

Media Monitor

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Campaign '92: Early Returns

TV News Coverage of the 1992 Presidential Campaign

How are the media covering the race for the presidency? The Center for Media and Public Affairs is analyzing TV news coverage of the 1992 presidential elections from the 1991 "preseason" reports through the general election in November. This first report from our ongoing study examines 401 election stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts up to the February 18 New Hampshire primary. We also compare current campaign coverage with results from our previous study of the 1988 election.

Major findings:

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■ **Bashing Bush** President Bush received the worst press of any candidate but David Duke - nearly three-to-one negative. *Page 3*

■ **Toasting Tsongas** Paul Tsongas is the only candidate to combine good press (62% positive) with high "horse race" ratings (80% positive). *Page 3 & 4*

■ **Watching Clinton** Bill Clinton got as much coverage in 1992 as all his Democratic rivals combined. *Page 3*

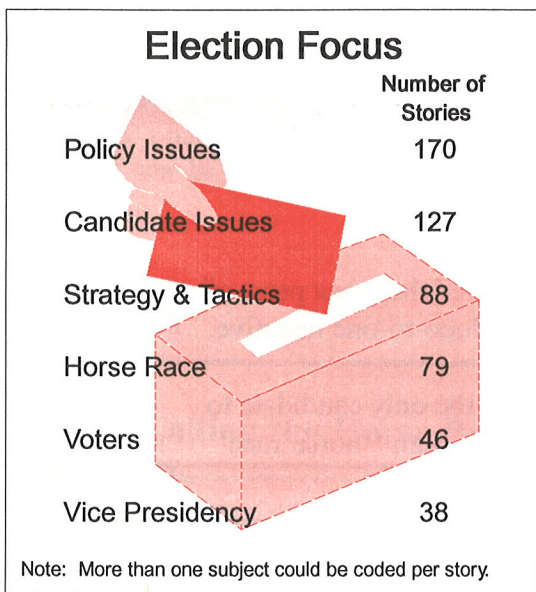
■ **Here's the Beef** Policy issues were discussed twice as often as the horse race. Issue coverage was three times as heavy as in 1988. *Page 2*

■ **Money Matters** The state of the economy was the central focus of election news. Evaluations of the economy were over 90 percent negative. *Page 2*

■ **Less is More** The amount of election news dropped by nearly 50 percent from 1988 levels. *Page 2*

Covering the Kickoff

From January 1991 through the eve of the New Hampshire primary on February 17, the three major networks aired 401 stories on the 1992 presidential campaign, accounting for 13 hours 11 minutes of airtime. CBS had the most coverage - 152 stories with 4 hours 57 minutes of airtime, followed by NBC (137 stories, 4 hours 46 minutes) and ABC (112 stories, 3 hours 28 minutes). Campaign coverage is running well below 1988 levels. By February 17, 1988 the networks had aired 755 campaign stories, nearly double the current total of 401. One reason for the drop-off - only 11 stories on the Iowa caucuses this year, compared to 137 four years ago.

