



# SPECIAL REPORT

## AN IN-DEPTH STUDY, ANALYSIS OR REVIEW EXPLORING THE MEDIA

THE MEDIA RESEARCH CENTER • 325 SOUTH PATRICK ST. • ALEXANDRIA, VA 22314 • WWW.MRC.ORG

August 28, 2006

# Election In The Streets

## How The Broadcast Networks Promote Illegal Immigration

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**S**purred by a passionate public outcry against the tide of illegal immigration, on December 16, 2005, the House of Representatives passed a bill to curb the flow of illegal aliens and give the federal government more responsibility for detaining and deporting them. On that night, ABC, CBS, and NBC didn't cover the vote. But when left-wing advocacy groups for illegal aliens organized large protests against the House bill in the spring, as the Senate considered its own immigration bill, the networks suddenly, fervently discovered the issue and gave the advocacy groups not a mere soapbox in the park, but a three-network rollout of free air time. Protest coverage, often one-sided, stood in stark contrast to polling data showing that a stricter approach to illegal immigration was broadly popular in the country.

To determine the tone and balance of network coverage of illegal aliens, MRC analysts evaluated every ABC, CBS, and NBC morning, evening, and magazine show news segment on the immigration debate from the outbreak of protest coverage on March 24, 2006 through May 31, 2006. In 309 stories, analysts found the following trends emerged:

- **While they celebrated "massive" immigration protests with "huge" crowds, the broadcast networks largely avoided scientific polling data that showed the protesters were in an overwhelming minority.** The *USA Today*/Gallup poll asked whether illegal immigration is "out of control" or "not out of control." Fully 81 percent said "out of control." Fox News asked how serious illegal immigration was as a problem: 60 percent said very serious, 30 percent said somewhat serious. That's 90 percent. These polls were never cited by ABC, CBS, or NBC. In contrast to hundreds of words emphasizing a huge "wave" of "pro-immigrant" activism, the networks aired only 16 mentions of nationwide polls on immigration that considered the opinion of non-protesters. Two of them were CBS polls emphasizing support for a "guest worker" program after a long list of conditions.
- **Advocates of opening a wider path to citizenship were almost twice as likely to speak in news stories as advocates of stricter immigration control.** Advocates for amnesty and guest-

worker programs drew 504 soundbites in the study period, compared to just 257 for tighter border control. (Sixty-nine soundbites were neutral). On the days of pro-illegal-alien rallies, their critics nearly disappeared from the screen. For instance, on the night of April 10, the soundbite count on the three evening newscasts and ABC's *Nightline* was 43 to 2 in favor of the protesters. When the debate shifted to Capitol Hill in May, coverage grew more balanced.

- **While conservative labels were common, liberal labels were rarely or never used.** In the study period, reporters referred to “conservatives” or “conservative” groups 89 times, most intensely during legislative debate in May, when President Bush was presented as having to “appease” his “conservative” base. NBC’s Matt Lauer even referred to Bush’s base as the “far right.” By contrast, the “liberal” label was used only three times – all of them by ABC. CBS and NBC never used the word, even as hard-left protest organizers described the House bill on public radio as full of “horrendous and macabre clauses, fascist clauses.”
- **While protests centered on underlining the vital role illegal aliens play in the American economy, the burdens of illegal immigration in added government costs or crime were barely covered.** While the networks poured out their air time to the sympathetic stories of hard-working immigrant families, only six out of 309 stories mentioned studies that illegal aliens cost more to governments than they provide in tax dollars. Only six stories gave a mention to the problem of the cost or threat of criminal aliens.
- **The networks have not dropped the word “illegal” in favor of “undocumented” immigrants, although some reporters struggled to adopt clumsy liberal-preferred terminology.** Groups like the National Association of Hispanic Journalists have urged their colleagues to never use the word “illegal,” but the word was still more than five times more common than “undocumented.” In 309 stories, there were 381 uses of the word “illegal,” and 73 uses of “undocumented.” But some reporters struggled to please: NBC’s Kevin Tibbles actually referred to protests by “those who critics call illegals.”

The report concludes with recommendations for a more balanced picture in network news coverage of the immigration debate. Newscasters need to acknowledge that protests, even large ones, are often an incomplete measure of public opinion. Both sides of the debate deserve a chance to speak in news stories, not just voices “emerging from the shadows” that reporters sympathetically promote. On this issue, as well as many others, network newscasts ought to reflect the reality that the political debate is between conservatives and liberals, not conservatives and supposed nonpartisans painted in gauzy terms like “immigrant rights groups” – even as they decried “fascist” opponents.

# Election In The Streets

## How the Broadcast Networks Promote Illegal Immigration

BY TIM GRAHAM  
DIRECTOR OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

On December 16, 2005, the House of Representatives passed a bill to curb the flow of illegal aliens and give the federal government more responsibility for detaining and deporting them. That night, ABC, CBS, and NBC didn't cover the vote, even though it was front-page news in the next day's *Washington Post*. Before the vote, the *Post* suggested Republicans were "driven by the rising anger of their constituents."

But in the spring, when left-wing advocacy groups for illegal aliens organized large protests against the House bill, as the Senate considered its own immigration bill, the networks suddenly, fervently discovered the issue and gave the advocacy groups not a mere soapbox in the park, but a three-network rollout of free air time. Protest coverage, often one-sided, stood in stark contrast to polling data showing that a stricter approach to illegal immigration was broadly popular in the country. The broadcast networks took the nation's passion for stricter immigration control and defiantly tried to turn it upside down.

