

Abortion Rights and Wrongs

Media Coverage of the Abortion Debate 1991-92

How have the media covered the emotional debate over abortion? We analyzed 224 print and broadcast news stories that ran from May 1, 1991 through May 31, 1992, as advocates anticipated a major Supreme Court decision that would narrow the scope of *Roe v. Wade*. Our study included 187 stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows, along with 37 stories in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. The results are compared with our previous study of abortion coverage in 1989. Also in this issue: Final data on TV's coverage of the 1992 primaries, and an update on President Bush's declining TV image.

Major findings:

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■ **Gender Gap** In stories reported by men, most opinions quoted were pro-life. In stories reported by women, most opinions were pro-choice. *Page 4*

■ **Change of Heart?** Overall pro-life sentiments outnumbered pro-choice views by 57 percent to 43 percent. In 1989 a majority of opinions in the news were pro-choice. *Page 4*

■ **Faces in the Crowd** Pro-choice activists were quoted more often than pro-life activists. But the most frequently quoted group was Operation Rescue. *Page 2*

■ **What's in a Name?** On television the two sides were called "abortion rights" and "anti-abortion" groups. In print they were called "pro-choice" and "pro-life". *Page 3*

Election '92 Update

■ **Sound Nibbles** The average length of a "sound bite" by presidential candidates dropped from 9.8 seconds in 1988 to 7.3 seconds in 1992. *Page 5*

■ **From Bad to Worse** Overall coverage of the candidates was more negative in 1992 than in 1988. *Page 5*

The Abortion Story

From May 1, 1991 through May 31, 1992, we analyzed news coverage of the abortion issue by counting all sources quoted, opinions presented, and labels applied to the two sides of the debate. Newsworthy events included three sets of demonstrations - the high profile Operation Rescue demonstrations in Wichita, pro-life demonstrations in Buffalo, and the annual activities by both sides on the anniversary of Roe v. Wade. Attention also focussed on the Supreme Court over its finding that abortion counselling could be prohibited in federally funded facilities, its anticipated ruling on Pennsylvania's restrictive abortion law, and the Clarence Thomas nomination battle.

We examined 224 news stories on abortion that appeared on the major television networks and weekly newsmagazines during this period. These included 187 stories with combined airtime of 6 hours 14 minutes on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows, and 37 stories in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. There was little variation in the amount of coverage by individual networks or magazines.

Top Mentioned Topics

Topic	Stories
1) Demonstrations	105
Pro-Life	97
Pro-Choice	41
2) Supreme Court	68
3) History	47
4) Federal Funding	37
5) Pennsylvania Case	36
6) Criminal Cases	35
7) Review of Legal Status	31
8) Litigation	14
9) Abortion Alternatives	13
10) State Interest In Regulation	13

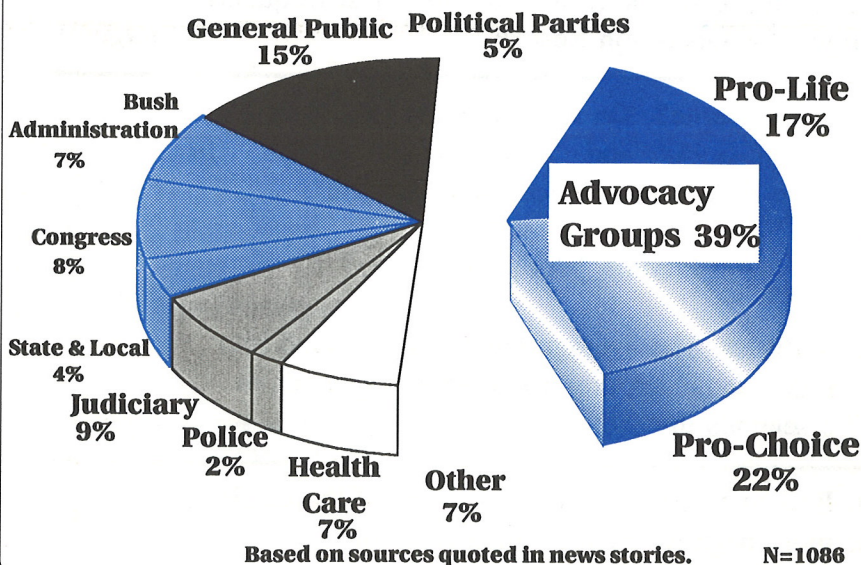
The number of stories in which each topic was mentioned.

