates and Congresses as well as Republican and Democratic presidents.

Numerous political figures are referenced each day in the news, ranging from presidents and cabinet members to municipal managers and county commissioners. This study focuses on the ideological labeling of U.S. senators and representatives. While there are numerous labels that can be used to denote ideology, this article focuses on two ideological labels specifically mentioned by Goldberg: *liberal* and *conservative*.

Using the LexisNexis database (2004), we searched every newspaper article in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the eight major newspapers between 1991 and 2004 in which an ideological label (i.e., *liberal*, *conservative*) was used within the same sentence as or within seven words of a senator or U.S. representative.[4] Ideological labels within seven words or within the same sentence of a political figure do not necessarily describe that political figure. An article that reads "conservative groups oppose Senator Paul Wellstone" must be read in context so as not to label Senator Wellstone inaccurately as a conservative. To determine how frequently the labels are describing political figures, five coders read a random sample of articles. The articles were coded as either labeling the political figure or not labeling the political figure. If it was determined that the politician was being labeled, coders documented the name of the politician. One hundred and forty-two randomly chosen articles (forty from *The New York Times,* forty from *The Washington Post*, and sixty-two from the major regional newspapers) in which the word *senator* is within the same sentence as or within seven words of the word *liberal* or *conservative* were read for each year (1991 through 2004). Another 142 articles per year were read to evaluate labeling of *liberal* and *conservative* with the word (congressional) *representative*.

142 articles per year × 14 years = 1,988 articles for senators
142 articles per year × 14 years = 1,988 articles for representatives
TOTAL N = 3,976 articles

Data Analysis

Only about half of the articles use the *liberal* or *conservative* label to describe senators and representatives. The percentage of articles in which either label (*liberal* or *conservative*) describes a senator is 44 percent for *The New York Times*, 39 percent for *The Washington Post*, and 48 percent for the major regional newspapers. The percentages of articles in which these ideological labels describe a U.S. representative are similar (55 percent for *The New York Times*, 47

percent for *The Washington Post*, and 49 percent for the regional newspapers). The remainder of these labels describes interest groups or unnamed sources or refers to liberals and conservatives as a group.

The raw LexisNexis search results (the number of articles found with the political figure *senator* or *representative* within seven words or within the same sentence) were adjusted by the rate of labeling found in the coded articles. For example, 234 articles were found in *The Washington Post* during the time period 1991–1992 (102nd Congress) in which the word *conservative* was within seven words of or within the same sentence as *senator*. Thirty of these articles were read by the authors. The label *conservative* applied to politicians in ten of these cases. The graphs below show the expected ideological labeling given the rate of labeling found by the coders. Of the 234 articles that were found in which *conservative* was within seven words of or within the same sentence as *senator*, we would expect the ideological label to be applied 33 percent (10/30) of the time. We would expect an ideological label in 77 of the 234 articles ($0.33 \times 234 = 77$). Data are aggregated by congressional sessions (a two-year period) to enhance statistical significance.

Figures 1 through 6 show a pattern of conservative labeling of senators and representatives during most of the entire fourteen years (1991–2004) of this study. This trend persists through three presidencies and seven congresses, suggesting at first glance that newspaper reporters are not simply responding to particular events but are rather systematically engaging in a practice of disproportionate conservative labeling of senators and congresspersons.

While the country experienced a party change in the presidency (Democrat Bill Clinton's winning the White House in 1992) and in the Congress (Republicans' gaining majority control of Congress in 1994), chi-square tests confirm that the label *conservative* is applied to senators more often than the label *liberal* in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and major regional newspapers throughout the fourteen years of the study. There are some notable exceptions: In the aggregate period 1991–1992 (approximating the duration of the 102nd Congress), there is no statistically significant difference of senators' being labeled in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* ($p < .05$). For the major regional newspapers during this same period, the *liberal* label is applied to senators more frequently than the *conservative* label ($p < .05$). Similarly, in the aggregate years of 2003 and 2004, there is more liberal labeling than conservative labeling of senators in *The Washington Post* ($p < .05$).

