

Campaign 2004 - The Primaries

TV News Coverage of the Democratic Primaries

How did TV news cover the presidential primary elections this year? And how did this coverage compare to previous primary seasons, since CMPA began tracking election news in 1988? This special report on Campaign 2004 examines how the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news covered the race for the Democratic nomination until Super Tuesday (1/1-3/1/04).

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Major Findings:

Less News...

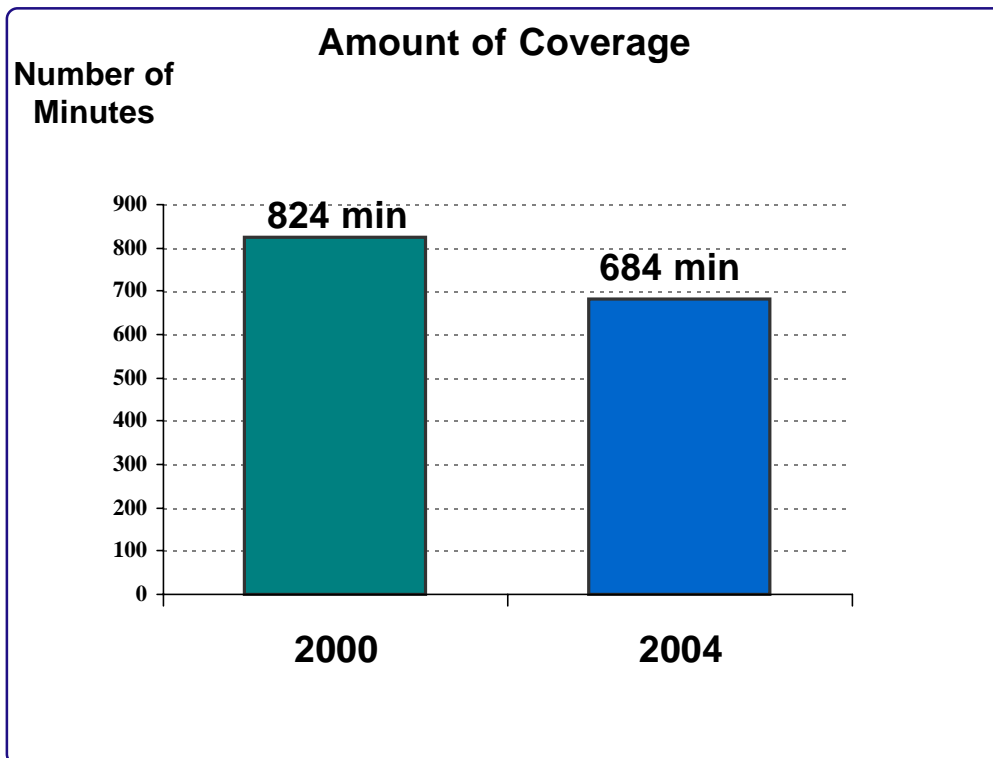
- Primary Coverage was down 17% from 2000. *Page 2*

...Is Good News for Candidates

- Kerry had best press of any nominee we've ever tracked -- 81% positive. *Page 4*
- But Edwards had the best press of any major candidate-- 96% positive. *Page 4*
- The Democratic field got the best combined coverage ever -- 75% positive. *Page 4*
- Democratic primary candidates have gotten 60% good press since 1988, compared to 45% for Republicans. *Page 5*

