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## **Iowa and New Hampshire How TV Covered the Early Primaries**

From January 1 through February 16 (the New Hampshire primary vote), we coded 359 election stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows, nearly three per newscast. Election news took up nearly 12 hours, or 23% of the total newstime.

Results of our ongoing analysis of 1988 election news:

- ★ Presidential Campaign ★**
- \* Better Press for Bush - Before Iowa, Bush had the worst press of any major candidate--only 39% positive. After Iowa it jumped to 66% positive. (p. 3)
  - \* No Cheers for Gephardt - After Gephardt's Iowa win, his portion of the coverage dropped, and his good press fell from 49% to 40% (p. 4)
  - \* Rather vs. Bush - After the controversial January 25 interview, Bush's level of good press on CBS dropped from 50% to 27% (p. 4)
  - \* Iran/contra Issue Fades - Before Iowa, the Iran/contra affair was mentioned twice as often as any other issue. Afterward it disappeared from the top five. (p. 2)
  - \* Horse Race Heats Up - After Iowa, there were over 9 horse race stories for every story on policy issues. (p. 2)



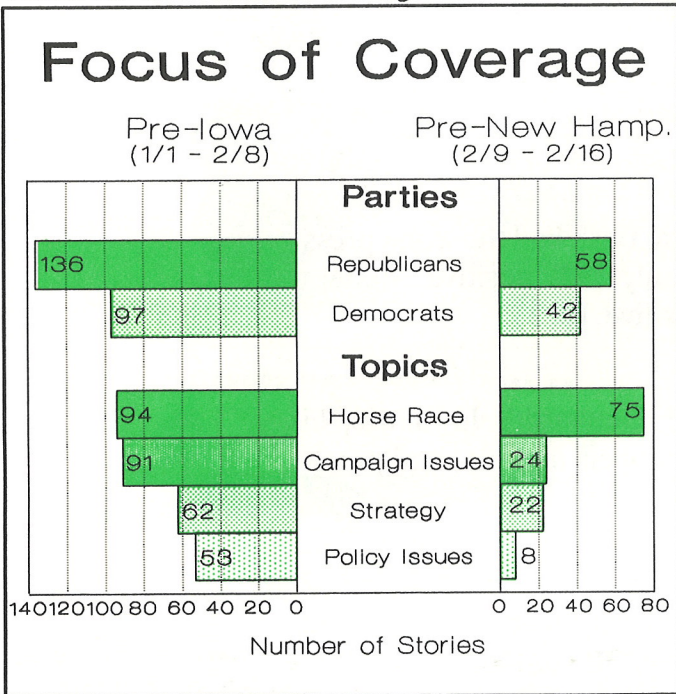
## Covering the Kickoff

TV news coverage picked up the pace with the onset of the primary season. From January 1 through the February 16 New Hampshire primary, the networks ran 359 stories, an average of almost three per newscast.

Those stories consumed 11 hours 45 minutes, or 23% of the total newshole, including 42% of the nightly news from February 9 (Iowa) to February 16 (New Hampshire). Coverage was heaviest on CBS at 4 1/2 hours, lightest on ABC at 3 1/3 hours.

## Hello Horse Race

Reversing the 1987 "preseason" pattern, the Republican race got more attention than the Democratic race (194 to 139 stories). As the horse race heated up, it began to attract the lion's share of coverage. Stories on the race



barely exceeded campaign issues stories (like the Bush-Rather run-in) in pre-Iowa coverage. In the week between the Iowa and New Hampshire votes, more stories appeared on the horse race than on campaign issues, strategy, and policy issues combined. The horse race outpaced "the issues" by nearly a ten to one margin (75 to 8 stories).

Much of the coverage was poll driven, reflecting the daily results of tracking polls. Over 40% of all stories cited poll results, including nearly half (48%) of the stories appearing between February 9 and 16.

## Goodbye Irangate

The issues that did attract coverage changed with the campaign geography. Only taxes and trade policy made the top five in both periods. Farm issues and the budget deficit were replaced by energy policy and American-Soviet relations as Iowa gave way to New Hampshire.

### Top Five Issues Iowa

1. Iran-contra - 45
2. Farm Issues - 20
3. Taxes - 19
4. Trade - 14
5. Deficit - 14

### New Hampshire

1. Taxes - 19
2. Energy Policy - 11
3. U.S.-U.S.S.R. Relations - 10
4. Trade - 9
5. Arms Control - 7

\* Number of stories mentioning each issue.