Additionally, in the aggregate period of 2001 and 2002 (approximating the tenure of the 107th Congress), there is no statistically significant pattern of labeling senators in *The Washington Post*. Likewise, for the aggregate period of 1993 and 1994 (approximating the duration of the 103rd Congress), there is

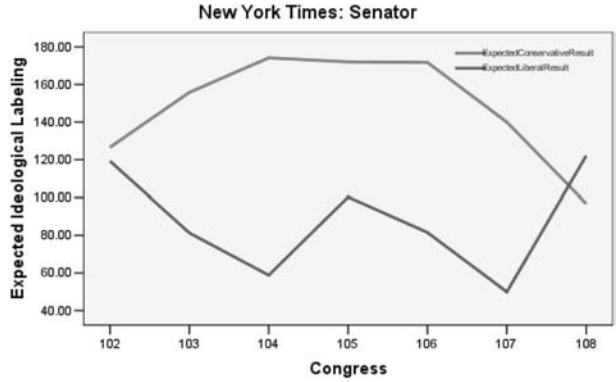


Figure 1
The New York Times Articles with Senator and Ideological Labels

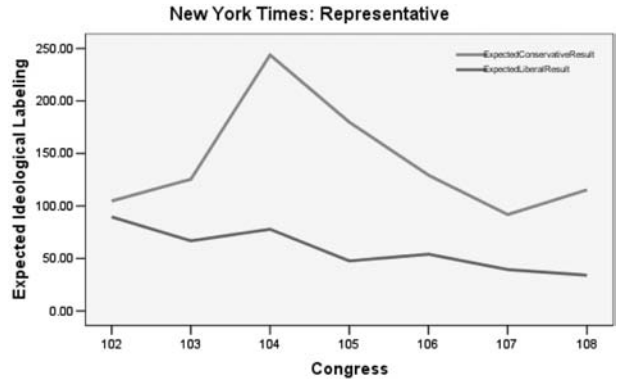


Figure 2
The New York Times Articles with Representative and Ideological Labels

no statistical significance in labeling in major regional newspapers, nor is there any statistical significance in labeling of senators in *The New York Times* in the aggregate period of 2003 and 2004 (approximating the duration of the 108th Congress).

For the labeling of members of the U.S. House of Representatives, the data reveal a much more consistent pattern of conservative labeling. There is no two-year time frame in which the *liberal* label is applied more than the

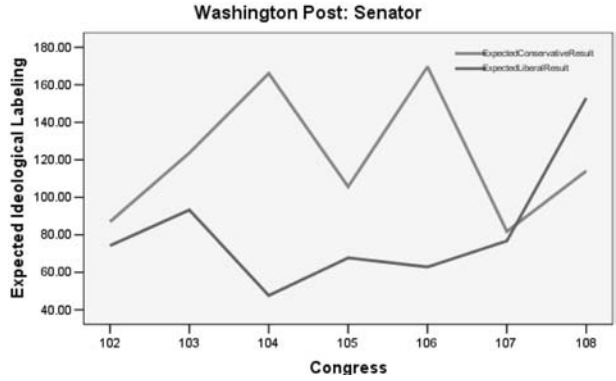


Figure 3
The Washington Post Articles with Senator and Ideological Labels

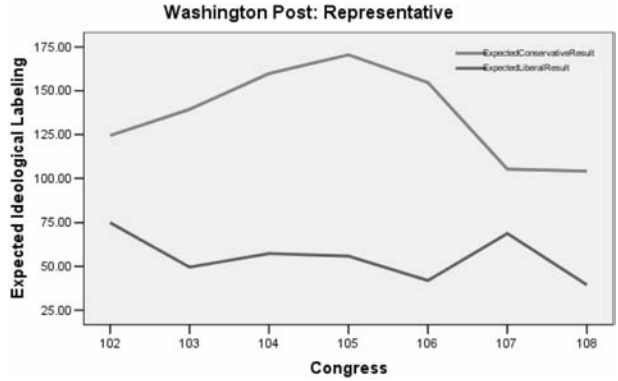


Figure 4
The Washington Post Articles with Representative and Ideological Labels

conservative label, and only during the aggregate period of 1991 and 1992 in *The New York Times* is there no statistically significant difference in labeling of congresspersons.