But Bad News for Voters

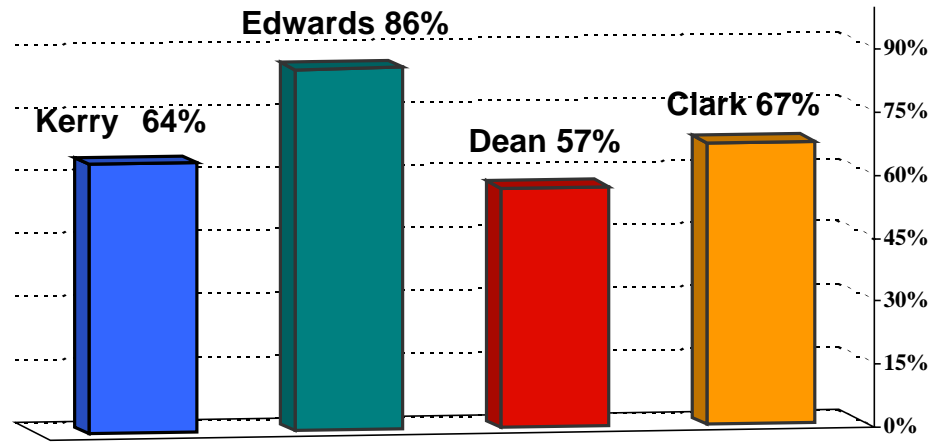
- Only 18% of all coverage was issue-oriented; 77% dealt with the horse race. *Page 7*
- The 18% issue-oriented coverage was the lowest since 1988 (15%); the highest was 1996 -- 44% issue coverage. *Page 7*



Coverage of the Primary contests from January through Super Tuesday was down 17 percent from 2000 in airtime, and 30 percent in the number of stories.

Notes: Study based on 356 stories that totaled 684 minutes of coverage on the Democratic primaries from 1/1/04 to 3/1/04. NBC aired 129 stories for 259 minutes, ABC 127 stories for 223 minutes, and CBS 100 stories for 192 minutes. CBS was often preempted during weekends because of sports programming.

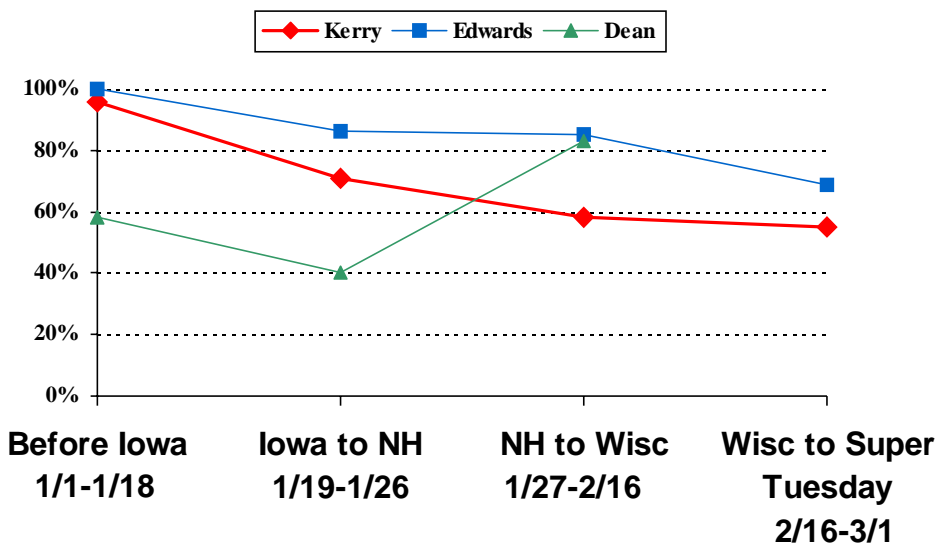
Good Press -- (1/1-3/1/04) Percent Positive Evaluations



Based on evaluations by sources and reporters on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news. Joe Lieberman, Al Sharpton, Dick Gephardt, and Dennis Kucinich received too few evaluations for meaningful analysis during entire time period.