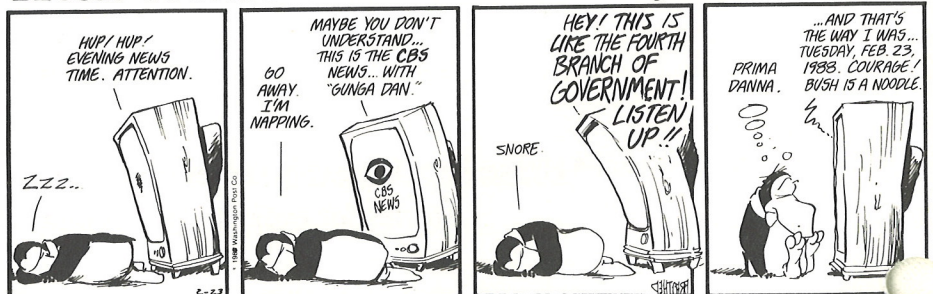
But the major change was the disappearance of the Iran/contra affair as an election issue. Until the Iowa caucuses, Iran/contra was the issue most frequently covered. It was mentioned in over twice as many stories as any other policy issue. After Iowa it fell all the way out of the top five.

## Off and Running

The networks' horse race judgments reflect the various candidates' prospects both in the polls and at the polls. On the Democratic side, Gephardt and Hart got the most attention prior to the Iowa caucuses, but most of Hart's handicappers gave him long odds. By contrast, Gephardt

