

# The Parties Pick Their Candidates

## TV News Coverage of the 1992 Presidential Primaries

How have the media covered the race for the presidential nominations? The Center for Media and Public Affairs is analyzing TV news coverage of the 1992 presidential elections from the 1991 “pre-season” reports through the general election in November. This report examines the 424 election stories that appeared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts from January 1 until the March 17 Michigan and Illinois primaries, when George Bush and Bill Clinton took commanding leads in their races for convention delegates. We also compare current campaign coverage with results from our previous study of the 1988 election.

### Major findings:

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■ **More News...** The rate of election news nearly doubled after the New Hampshire primary. But overall coverage still trails 1988 levels.

*Page 2*

■ **But Less Substance** After New Hampshire, the horse race replaced the policy debate as the major focus of campaign news.

*Page 3*

■ **Read Their Lips** Over 95 percent of sources criticized George Bush’s record on taxes.

*Page 4*

■ **Press Power Outage** George Bush and Bill Clinton both won despite receiving worse press than their rivals. Bush’s coverage has been 76 percent negative, Clinton’s 63 percent negative.

*Page 3*

■ **Favorite Sons** Clinton fared best and Bush worst on CBS; Bush fared best and Clinton worst on ABC.

*Page 5*

■ **Blaming the Media** Nine out of ten sources criticized the media’s role in the campaign.

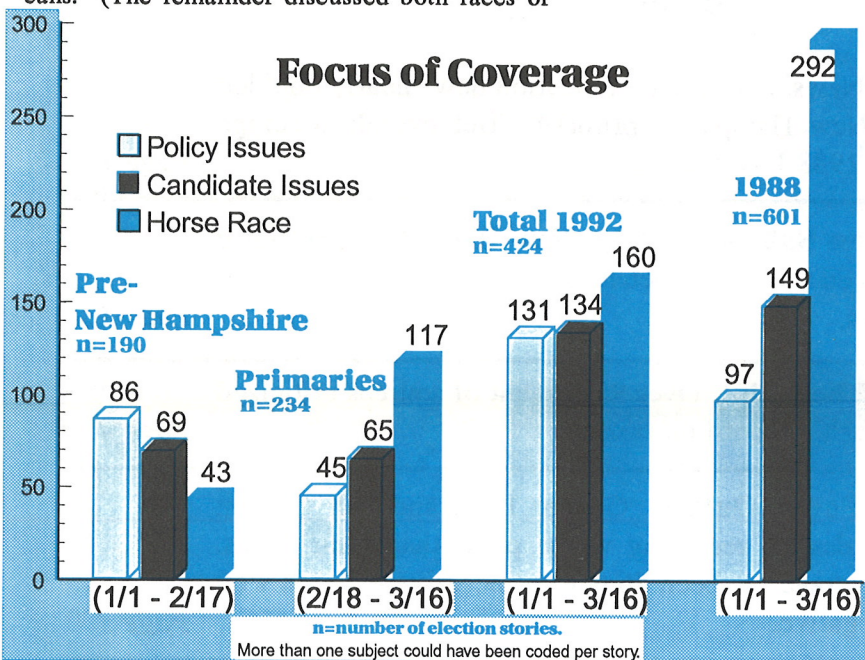
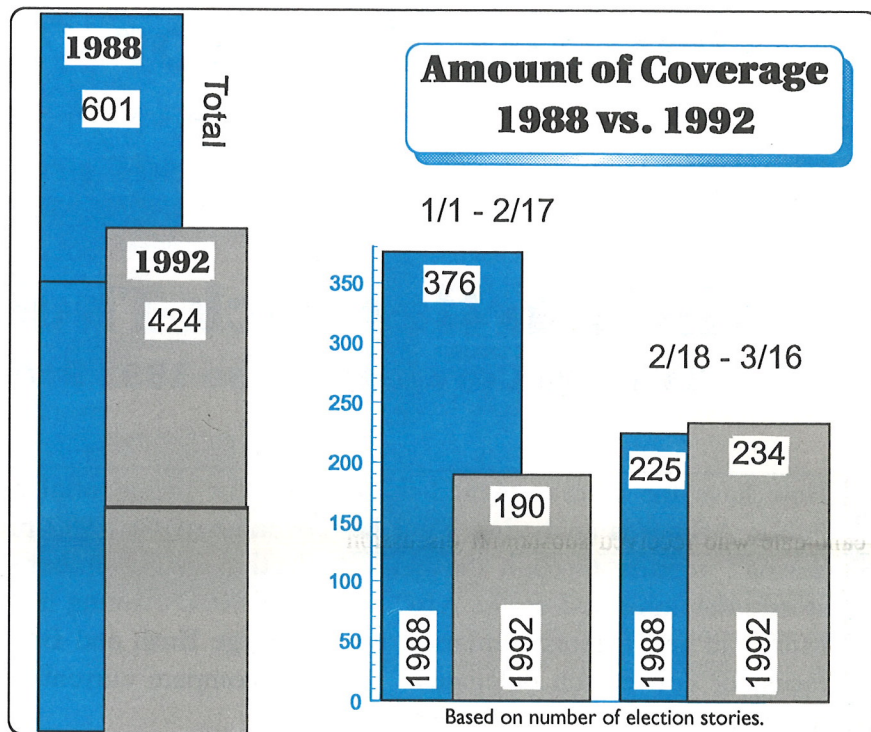
*Page 6*