Blockades and Stockades

Demonstrations, marches, and protests received the most attention with 105 mentions. Pro-life demonstrations generated 97 mentions and pro-choice actions 41; many stories mentioned both. The Clarence Thomas nomination made the Supreme Court itself (apart from specific rulings) the second most frequently mentioned issue (68). Concerns over the fate of Roe v. Wade put the history of the debate in third place (47 mentions). The Supreme Court ruling that federal funding to clinics was not a constitutional right put the funding question in fourth place with 37 mentions, closely followed by mentions of the Pennsylvania case (36).

Rounding out the top ten were mentions of criminal cases related to the arrests and trials of protestors (35), reviews of the legal status of abortion (31), other litigation (14), and finally, discussion of abortion alternatives (13) and mentions of a state's right to regulate abortion (13).

Sources



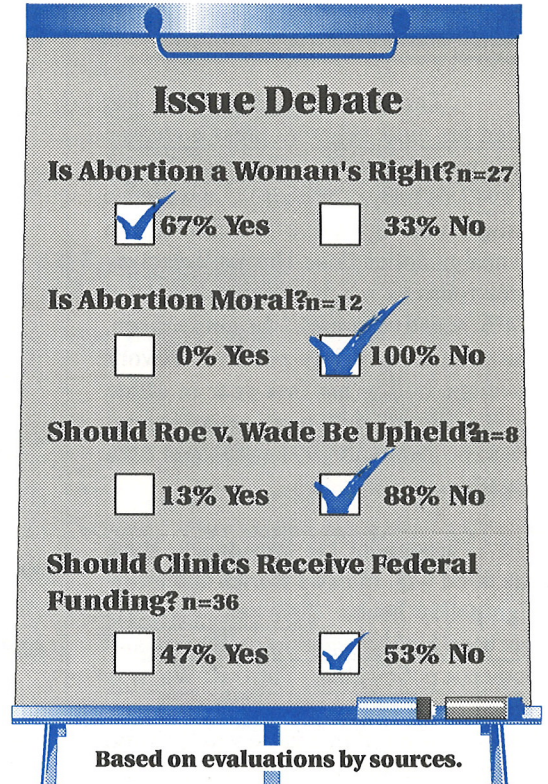
Whose Views?

The most frequently heard voices, representing nearly two-fifths (39%) of all sources, were pro- and anti-abortion rights activists. Advocates from the pro-choice side were quoted 239 times, while pro-life activists were heard 186 times. Leading pro-choice sources included Planned Parenthood (35), NARAL (19), and representatives of Republicans for Choice (11) and the ACLU (11). Among pro-life groups, the standout was Operation Rescue with 58 citations (17 from its leader Randall Terry), followed by National Right to Life, with only 12 citations. The pro-life side also benefitted from the high media profile of its ally, George Bush, who was quoted 28 times on this issue.

Naming Names

Abortion activists usually identified themselves as either "pro-choice" or "pro-life", but reporters frequently chose other terms. Overall, reporters assigned the "abortion rights" label 51 percent of the time, compared to 47 percent designating the "pro-choice" label and two percent "pro-abortion". On the other side, reporters used the "anti-abortion" label 68 percent of the time and "pro-life" or "right-to-life" 32 percent.

Television reporters usually identified the two sides as "abortion rights" (62%) and "anti-abortion" advocates (86%). This represents a major change from our previous study of this topic (*Media Monitor*, 10/89) in which "Roe" supporters were usually (74%) labelled as "pro-choice", while opponents were almost always (94%) called "anti-abortion". By contrast, magazine reporters chose "pro-choice" (67%) and "pro-life" (61%) as the most frequent labels.



