

Volume II, Number 1

January, 1988

## The 1988 Election Part I: The Preseason

TV news coverage of election '88 was already in full swing during 1987. From February through December we analyzed 379 election stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows -- over eleven hours of coverage.

The results:

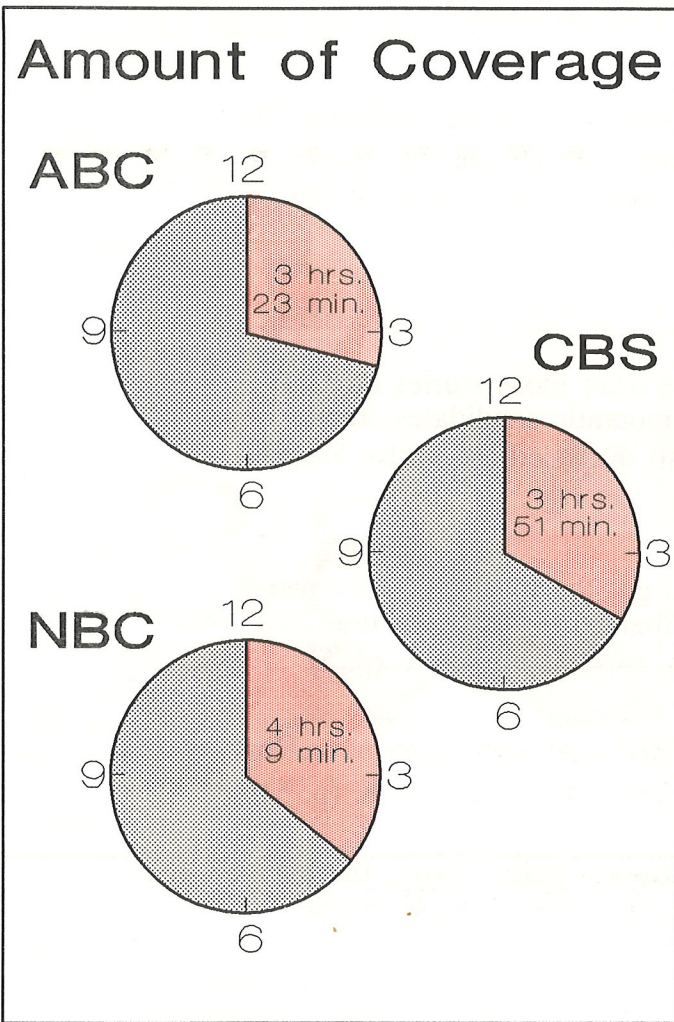
- \* Hart Dominates Coverage - There were more stories on Gary Hart than on all other Democratic candidates combined. Hart's coverage also outpaced the entire Republican field. (p. 3)
- \* Jackson Gets Best Press - Jackson got the most positive coverage of any candidate in either party; Hart got the worst. Among Republicans, Bush fared worst. (p. 5)
- \* The Horse Race - Bush garnered the best horse race news, Hart the worst. Jackson again led among Democrats. (p. 5)
- \* Issues Downplayed - For every story on policy issues, there were nearly two on the horse race and three on campaign controversies. (p. 2)

The Early Line: Democrats got about twice the media attention of Republicans during 1987. Jackson had the best coverage. Bush combined the best horse race coverage with the most negative evaluations.

*Media Monitor* will continue to analyze network news coverage throughout the 1988 Presidential campaign.