The networks increased their coverage of the 1992 presidential campaign after the New Hampshire primary, but overall coverage still lags behind 1988 levels. From January 1 through March 16 (the eve of the Midwestern primaries), the three network evening newscasts aired a total of 424 campaign stories, over 14 hours of airtime. ABC broadcast the most stories, 150, but NBC's 141 stories provided more airtime (4 hours 56 minutes to ABC's 4 hours 43 minutes). CBS trailed on both counts, with 133 stories and 4 hours 25 minutes.

By March 16, 1988 the networks had aired more than 600 stories, nearly half again as many as they broadcast this year. With the Iowa caucuses essentially uncontested, pre-New Hampshire coverage was nearly 50 percent lower in 1992 than four years ago. The networks aired only six Iowa stories in 1992, vs. 108 in early 1988.

Prior to New Hampshire, the Democratic race accounted for 45 percent of all campaign stories, compared with 32 percent for the Republicans. (The remainder discussed both races or



addressed the campaign without reference to either race.) In the two weeks following New Hampshire, however, coverage of Republicans outpaced that of Democrats (by 43% to 39% of stories) for the only time this year. The reason: Pat Buchanan's "better-than-expected" showing in the New Hampshire primary. This increase in Republican coverage may have de-

prived Democratic primary winner Paul Tsongas of much of his expected momentum. After the campaign shifted to Super Tuesday and the Midwest, the Democrats received almost twice as much coverage as the Republicans (51% to 26%).

### Style and Substance

Compared with 1988 coverage, news of this campaign has been both more substantive and more gossipy. Led by heavy discussion of the economy and taxes, policy discussions are twice as prominent this time, and horse race news is down sharply. But candidate controversies have also drawn a greater share of the coverage, due mainly to allegations levied against Democratic front-runner Bill Clinton. One out of every six campaign stories (70) have included references to the allegations against Clinton, including marital infidelity, draft avoidance, and conflict of interest.

The emphasis on character issues has been a constant throughout the campaign, while coverage of policy issues trailed off as the race heated up after New Hampshire. Prior to New Hampshire, policy issues were the primary focus of campaign news, attracting twice as much atten-



tion as the horse race. But the onset of weekly primaries reversed this ratio. Since New Hampshire, half of all campaign stories have focussed on the horse race, more than double the coverage given to policy issues.