Terms of Debate

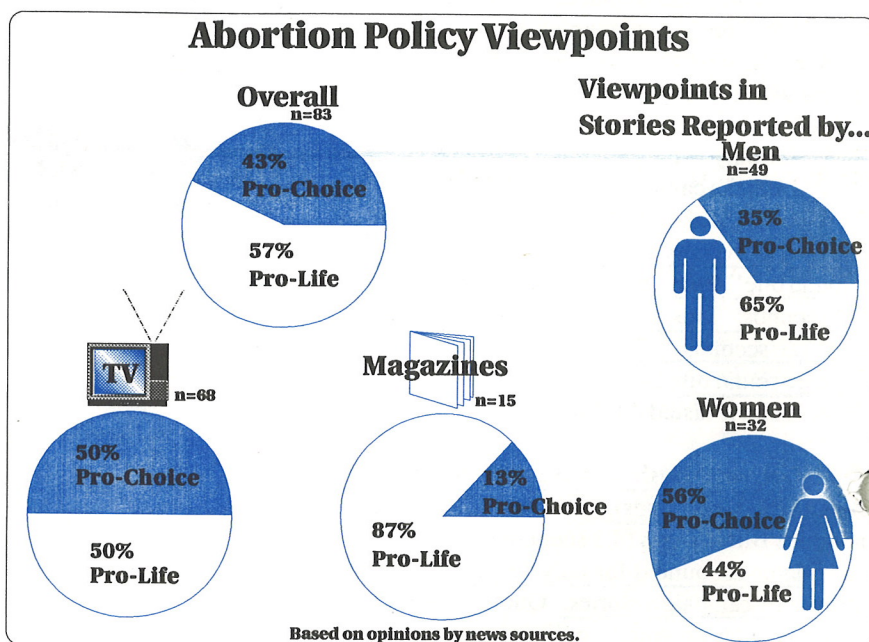
The distribution of opinion in the media depended upon how the issue was raised. Pro-choice views dominated when arguments focused on a woman's right to obtain an abortion. Sixty-seven percent of sources agreed that women should have this right. Example: "I don't believe we can be one country until we respect a woman's right to choose." (Bill Clinton, ABC, 4/19/92)

On the questions of the morality of abortion and the status of Roe v. Wade, the advantage went to the pro-life side. All twelve sources commenting on the morality of abortion argued that it was immoral. Randall Terry made this case most strongly in an NBC profile, "...any woman who's contemplating killing their children should not kill their offspring. It's evil, it's immoral, it's murder." (4/23/92) Seven out of eight sources also argued that Roe v. Wade should be overturned. For example, *U.S. News & World Report* cited the Bush administration view that Roe "was wrongly decided and should be overruled." (4/27/92)

Finally, on the issue of federal funding to clinics, the debate was much more balanced. Fifty-three percent of sources felt that federal money should not go to clinics, while 47 percent argued that abortion should be accessible to all. (This represents a shift from our 1989 study, in which 70 percent of sources were opposed to federal funding.) Rep. Henry Hyde (R-IL) told Cokie Roberts, "I don't want my tax dollars going to facilitate women exterminating their unborn child." (ABC, 6/26/91) By contrast, Planned Parenthood declared, "Denying a woman that information is setting up a two layered health care system, one set of information for the rich, the other set of information for the poor." (NBC, 11/19/91)

We created a single index of pro-life vs. pro-choice opinion by combining source viewpoints on the questions of abortion rights, morality, Roe's legal status, and government funding. Overall, pro-life opinions were in the majority. Fifty-seven percent of sources held pro-life views on these issues while 43 percent were pro-choice. Most of the debate (68 opinions) occurred on television news, where opinions came out evenly balanced between the two sides. NBC accounted for half of all televised opinions and came closest to striking a balance, with 56 percent of sources expressing pro-life views and 44 percent pro-choice. ABC had the fewest opinions expressed (15) and the only pro-choice tilt (80%), while CBS, with slightly more opinions (19), presented 63 percent pro-life views. In the magazines there was a heavy pro-life tilt, with 13 out of 15 sources favoring the pro-life camp. Two-fifths of all opinions coded in the newsmagazines decried the immorality of abortion.

by men, opinions quoted favored the pro-life side by 65 to 35 percent. On television, the gender gap attained perfect symmetry. Male-reported stories cited 56 percent pro-life arguments, while female-reported stories cited 56 percent pro-choice opinions. These numbers are little changed from our 1989 study, in which male reporters on the network news presented pro-life positions 60 percent of the time and female reporters aired the pro-choice views 58 percent of the time.