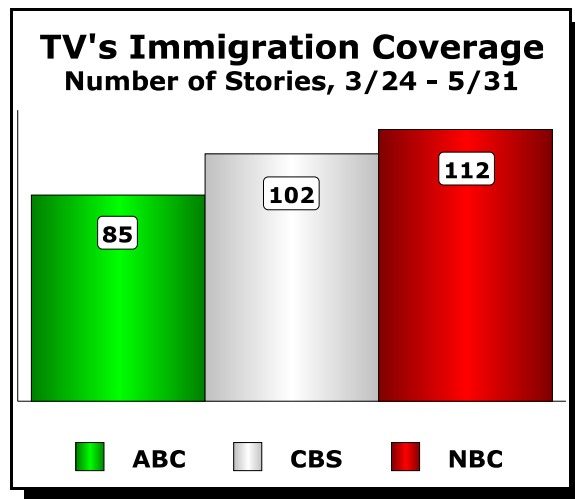
To determine the tone and balance of network coverage of illegal aliens, MRC analysts evaluated every ABC, CBS, and NBC morning, evening, and magazine show news segment on the immigration debate from the outbreak of protest coverage on March 24, 2006 through May 31, 2006. Analysts reviewed 309 stories, 118 of them brief anchor-read items. The following trends emerged:

- 1. While they celebrated "massive" immigration protests with "huge" crowds, the broadcast networks largely avoided scientific polling data that showed that the protesters were in an overwhelming minority.**

Anchors and reporters emphasized and underlined the awakening of a "sleeping giant" of protest with 192 numerical descriptions of the size of protests across the nation or in individual cities. There were 140 superlative adjectives on attendance ("huge," "massive," "extraordinary"). Eighteen of those superlatives suggested the rallies were historic.

For instance, on the March 26 *CBS Evening News*, anchor Mika Brzezinski touted "mass demonstrations that matched the biggest of the civil rights movement or Vietnam War." On April 10, *ABC World News Tonight* anchor Elizabeth Vargas opened simply: "We begin with

an unprecedented show of support for America's illegal immigrants." CBS anchor Bob Schieffer argued: "Not since the protests of the Vietnam era has there been anything quite like it." On the May 1 *Nightline*, ABC host Terry Moran promised: "We have live reports from the epicenter of the protests. From the small towns, where the protesters made history." NBC repeatedly touted what they estimated were the largest rallies in history in individual towns, from Los Angeles to Dallas to Denver.



The networks didn't even wait for the marches to take place before predicting the creation of history. ABC's Kate Snow previewed the May 1 walkout with this opening on *Good Morning America*: "This is the number one radio show here in the morning here in New York City. It's called 'El Vacilon de Manana,' and it is one of the forces behind what could be the largest immigrant walkout ever." On numerous occasions, anchors and reporters told viewers that enormous crowds were "expected" as the protests approached.

These claims to history or demands from the streets have not been channeled for the massive annual "March for Life" against abortion, which is routinely ignored by the networks. On the evening newscasts of January 23, 2006, aired hours after the pro-life protest concluded, CBS said nothing. NBC aired a three-sentence anchor brief. Only ABC had a story on abortion, which briefly used the protests as a news hook for a broader story on pro-life strategies to overturn *Roe vs. Wade*. There were no rave reviews of "huge" marches across America.

Certainly, the pro-illegal immigration rallies were large and provided visuals of waves of protesting humanity. But the networks aggressively pressed the case that these protests presented a demand that should be heeded in Washington. On May 2, CBS *Early Show* co-host Hannah Storm protested to the Senate Majority Leader, Bill Frist: "Monday, over one million immigrants skipped work and skipped school and marched in streets across America. What is it going to take, Senator, for Congress to come together and institute some meaningful immigration reform?"

For one example of the flood of positive adjectives that accompanied the illegal-alien protests, consider Terry Moran's salesmanship from Los Angeles on ABC's *Nightline* May 1:

Today, this city saw a demonstration of **epic proportions**. A peaceful **army** of protesters, marching through the city streets. They're just cleaning up after them behind me right now. It was a **massive** show of strength from Southern California's immigrant community, angered by a proposed legislation in Congress that would make every illegal immigrant a felon. More on LA in a moment. But this was a national day of protest by immigrants and their supporters. About **400,000** people protested in Chicago, where marchers gathered in downtown park for one of the **biggest** events in the day. In Philadelphia today, **huge** crowds converged on the Liberty Bell. In Milwaukee, a **massive** march on the shores of

Lake Michigan. And these are merely a few examples of the **giant** flex of immigrant muscle today....**Hundreds of thousands** of workers, their families and supporters, took over the city streets today in a **massive** demonstration of **sheer numerical power**. It was **breathtaking**. And across LA today, the impact of what was billed as the great American boycott was **dramatic**.

**Allergic To Polls.** In contrast to hundreds of words emphasizing the “wave” of “pro-immigrant” activism, the networks aired only 16 mentions of nationwide polls on immigration that might include the opinion of non-protesters: six on ABC, five on NBC, and five on CBS. That included scant acknowledgment of the networks’ own polls on immigration. The networks were not so reluctant to make routine mentions of the President’s “sagging” approval ratings, but on immigration, the polls were few.