## In the Spotlight

George Bush has been the center of attention throughout the 1992 campaign, but Bill Clinton, Pat Buchanan, and Paul Tsongas have narrowed the visibility gap. Most of Buchanan's coverage came after his surprise showing in New Hampshire. For the next two weeks, Buchanan and the president appeared almost equally often (44 Buchanan stories vs. 47 for Bush). During that period Bush and Buchanan each attracted more coverage than Clinton and Tsongas combined.

Scandal-scarred Bill Clinton was the most prominent Democrat, although rival Paul Tsongas received roughly equal amounts of coverage following the New Hampshire primary. Despite his improved primary showings, Jerry Brown has yet to achieve the levels of coverage attained by either Tsongas or Clinton. Only by the eve of the Illinois and Michigan primaries did Brown catch up to Bob Kerrey and Tom Harkin in total coverage.

## Bad News for Bush

Republicans George Bush and Pat Buchanan vied for the worst press score of all major candidates. With three negative evaluations for each positive comment, Bush's overall 76 percent negative total makes him the front-runner in the bad press derby, although Buchanan is close behind at 68 percent negative. The president's ratings have been even worse since the March 3 "Junior Tuesday" primaries -- over four-to-one negative. Bush received his worst reviews on CBS, which also gave Buchanan his best press. As a result, Buchanan got twice as much good press on CBS as did Bush (38% vs. 19% positive).

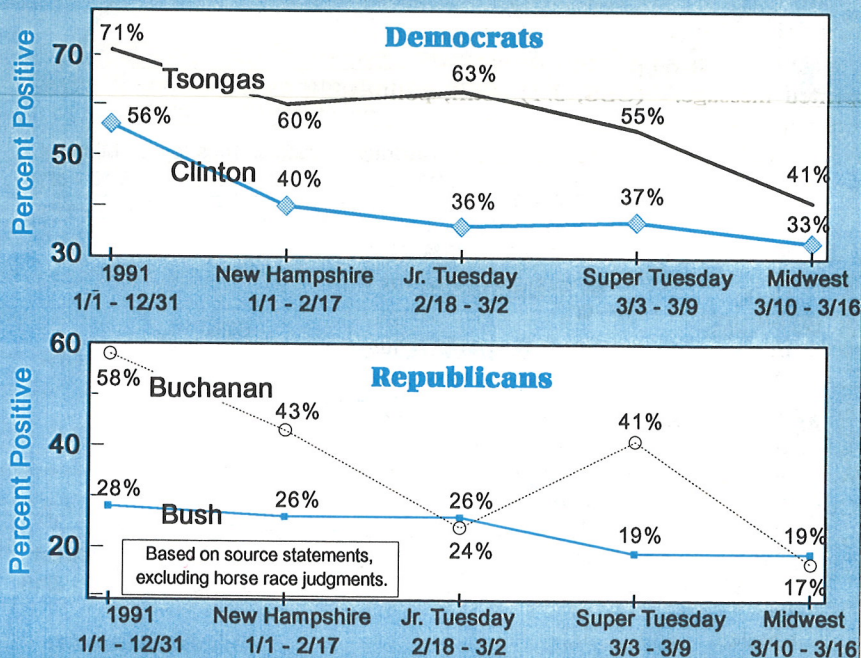
## Amount of Candidate Coverage

	Number of Stories
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Bush	153
Buchanan	100
Duke	6
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Clinton	117
Tsongas	82
Brown	29
Kerrey	29
Harkin	26

Note: Number of stories featuring each individual's presidential candidacy, (1/1/92 - 3/16/92).

The criticisms that the Republican contenders aimed at each other drove down their level of good press, especially after Super Tuesday, when both received more than 80 percent negative evaluations. The campaign rhetoric is reflected in statements by "partisan" sources (those with an attachment to a candidate, campaign, or political party), from whom both received 76 percent negative press. But among

## Good Press Over Time





“non-partisan” sources (such as pundits, reporters, and ordinary voters) Bush fared far worse than Buchanan. Bush received equally heavy criticism from these sources (76% negative), while Buchanan was treated to more balanced reviews (47% positive).

