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Super Tuesday — Before and After TV's Changing Coverage of the Campaign

From January 1 until the March 15 Illinois primary we analyzed 597 election stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows--nearly 60 stories a week, almost nineteen hours total airtime.

Major findings:

***Jackson's rise** - Jackson has gotten the best press of any candidate--81% positive. His share of the Democratic coverage jumped from 8% to 21% after New Hampshire. (p. 2)

***Robertson's Fall** - Robertson's proportion of good press fell from 70% to 33% after New Hampshire. (p. 3)

***Gephardt's Bad News** - Gephardt is the only major candidate to get mostly bad press during every primary period. (p. 3)

***Calling the Race** - Until Super Tuesday Dukakis had the best "horse race" news of any candidate. Then Jackson surpassed him. (p. 4)

***Frontloading** - Iowa attracted over twice as much TV coverage as all 20 Super Tuesday states. New Hampshire coverage also outpaced Super Tuesday. (p. 2)

***CBS Lightens Up** - CBS featured the most election coverage until New Hampshire, but the least since then. (p. 2)

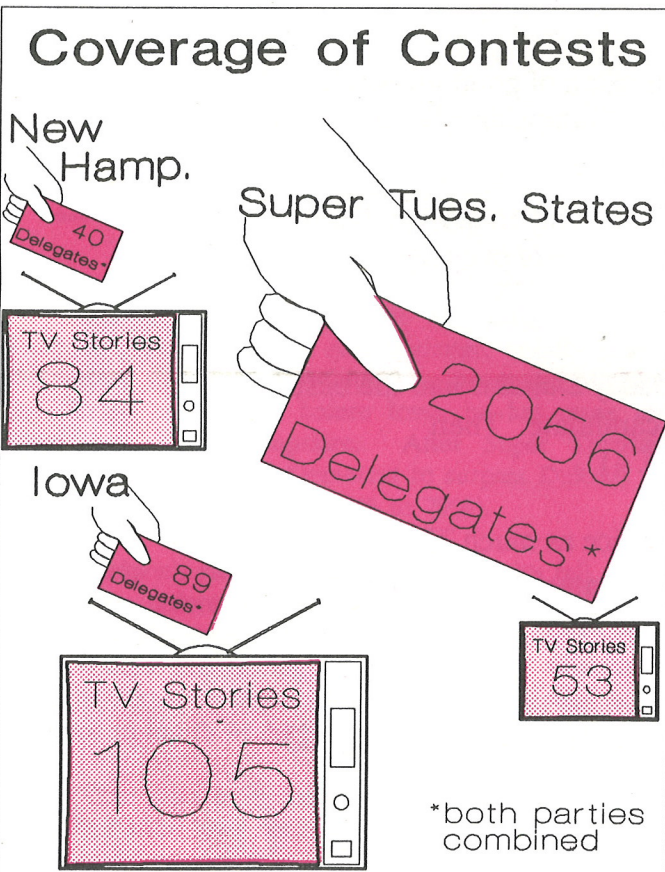
ABC Up, CBS Down

TV news continued its heavy election coverage as the primary season raced through Super Tuesday and Illinois. The pace actually picked up after New Hampshire. From January 1 through February 16 TV news averaged 55 election stories a week. From February 16 through March 15 the coverage increased to 60 stories a week. Total coverage since January 1 is 597 stories running 18 hours 46 minutes.

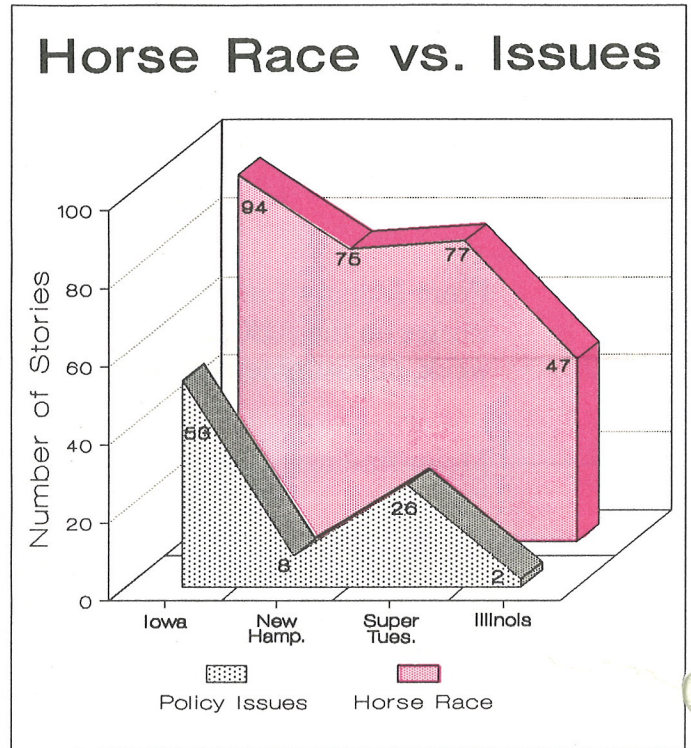
CBS's coverage slowed down after New Hampshire, while ABC's picked up speed. Until February 16 CBS had the heaviest coverage (269 minutes), over an hour of air time more than ABC (202 minutes). Since then CBS has had the lightest coverage (122 minutes), about one-half hour less than either ABC or NBC (150 minutes).