## Pregame Show

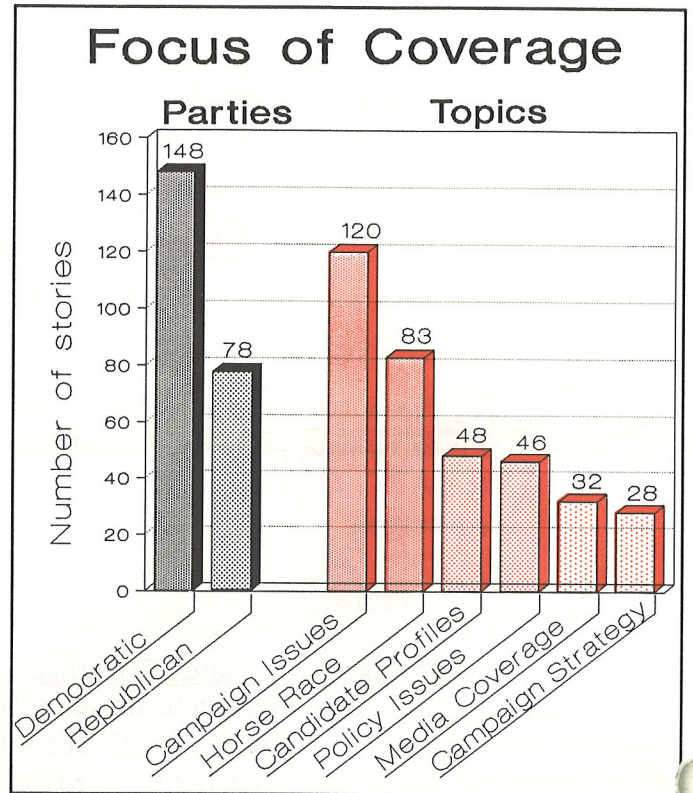
It was only the preseason, but '88 election coverage was in full swing during 1987. In the period from February 8, a full year before the Iowa caucuses, to the end of 1987, we examined all network news coverage of the election. We coded 379 election stories lasting a total of 11 hours 23 minutes. Coverage was heaviest on NBC, with 139 stories and over 4 hours of coverage. CBS ran 115 stories lasting just under 4 hours. ABC aired more stories (125) but kept them short, totaling under 3 1/2 hours.



## What's the Story?

The Democratic race provided nearly twice as many stories as its Republican counterpart (148 to 78). The mainstays were campaign trail controversies like Hart's sex life and Biden's borrowed phrases. These "campaign issues" outdistanced even the horse race news and left the policy debate in the dust. There were nearly three stories on campaign is-

ues for every report on issues of domestic or foreign policy. The media's own role in the campaign became a major story, covered nearly as often as policy issues.



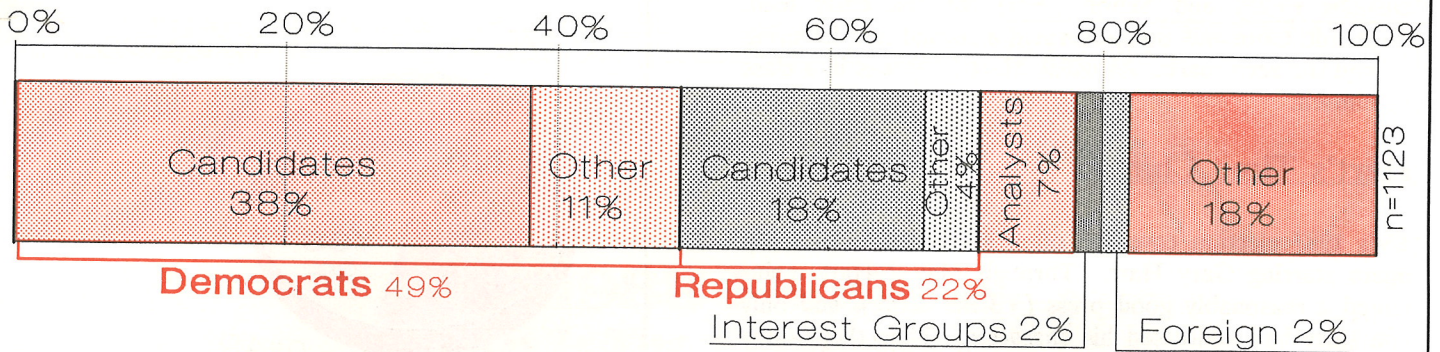
## The Policy Debate

Although substantive policy issues were rarely analyzed in depth, they were often commented on. We coded 697 mentions of policy issues, spread across a wide number of topics. Much of the policy debate was event driven, led by the Iran-Contra affair (85 mentions) and arms control (63). Perennial issues like taxes, the deficit, welfare, education, and farm policy lagged well behind.