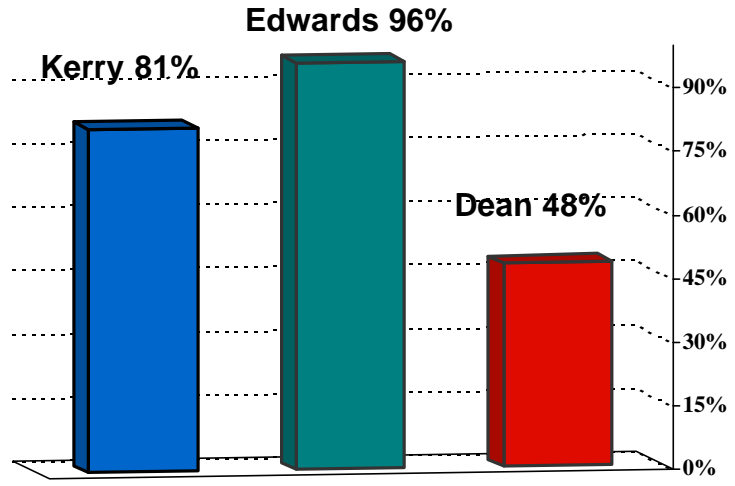
Evaluations include judgments of the candidates' records, positions, personalities, behavior, abilities, etc., but not their standing or prospects in the horse race, which we tally separately.

Good Press Over Time



Based on evaluations by sources and reporters on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news. Dean received too few assessments after Wisconsin for meaningful analysis, and Clark too few for all but the Iowa to NH time period, during which he received 72% positive evaluations.

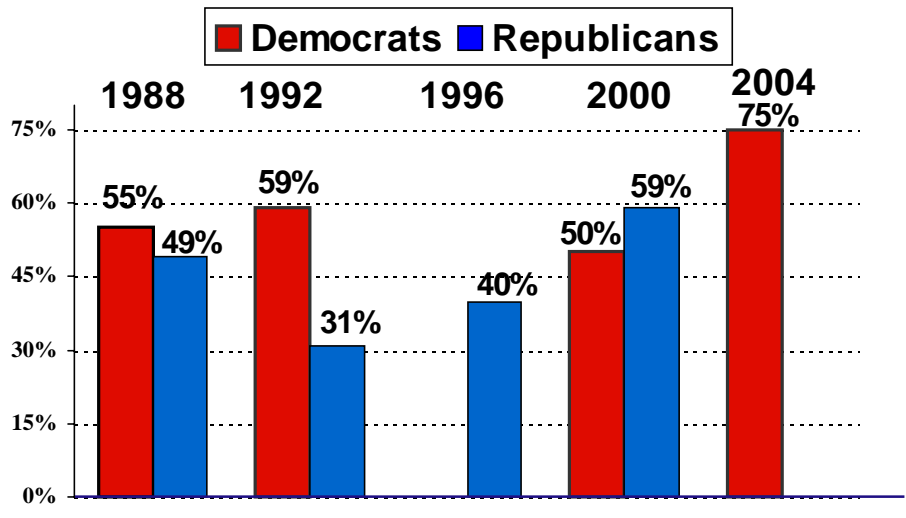
Good Press -- (1/1-3/1/04) Nonpartisan Evaluations



Based on evaluations by nonpartisan sources and reporters on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news. Our analysis emphasizes nonpartisan sources, who are not identified with any political party. These sources have greater credibility with voters, and reporters have greater discretion in selecting them.

