

Taking the Nation's Pulse

TV News Coverage of Health Care Reform

Major findings:

■ **The National Health** Coverage of health issues is up 50 percent since President Clinton's inauguration. *Page 1*

■ **What AIDS Crisis?** For the first time since 1990, AIDS was mentioned less often than cancer. *Page 2*

■ **Take Two Aspirin** Health reform proposals drew three times as much criticism as praise. *Page 3*

■ **He's No Marcus Welby...** Two out of three sources criticized Bill Clinton's handling of health issues. *Page 3*

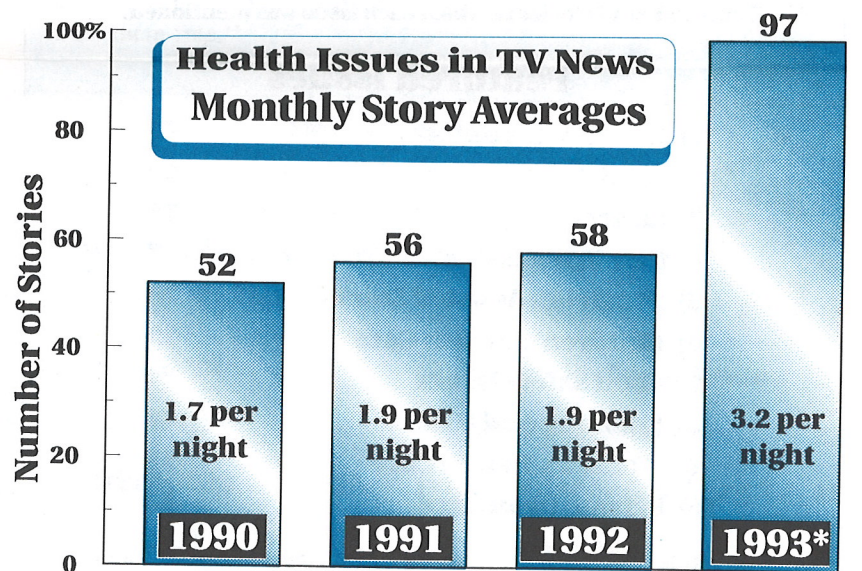
■ **...But Neither Was Bush** George Bush's health policies got even worse press. *Page 4*

■ **Joke Watch** Jay Leno and David Letterman have told nearly 400 jokes about Bill Clinton this year. *Page 5*

How has TV news covered health issues amid the new president's calls for health care reform? This month *Media Monitor* analyzes health care news in 1993 and compares coverage of the Clinton and Bush administrations' health policies. This issue also updates our ongoing survey of political humor by late night TV comedians.

The Clinton administration's commitment to health care reform gave a shot in the arm to TV news coverage of health issues. Although health care has been one of the top five TV news topics during each of the past three years, news about health issues has increased by over 50 percent since President Clinton's election.

(continued on page 2)



* January 1 - May 31

From January through May of 1993, the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts together devoted 484 stories and over 15 hours of airtime to various health issues, an average of more than three stories per night. CBS offered the strongest dose of health stories, airing 5 hours and 52 minutes of coverage, an hour more than either NBC (4 hours 42 minutes) or ABC (4 hours 33 minutes). Health coverage peaked in May (138 stories), as the date for the administration's anticipated policy announcement came and went.

AIDS Goes AWOL

AIDS and cancer are probably the two most feared diseases in America today. Since 1990, we have noted the number of stories concentrating on these diseases as part of the overall health care news agenda. AIDS has consistently been the focus of at least one out of four TV news stories about health issues; in 1991 the ratio peaked at one out of three stories. During 1993, however, AIDS has been the focus of only one in twelve health stories. As a result, news about cancer

has surpassed AIDS news for the first time. Only last year, network newscasts mentioned AIDS six times as often as cancer. (As noted below, however, AIDS has been covered in depth slightly more often than cancer this year.)