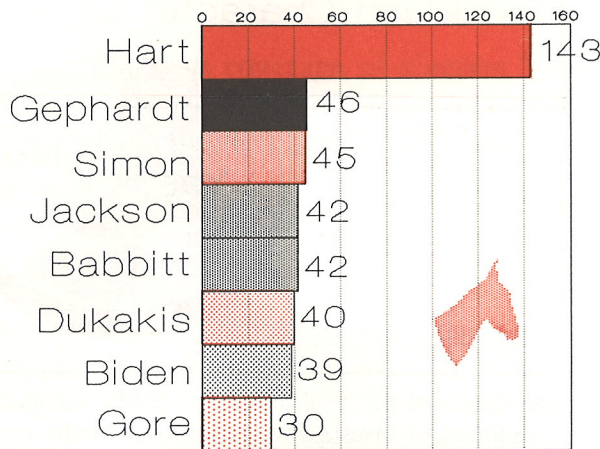
Among foreign policy questions, only Central America made the top ten issue list. There was virtually no mention of the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, or South Africa. Among domestic concerns, women's issues, abortion, trade policy and unemployment just missed making the top ten. Non-starters on the home front included civil rights, energy, and AIDS.

The networks often differed in their coverage of the issues. NBC offered the heaviest coverage of the Iran-Contra affair, Central America, and social welfare issues (including social security). CBS led the reporting on education reform and government ethics. ABC, which had the least issue coverage, provided most of the election reporting on AIDS

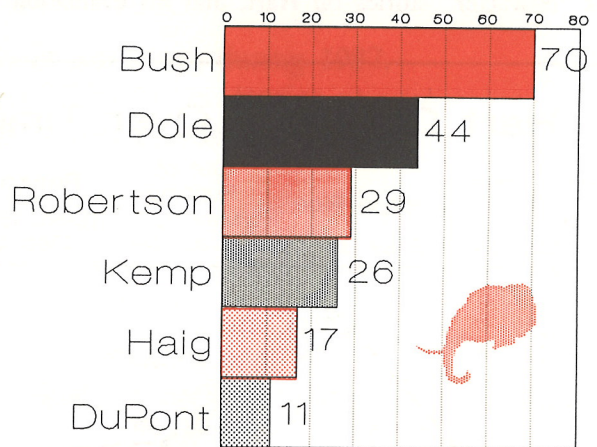
# Sources



## Democrats

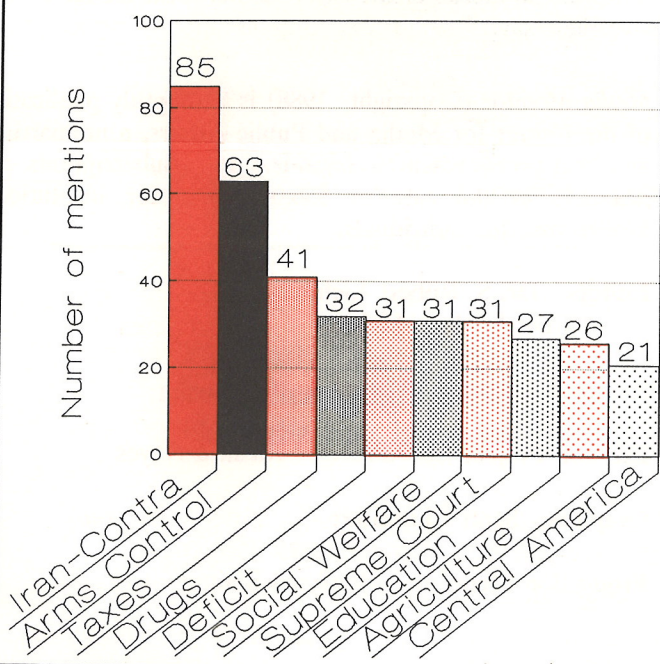


## Republicans



\*Candidate totals include family and staff.

## Top Ten Policy Issues



## Making News

Democrats dominated election coverage in 1987, accounting for over twice as many sources as Republicans (49 to 22%). Besides the candidates and their camps, partisan sources included officeholders, party activists, and primary voters.