Oddly, while *Nightline* was effusive about the protests, they were the most likely ABC program to offer viewers actual ABC News poll results. On April 10, host Terry Moran noted: “In an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll released today, 75 percent of Americans say the government is not doing enough to keep illegal aliens out of the country, but 63 percent favor a guest worker program that would allow illegal immigrants now working in the U.S. to apply for legal status and eventual citizenship.”

On May 15, Moran reported: “The government’s inability to stem the tide of illegal immigration has enraged Mr. Bush’s conservative supporters. And it clearly troubles the general public. An ABC News poll tonight finds that 77 percent of the public feel the government is not doing enough to keep illegal immigrants from coming into the country. And 58 percent feel strongly about it.”

On air, CBS twice mentioned its polls emphasizing support for a “guest worker” program after a long list of conditions. As part of the big April 10 protest coverage, CBS reporter Jim Axelrod announced: “According to a new CBS News poll, 74 percent of Americans favor allowing illegal immigrants to stay and work if they have been here at least five years, pay a fine and back taxes, speak English and don’t have a criminal record. But even if you wipe away all those conditions, more Americans still favor allowing illegals to apply for work permits than oppose the idea.” (That number was 49 percent to 43 percent, with a three percent margin of error.) The next morning, the poll result was shortened. Co-host Julie Chen declared: “A new CBS News poll shows 74 percent of Americans favor legal status for immigrants who have been here for more than five years.”

**What Polls Were Missing?** CBS did not cite its own poll findings that 87 percent (April 6-9) or 89 percent (May 4-8) of Americans said that the problem of illegal immigration was “very serious” or “somewhat serious.” But CBS used the polls against President Bush. On March 30, Jim Axelrod noted Bush was facing “strong Republican opposition” and “attacks from his own party, who paint him as out of touch with Americans on immigration reform, since polls show most Americans think immigrants here illegally should be forced to go home.”

NBC's polling mentions in March were designed to highlight GOP fissures on immigration, a favorite NBC theme. On March 25, George Lewis singled out Republican numbers: "But according to an NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll, 59 percent of Republicans disagree with a temporary worker program for illegal immigrants." But in fact, the poll results found 59 percent of all Americans disagreed with the temporary-worker program, not just Republicans. Two days later, David Gregory also singled out the GOP: "The public, polls show, considers illegal immigrants a major problem. But figuring out how to solve it has divided Congress and split the President's base — the business community against grass-roots conservatives."

NBC never passed along that NBC's pollsters asked their sample if they would be more likely or less likely to vote for a candidate "who favors tighter controls on illegal immigration," and 71 percent said more likely, and only 11 percent said less likely. But the tiny percentage who agreed with the liberal stance was not presented as a political problem for Democrats or left-wing protest organizers. In May, NBC twice acknowledged its own poll showed that people felt the one-day May 1 boycott against working and shopping would hurt rather than help the cause of illegal immigrants, by a margin of 57 to 17 percent. The other two networks didn't notice.

**Poll Showed Protests Didn't Help.** On the April 1 *NBC Nightly News*, reporter Kevin Corke touted a new *Time* poll showing 79 percent of Americans in favor of a guest worker program, but *Time* assured survey respondents that guest workers would be here "for a fixed period of time, so the government could keep track of them." The question as worded hardly suggested legalizing illegal aliens. Corke also noted 75 percent said illegals shouldn't be eligible for government subsidies like food stamps.

None of the networks noticed this question in the *Time* poll: when asked if demonstrations by "immigrants and immigration rights advocates" would make them more likely to favor a guest worker program or more likely to favor laws that "make it a crime" to enter or work illegally, only 12 percent said demonstrations made them more likely to endorse the guest-worker program, compared to 35 percent who said it made them more likely to favor laws to "make it a crime" to enter or work here, and 49 percent who said protests "don't have that much effect" on their opinion.

### A Startling Contrast

"Over the past several days, a protest movement has been born, erupting with a startling air of spontaneity in mass demonstrations."

— Terry Moran, March 27 *Nightline*.

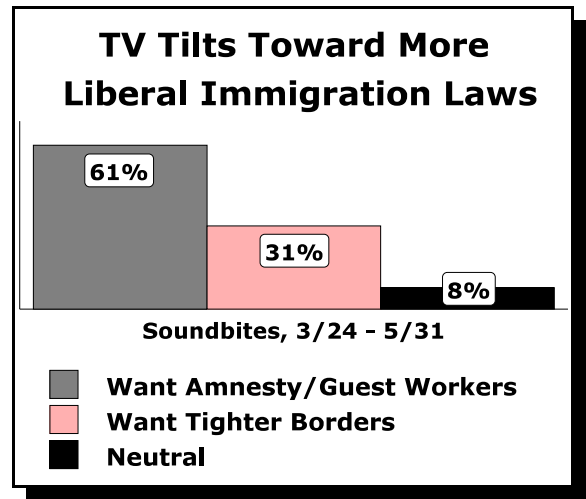
*vs.*

"Tonight on *Nightline*, 'Raising an Army.' The huge immigration protest that stunned the nation. A behind-the-scenes account of who organized them. The role of Spanish-language radio and TV, and the launching of a protest movement Congress couldn't ignore."

— Terry Moran, March 28 *Nightline*.