The most frequently mentioned topic was health care reform, which figured in a quarter of all health-related news (121 stories). Health reform coverage centered around speculation about the administration's reform plan, criticism of health care task force procedures, and evaluations of Hillary Rodham Clinton's leadership role. New fears about electromagnetic radiation from cellular phones and power lines helped make cancer the second leading health topic with 69 stories. AIDS, by far the leading health care topic in the recent past, dropped to third place (54 stories). AIDS coverage included profiles of people infected with the virus and research into new drug treatments and procedures. The high cost of health care and its effects on individuals and the economy closely followed AIDS in media attention with 51 mentions. The inadequacies and high costs of private health insurance were mentioned in 43 stories. Fueled by President Clinton's efforts to immunize all American children, an equal number of stories discussed children's health care. The top ten list was rounded out by mentions of new taxes that may be required to treat the ailing health care system (38 stories), new procedures for treating diseases other than AIDS (36), food safety discussions prompted by meat contamination (27), physician-assisted suicide and Dr. Jack Kevorkian (26), and the health effects of smoking, including the tobacco industry's liability for smoking-related illness (26).

Issues Mentioned

1) Health Care Reform	121
2) Cancer	69
3) AIDS	54
4) High Costs of Health Care	51
5) Private Insurance	43
5) Children's Health Care	43
7) Taxes	38
8) New Procedures for Treatment	36
9) Food Safety Issues	27
10) Smoking and Health	26
10) Physician Assisted Suicide	26

The number of stories in which each issue was mentioned.

Featured Issues

1) Health Care Reform	70
2) AIDS	40
3) Cancer	36
4) New Procedures for Treatment	27
5) Physician Assisted Suicide	26
5) Children's Health Care	25
7) Food Safety Issues	25
8) Smoking and Health	20
9) Women's Health Care	18
10) Private Insurance	12

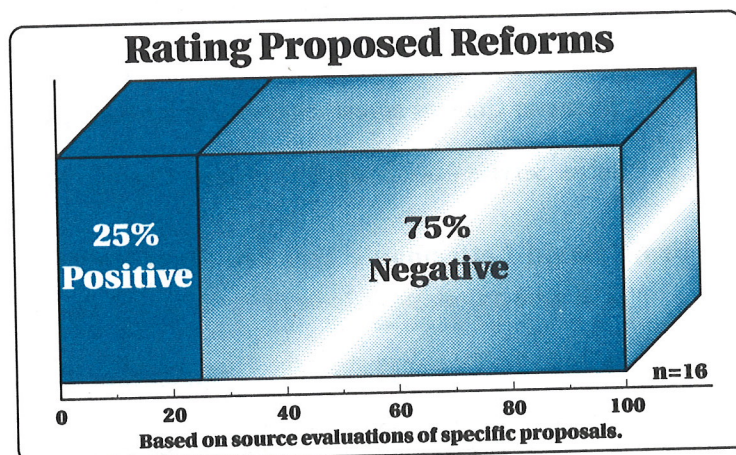
The number of times each issue was the major focus of a story.

Mentions of various topics provide a backdrop for the health care news agenda, setting the parameters of coverage. To measure the pulse of health care news, we also tallied the number of times each issue became the major focus of the story. (While we recorded all issues that were mentioned in each story, only one could be counted as its major focus.) By this more stringent measure, health care reform remained the leading issue (70 stories). Although cancer was mentioned more frequently than AIDS, slightly more stories revolved around AIDS-related issues (40) than those connected with cancer (36). Women's health concerns, which didn't place on the mentions list, generated enough stories (18) to place ninth on the list of featured issues.