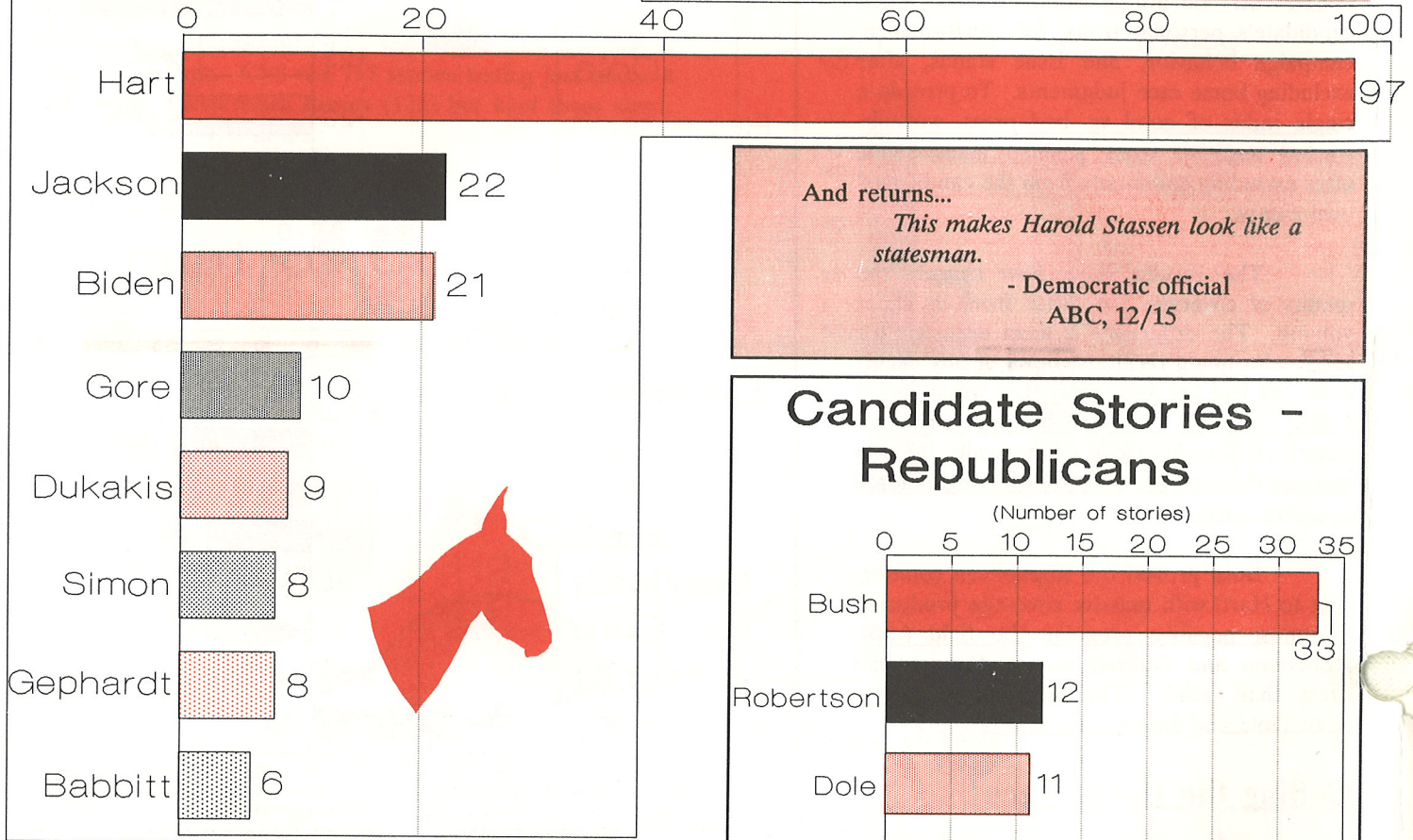
All outside experts (academics, pollsters, pundits etc.) together made only 77 appearances. The most prominent analyst was William Schneider of the American Enterprise Institute. His 12 appearances outdistanced the entire DuPont campaign.

Among candidates, a wide gulf separated Gary Hart from the rest of the Democratic field, who were clustered together. Hart was also quoted over twice as often as Republican source leader George Bush.