2. **Advocates of opening a wider path to citizenship were almost twice as likely to speak in news stories as advocates of stricter immigration control.**

Advocates for amnesty and guest-worker programs drew 504 soundbites in the study period, compared to just 257 for tighter border control. (Sixty-nine soundbites were neutral). Soundbites were classified by the position they emphasized, meaning that for example, President Bush ended up on both sides of the soundbite count, depending on if he was emphasizing the need for a guest worker program or the need for a stiffer border presence.



On the days of pro-illegal-alien rallies, their critics nearly disappeared from the screen. On the night of April 10, the soundbite count on the three evening newscasts and ABC's *Nightline* was 43 to 2 in favor of the protesters. On the night of May 1 on the same four shows, the soundbite count was 62 to 8.

The soundbites were designed to persuade the audience that aliens were Americans. On NBC, "Jorge, a Phoenix plumber," in the country illegally for 11 years, proclaimed "I pay taxes, I pay bills. We've sent kids to school. I take all responsibilities of any American." On ABC, one demonstrator, a New York union leader, decried the House bill as "entirely un-American. And it's a shame. It's hypocritical." The man explained he was "proud" of his "undocumented" entry: "I found my opportunity... I was able to build a family and get a shot at the American dream."

When the debate shifted from the streets to the Capitol in May, coverage grew more balanced. In late March and April, the soundbite disparity was 294 to 132. In May, it was 210 to 125. One reason for the shift in soundbites was the shift in stories. President Bush's decision to ask the National Guard to help in controlling the border in May led to network stories on immigration enforcement.

Incoming CBS anchor Katie Couric told *The Washington Post* she hopes to take her newscast outside the Beltway and "hear from real people." For example, "On immigration, she says, CBS might interview a restaurant owner about illegal immigrants or a recent emigre from Guatemala." In fact, immigration coverage during the study period was loaded with recent immigrants and employers outside the world of the Beltway elites. On May 1, CBS's Kelly Cobiella reported from Dodge City, Kansas, focusing on meat-packing immigrant Clemente Torres, now a legal citizen, who marched in the boycott, and a local furniture-store owner who insisted his employees come to work.

It's inside-the-Beltway politicians who were barely included until the congressional debate in May. Even then, the most prominent politicians in the aftermath of President Bush's proposal to add National Guard troops in support of the Border Patrol were border-state governors.

### 3. While conservative labels were common, liberal labels were rarely or never used.

One classic example of how national media outlets skew political news coverage is how the epic political battles of our time are presented as the conservatives versus the nonpartisans. The fight over illegal immigration was no different. In the study period, reporters referred to "conservatives" or "conservative" groups 89 times, most intensely during legislative debate in May, when President Bush was presented as having to "appease" his "conservative" base. NBC's Matt Lauer even referred on *Today* to Bush's base as the "far right." By contrast, the "liberal" label was used only three times – all of them by ABC. CBS and NBC never used the word.

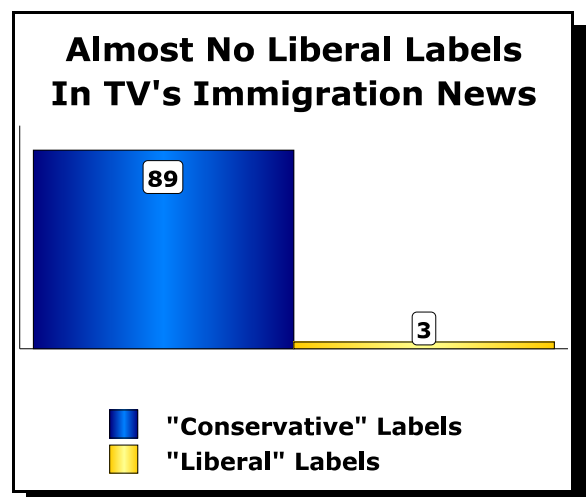
ABC used 25 conservative labels to 3 liberal labels. CBS carried 19 conservative labels and zero liberal tags. The disparity was greatest at NBC, a label-happy 45 to 0.

The word was sometimes used in rapid-fire repetition. On the May 14 *World News Tonight*, ABC White House correspondent Martha Raddatz asserted the President is "under tremendous pressure from his conservative base. He wants to reach out to that conservative base and say, look, we're really beefing up border security." Two sentences later, she repeats: "He hopes if he beefs up security on the border, he will appease his conservative base."

On the May 15 *Today*, Tim Russert insisted President Bush "is losing conservative support. How does he get it back? He tries to tackle an issue like immigration, talking like a conservative in terms of shoring up the borders, and like a compassionate conservative in terms of the 11 million [illegal aliens] who are still in the country."

The House bill drew other adjectives indicating a strong ideology in the early weeks of the study period, offering a vibe of mean-spirited neighbors that would "roll up the welcome mat." The House gave America a "harsh anti-immigration bill" a "heavy-handed approach," a "hard-nosed" proposal, a "harsh clamp-down," a "harsh-edged call to arms," a set of "hard-ball measures," offering President Bush a "hard line."

The "liberal" label was much less forthcoming. When large national groups like the National Council of LaRaza were interviewed, as on the



March 28 *Today*, NBC substitute host Campbell Brown merely described them as “the largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States.”