### BLOOM COUNTY

by Berke Breathed

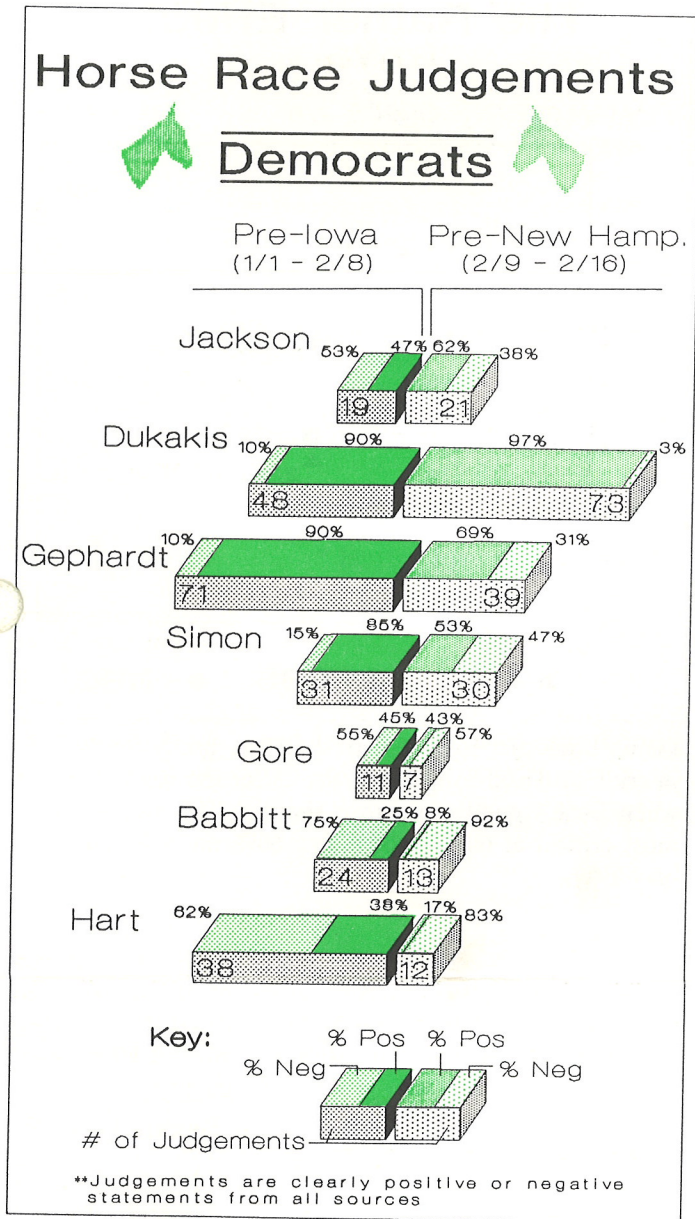


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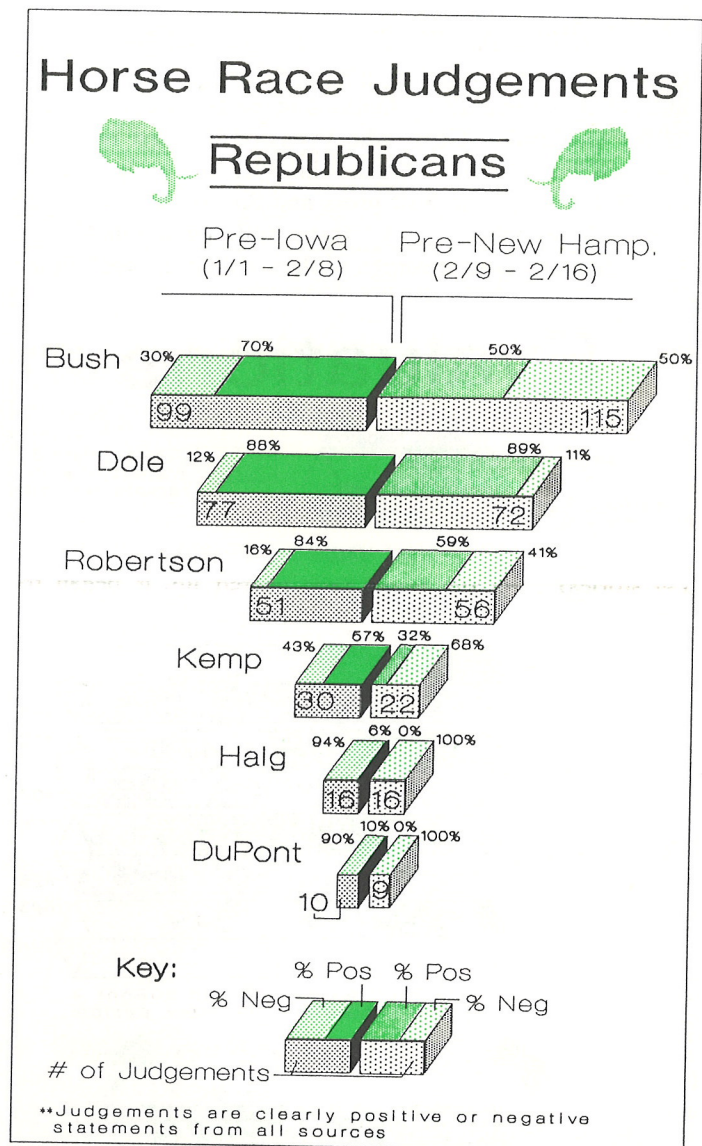


shared a highly positive (90%) horse race profile with Dukakis (90%) and Simon (85%).

After February 9, Dukakis held the spotlight with an almost perfect 97% positive rating and nearly double the number of mentions of any rival. Gephardt's form sheet fell to a still strong 69% positive, but Hart dropped out of the list of serious contenders, with only 17% positive mentions.



The Republicans were treated as a two-and-one-half man race. Bush consistently attracted the most attention, but his horse race rating stayed behind those of both Dole and Robertson throughout the six weeks. Dole's big edge over Bush in horse race news just before the New Hampshire vote (89% to 50% positive) contrasts sharply with the actual tallies.