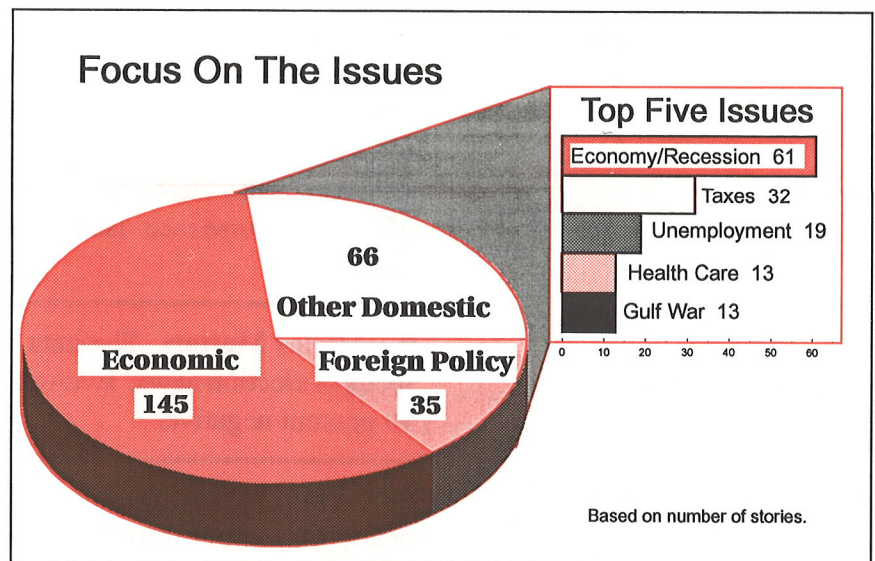


Policy issues have been featured twice as frequently as "horse race" speculation, by 42 percent to 20 percent of all stories. At this point in Campaign '88, by contrast, horse race news predominated over issues by 34 percent to 14 percent of all stories. That means policy issues are three times as prominent in this presidential race as they were in the last one (42% of stories now vs. 14% then). But stories on "candidate issues" (scandals, gaffes, etc.) have shown no letup. Led by Bill Clinton's marital and military troubles, they have shown up in 32 percent of all stories, about the same proportion as in 1988.

The Policy Debate

Debate over the recession and taxes has made domestic economic policy the central focus of Campaign '92. Overall, discussions of domestic policy outnumber foreign policy debates by a six-to-one ratio, and two-thirds of the domestic debate concerned economic issues. One in every five election stories has featured a discussion of the economy.

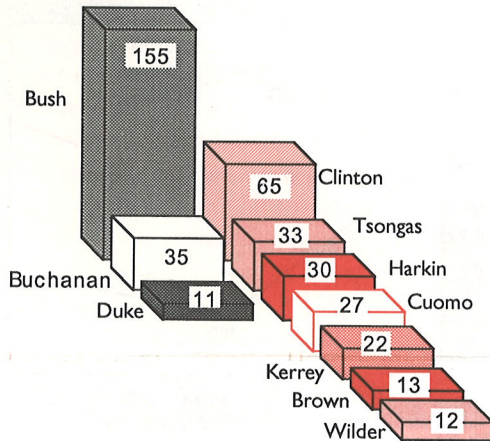
The most frequently debated topic by far (116 sources) was the state of the economy, and the verdict was overwhelmingly (92%) negative. Debate on the overall state of the nation was also gloomy, with four out of five sources (79%) saying the U.S. was facing troubled times. Taxes were the second most frequently featured issue area (32 stories). Sixty-three sources, mainly the candidates, debated tax policy. A strong majority (65%), led by George Bush and Bill Clinton, called for cutting taxes. Only 13 percent called for higher taxes; the other 22 percent argued for leaving tax rates alone. The president's record on taxes came under heavy fire, as 97 percent of sources criticized his tax policies. He fared nearly as badly on his handling of the economy (75% negative). Bush's best issue - the Gulf War - drew little attention, although five out of every six sources (83%) who discussed the war praised his efforts.



Making News

George Bush has been the central figure in the networks' campaign coverage. Bush gained visibility both as the incumbent and as a punching bag for attention-starved Democrats. In 1991, Mario Cuomo drew more stories than any Democrat in the race. A New Hampshire write-in effort helped keep Cuomo's overall coverage above that of both Bob Kerrey and Jerry Brown. It took the Gennifer Flowers scandal to propel a Democrat into the media spotlight. Ironically, the controversies surrounding Clinton kept all other Democrats in the shadows. So far this year, Clinton has been featured in nearly as many stories (52) as his four rivals combined (54). Among Republicans, the late-starting Patrick Buchanan campaign gathered more attention in 1992 than all candidates except Bush and Clinton. In contrast, David Duke - who received a burst of attention when he announced his candidacy in December - has been virtually shut out since then, with only one story in 1992.