The candidates' news-making ability was also indicated by the number of stories devoted to each. More stories were devoted to Hart (97) than to all his Democratic opponents combined (84) or the entire Republican field (68). Jackson ran a clear second among the Democrats,

# Candidate Stories - Democrats

(Number of stories)



with over twice as many stories as any competitor other than Hart. Republican frontrunner Bush generated about three times as many stories (33) as Robertson (12) and Dole (11). Stories about the Republican long-shots were limited mainly to the announcement of their candidacies.

Previous issues of the *Monitor* are available from the Center:

- THE IRAN/CONTRA STORY
- THE TOWER REPORT
- CHERNOBYL ANNIVERSARY
- GLASNOST COVERAGE/HART AFFAIR
- FROM IRANGATE TO OLLIEMANIA
- JAPANESE TRADE CHALLENGE
- MARKET MELTDOWN/BORK BATTLE
- INF TREATY DEBATE
- THE AIDS STORY

Hart exits...

*The fall of Gary Hart was...Greek tragedy mixed with American soap opera.*

- British reporter  
CBS, 5/8

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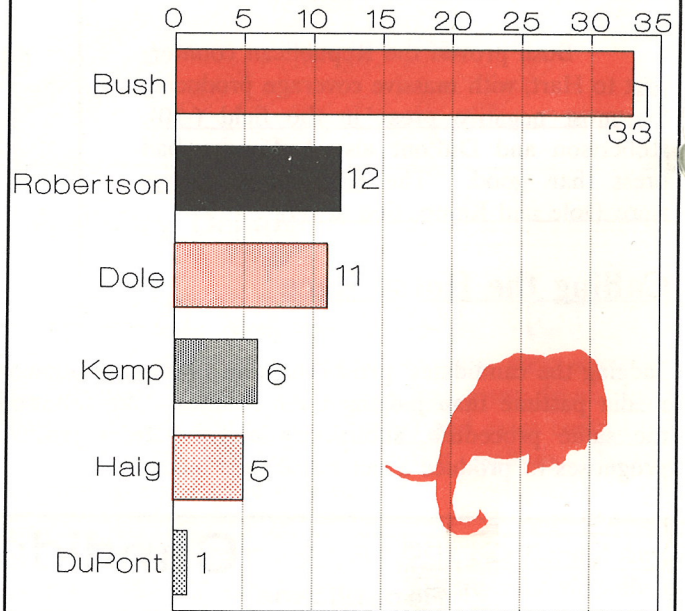
And returns...

*This makes Harold Stassen look like a statesman.*

- Democratic official  
ABC, 12/15

# Candidate Stories - Republicans

(Number of stories)



*The seven Democrats now running have been called the seven dwarfs...But Jackson's numbers make him the strongest dwarf.*

- John Chancellor  
NBC, 6/25

*Forget Jesse Jackson. Mookie Wilson for President!*

- Mets fan  
CBS, 7/2

## Good Press\Bad Press

It's not just how much news but what kind of news you make that counts in politics. We coded all on-air evaluations of each candidate's personal traits, job performance, campaign behavior, and issue stands, after excluding horse race judgments. To provide a single index of good vs. bad press, we subtracted negative from positive assessments, after excluding comments from the candidates' own camps.

The results show how sharply the quality of coverage can differ from its sheer volume. The difference is most dramatic for Hart, who made the most news of any candidate yet had far and away the worst press (-52). No other Democrat had a negative net score. At the other end of the scale, Jackson enjoyed the best press (+19) of any candidate in either party.

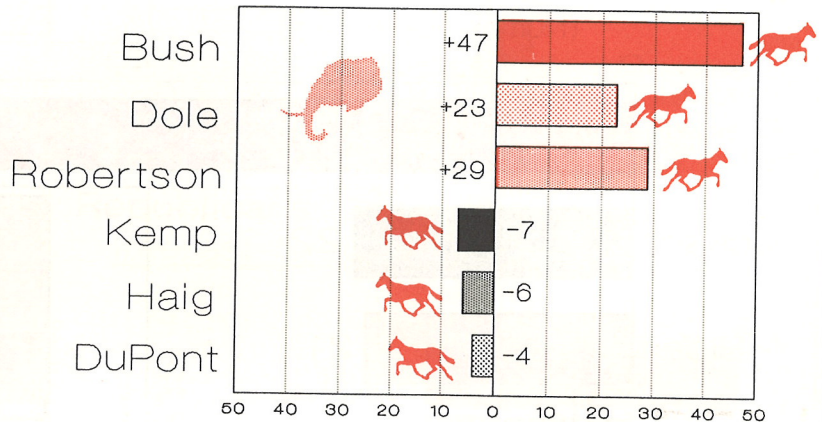
Bush proved the Republican counterpart to Hart, with massive coverage producing the most negative press in the field (-10). Robertson and DuPont also had more bad press than good. The Republican leaders were Dole and Kemp, tied at +8.