Presidential politics may help explain some of the patterns detected in 1992 and 2004, when Democrat senators Al Gore, John Kerry, and John Edwards were on their party's presidential or vice-presidential ticket. The intense news

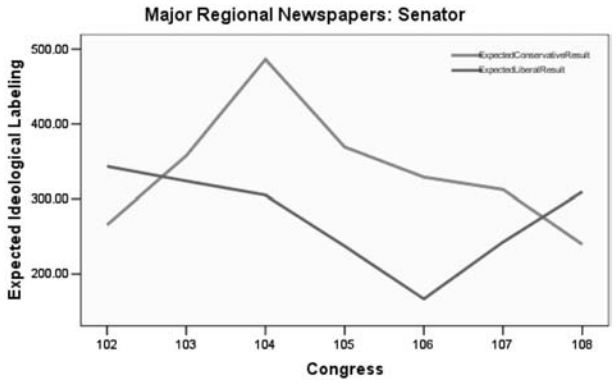


Figure 5
Major Regional Newspaper Articles with Senator and Ideological Labels

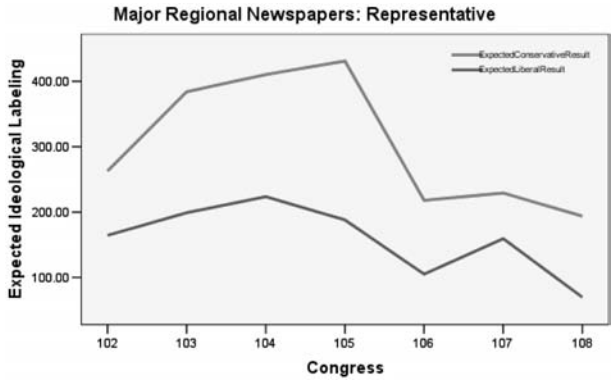


Figure 6
Major Regional Newspapers with Representative and Ideological Labels

coverage of these senators may explain the spike in liberal labeling during these time periods. Yet the preponderance of data shows a trend of conservative labeling, both of senators and members of Congress.

One explanation for this pattern is that biased labeling is the result of unbalanced media attention toward Republicans generally. During the past fourteen years, however, there has been relatively equal attention devoted to senators and representatives from both the Republican and Democratic parties in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and eight major regional newspapers. Table 1 shows that between 1991 and 2004, these ten newspapers produced

Table 1
Distribution of party labels for senators and representatives: 1991–2004

	Republican		Democrat	
Newspaper	*N*	%	*N*	%
New York Times	71,373	50	70,532	50
Washington Post	17,436	52	15,800	48
Major regional newspapers	65,835	47	72,979	53
All newspapers	154,644	49	159,311	51

comparatively equal numbers of articles that reference senators and representatives and identify them with their respective party label.

The difference in the number of ideological labels applied to senators and representatives in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and major regional newspapers is not the result of a difference in the number of references to ideologically different senators and representatives in those papers.

Another explanation is that conservatives are labeled more than liberals because there are more conservatives in the political arena to label. Although the party composition among members of Congress is relatively balanced, their ideological composition is not. Perhaps the difference in ideological labeling in newspapers could be explained by a preponderance of conservative senators and representatives. Conservative Democrats, while members of the Democratic Party, are ideologically much more similar to many of their conservative Republican counterparts. Preliminary analysis indicates that the labeling of conservative "Blue Dog" Democrats constitutes a significant proportion of overall conservative labeling. For all newspapers included in our search, in approximately 20 percent of instances in which a conservative was labeled, that conservative was a Democrat.