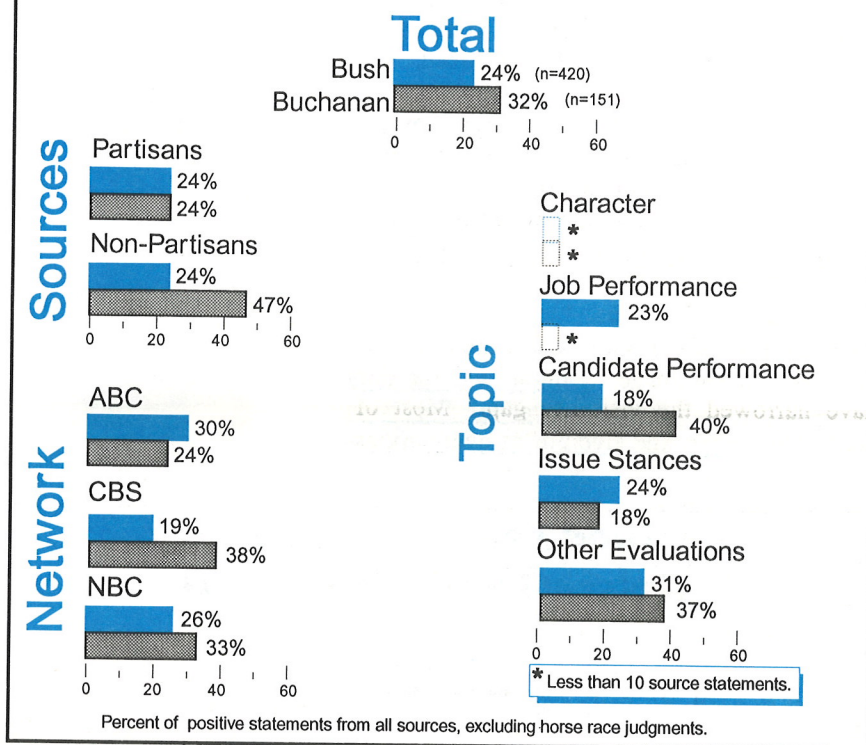
Disapproval toward Bush was directed mainly at his record in office, especially on taxes, which drew criticism from 40 out of 42 sources. One voter complained, “Bush has come in and allowed taxes to go up, and the economy’s gone down.” (CBS, 3/3) The Gulf War was Bush’s best issue, although it was far less prominent. As one voter told NBC, “I like the way Bush handles himself. I give him great credit for Desert Storm.” (3/2) Overall, the president’s domestic record was portrayed more critically than his foreign policy record (83% vs. 57% negative), and domestic issues were the basis of four-fifths of Bush’s evaluations.

As the campaign shifted into high gear, Bush was also criticized for his negative ads and the abilities of his campaign team. CBS’s Susan Spencer reported after Super Tuesday, “Supporters are relieved that the president has suspended his frantic road trips, but distressed at the ever-plummeting approval ratings. Some blame a campaign still reeling from Pat Buchanan, and one without a consistent, coherent message.” (3/12)

Buchanan was also criticized for the tone of his campaign, but was praised for the unexpected effectiveness of his enterprise. Sen. Connie Mack (R-FL) charged, “The message that Pat Buchanan has been giving is a negative, mean-spirited message.” (CBS, 3/1) Still, political reporters marvelled at the candidate ABC’s Jim Wooten called “a political magician, who turns losing into winning.” (ABC, 3/4)

The networks treated Buchanan’s issue stands as his Achilles heel. He was criticized for his opposition to the Gulf War and for allegedly espousing racist or anti-Semitic views. Thus, it was a double-edged sword when CBS quoted this endorsement, “Pat Buchanan - I love him! If he gets on the ballot, he’s got my vote,” from the Exalted Cyclops of the Colorado Ku Klux Klan. (3/3) Voters also questioned the former columnist’s experience. “Pat is a great analyst,” said one voter, “but I do not think Pat Buchanan would make a good president of the United States.” (NBC, 3/2)