On the March 27 *Good Morning America*, ABC’s Charles Gibson came out of an interview with Sean Hannity agreeing that both predictable sides of the debate are split: “It’s no conservative [unanimity], no liberal. There is as wide a range of opinions as there are members of Congress.”

On the April 9 *Good Morning America*, ABC’s Kate Snow quoted from Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid’s statement that President Bush and GOP leaders failed “to stand up to the extreme right wing of their party,” which she called “pretty tough words.” ABC political analyst George Stephanopoulos replied that both sides of the aisle were nervous and getting “buyer’s remorse” about the Senate bill, both “conservative Republicans” and “liberal Democrats.” On the May 2 *Good Morning America*, co-host Charles Gibson introduced his guest Lou Dobbs of CNN as “an outspoken critic of open borders and more liberal immigration policies.” In none of these cases did ABC identify the protesters or their organizers as liberal or left-wing.

The L-word was avoided even as the same protest organizers that appeared in network news stories denounced the House bill on public radio as full of “horrendous and macabre clauses, fascist clauses.” On the March 27 edition of Pacifica Radio’s “Democracy Now” program, broadcast on public radio stations and public-access TV channels nationwide, Javier Rodriguez, one of the principal protest organizers for the Los Angeles group called the March 25<sup>th</sup> Coalition Against HR 4437, explained they had a political strategy and a media strategy: “The political was to send the message of hope and, of course, to stand to stop the Sensenbrenner bill because of its horrendous and macabre clauses, fascist clauses.” He was blunt: the goal was complete amnesty for every illegal alien: “The main demand is legalization for the 12 million undocumented.”

Jesse Diaz, another leader of the March 25<sup>th</sup> Coalition, told Socialist Alternative.org he had the same radical agenda: “The principle of the immigrants rights movement has been, has always been for full amnesty. Full, immediate, unconditional, universal, immediate amnesty for everybody.” He wanted no part of the congressional compromises with Bush: “I was asking myself ‘Why do they want this compromise guest worker program and all that bull [expletive]?’” He demanded a new party line: “I think that you really can’t have it both ways. You can’t be in the immigrant rights movement and take a moderate stance. It’s got to be a very progressive stance.” But the networks wouldn’t even describe him as a liberal when they quoted him.

### ‘Firebrand’ Lost In A ‘Dreamscape’

**ABC’s Terry Moran:** “Take a ride with Congressman Tancredo around his district...And you find out very quickly that for this firebrand Republican conservative, who’s made immigration his signature issue, politics is really a personal thing.”

**Rep. Tom Tancredo:** “Sometimes on Friday afternoons at the office, you know, I’ll say — especially if we got new people for us — I’ll say, ‘okay we’re going to Tancredo Land.’”

**Moran:** “Tancredo Land. It’s kind if a dreamscape, really. Soaked in nostalgia, Tom Tancredo’s memories of the old Italian neighborhood that cradled and made him.”

— Report on ABC’s *Nightline*, April 5.

On May 1, *NBC Nightly News* quoted Mara Verheyden-Hilliard, but carried just her name on screen. NBC didn't note her membership on the steering committee of International ANSWER, a hard-left protest-organizing group affiliated with the Trotskyite Workers' World Party. Verheyden-Hilliard merely told NBC she was boycotting for a "very clear message." They didn't capture her at a press conference berating immigration agents, as reported by KABC-TV: "At this moment, across the United States we have been witnessing violent, cruel, terrorizing raids on working people. Racist attacks, racist raids that we condemn unequivocally." Following the usual pattern of sanitizing protest coverage, protest leader press-conferences and podium speakers at the rallies were ignored, as well as the point that many podium speakers did not speak in English to the assembled crowds.

The networks were so lax in describing protest organizers they didn't seem to notice when they were former diplomats for foreign governments. A March 24 ABC story on a Georgia protest by Steve Osunsami quoted Teodoro Maus, listing him on screen as a "community leader." They didn't tell viewers Maus was Mexico's consul general in Atlanta from 1998 to 2001.

#### **4. While protests centered on underlining the vital role illegal aliens play in the American economy, the burdens of illegal immigration in added government costs or crime were barely covered.**

While the networks poured out their air time to offer sympathetic stories of hard-working immigrant families, only six stories mentioned studies that illegal aliens cost more to taxpayers than they provide in tax dollars. Only six stories gave even a mention to the problem of the cost or threat of criminal aliens.

This issue is strongly felt in poll results. On the August 10 *Today*, NBC's Tim Russert explained his sense of public opinion: "In the generic sense, people say 'We need strict enforcement. Build fences. Keep illegal immigrants out. We have to deal with this problem.' When you humanize the problem and you have high school kids in the street marching, saying 'I was born here, I'm an American citizen, don't ship my Mom and Pop home,' then it becomes a much different debate, and that's what's playing out in the streets and the halls of Congress." By focusing heavily on illegal aliens and their families, the networks were also hosting a "much different debate," not a debate about cost burdens or criminal aliens.

When CBS asked respondents in May if "illegal immigrants do more to strengthen the economy because they provide low-cost labor and they spend money, or do illegal immigrants do more to weaken the U.S. economy because they don't pay all taxes, but use public services," only 22 percent said they strengthen the economy, and 70 percent felt they weaken the economy by draining public services.

A Fox poll in April read respondents a list of possible concerns over illegal immigration, and two led the list: 87 percent were concerned that aliens “overburden government programs and services” and 75 percent were concerned they “lead to an increase in crime.”