We further examined the ideological ratings of senators and congresspersons provided by the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) and the American Conservative Union (ACU) to determine the extent to which the overall ideological composition of respective congresses explains the difference in labeling. These groups compile ideological ratings for every member of the Congress based on their voting records.[5] These ideological ratings show that Congress has shifted slightly to the right during the past fourteen years, enough to account for some but not all of the labeling patterns observed over time.

Adjusting for Labeling Frequency

The data shown above denote a pattern in which more conservative senators and members of the House appear to be labeled more than liberals. Yet the

methodology used above does not account for the frequencies with which specific senators and congresspersons are labeled, either as a conservative or as a liberal. For example, imagine a hypothetical scenario in which, in 2001, Senator Orrin Hatch is mentioned three times in *The New York Times*, and each time, he is labeled as a conservative. The sampling methods used reveals three articles about Hatch, all of which show him conservatively labeled. In the same hypothetical example, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton is mentioned one hundred times in the *Times* in 2001; we sample three articles, all of which show her labeled as a liberal. At first glance, one might think there is no difference in labeling between Hatch and Clinton, in large part because sampling procedures mask how frequently each senator is labeled.[6] We therefore identified the most frequently mentioned senators in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* from 1991 to 2004. We then read every article in which the word *liberal* or *conservative* was either within seven words of or in the same sentence as the name of that senator. Delineating the frequency of labeling among oft-cited senators further enables us to bolster or refute claims about labeling patterns.

The data are inconclusive. Of the top seven senators from 1991 to 2004, 59 percent ($n = 58$) were Republicans, and 41 percent ($n = 40$) were Democrats. The top five senators cited during this tenure generate labeling patterns in which 63 percent ($n = 44$) are Republicans and 37 percent ($n = 26$) are Democrats. Yet claims of any labeling bias (conservative or liberal) are mitigated when one also realizes that Senator Paul Wellstone (D–MN) is the most frequently labeled senator in the *Times* for three of the fourteen years studied (1994, 1996, and 1997). Furthermore, not only is Wellstone labeled more than his Republican counterparts, his *liberal* moniker is applied overwhelmingly more frequently than that of any of his Republican colleagues, with more than one-quarter of all 1997 *Times* articles that mention Senator Wellstone describing him as a liberal, compared to 16 percent of articles mentioning Senator Phil Gramm (R–TX) describing him as a conservative.

The Washington Post data also reveal a mixed labeling pattern. Of the top seven most labeled senators in the *Post*, 57 percent ($n = 56$) are Republican, and 43 percent ($n = 42$) are Democrats. The top five most labeled senators generate similar findings (63 percent [$n = 44$] are Republicans, 37 percent [$n = 26$] are Democrats). In five of the fourteen years studied (1991, 1992, 1993, 2001, 2002), Senator Jesse Helms tops the list of the most frequently labeled senators. Yet these data also show that Senator Paul Wellstone leads his peers in four years (1996, 1997, 1998, 2000). The senators with the highest labeling rate for any year (that is, the percentage of times any article mentions the senator and describes him as liberal or conservative) are Senators Faircloth (1994 [25 percent]), Wellstone (1996 [22.6 percent]; 1998 [21.1 percent]; and 2000 [20.5 percent]), and Lott (1994 [21.2 percent]). In

short, there is no clear labeling pattern. Overall, more Republicans are labeled than Democrats, but at times, some Democrats are labeled more frequently than Republicans.