## Good Press - Republicans (Percent Positive Evaluations)



## Sex, Lies and Tape at 11

Bill Clinton forged ahead of his rivals despite receiving the worst press of any Democratic candidate. Following allegations in late January of an extramarital affair, Clinton drew more than 60 percent negative press, a score which remained essentially unchanged through Super Tuesday. In contrast, Paul Tsongas enjoyed rave reviews until the final days of the Super Tuesday campaign, when sharp partisan attacks and counterattacks drove his good press below 50 percent for the first time. Reflecting the negative tenor of the campaign, both Clinton and Tsongas fared better among non-partisan sources than among partisans. Nonetheless, a majority of non-partisan comments about Clinton were negative, compared with a two-to-one positive ratio for Tsongas.

As Tsongas sagged, Jerry Brown began to gather his own media momentum with an overall 66

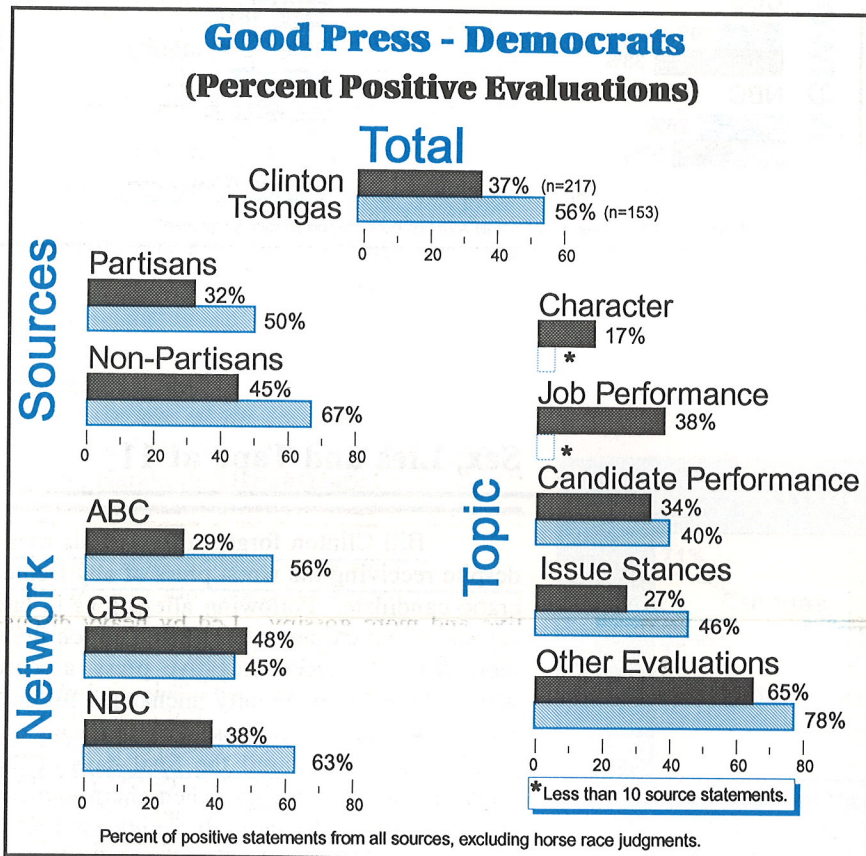


percent positive press score. While Brown was not the focus of enough discussion for a full analysis, he fared best among non-partisan sources (87% positive). Brown did especially well on ABC--76 percent positive, compared to 50 percent on CBS and NBC combined. One Michigan union member raved, "Brown is my man. He's the only person I see that's going to pull us out of this mess." (ABC, 3/16) Nearly all of the negative comments on Brown came from the Clinton camp, in response to Brown's allegations of conflict of interest on the part of Hillary Clinton.