Amount of Coverage*

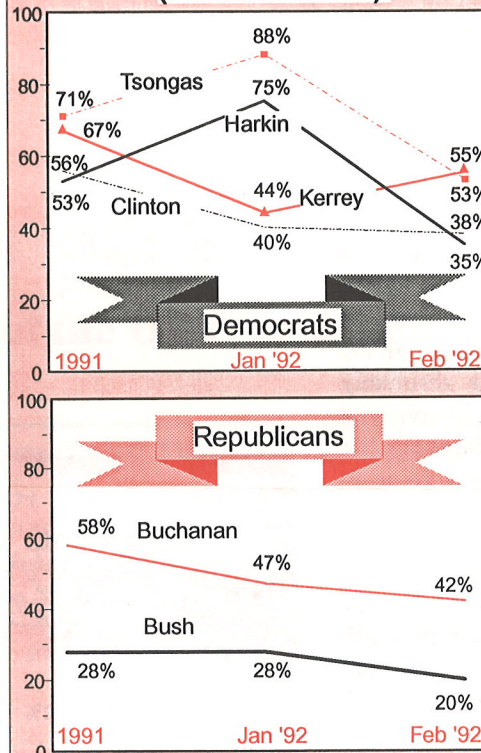


*Number of stories featuring each individual as a (potential) presidential candidate (1/1/91 - 2/17/92).

Good Press/Bad Press

To determine how much good and bad press each candidate receives, we note every positive or negative evaluation of his record, policies, personal character, and performance on the campaign trail. The result measures the

Good Press Over Time (Percent Positive)



Note: Candidates with less than 5 evaluations in any time period are excluded.

Overall Good Press

Candidate	Percent Positive	Number of Evaluations
Jerry Brown (D)	70%	20
Paul Tsongas (D)	62%	47
Bob Kerrey (D)	53%	45
Mario Cuomo (D)	52%	54
Tom Harkin (D)	52%	44
Douglas Wilder (D)	50%	10
Pat Buchanan (R)	47%	58
Bill Clinton (D)	41%	90
George Bush (R)	27%	448
David Duke (R)	24%	17

candidate's perceived desirability, but not his viability. Evaluations of election prospects are calculated separately as "horse race" ratings.

As a group, the Democratic contenders are getting better press than their Republican counterparts--52 percent positive for the Democratic field vs. 29 percent for the Republicans. The main reason is George Bush, who has been the focus of more debate than all his rivals in both parties combined. Nearly three out of every four sources (73%) who evaluated Bush have criticized him. NBC's Lisa Myers observed, "It's tough to lead when you don't know where you want to go. Call it a vision; George Bush doesn't seem to have one." (NBC, 1/28/92) Of all the presidential candidates, only ex-Klansman David Duke (76% negative) received worse press than Bush.

Among the major Democratic contenders, Paul Tsongas has racked up the best overall press score (62% positive). NBC's Andrea Mitchell set the tone with her profile: "What few people realize is that Tsongas is a man with a mission, who has licked tougher odds than he faces this year....[He] has ideas which have already forced the other Democrats to be more substantive in

this campaign.” (NBC, 2/5/92) Among the other Democrats, Kerrey, Tom Harkin, and non-candidate Cuomo received balanced coverage, although Harkin faced criticism in February that he was a negative campaigner.