Where's the Story?

TV continued its tradition of "frontloading" - focusing mainly on the earliest contests. Coverage of the Iowa caucuses doubled that of all 20 Super Tuesday states. New Hampshire coverage also easily outpaced the attention given Super Tuesday. This despite the fact that the Super Tuesday states selected eighteen times as many delegates to the parties' conventions as did Iowa and New Hampshire combined (36% vs. 2% of all delegates).



In terms of TV stories allotted per delegate, an Iowa delegate was worth 48 times as much news coverage as a Super Tuesday state delegate. A New Hampshire delegate was worth 81 times the TV coverage of a Super Tuesday delegate.



Horse Race 1; Issues 0

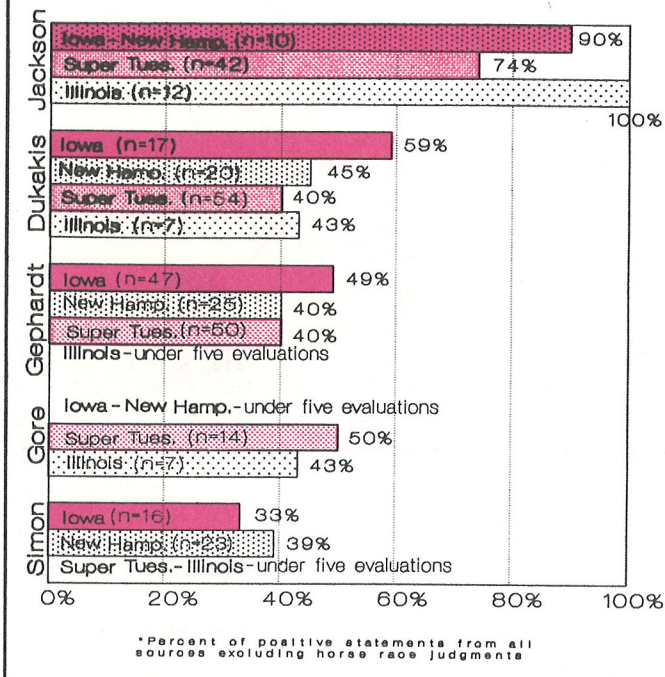
After a brief flurry of policy debate before Iowa, the horse race has left policy coverage in the dust. Before the Iowa caucuses, TV news featured 53 election stories on policy issues like the Iran/contra affair, farm issues, taxes, trade, and the federal deficit.

Since Iowa a total of only 36 stories have focused on any policy issue. In the coverage of New Hampshire, Super Tuesday, and Illinois, horse race stories outpaced issue stories by margins of 9 to 1, 3 to 1, and over 20 to 1 respectively.

Who's News?

TV coverage has swung back and forth between the two parties. During the 1987 "preseason" the Democratic candidates got over two-thirds of the coverage (measured by number of times quoted on the air). During the Iowa and New Hampshire campaigns attention shifted to the Republicans, who received nearly 60% of news coverage. Since then TV's attention has been almost evenly divided.