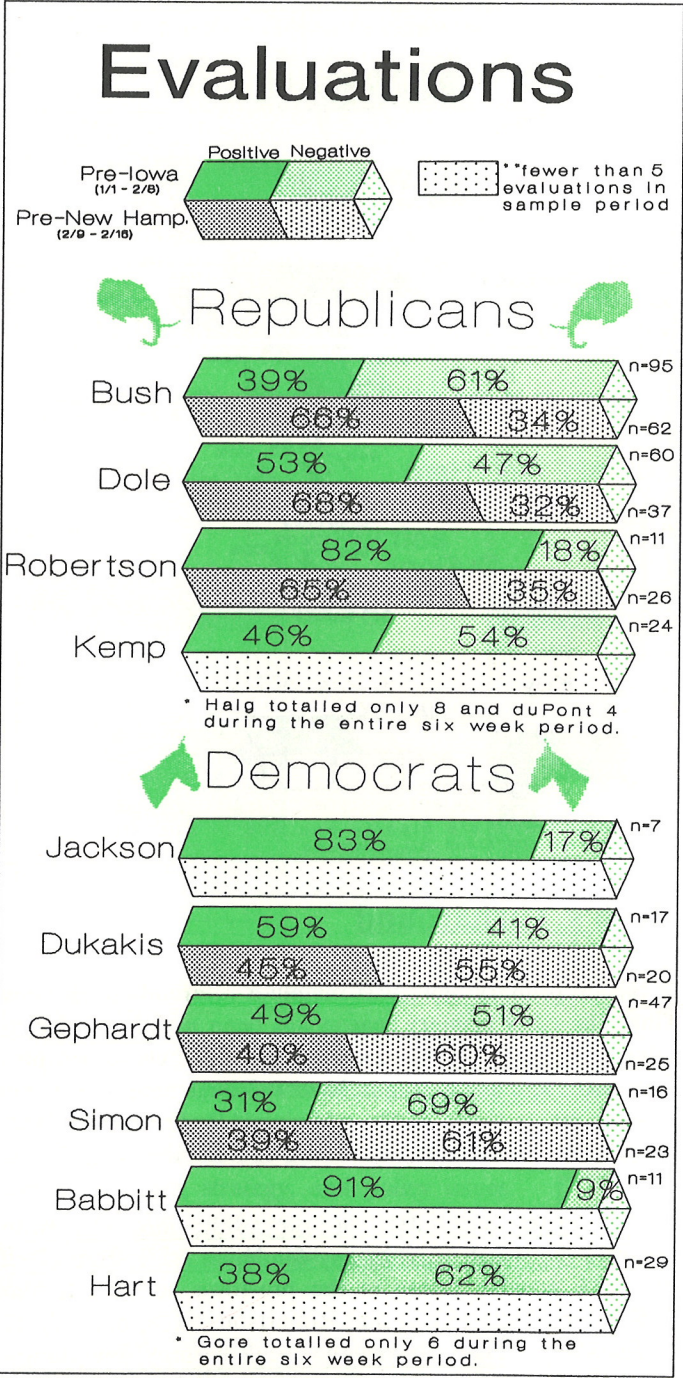
### Bush's Turnaround

If the preprimary news was mainly a referendum on Gary Hart, the early primary season has been mainly a referendum on George Bush. Since January 1 his character, performance, and issue stands have received nearly as many evaluations as those of the remaining Republican field or the major Democratic contenders combined.

From the outset of our study, however, Bush received the worst press of any candidate aside from Hart. His 39% positive rating in the pre-Iowa period left him well behind Dole (53%) and Robertson (82%, but only 11 evaluations). Then, during the week before New Hampshire, Bush jumped to a 66% positive rating that left him in a tight race with Dole and Robertson for best press in either party. The sharp rise in good press offset the simultaneous drop in Bush's horse race ratings (70% to 50% positive) after Iowa.



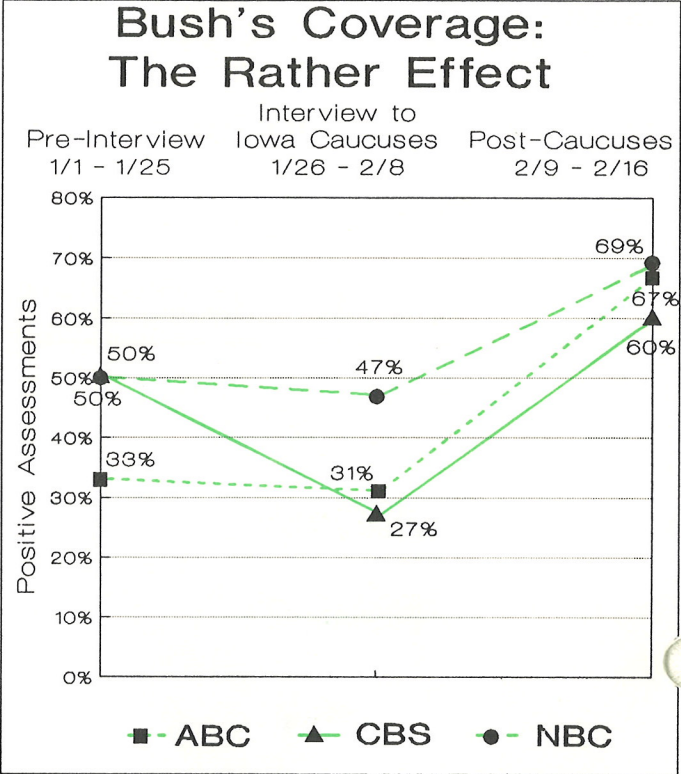
Among the Democrats, Jackson and Babbitt continued to receive excellent press (90%+ positive) but very little of it--10 and 12 evaluations respectively compared to 72 for Gephardt. Gore, who bypassed the first two tests, got even less attention. Of the three leading early contenders, Dukakis had the best press and Simon the worst, with Gephardt in between. All three suffered a falloff after Iowa, due largely to coverage of their attacks on each other.



## The Rather Factor

On January 26 George Bush and Dan Rather paired off in the biggest media controversy since the Gary Hart-Donna

Rice and Joe Biden-Neil Kinnock brouhahas. Before the Rather interview, CBS' evaluations of Bush were evenly balanced (50% positive), his best press of the three networks. After the interview Bush's evaluations remained stable on the other networks, dropping only two percent. But his stock dropped sharply on CBS, to only 27% positive. The difference was partly a falloff in positive state-



ments broadcast from the Bush camp, partly an increase in criticism aired from his rivals. After the Iowa caucuses, when Bush's good press rose sharply, CBS remained the most critical at 60% positive (vs. 66% on ABC and 69% on NBC).

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