Character questions put much of the tarnish on Clinton's press image. Clinton was the only candidate who received substantial discussion of his character, and five out of every six as-

Tsongas received his best press for his policy proposals, especially prior to Super Tuesday. One studious voter told ABC, "I really have a lot of confidence in his industrial growth package." (3/4) Even reporters seemed wowed. "The fact is, Paul Tsongas is a serious man, on a serious mission," profiled NBC's Mike Jensen. "Most of what Tsongas says makes sense to economists, even if it's politically risky." (3/4)

The networks differed sharply in their treatment of the major Democratic rivals. Clinton and Tsongas received roughly balanced coverage on CBS, but Tsongas fared far better on ABC and NBC. Clinton's level of good press even dropped below George Bush's on ABC (30% vs. 29%). On the other networks, the president ran far behind all the Democratic contenders in the race for good press.



## The Expectations Race

The early line on this year's race survived a shake-up in New Hampshire as the pre-season picks recovered their form by Super Tuesday. On the Democratic side, Bill Clinton was widely touted as the early front-runner, with 100 percent positive horse race ratings throughout 1991. Then charges of philandering and draft evasion, coupled with his sharp drop in the polls, injected a pessimistic note to coverage of Clinton's prospects, leaving him with only 53 percent positive horse race news during the New Hampshire race.

Tsongas saw press coverage of his electoral prospects peak during the New Hampshire campaign, when he was seen as the chief beneficiary of Clinton's woes. After New Hampshire, Tsongas kept his prospects afloat with good showings in Maine and Maryland, but the media began to focus on the southern contests where Clinton was expected to win. After his victory in the Georgia primary, the press rediscovered the Arkansan's viability. Between March 3 and March 16, Clinton's horse race score averaged 93 percent positive. Tsongas drifted down to 71 percent positive, and then crashed to just 25 percent positive following his defeat in Florida.

assessments were critical. In early February, one woman told NBC: "If he's going to cheat on his wife, he's going to cheat on America." (2/11) After Super Tuesday, to illustrate how "character issues" continued to dog Clinton, NBC aired a heckler's catcall: "Hey! Where's Gennifer, you draft-dodging idiot!" (3/16)

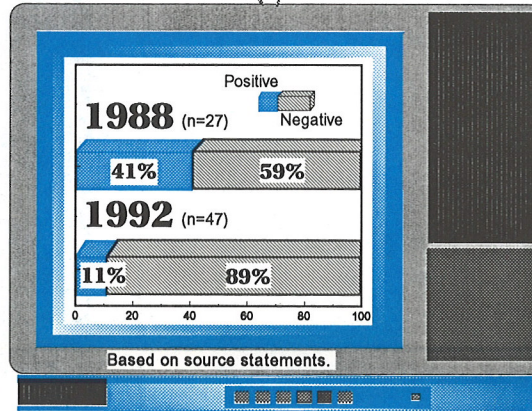


As Tsongas slid, Brown surged, breaking into the media horse race for the first time with his near-win in Maine. His victory in the Colorado primary the following week, coupled with the departures of Kerrey and Harkin, assured Brown of more serious press attention. During the Midwestern primaries, Brown's climb to second place in Michigan boosted his viability ratings at Tsongas's expense.

On the Republican side, Bush's favorable re-election prospects were touted throughout 1991, thanks mainly to the perceived political benefits of the Gulf War. During the New Hampshire campaign, however, the insurgent candidacy of Pat Buchanan, coupled with the recession's persistence, knocked Bush down to just 21 percent positive horse race evaluations. By contrast Buchanan needed only to exceed "expectations" to be

awarded media victories in the early primaries. His thirtysomething showings in New Hampshire and Georgia kept the media's portrayal of his prospects favorable until Super Tuesday. After Bush's southern sweep that day, the president's viability ratings recovered, while Buchanan's became more mixed. By March 16, early favorites Bush and Clinton had become favorites once more among the horse race handicappers.