## Calling the Horse Race

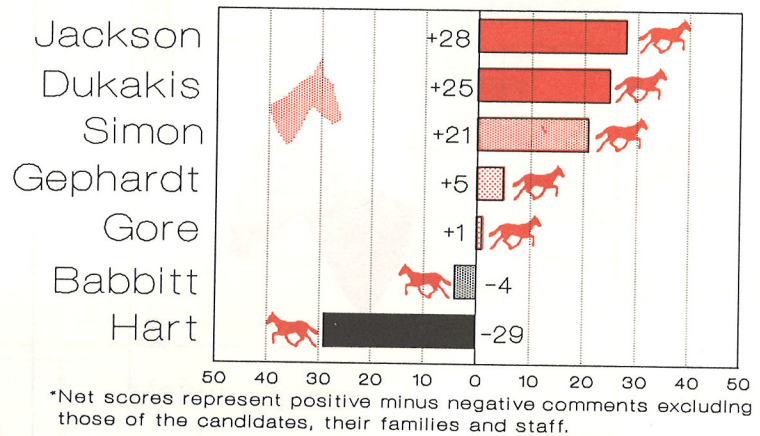
Judging the candidates' prospects is an even more popular media pastime than judging their abilities. We followed the same procedure, subtracting negative from positive prognoses to produce a net horse race index.

# Horse Race Judgements

## Republicans



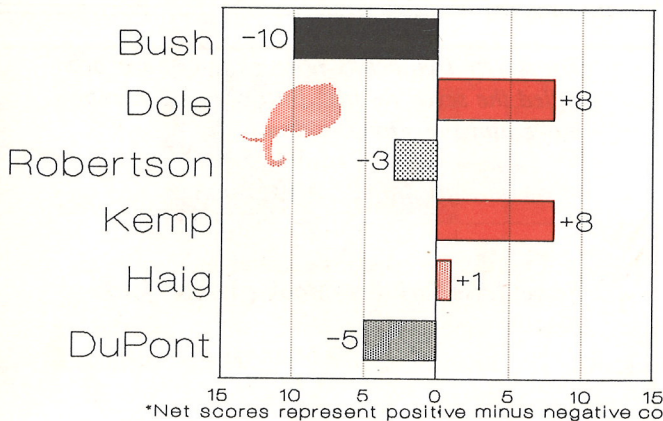
## Democrats



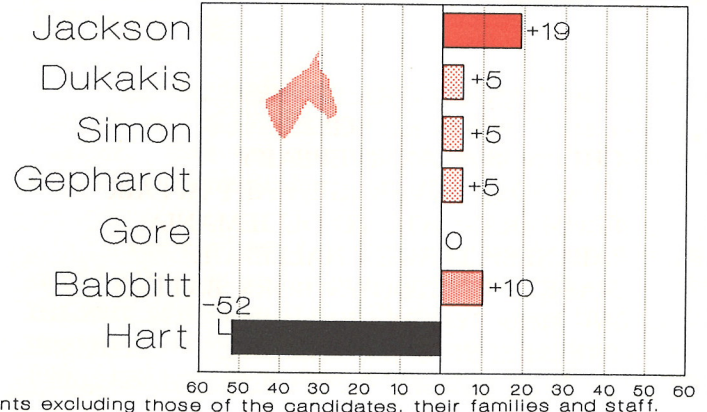
On the Republican side, frontrunner Bush earned by far the best horse race score (+47) to balance his bad press in other spheres. The surprising Robertson edged out Dole for second place (+29 to +23). The other candidates' negative scores reflect their darkhorse status.