The Gender Gap

The balance between pro-life and pro-choice opinion in abortion stories varied according to the gender of the reporter. (This is not a measure of the opinions of the reporters themselves but rather their selection of sources and quotes.) In stories reported by women, pro-choice opinions dominated by 56 to 44 percent. In stories reported

Voter's Choice

How important will the issue of abortion be in the campaign this fall? According to Mark Phillips of CBS news, "Heading into a political season where it seemed that economic choices would dominate, the decision by the Supreme Court to review the Pennsylvania law has once again dropped the abortion hot potato right in the middle of the presidential campaign." (1/22/92) During the 1988 primaries, abortion was mentioned in campaign stories 25 times. This year the number rose to 40. In the fall of 1988 abortion was an issue in 47 general election stories. Fallout from the Supreme Court's ruling on the Pennsylvania case suggests that the number of abortion stories will rise during the fall campaign this year as well.

Abortion: An Election Issue

	The Primaries	General Election
1988	25	47
1992	40	?

Based on the number election stories in which abortion issues were mentioned on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts.

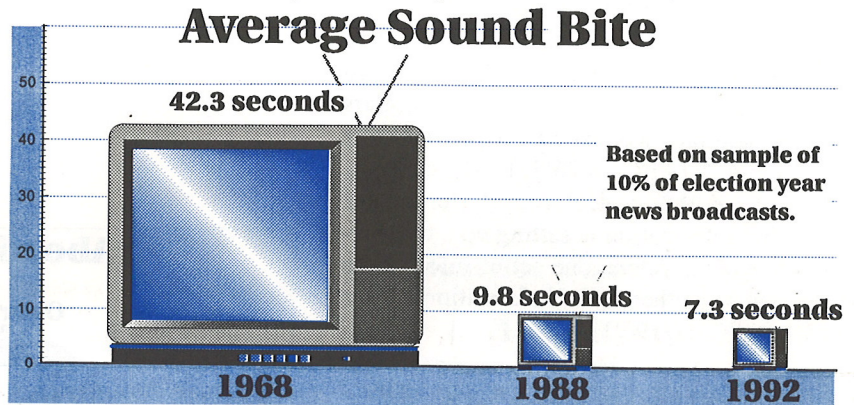
The 1992 Elections - Primary Wrap-Up

Time Out

During the 1992 primary season (1/1 to 6/2) the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows broadcast 828 campaign stories totalling 26 hours 11 minutes of airtime. Despite heavy coverage during the campaign's final days (53 stories in the last week alone), coverage still lagged behind 1988 levels, when the networks ran 961 campaign stories worth nearly 29 hours of airtime.

Not only is the campaign getting less time in 1992, but the candidates are getting less time in the election stories that are aired. In 1988, a Harvard University study found that the average "sound bite" from a presidential candidate lasted 9.8 seconds. This year, the average quote lasts only 7.3 seconds, a 25 percent reduction. The average sound bite has declined 83 percent since 1968, when it lasted 43.2 seconds.

President Bush had the longest average sound bite (8.4 seconds), followed by Democratic nominee Bill Clinton (8.1 seconds). Overall, the candidates accounted for only 13 percent of the airtime in campaign stories. Quotes from other sources (such as voters, political experts, etc.) made up 15 percent of airtime. Reporters' own voices occupied the remaining 72 percent of election news airtime.