ABC carried one mention of costs, and three of crime. CBS had three mentions of costs and two of crime, and NBC had only two mentions of cost and one of crime.

**Costs.** On the March 26 *Sunday Morning*, CBS reporter Sharyl Attkisson noted: “While more than half the undocumented workers do pay federal taxes, it’s not enough to offset their much bigger drain on the federal budget for services like Medicaid, health care, and food stamps.” An on-screen graph credited the Center for Immigration Studies. Attkisson mostly repeated that sentence two days later on *The Early Show*.

A handful of reports mentioned local cost burdens, not national ones. On the April 19 *Nightline*, ABC’s Chris Bury reported from Cochise County, Arizona that illegal aliens cost a small hospital there about \$400,000 in health care just from May to December. NBC’s George Lewis passed along on May 17 that the mayor of Yuma, Arizona “says his city’s social services are burdened by illegal immigrants, that he wants Washington to crack down hard.”

CBS, on the other hand, aired stories emphasizing the costs of deportation and decrying the “nasty” idea of keeping illegal aliens out of federal entitlement programs. On the April 18 *Evening News*, anchor Bob Schieffer introduced a story on how a new law signed by President Bush to keep illegal aliens out of the Medicaid program “could have a nasty side that is harmful to many U.S. citizens as well.” Reporter Sharyn Alfonsi’s one-sided report used only liberal activists as she claimed the law “could hurt millions of honest Americans” who “don’t have the paperwork” of citizenship, “like the elderly and the mentally ill.” On the April 19 *Evening News*, CBS reporter Byron Pitts underlined the cost of enforcing immigration laws: “Detaining and deporting aliens is an expensive business. Last year, it cost taxpayers \$56 million in flights.”

**Crime.** No story in the study period mentioned the problem of Latino criminal gangs, often heavy with illegal aliens, like the El Salvadoran gang Mara Salvatrucha 13, or MS-13, with an estimated 10,000 members. The biggest focus on crime came in stories on the town of Costa Mesa, California. Even when the subject featured more conservative spokesmen, the networks found controversy and threatening trends on the right, something they often underplayed or ignored on a day of celebrating protests. On the March 28 *CBS Evening News*, reporter Bill Whitaker reported the town voted to train police to perform the duties of federal

### **They’re Vital Cogs, Not Forces of Chaos**

“Lou, you said yesterday though in the commentary, that these people who were marching yesterday, and there were millions across the country, wanted to bring paralysis and chaos to this country. Lou, can’t you acknowledge that what they were trying to do was show that they’re vital cogs in our society and that they keep many of our, parts of our society going?”

— ABC’s Charles Gibson to Lou Dobbs, May 2 *Good Morning America*.

immigration agents “to nab and deport criminals here illegally.” The mayor of the town, Allan Mansoor, made friends with conservative Minuteman activists, described by Whitaker as “patriots to some, vigilantes to others.” He concluded: “Costa Mesa is changing in ways both sides find threatening.”

On that same night, *NBC Nightly News* reporter George Lewis also reported on Costa Mesa’s effort to “get rid of illegal immigrants who commit crimes.” Lewis found “The mayor says that will make the city safer. His critics accuse him of grandstanding.” The Minutemen were a “controversial citizens group.” The mayor was given two soundbites, and his critics were given five.

On April 20, CBS anchor Bob Schieffer read this brief dispatch: “It turns out that immigration laws are also useful tools for getting sexual predators off the streets. Seen in this exclusive CBS News video, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents in New York arrested 52 convicted child-sex offenders today from 14 countries. They’ll be deported for immigration violations.” With exclusive video and a dramatic storyline, why couldn’t CBS manage more than a few seconds of anchorman air time on this?

Crime came up only once for ABC, only briefly mentioned by reporter Martha Raddatz as a GOP argument in favor of the wall in the San Diego area on the May 17 *World News Tonight*: “The senators say the 14-mile-long and 14-foot-high barrier has reduced crime and improved the economy in southern California,” followed by Democrats doubting the effectiveness of more fencing.

**5. The networks have not dropped the word “illegal” in favor of “undocumented” immigrants, although some reporters struggled to adopt clumsy liberal-preferred terminology.**

Groups like the National Association of Hispanic Journalists have urged their colleagues to avoid the word “illegal” (see text box), but the word was still more than five times more common than “undocumented.” In 309 stories, there were 381 uses of the word “illegal,” and 73 utterances of “undocumented.” The words often appeared in the same story together as interchangeable terms.

**The I-Word Is ‘Dehumanizing’**

“While many national news outlets use the term ‘illegal immigrant,’ this handbook calls for the discussion and re-evaluation of its use. Instead of using illegal immigrant, alternative labels recommended are ‘undocumented worker’ or ‘undocumented immigrant’.... Terms such as illegal alien or illegal immigrant can often be used pejoratively in common parlance and can pack a powerful emotional wallop for those on the receiving end. Instead, use undocumented immigrant or undocumented worker, both of which are terms that convey the same descriptive information without carrying the psychological baggage. Avoid using illegal(s) as a noun.”