Scandal-scarred Bill Clinton was the only Democrat to receive mainly negative press coverage. Before any allegations of adultery or draft avoidance were aired, Clinton’s press was 46 percent positive. Thereafter (from 1/24 through 2/17) it sank to 35 percent positive. Perhaps the most celebrated evaluation of Clinton was Gennifer Flowers’ review of his “60 Minutes” interview: “He is absolutely lying.” (ABC, 1/27/92) A voter interviewed on NBC two weeks later was even harsher: “If he’s going to cheat on his wife, he’s going to cheat on America.” (NBC, 2/11/92) Still, the Arkansas governor had his share of defenders, such as one woman who emerged from a Clinton speech impressed: “Prior to hearing him . . . I would not have voted for him. After hearing him, I think he expressed in very concrete terms how he cares for people.” (ABC, 2/14/92)

Calling the Horse Race

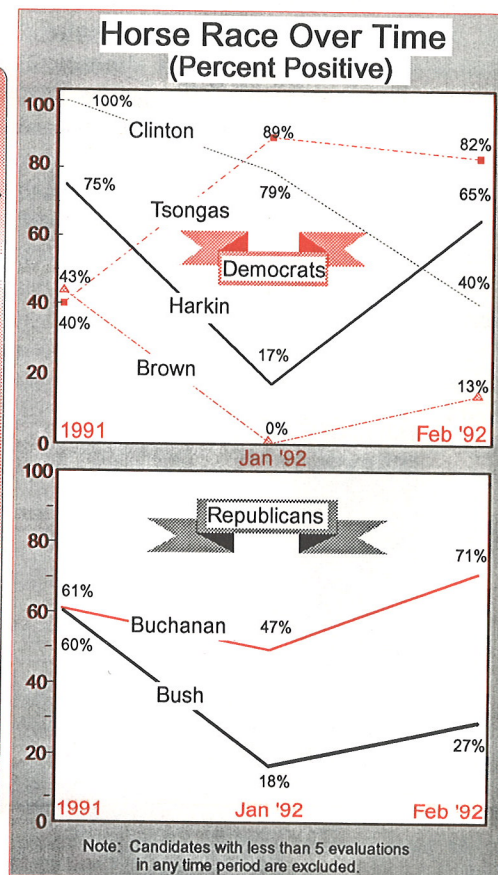
In addition to evaluations of each candidate’s desirability, we noted all evaluations of electability, or “horse race” press. The most attention here was directed toward the Tsongas vs. Clinton face-off in New Hampshire. Early favorite Clinton received 100 percent positive horse race press in 1991. His viability ratings dropped to 51 percent positive after the charges of philandering and draft evasion were aired. Conversely, Tsongas started with mostly negative horse race press. His subsequent surge in the polls made him the new media front-runner, and the first candidate this season to receive high marks for both his viability and his desirability--in short, media momentum.

While it received less attention than Tsongas-Clinton, the Bush-Buchanan expectations race was the most surprising. In debating Bush’s prospects, the networks gave little notice to

polls which showed Bush maintaining a lead over Buchanan in New Hampshire. Rather, they focussed mainly on the president’s declining national approval rating, and his prospects for the general election. “President Bush used the word free-fall in talking about the economy,” noted CBS’s Susan Spencer. “Free-fall may apply to his popularity as well.” (CBS, 1/20/92)

Buchanan, in contrast, was gauged by his ability to embarrass Bush. The frequently-used yardstick was Sen. Eugene McCarthy’s 42 percent showing in 1968. By the eve of the

Overall Horse Race Judgments		
	Percent Positive	Number of Evaluations
Paul Tsongas (D)	80%	82
Pat Buchanan (R)	62%	52
Tom Harkin (D)	62%	35
Bill Clinton (D)	59%	112
Mario Cuomo (D)	56%	41
Bob Kerrey (D)	55%	20
David Duke (R)	54%	13
George Bush (R)	47%	243
Jerry Brown (D)	17%	29
Douglas Wilder (D)	0%	7



primary vote, expectations were more positive for Buchanan than for Bush. As ABC’s Brit Hume put it, “Unless all the polls are wrong, Buchanan seems certain to get enough votes here tomorrow to at least go on to other states.” NBC’s John Cochran added, “If [Buchanan] gets that high [38 to 42 percent], George Bush is seriously embarrassed and is in trouble on Super Tuesday down South.” (2/17/92) Such predictions foreshadowed subsequent interpretations of the actual vote.