# Candidate Evaluations

## Republicans



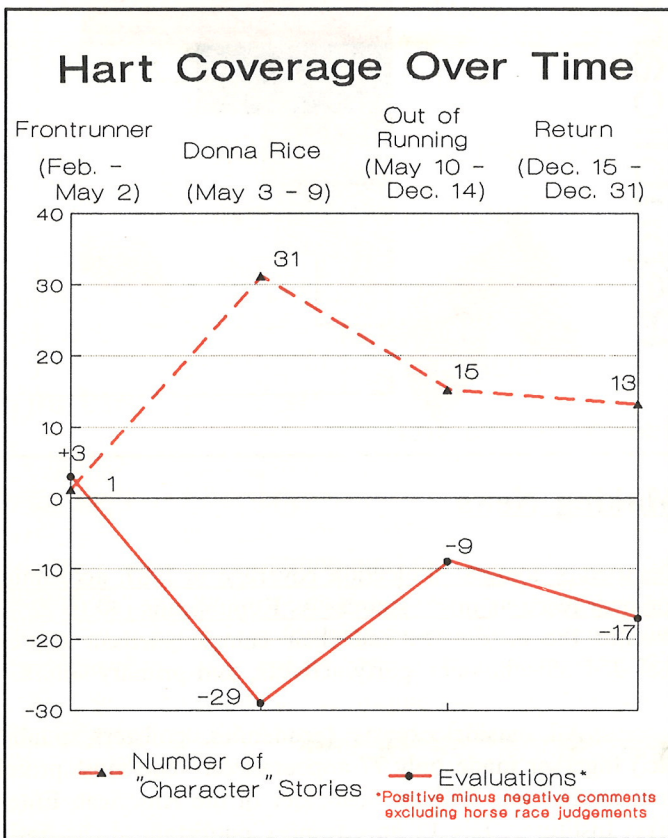
## Democrats



Among Democrats Jackson (+28) nosed out Dukakis (+25) and Simon (+21) for the early lead. Gephardt, Gore and Babbit formed a second tier, hovering around the zero mark. As usual, Hart (-29) was in a class by himself.

## Hart's Time Chart

TV's 1987 election coverage often seemed to be a soap opera starring Gary Hart. Through May 2 Hart maintained a reasonably good press (+3 net score), and only one story had addressed his character. Then the Donna Rice story broke. During the next week, the networks ran 31 "character" stories on Hart, and his evaluation index



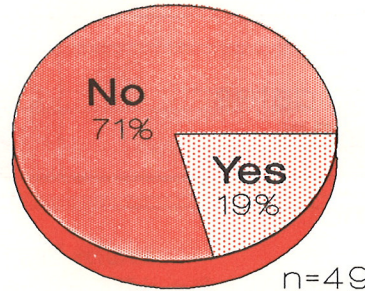
sank to a dismal -29. After his withdrawal on May 9, he continued to stimulate both bad press and character stories, both of which intensified after his December 15 reentry. Result: Hart has accumulated almost as much bad press and character stories since his withdrawal as he did during the Donna Rice media blitz.

## The Message is the Media

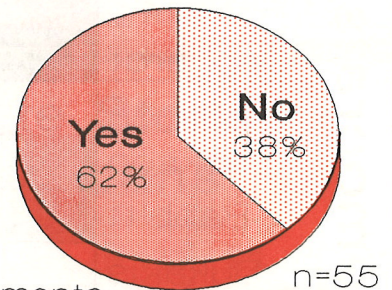
The media became part of the story of campaign '88, as critics questioned their coverage of Hart's and Biden's foibles. Commentators and the general public alike split

## TV Rates the Media

Do Media Act Responsibly?



Too Much Character Coverage?



\*Source judgements

over issues of personal privacy vs. public accountability and techniques of investigative reporting. Media responsibility became a major theme of the coverage, with over two out of three sources (71%) criticizing election reporting as irresponsible. A related topic was the rise of the "character" issue as a major focus of news coverage. Once again, most sources (62%) cited in the resulting debate criticized the media for overplaying the character question. Thus, whatever the merits of the case, the networks let the critics have their say.

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