Conclusions

Reading every *Times* and *Post* article in which frequently labeled senators are mentioned diminishes the case that there is a distinct labeling bias or even any clearly demarked labeling patterns. Indeed, more Republicans in the aggregate are labeled than Democrats, but there are also more Republicans than Democrats in the Congress, and the ideological tenor of both the House and the Senate leans slightly conservative, especially after 1994, when the Republicans became the House majority party. Goldberg contends that the ostensible liberal bias of labeling conservatives is neither deliberate nor planned, but rather, a product of subconscious acts by liberals who think liberalism is part of the political mainstream, whereas conservatism is an ideological extreme. Our research shows that in general, more conservatives are labeled than liberals, but numerous exceptions permeate the data. First, many liberals are labeled. Second, liberals are sometimes labeled more frequently than conservatives. Third, one liberal (Senator Paul Wellstone) is sometimes labeled more than any conservative senator. These exceptions, combined with the increased pejorativization of the word *liberal*, the concomitant partisan self-identification among political elites (i.e., liberal elected officials' refraining from describing themselves as liberal), and the newsworthy current events of the day (e.g., Republicans' gaining control in 1994), appear to explain the labeling patterns from 1991 through 2004. The conservative labeling may stem partly from unease on the part of many Democrats to self-identify as liberals, with Republicans' proudly extolling the word *conservative* to describe themselves.[7]

Recall as well that only about 50 percent of the articles actually label a senator or representative. Further qualitative research needs to be done to see if certain interest groups or undefined groups (e.g., "Liberals believe . . . ," "Conservatives express . . . ") are systematically labeled as liberal or conservative. By expanding conceptions of media bias beyond politicians and thereby including interest groups, think tanks, and scholars, Alterman (2003) contends that a conservative bias pervades the news: "Across virtually the entire television punditocracy," he writes, "unabashed conservatives dominate, leaving lone liberals to offer themselves up to be beaten up by gangs of marauding right-wingers, most of whom voice views much further toward their end of the spectrum than does any regularly televised liberal" (pp. 28–29).

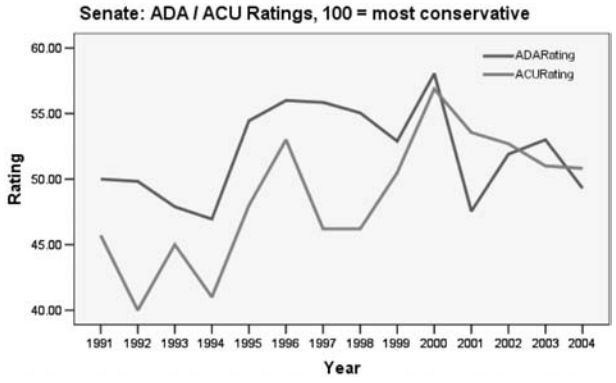
Our article neither confirms nor refutes Alterman's claims. We cite him to suggest that future studies of ideological labeling should expand beyond politicians and include policy analysts, think tank scholars, and academics. Case study work

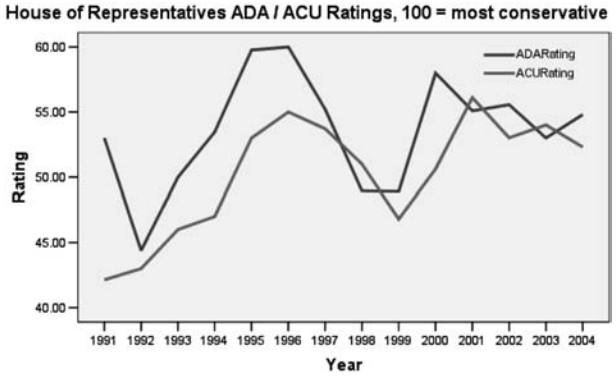
by Kuypers (2002) and by the Media Research Center (2002) show disproportionate labeling of conservative politicians and of interest groups; here again, we advocate a systematic, time-series analysis to determine if these case studies and methodologies respectively signify aberrancy or normalcy. Similarly, our research design and methodology allow for systematic investigation of other public officials and prominent, nonelected public figures (e.g., Pat Buchanan, Al Franken, Michael Moore) in the hopes of discerning if ideological labeling is pervasive throughout journalists' descriptions of newsworthy political individuals.