Good Press*: Democrats



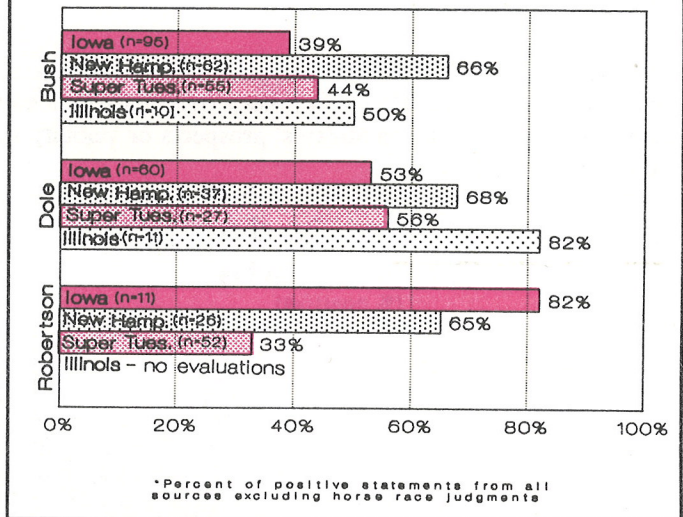
Among the Democratic candidates Jackson is the early winner in the race to catch the media's eye. Since New Hampshire, he has nearly tripled his coverage (from 8% to 21%) to become TV's most-quoted Democrat. Jackson has also been the focus of more stories than any rival since New Hampshire.

Among Republicans Bush surrendered his early lead in the visibility race to Dole and Robertson after New Hampshire, although a shift back to Bush is likely.

Good Press/Bad Press

Along with visibility, candidates vie for good press--positive things said about you. Our measure of good vs. bad press includes all statements aired on each candidate's character, job performance, and issue stands.

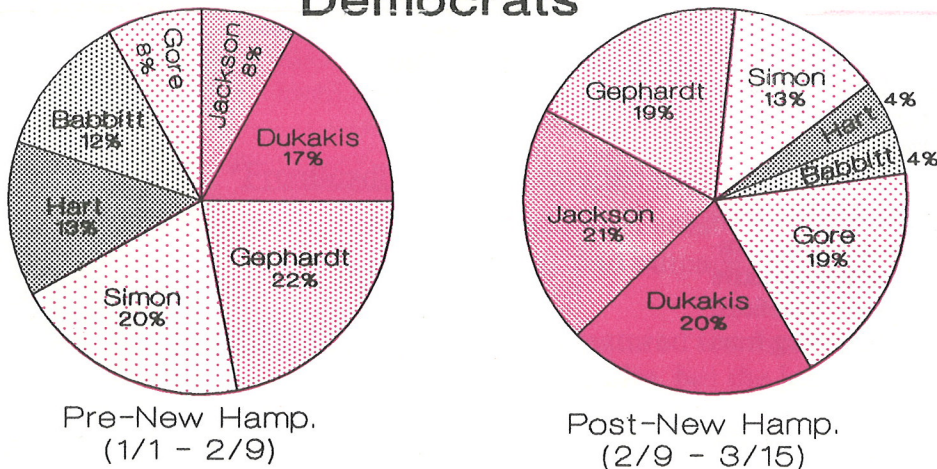
Good Press*: Republicans



Since the outset Jackson has received the best press of any major candidate. (He was briefly matched by media favorite Bruce Babbitt.) The best news for Jackson is an increase in the volume of his positive coverage after New Hampshire. Since January 1 81% of Jackson's evaluations have been positive. But the actual number of pro-Jackson statements was higher during the week before the Illinois primary than in the entire six weeks of Iowa and New Hampshire coverage.

Share of Coverage*

Democrats



*Number of times quoted as proportion of all candidates

Jackson's excellent press stands in sharp contrast to his competitors. Since Iowa no other Democratic contender has gotten more good press than bad press (50%+ rating). Moreover, Simon and Gephardt have nearly disappeared from the ratings.

