

Volume II, Number 9

November 1988

Bad News is Good News for Bush

T.V. Coverage of the 1988 General Election

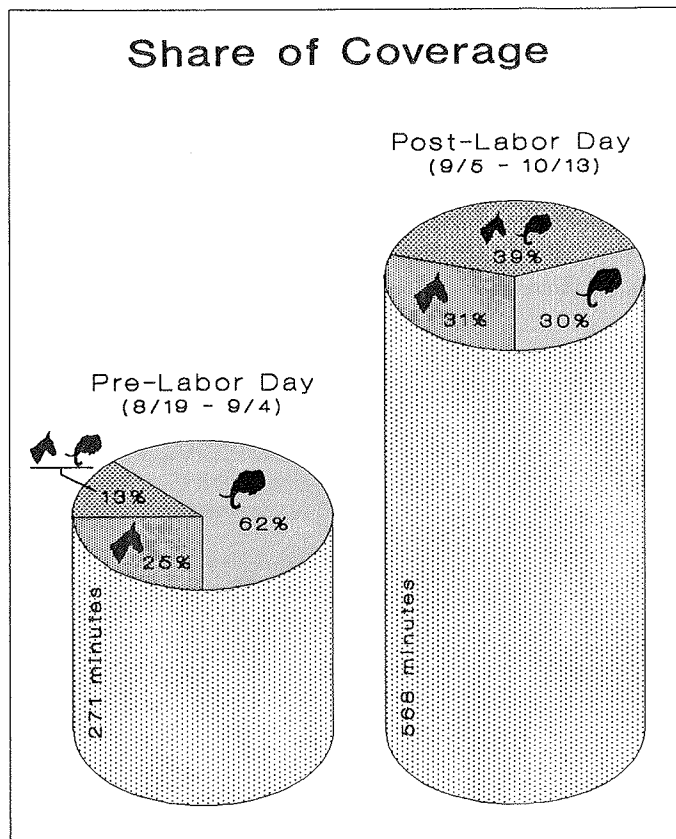
How has TV news covered the general election? And how have the fall broadcasts compared to the primary coverage? As part of our ongoing election '88 study, this month's *Media Monitor* examines nearly 14 hours of election coverage on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news from the end of the Republican convention on August 19 through the second Presidential debate on October 13.

Major findings:

- * Bad News - Evaluations of both Presidential candidates have been more than 2 to 1 negative. (p.3)
- * Who Says? - Bush has gotten better press among partisan sources; Dukakis has scored better among nonpartisans. (p.3)
- * Bush's Media Boost - Bush led Dukakis in good press by 56% to 22% before Labor Day, when he moved ahead in the polls. (p.4)
- * Bush sets the Agenda - Defense and crime were two of the top three issues mentioned most often. The Iran-Contra affair, the most visible issue during the primaries, fell to 21st place. (p.2)
- * "L" Word Watch - Dukakis has been labelled a "liberal" 25 times in 8 weeks. During the primary campaign he was termed liberal only 14 times in 18 months. (p.3)

CBS Leads the Race

During the eight weeks from the end of the Republican convention (August 19) through the second Presidential debate (October 13), the network evening newscasts devoted 474 stories to the Presidential election. Those stories consumed 839 minutes - one minute shy of 14 hours - of airtime. CBS led the pack with 176 stories lasting a cumulative 5 hours, 27 minutes. ABC was second with 156 stories and 4 hours, 19 minutes of coverage, followed by NBC's 142 stories totalling 4 hours, 13 minutes.