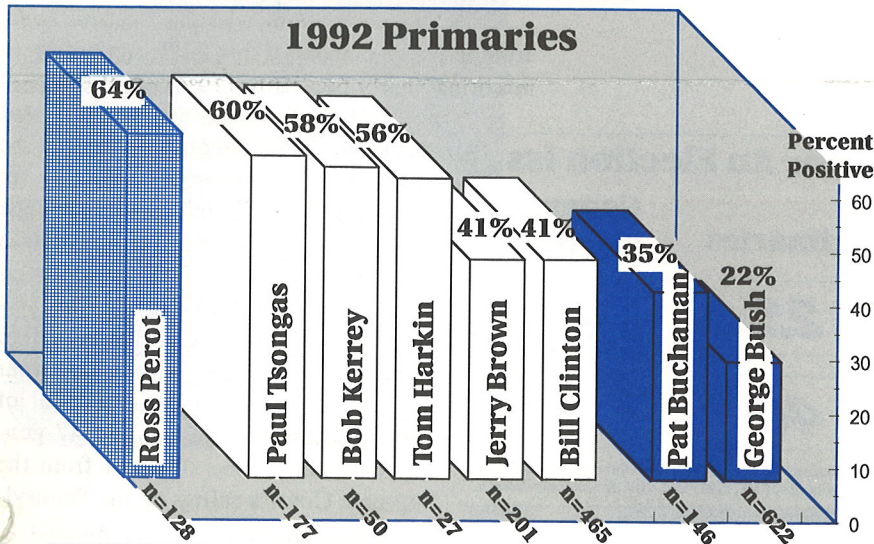
Note: Average length of uninterrupted quotes from presidential candidates. Based on sample of 10% of election year news broadcasts.

Bad News Blues

During the primaries, both George Bush and Bill Clinton received far more bad press than good. On-air evaluations of Bush were 78 percent negative in election stories, as he endured 23 straight weeks of predominantly bad press. Clinton fared somewhat better. Beleaguered by questions about his character, he received 59 percent negative evaluations overall. After his New York victory assured him of the Democratic nomination, however, his coverage improved markedly. Prior to the New York primary, Clinton's evaluations were nearly 2 to 1 (64% negative). After New York, 3 out of 5 (59%) were positive (i.e., only 41% were negative).

Television's treatment of the candidates collectively was decidedly more negative this year than four years ago. During the 1988 primaries, Bush received equal amounts of praise and criticism, and Democrat Michael Dukakis received slightly more good press than bad (54% positive evaluations). (See *Media Monitor*, July 1988) Among the major candidates this year, only Paul Tsongas and Ross Perot received large infusions of positive press. Two early dropouts--Tom Harkin and Bob Kerrey--also received more good press than bad, but neither was the focus of extensive discussion. No candidate came anywhere near Jesse Jackson's 1988 record of 74 percent positive press.

Overall Good Press



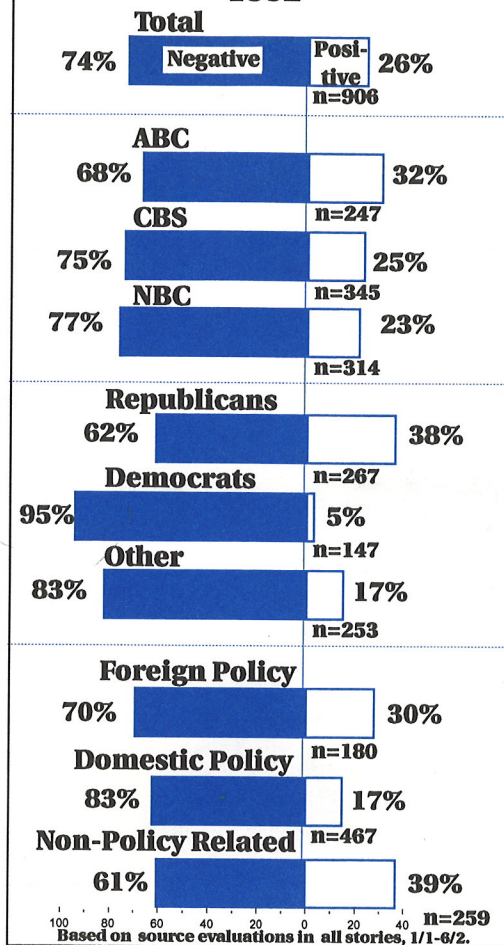
Based on source evaluations in TV news election stories, 1/1-6/2.