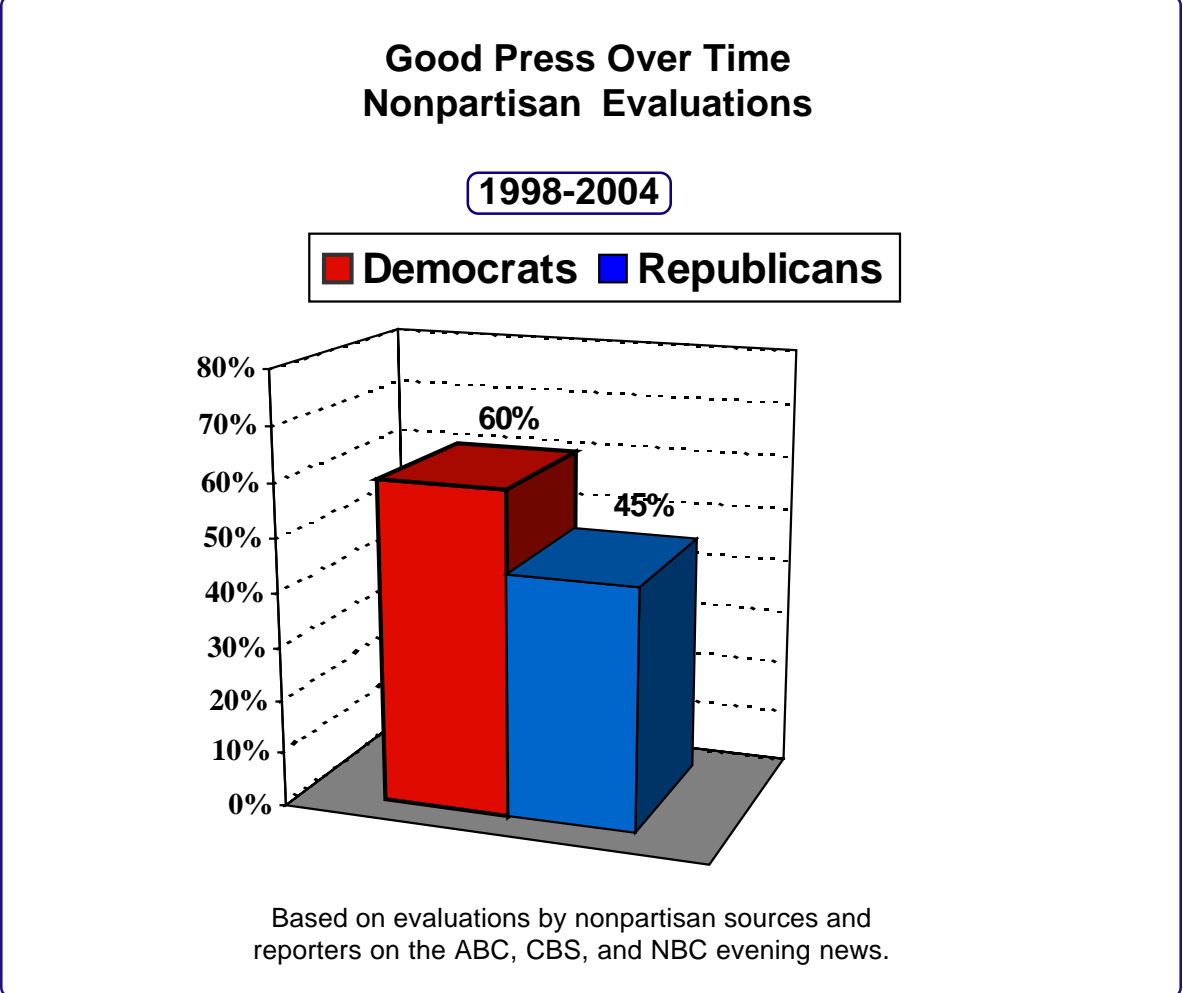
John Kerry received the best press of any presidential nominee we've tracked since 1988 -- 81 percent positive. But John Edwards had the best press of any major *candidate* since 1988 -- 96 percent positive.

Good Press Over Time Nonpartisan Evaluations



Based on evaluations by nonpartisan sources and reporters on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news.

The Democratic field in 2004 got the best combined coverage ever -- 75 percent positive.



Democratic primary candidates have gotten 60 percent good press since 1988 compared to 45 percent for Republican candidates.