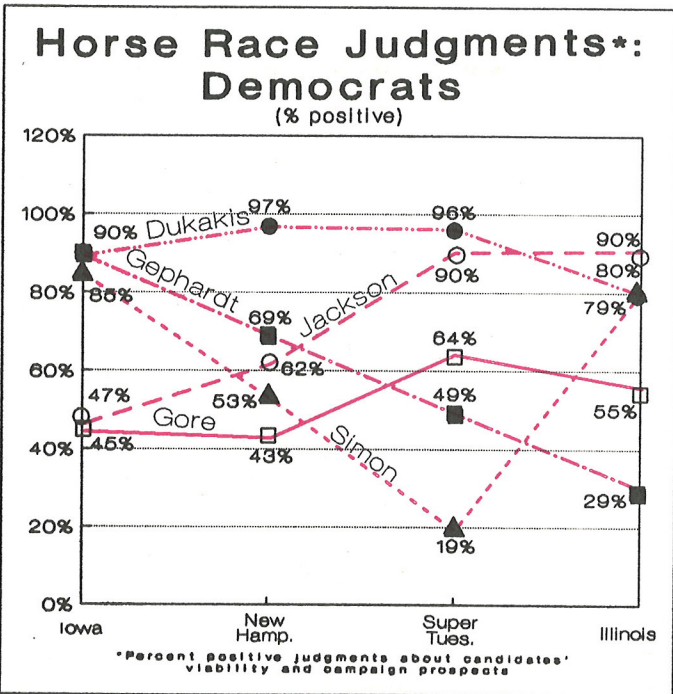
On the Republican side, each candidate has a distinctive profile. Dole got the best press overall, and the most consistently positive. He peaked after his Iowa win and again before Illinois. Robertson had the best press of any Republican until New Hampshire and the worst thereafter. He was hurt by heavy coverage of "funny facts" controversies like his claim about Soviet mis-

siles in Cuba, as well as his libel suit (now withdrawn) against Pete McCloskey.

George Bush has attracted the most evaluations and the worst press of the three. But he got his good press when he needed it most, during the week before the New Hampshire primary. So far Bush has gotten mainly good press only when he lost his frontrunner status.

The Field Narrows

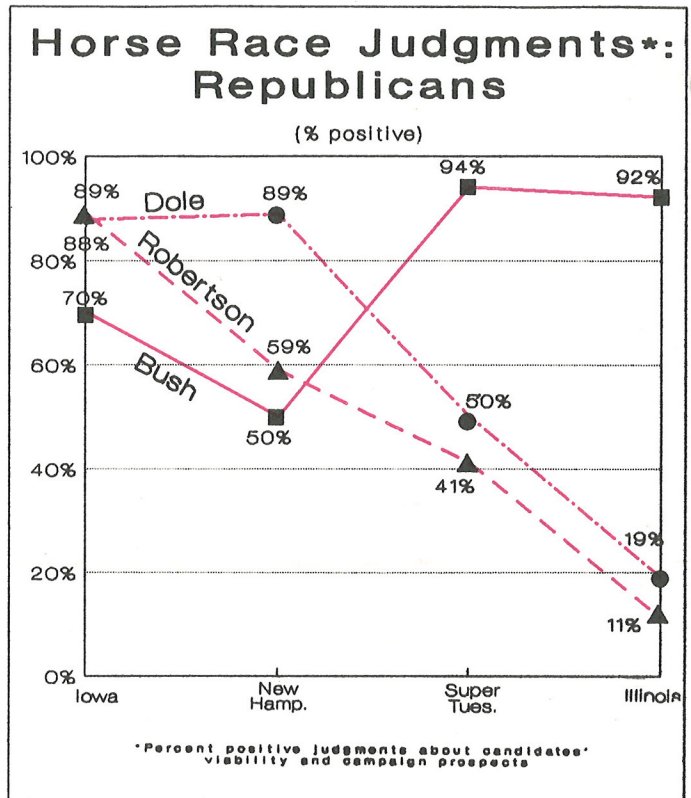
TV spends far more time handicapping the race than analyzing the candidates. There have been over twice as many judgments aired on the candidates' prospects or viability as on their desirability.



Among Democrats Dukakis has gotten the most consistently favorable horse race coverage, usually in the 90% positive range. But Jackson has shown the sharpest rise. Rated an also-ran before Iowa, he has come on strong since New Hampshire. After Super Tuesday Jackson became the first Democrat to surpass Dukakis in positive horse race news (by 90% to 79%).

Jackson's rise is matched by Gephardt's fall, from 90% positive before Iowa to only 29% since Super Tuesday. Simon slid even farther, from 85% to 19% positive reports, before rebounding in Illinois. Gore benefitted only slightly from his Super Tuesday showing, moving from fifth place to fourth in the media horse race.

The picture is less cluttered for Republicans. Before and after Iowa both Dole and Robertson received more hopeful reports than Bush. Since his New Hamp-



shire comeback Bush's horse race news has been nearly all good (90%+), while his rivals have bottomed out under 20% positive.

The way the media calls the race for the nominations, it looks like Dukakis, Jackson, and Bush as the candidates move into their stretch run.

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