– **March 28 press release put out by the National Association of Hispanic Journalists pressing the media to “to use accurate terminology in its coverage of immigration and to stop dehumanizing undocumented immigrants.”**

In March, CBS seemed to be the most enamored of “undocumented,” using “illegal” 20 times and “undocumented” 17 times. But in the next two months, it shifted toward the typical pattern found in the study period, with 75 uses of “illegal” and 10 of “undocumented.” CBS’s ratio of 95 to 27 was the closest to equal. NBC’s ratio was 137 to 23. ABC’s was 149 to 23.

Most of the time, the networks did not follow the NAHJ demands. But some reporters struggled to please: on *Today*, NBC’s Kevin Tibbles actually referred to protests by “those who critics call illegals.” The word “alien,” especially disliked by advocacy groups like the NAHJ, was rare. It was only used on seven occasions (three on ABC, three on NBC, one on CBS).

**Other Immigration Terms.** Analysts studied a few other terms to investigate the pattern and frequency of their use. “Immigration reform” was fairly common, used on 115 occasions in the study period. NBC employed it on 46 occasions, ABC had 35 uses of the word, and CBS had 34. While in most stories, “reform” was used to describe the more liberal Senate bill, there were a few mentions of “reform” as describing the House bill.

The notion of illegal-immigrant “rights” was popular in protester lingo, and surfaced on 31 occasions, usually to describe “immigrant rights groups” or to explain the cause of protesters. CBS used it most frequently, on 14 occasions. NBC had 11, and ABC had 6. CBS reporter Sandra Hughes explained on the March 24 *Evening News* that while the Senate worked up its “immigration reform” bill, “others are calling for more restrictive reform. Immigrant rights groups say they won’t back down.”

Only one news report attempted to ponder briefly the concept of illegal-alien rights. On May 1, NBC’s Lester Holt noted: “But the question over whether illegal immigrants should have rights is one many American workers remain unsure of.” A man on the street insisted the concept upset him, “because there’s a lot of people who want to be American citizens, but they’ve got to go through the right channels.”

The word “amnesty” is seen as a word conservatives favor, and was only used on 30 occasions, usually to describe what conservatives believe guest-worker programs represent. NBC used the word on 13 occasions, ABC 10, and CBS 7. Newspaper accounts of protests could be absolutely allergic to the word “amnesty” – in all of the *Washington Post*’s April 11 coverage of protests, it never used the word.

As passage of the more liberal Senate bill drew near in late May, all three networks used the complimentary adjective “landmark” to describe it, with NBC using the word four times, CBS twice and ABC twice. Once again, it was described prematurely as a “landmark” before the vote. How are the networks so sure what will be seen as “history” or a “landmark” by future generations? To viewers, it often sounds like spin for a bill journalists seem to favor.

While reporters on a few occasions divided the fight over illegal immigration with the simplistic and inaccurate terms “pro-immigration” and “anti-immigration,” the concept that border-control advocates were obvious or closeted racists was rare. In a profile of conservative Rep. Tom Tancredo on the April 5 *Nightline*, Terry Moran noted Katrina Vanden Heuvel of *The Nation* magazine thought he was a racist. She claimed “some of the white supremacist thinking that used to be represented by David Duke has been absorbed by people like Tancredo...the draconian legislation in the House is un-American.”

In May it erupted — from a soundbite in a story — when Sen. Harry Reid proclaimed on several networks that an amendment was “racist” because it insisted no person has the right to claim the United States had to provide services or materials in any other language than English.

ABC may have used the strangest hyperbole in the debate by using the theme “Immigration Wars” to frame their immigration stories on 29 occasions.

## Conclusion

---

In reviewing all of these stories, it seems quite apparent that the broadcast news makers see illegal immigrants through a very sympathetic lens, as downtrodden racial minorities who almost uniformly work hard, even if they obviously don’t play by the rules. They are family men and women. They even presented them as more American than Americans.

Patriotism is often seen as the refuge of political scoundrels, but not with illegal aliens. The networks seemed to offer honorary citizenship to anyone crossing the border. Network anchors hailed them as “emerging from the shadows” to speak out. Their protests “looked like a Fourth of July parade.” CBS’s Harry Smith found protesters “draping themselves in the American Dream.” ABC’s Terry Moran blatantly editorialized at the end of the May 1 *Nightline* that when you walk among the protesters, they are so “decent, polite and, well, neighborly,” and their gathering in “great numbers” to send a nonviolent message to government “all seems very American, for what it’s worth.” (Only ABC, never CBS or NBC, found the wide use of the flags of other countries in the protests as a controversy worth mentioning.)

### Does “The Race” Sense Racism?

**NBC’s Campbell Brown:** “Janet, I just want to ask you one question about what are racial undertones to this debate for many people? Is that something that worries you?”

**Janet Murguia, National Council of La Raza:** “Well, I think so. I think there’s a lot of folks who believe that in the name of security, in the name of anti-terrorism, they’re taking a broad brush and really being driven to I think what some people believe are undertone — racial undertones, anti-ethnic undertones here...”

**Lou Dobbs, CNN:** “I’ve got great respect for Janet, but the National Council of La Raza is talking about race? La Raza? What does that mean? It means ‘the race.’ The fact of the matter, this is not a racial issue. The only racial issue involved and injected in this are ethnocentric Hispanic activist organizations that are equating Hispanic with illegal alien.”  
— Exchange on NBC’s *Today*, March 28.