Examples of evaluations:

“I believe in [Kerry]. I believe what he says. I believe that he means what he says.”
—*Unidentified Iowa Voter, ABC (1/18)*

“It comes down to [Kerry’s] value system, his vision.”
—*N.H. Kerry voter, NBC (1/19)*

“I like [Edwards’] approach to the election. I like the way he treats other people.”
—*Iowa Resident Earl Crow, NBC (1/11)*

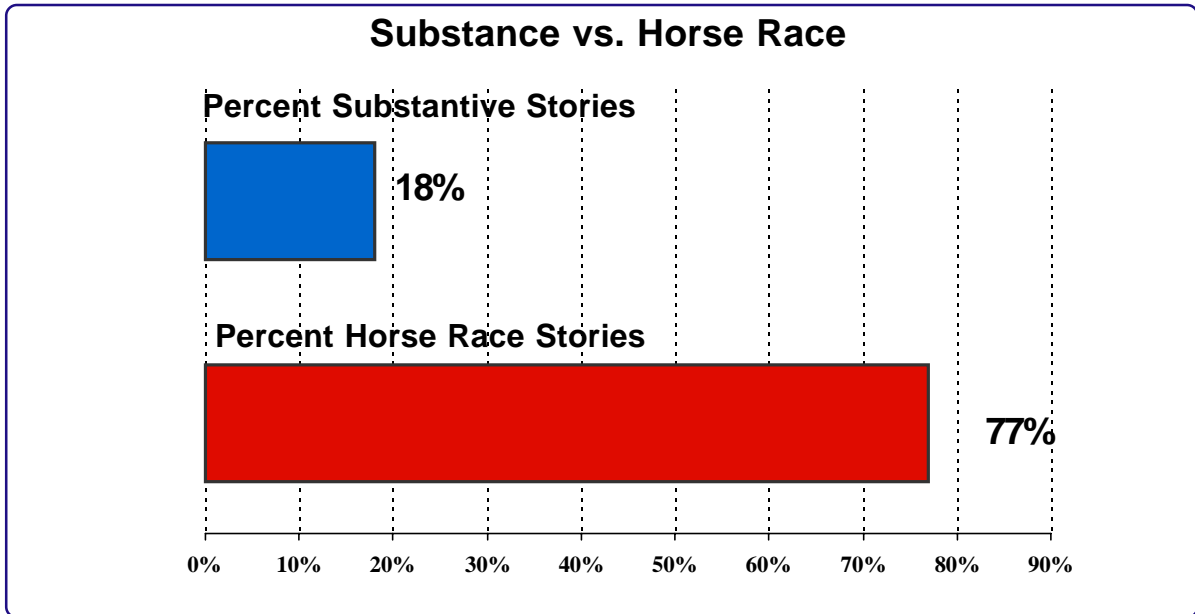
“[John Edwards is] the man who made nice politics work.”
—*Kelly O’Donnell, NBC (1/20)*

“I voted for John Edwards. And I find him refreshing. He seems very clean-cut.”
—*Unidentified Iowa Voter, CBS (2/03)*

“Voter: I’m going to support Dean. He’s the best guy.”
—*Unidentified Iowa Voter, CBS (1/06)*