Battle of the Airwaves

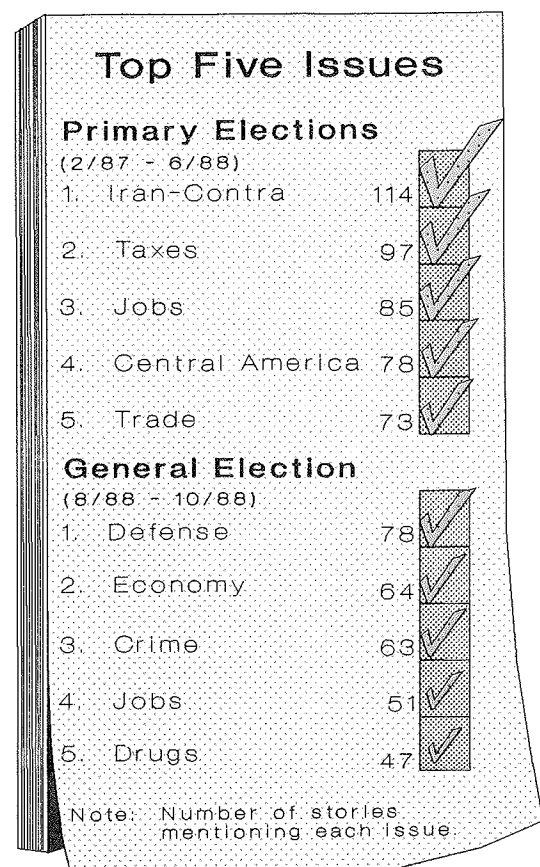
During the general election, the Republicans have commanded the most airtime - 40%, compared to 29% for the Democrats and 31% devoted to both parties or to neither (e.g. reports on the electoral college, polling, etc.).

However, the GOP edge in airtime resulted entirely from the attention given to Senator Quayle's troubles after the party's convention in August. Before Labor Day, the Republicans attracted two and one half times as much coverage as the Democrats. Since Labor Day,

the two parties have received almost exactly the same amounts of attention.

The Issue Agenda

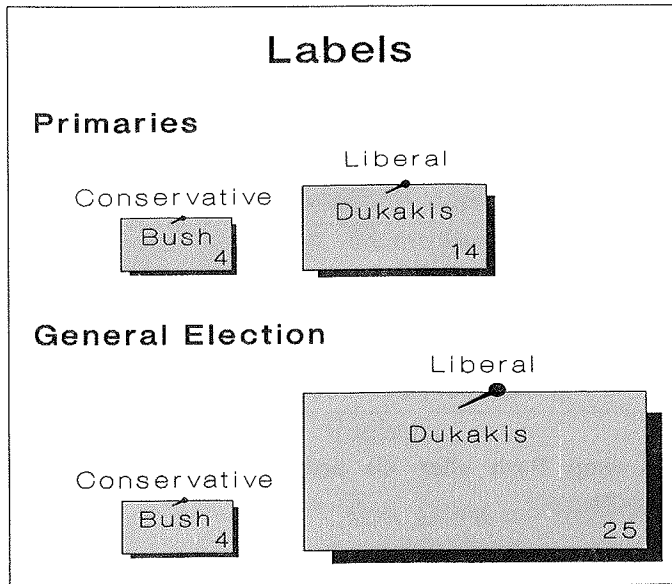
Among the top five issues aired during the primary season, only one - jobs - remained in the top five this fall. The Iran-Contra affair was the most visible issue this spring, but it dropped to twenty-first place on the fall list. Nor did aspects of Central American policy, international trade, or taxes retain their earlier prominence.



The current list pays homage to the Republicans' success in setting the issue agenda. Bush's attacks on Dukakis as weak on defense and crime generated two of the top three issue debates. Two others - jobs and the economy's conditions and prospects - are battlegrounds that resound with volleys from both sides. Only the fifth-ranked issue, drug policy, mainly reflects the Dukakis agenda (particularly his charges against Bush as an ineffectual point man in the Reagan administration's war against drugs). Defense was the number one issue during the first month of the campaign. Since then crime has held the top spot.

What's in a Name?

Bush's success in defining Dukakis as a liberal can be measured by the number of times ideological labels appeared in the news. During 18 months of campaigning for the nomination, Dukakis was called liberal 14 times, moderate 6 times, and conservative once. Some of the liberal tags came from Dukakis's own campaign, in an effort to attract liberal primary voters.



During the first eight weeks of the general election campaign, Dukakis has been labelled on the air as liberal 25 times, but never as moderate or conservative. This time the labels are coming from his opponent. Sample: "Are we gonna gamble our future on a liberal Democrat...?" (Bush, ABC, 9/22).