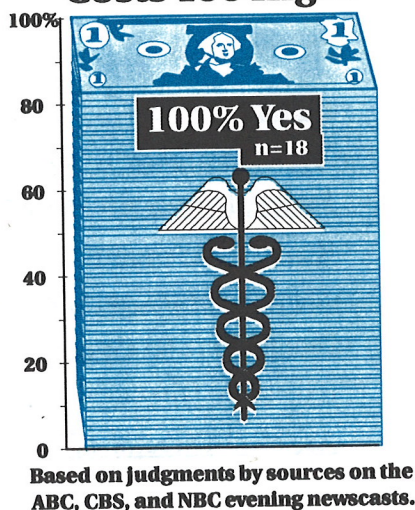
The Critical List

The voices speaking out on health care costs were unanimous -- all agreed that costs are too high and need to be brought under control. Bill Clinton put the case strongly during the presidential transition, "If we think we can fiddle around with the entitlements and all this other stuff, and... we don't do something about health care, it is a joke, it's gonna bankrupt the economy." (NBC, 1/5)

The frequently voiced concerns about costs, along with the incoming president's avowed intentions to do something about them, have focused health care coverage on the administration's emerging plan to rehabilitate the system. Although details have not been officially released, TV news has featured frequent speculation and de-

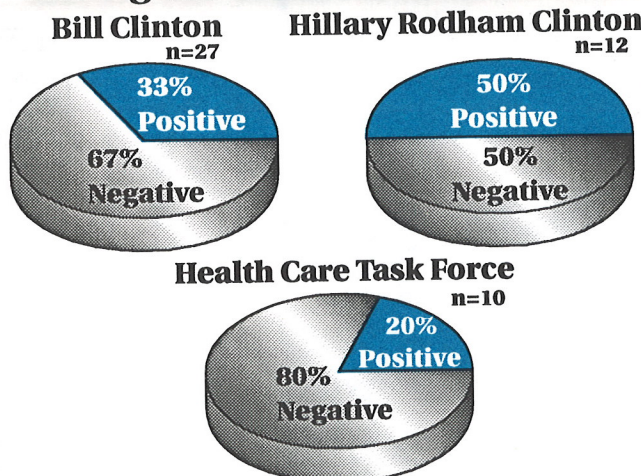


Are Health Care Costs Too High?



bate over what the final plan may include. Despite agreement on the need to reduce costs, specific reform proposals drew three times as much criticism as praise. Among the ideas that drew fire were caps on spending and prices, increasing taxes, a system of managed competition, and mandated health insurance. For example, AMA President Dr. John Clowe criticized possible government controls, "Strict national budgets and price controls are unwise, unworkable, and contrary to the best interests of our patients." (ABC, 3/24) And CBS reported that House Ways and Means Chairman Dan Rostenkowski considered managed competition to be "a kooky idea comparable to star wars." (4/30).

Rating the Team on Health Care



News sources turned thumbs down on the players in the health reform debate, as well as the policy proposals. President Clinton's personal handling of health issues has been criticized by two out of three sources. For example, after Clinton asserted that the costs of vaccines are unusually high in this country, the spokesman for a drug manufacturer told NBC, "Clinton's statistics are all wrong." (2/12) And after the president announced his intention to mandate health insurance for

all employees, CBS's Linda Douglas summarized the opposition viewpoint, "Small business leaders say providing health insurance is an economic decision that should be left to individual companies. They plan to wage a political war... threatening to sink the entire Clinton health care plan if necessary." (5/5) The president's task force on health care reform has gotten even worse press than its boss. Four out of five sources have criticized the task force's procedures or reported proposals. The group's closed door meetings drew fire from critics such as Rep. William Clinger (R-PA), who charged, "making policy in secret is wrong, and in this case even illegal." (ABC, 3/4)

The only major actor to emerge relatively unscathed so far is task force chairperson Hillary Rodham Clinton, who has received balanced coverage

(50% positive) of her role in health care policy. Even Mrs. Clinton has been targeted by critics who, according to NBC's John Cochran, "say she is a bleeding heart liberal determined to spend big bucks." (2/5) But she has attracted an equal number of supportive sound bites, such as Rep. Richard Gephardt's (D-MO) glowing endorsement on ABC: "She's very effective and very believable on this subject. She knows it, she's dealt with it, she cares about it, and the members are very relaxed and enthusiastic about her participation in this." (ABC, 2/4) Nonetheless, Mrs. Clinton's role in health care policy is the weakest part of her media image. Apart from this issue, TV news evaluations of the First Lady have been 82 percent positive. Her overall rating of 75 percent positive is matched only by Attorney General Janet Reno