## Rating The Media

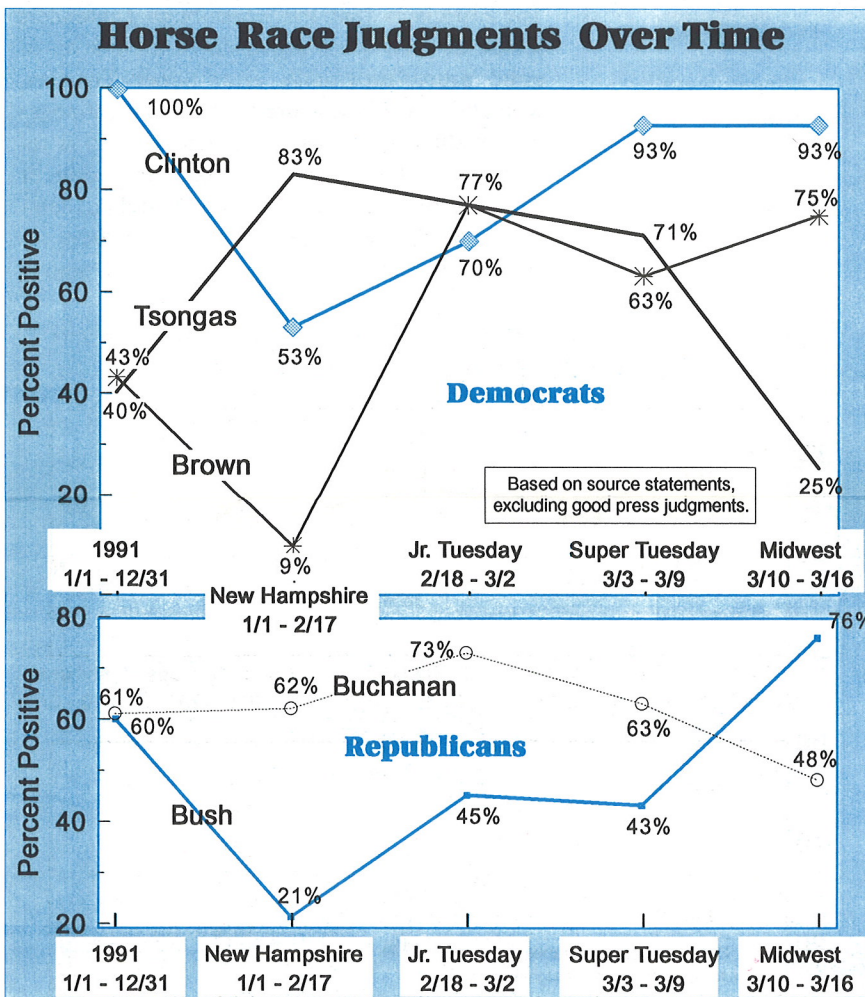


## Blame the Messenger

During the 1988 campaign, the *Miami Herald's* stakeout of Democratic front-runner Gary Hart and CBS's aggressive interview of then-Vice President George Bush put the media spotlight directly on the media. Overall, a majority (59%) of sources on the network evening news accused the press of behaving irresponsibly during the previous presidential election campaign.

In 1992, the media are back in the spotlight and faring worse than ever. Nine out of ten network news sources have criticized the role of the press in Campaign '92. The media's handling of the Clinton character story has been the prime concern. Reporting the Gennifer Flowers story, CBS's Wyatt Andrews asked whether "the newspapers and networks, including this one, [are] spending too much time scouring bedrooms, while neglecting the more important questions." (1/27) A voter told ABC that "with all the problems New Hampshire's having right now, that to even put something like that on the air is a disgrace." (1/27)

Republicans had their own less-publicized quarrel with the media. Bush supporters questioned whether or not Pat Buchanan was getting a "free ride" in coverage that portrayed him as serious candidate despite his failure to win any primaries or caucuses. Charged Republican whip Newt Gingrich, "The primary backers of the Buchanan campaign are the news media." Added Senator Phil Gramm (R-TX), "The news media are concerned that if they don't have a race to cover that in the midst of a recession that you [reporters] could be out of work." (NBC, 3/10)



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