While our study indicates the absence of a labeling bias per se, journalists and media scholars should not rejoice at our findings. The question remains why some public officials warrant an ideological label and others do not. No doubt Jesse Helms was a conservative and Paul Wellstone was a liberal. Describing them accordingly is not inaccurate, but arguably, dubiously necessary. The apparent idiosyncratic nature of applying labels suggests that reporters and editors need to ask themselves why they opt to omit or insert the *liberal* or *conservative* moniker sometimes but not always (or never). Such insertions and omissions have real implications on how citizens process news. Labels serve as heuristic cues in which news consumers remember individuals by the descriptor used (e.g., angry, conservative, left-winger) and not by his or her actions or policy statements (Kuklinski and Hurley 1994). Recall as well the findings of Brady and Ma (2003), who determined that there was disproportionate labeling of conservatives among the more ideological of senators. Furthermore, uneven labeling may be enervating trust in the media, a trend that appears to be enduring in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Fallows 1997; Lichter et al. 1986; Patterson 2003).

We make no claim that labeling biases are more prevalent than other types of biases worthy of examination and empirical verification. To the contrary, our data reveal that Goldberg's claim of a liberal labeling bias is overstated. Kuklinski and Sigelman (1992) correctly note that it is prudent to avoid the term *bias* unless it is indisputably warranted. We concur. Much like their work, we contend that the case of labeling patterns is both complex and elusive. Both liberals and conservatives are respectively labeled, as should be expected. Further research evaluating news talk-radio, television news, and the Internet will shed further light on the extent to which ideological labeling patterns exist throughout various media. Comparative research will also elucidate the extent to which ideological labeling is unique to the U.S. media. Measuring media biases remains a worthy, tricky, and important endeavor. How the media portray public officials—with or without labels—will continue to play an important role in how citizens understand their politics and the politicians who forge and frame public policies.

Appendix
Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) and American Conservative Union (ACU) Ideological Ratings





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Notes

1. Morton Kondracke, personal conversation, April 9, 2002, Washington, D.C.; Candy Crowley, personal conversation, March 18, 2002, Washington, D.C.
2. Nunberg notes that some of his papers go back as far as 1982, some only to 1992. He gauged the most liberal and conservative senators based on ratings produced by Americans for Democratic Action (ADA).
3. These newspapers were chosen based on three factors: (1) availability in LexisNexis, (2) high circulation, and (3) geographic reach.
4. Terms searched include *sen.*, *senator*, *representative*, *congressman*, *congresswoman*, and *rep.*, in lowercase and in capitalized letters. See Kuklinsi and Sigelman (1992) on the merits of studying media bias of senators.
5. See appendix.
6. We are grateful to William Meyer for alerting us to this point.
7. After Walter Mondale's 1984 presidential defeat, some Democrats sought to shift the party platform toward the center, simultaneously muting if not entirely abandoning the word *liberal* from the party vernacular (Baer 2000). Similarly, the campaigns of President Reagan (1984 against Walter Mondale) and George Herbert Walker Bush's (1988) victory over Michael Dukakis used the word *liberal* as a pejorative term (Nunberg 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e, 2003, 2006; Massey 2003. Bill Clinton avoided describing himself as a liberal in 1992 and 1996, as did Al Gore in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004 (Hamburger and Black 1996; Hunt 2004; Noonan 2004).

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Biographical Notes

Robert M. Eisinger is chair of the Political Science Department at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon.

Address: Department of Political Science, Lewis & Clark College, 0615 SW Palatine Hill Road, Portland, OR 97219; phone: 503-768-7642; fax: 503-768-7637; e-mail: eisinger@lclark.edu.

Loring R. Veenstra received a BA in political science from Lewis & Clark College in 2006.

E-mail: loring.veenstra@law.columbia.edu.

John P. Koehn received a BA in political science from Lewis & Clark College in 2004.

E-mail: john.koehn@gmail.com.