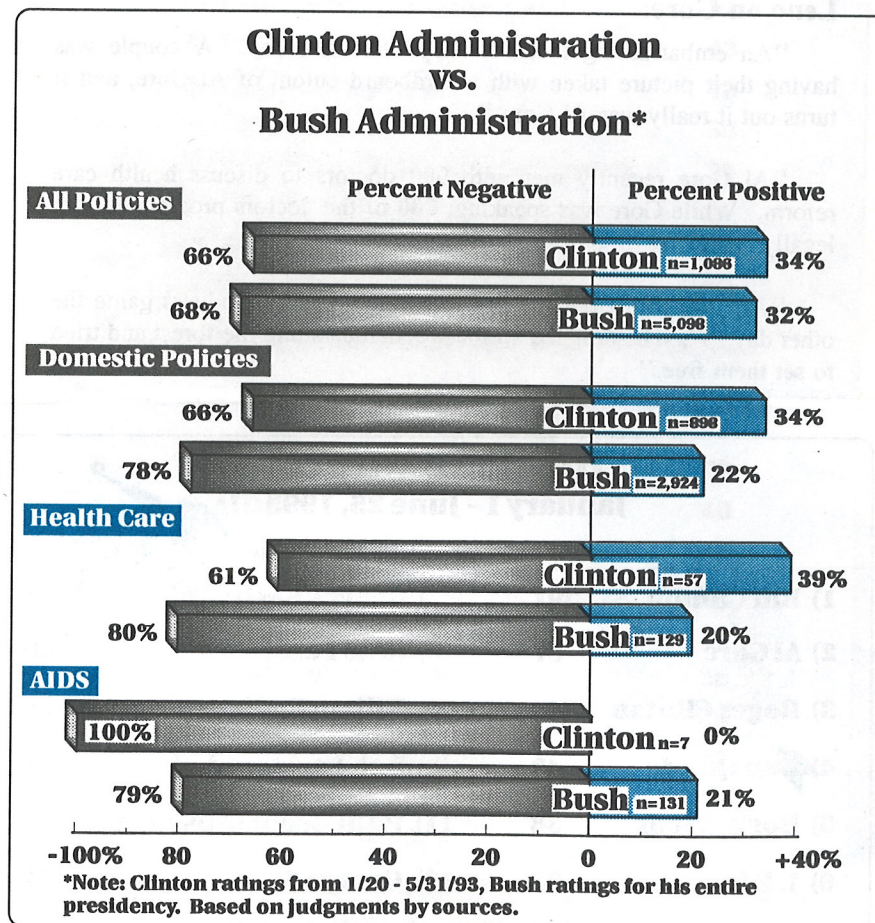
among members of the Clinton administration.

The administration's health care policies have come across best on NBC and worst on CBS. NBC is the only network to provide an even split of praise and criticism. Critics have outnumbered supporters by margins of nearly two to one on ABC and three to one on CBS.

Clinton vs. Bush

Despite all the early criticisms of the new administration's health reform plans, Bill Clinton is faring better than his predecessor on this issue. Although the Clinton administration's health policies have been applauded by fewer than two in five sources (39% positive), that is almost twice as positive a rating as the Bush administration enjoyed. During his entire term of office, George Bush's health policies were praised by only one out of every five sources on TV news. Republican policies were frequently criticized for failing to control health and insurance costs; provide adequate care for women, children, the elderly, and racial minorities; or to deal with the AIDS epidemic. Clinton's relatively favorable media treatment on the health front stands out against an overall media image that is substantially more negative than Bush's was in June 1989. At that time a majority (56%) of TV news sources had sung Bush's virtues. By the time he left office, however, over two out of three sources criticized his policies -- roughly equal to Clinton's current level of bad press.