In this civics lesson on what it means to be a citizen or a patriot, there was no debate on whether it was proper for the illegal-alien protests, treated like a slam-dunk election in the streets, to cancel out the opinions of tens of millions of voters. The networks never once considered that some people would find it bizarre for illegal aliens to participate in the making or unmaking of legislation when they have entered the country in violation of the law. In his book *The Image*, Daniel Boorstin inspired many media critics to scorn the “pseudo-event,” an event solely designed to attract publicity. With these protests, conservatives could argue they were pseudo-events populated by pseudo-citizens.

### Draped In A Dream

“When you saw these pictures yesterday from these demonstrations in all these cities across the country, hundreds of thousands of people, American flags unfurled, people draping themselves in the American dream, what did you think?...It’s really unprecedented, this groundswell that has come up...People literally all over the country walking away from their jobs to stand in the street and say, ‘I count for something.’”  
— CBS’s Harry Smith to CNN’s Lou Dobbs and Governor Bill Richardson (D-NM) on *The Early Show*, April 11.

The networks also found no cause for questioning protest organizers when a major rallying cry in the protests was “Today we march, tomorrow we vote.” Does that mean that protest groups are encouraging voting by illegal aliens? The networks never wondered. Critics of illegal immigration note that in 1996, conservative California Congressman Bob Dornan lost his seat to Loretta Sanchez by fewer than 1,000 votes. State elections officials found that at least 300 votes in that election were cast illegally by non-citizens.

If the broadcast networks are interested in presenting a truly balanced picture of America’s immigration debate in their news coverage, they need to consider a few recommendations:

- 1. Newscasters need to acknowledge that protests, even large ones, are often an incomplete measure of public opinion.** It’s strange for the networks to tout polls when they bolster liberal causes, and then bury them when they don’t. It’s also strange for the networks to tout large protests when they bolster the left, and ignore large protests (like pro-life marches) when they don’t. In either case, protests offer a good visual display of political passion, but they ought to be incorporated into a broader, more realistic evaluation of where the overall American public stands, even if public opinion is complex.
- 2. Both sides of the debate deserve a chance to speak in news stories, not just voices “emerging from the shadows” that reporters sympathetically promote. Both sides deserve tough, skeptical coverage, too.** Major protests can fairly be covered with more emphasis on the protesters on that day, since that is what is “new.” But network producers need to work harder to insure that over the weeks or months of coverage of an issue like immigration, that critics of the immigration protests are heard as well. That

includes more emphasis on critiques of the protests and protest groups in particular, which often seemed to attract the praise of “objective” network observers.

3. **On this issue, as well as many others, network newscasts ought to reflect the reality that the political debate is between conservatives and liberals, not conservatives and supposed nonpartisans.** This recommendation cuts across all political stories, in nearly every debate between conservatives and liberals. It’s not a persuasive argument that stories don’t include the L-word because liberals don’t like the word “liberal,” or don’t feel the word “liberal” describes their views. Any journalist attempting to balance a story should either use both labels when they apply, or avoid both labels. It’s unfair to paint one side as the “far right” and then pain the left in gauzy terms like “immigrant rights groups” – even as they harshly decried “fascist” opponents.
4. **The network news ought to borrow from the arguments of both sides to tell the immigration story, and not avoid stories that seem to underline a conservative argument.** In this study period, the networks seemed allergic to sentences (let alone entire stories) that discussed the problem of illegal-alien cost burdens to taxpayers and illegal-alien crime and imprisonment issues. There were stories on the Minutemen, and other illegal-immigration opponent efforts like WeHireAliens.com. There were stories on life with the Border Patrol, even if those mostly came in May, after the White House put the idea of bolstering border control in the headlines. But stories often seemed designed to persuade people to welcome illegal aliens and support liberal policies. Introducing one story on the March 31 20/20, host John Stossel explicitly pleaded that “before you choose sides” on illegal immigrants, you needed to watch a heart-warming story on two illegal immigrants who put their kids through college by dumpster diving seven days a week for aluminum cans.
5. **It would be wise to wait for time to elapse before defining “history” and “landmark” legislation, and to wait for protests to occur before describing them as attracting “millions.”** Perhaps nothing betrays a rooting interest by reporters more obviously than people in a 24-hour news cycle identifying an event as historic before it happens, or six hours after it occurs.

Anchors like Katie Couric are now promising to go beyond the headlines on the evening news: “The biggest job isn’t telling people what happened. It’s getting them to understand why they should care.” The overcoverage and gushing tone of illegal-alien protests sounded just like that. It was not so much “news” as salesmanship: a collection of positive, panoramic visuals for helping reporters “tell people why they should care” – care about what liberals care about.

---

**The Media Research Center**

325 South Patrick Street • Alexandria, Virginia, 22314

(703) 683-9733 • [www.mediaresearch.org](http://www.mediaresearch.org)

**L. Brent Bozell III**, President

**Brent H. Baker**, Vice President for Research and Publications

**Richard Noyes**, Research Director • **Tim Graham**, Director of Media Analysis

**Michael Chapman**, Director of Communications

**Geoff Dickens**, **Brad Wilmouth**, **Megan McCormack**,

**Michael Rule** and **Scott Whitlock**, News Division Analysts

**Michelle Humphrey**, Research Associate

**Karen Hanna**, Media Archivist • **Kristine Looney**, Assistant Media Archivist

**Michael Gibbons**, MRC Webmaster

---

*To schedule an interview, please contact Colleen O'Boyle or Tim Scheiderer at (703) 973-5004.*