Rating the President

This year, President Bush has faced his most negative press coverage since we began tracking his media image in 1987. While his overall TV news score is slightly more positive than his image in campaign stories alone, Bush still receives three times as much criticism as praise (74% negative press). In comparison, Bush received mainly positive network coverage during his first year in office (55% positive), with more negative coverage in 1990 and 1991 (64% and 61% negative, respectively).

Throughout his presidency, Bush has fared well in news stories about foreign policy issues. This year, his press has been highly negative on foreign and domestic policy alike. The Gulf War was Bush's only bright spot (57% positive), but discussion of that issue was dwarfed by education (80% negative) the economy (84% negative), race relations (85% negative), taxes and the environment (both 88% negative). Overall, Bush's domestic policies were criticized by 83 percent of sources, while his foreign policies were criticized by "only" 70 percent.

Rating the President 1992



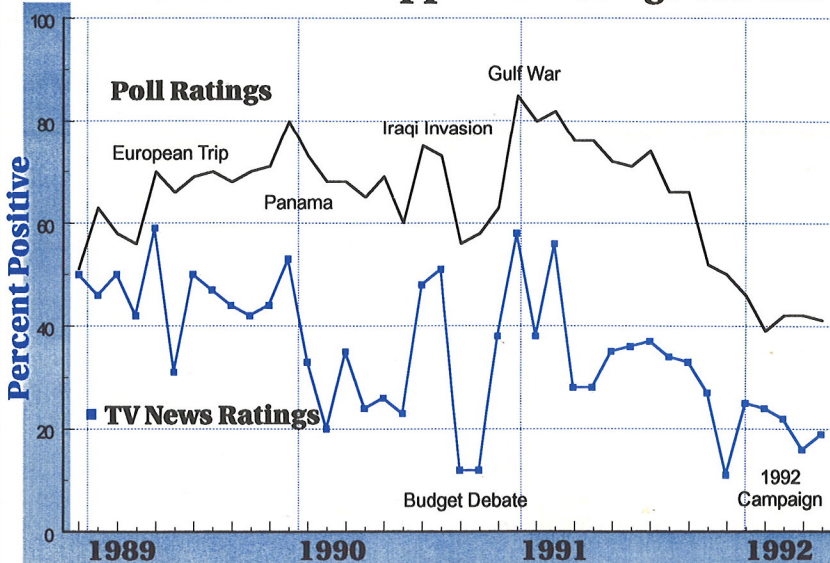
Criticism has outweighed praise even from Republican news sources (62% negative). Critical comments came mostly from Bush's Republican challenger Patrick Buchanan, as well as Republican voters interviewed on why they were abandoning Bush for either Buchanan or Perot. Six out of seven sources with no identified partisanship offered criticism (83% negative), while sources identified as Democrats criticized Bush 95 percent of the time. Typical of this year's tougher coverage was a Washington, D.C. tourist interviewed by NBC: "If I had George Bush in my hands, I would choke the man to death and then I'd body slam him for an hour." (4/16)

Media Momentum

Our long-term tracking shows that the ebb and flow of Bush's public approval rating is directly related to his TV news coverage. Statistically, monthly changes in Bush's good press/bad press ratio are highly correlated (r=.66) with changes in monthly Gallup polls asking people to assess his performance as president. During the past 41 months, Bush's poll ratings have consistently shifted in the direction of his media ratings, especially whenever the coverage was both intensive and one-sided. These shifts in his public approval have followed, not preceded, the shifts in news coverage, suggesting that the news is driving opinion, not catering to the public's views.

Bush's best press has been associated with his foreign policies, notably the 1989 invasion of Panama and the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Bush's best news month came in March 1991, when 77 percent of news sources provided positive evaluations in the wake of the Iraqi surrender. Bush's worst press has been linked to domestic policy, especially the October 1990 budget summit (when he received 94% negative press), and this winter's coverage of the economic recession. Since October 1991, Bush's evaluations on the evening news have ranged from 67 percent to 89 percent negative. During that same time period, his Gallup approval rating has dropped 25 points, to just 41 percent public approval in late May.

TV News & Public Approval Ratings of Bush



Poll Ratings based on Gallup poll question, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way George Bush is handling his job as president?"

TV News Rating is based on the percentage of positive evaluations by sources on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news programs.