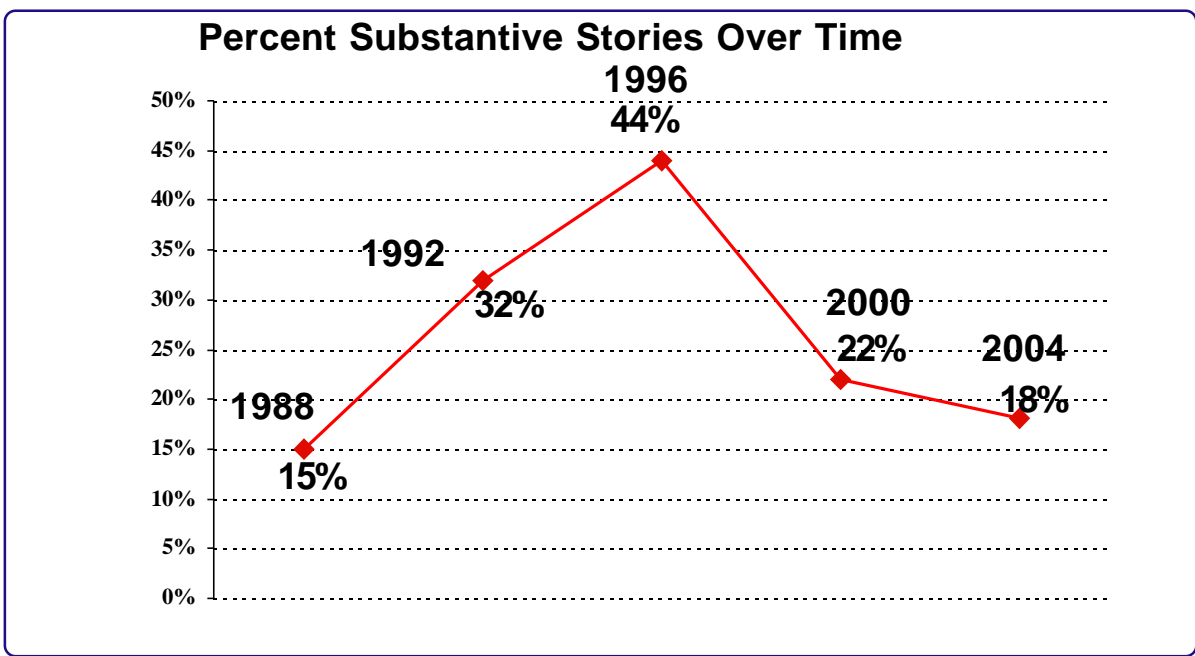
“[Dean] just makes one dumb statement after another.”
—*Drake University Professor, ABC (1/9)*

“[Dean] flies off the cuff too much.”
—*N.H voter, ABC (1/21)*



Only 18 percent of all coverage this year was substantive, while 77 percent dealt with the horse race.

Note: Substantive stories include discussions of policy issues, candidates' records or candidate qualifications. Horse race discussions focus on a candidates viability or strategy. More than one topic may be coded per story.



The 18 percent substantive coverage in 2004 was the lowest since 1988 (15%); the highest was 1996, when 44 percent of the stories included substantive coverage.

Center for Media and Public Affairs

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Please see our web site, www.cmpa.com, to review previous election studies.

Election 2004

Network News Focus: Fluff, Flubs—Not Functional (February 9, 2004)

Networks Anointed Kerry, Edwards Before Iowa Voters Did (January 23, 2004)

Dean Trails in Race for Positive Press (January 16, 2004)

Election 2000

Journalists Monopolize TV Election News (October 30, 2000), PBS Bests Networks in Election News (October 23, 2000), TV Has Bad News for Gore (October 18, 2000), TV News See Gore As Winner (October 5, 2000), The Incredible Shrinking Sound Bite (September 28, 2000), Campaign 2000—More News, Less Filling (September 22, 2000), Convention Coverage Gore-ifies AI (September 5, 2000), Networks Defy Convention-AI Wisdom (August 14, 2000), Networks to Parties: “Drop Dead” (July 31, 2000)

Or call the Center to receive a copy of the following studies.

Media Monitor

Campaign 2000 Final: How TV Covered the General Election Campaign (Nov/Dec 2001)

Campaign 2000 – The Primaries: TV News Coverage of the Democratic and GOP Primaries (March/April 2000)

Campaign 2000 – Early Returns: Network News Coverage of the Campaign “Preseason” (Nov/Dec 1999)

And many more that reported on the coverage of the 1996, 1992, and 1988 presidential campaign seasons.

Books

The Nightly News Nightmare: Network Television’s Coverage Of U.S. Presidential Elections, 1988 – 2000 (2002)

Good Intentions Make Bad News: Why Americans Hate Campaign Journalism (1995)