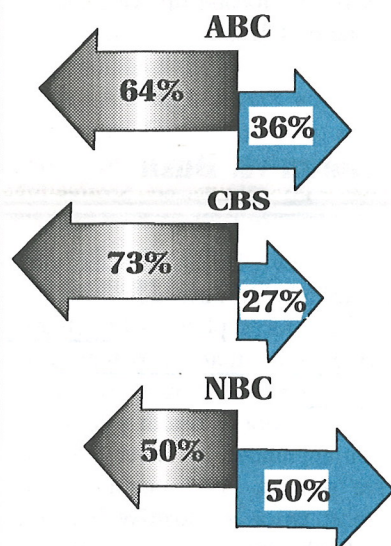
Clinton's health care program has also received slightly more positive coverage than his positions on other issues. Total evaluations of White House policies stood at only 34 percent positive through May. The current administration's AIDS policies have



Joke Watch

Ratings of Clinton On Health Care By Network

Percent
Negative Percent
Positive



Based on judgments by news sources.

actually gotten worse press than its predecessor's. But the decline in AIDS coverage is reflected in the rarity of televised opinion on this issue. By contrast, Bush's AIDS policies were criticized as frequently as all other aspects of his health care policies combined. A complete analysis of the Clinton administration's TV news profile will appear in the next issue of *Media Monitor*. ■

Related Media Monitors:

Diagnosing the Health Care Crisis

-- Media Prognoses and Prescriptions for Health Care In America (5/92)

Our Sick Health Care System

-- Media Coverage of the Health Care Policy Debate (6/91-7/91)

The AIDS Story -- Science, Politics, Sex and Death (12/87)

Bill Clinton has replaced Dan Quayle as the favorite target of television's late night comedians. During the first half of 1993, Jay Leno and David Letterman zinged President Clinton nearly 400 times, more than six times as frequently as any other public figure. Three members of the First Family were among the ten most joked about individuals. The President, his relatives, and associates made up six of the top twelve joke targets this year.

Leno on Clinton:

"Did you know if President Clinton breaks one more promise, he automatically will be given his own used car dealership?"

"Clinton is like one of those guys on the spray-on hair commercial. Everybody on the planet knows it's not working except the guy with the stuff on his head."

"First Hillary gets a haircut, then Clinton gets one. You don't think maybe they're trying to alter their appearance so they can just sneak out of the country, do you?"

Leno on Gore:

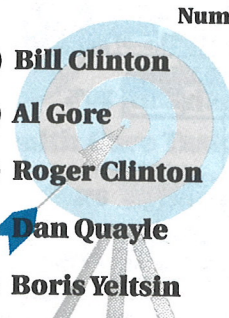

"An embarrassing incident happened yesterday. A couple was having their picture taken with a cardboard cutout of Al Gore, and it turns out it really was Al Gore."

"Al Gore recently met with 900 doctors to discuss health care reform. While Gore was speaking, 700 of the doctors proclaimed him legally dead."

"Al Gore threw out the first pitch at a Braves-Dodgers game the other day. Then he dragged all the wooden bats into the forest and tried to set them free."

Top Joke Targets January 1 - June 25, 1993

Number of Jokes

1) Bill Clinton	391	7) George Bush	32
2) Al Gore	57	8) Ross Perot	30
3) Roger Clinton	44	9) Hillary Rodham Clinton	21
4) Dan Quayle	42	9) Bob Packwood	21
5) Boris Yeltsin	38	11) Ruth Bader Ginsburg	12
6) J. Edgar Hoover	33	12) George Stephanopoulos	11

Based on the number of jokes from the monologues of Jay Leno and David Letterman.

From David Letterman's Top Ten Signs Hillary is in Charge:

"New law prohibiting spelling Gennifer with a 'G'."

"Whenever Clintons appear together, Marine Band plays 'I am Woman, Hear Me Roar'."

"Secret Service Code Name for President Clinton: 'Mr. Mom'."

From David Letterman's Top Ten Signs Roger Clinton is Going to Be Trouble:

"If he were a Corleone he'd be Fredo."

"In made-for-TV movie about the Clinton family, he's being played by Gary Busey."

"Already applied for presidential pardon."

Note: The wording of some jokes has been altered slightly for brevity. ■

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