For Bush, by contrast, ideology hasn't been an issue. During the primaries he was called conservative only four times, which matches his total so far during the fall race.

Goodbye to Good Press

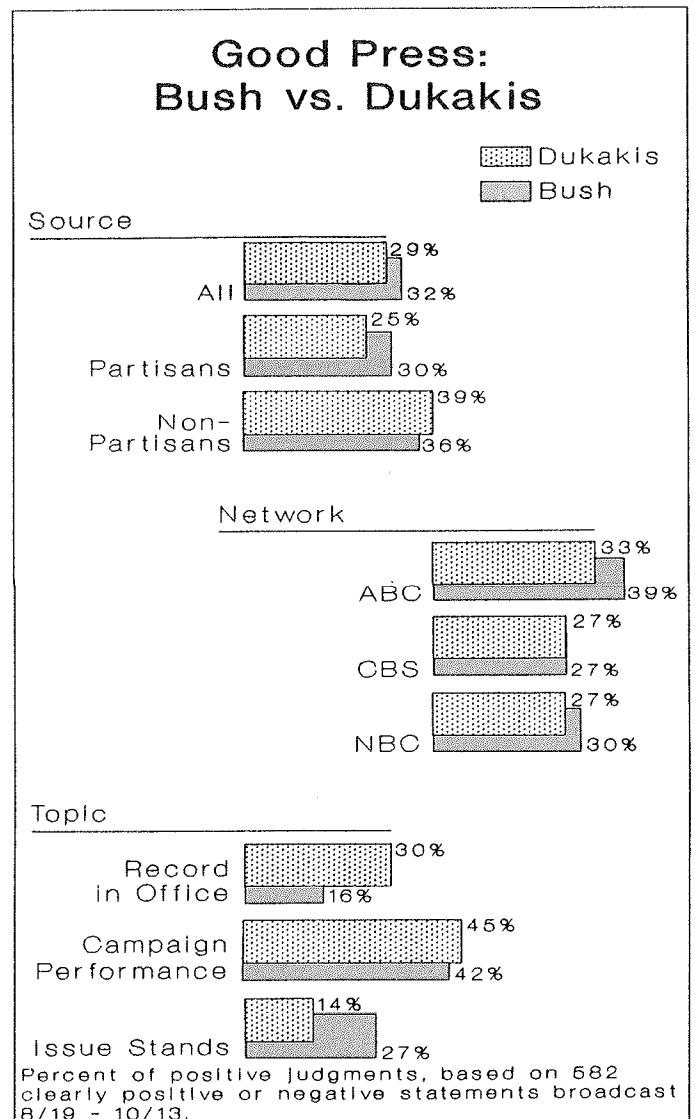
The most notable aspect of candidate evaluations this fall is their uniformly negative tone. Bad press has substantially outweighed good press for both Bush and Dukakis on all three networks, from all types of sources, on all major topics of their candidacies.

Overall Bush leads Dukakis in good press by a narrow 32% to 29% margin. But both men have attracted over

twice as many negative as positive evaluations. This is partly the result of negative campaigning. Even when Democratic and Republican sources are excluded, however, the remaining voices have been 63% negative. Sample: "Governor Dukakis...is no friend of police...He has presided over a revolving door criminal justice system." (Boston policeman, ABC, 9/22).

Bush's lead of 30% to 25% among partisan sources reflects his success in carrying the attack to his opponent. Dukakis leads by 39% to 36% among non-partisan sources. Bush has received a slightly better press than his opponent on ABC and NBC, while both have been treated equally on CBS.

Dukakis has outpaced Bush in assessments of campaign performance, reflecting criticism of Bush's attack mode more than enthusiasm for his own stump style. Dukakis has also gotten nearly twice as much good press as Bush on their respective records in public office. Only one



source in six has praised Bush's record as vice-president, but Bush holds a similar margin in good press on issue stands, because only one source in seven has defended Dukakis's policies.

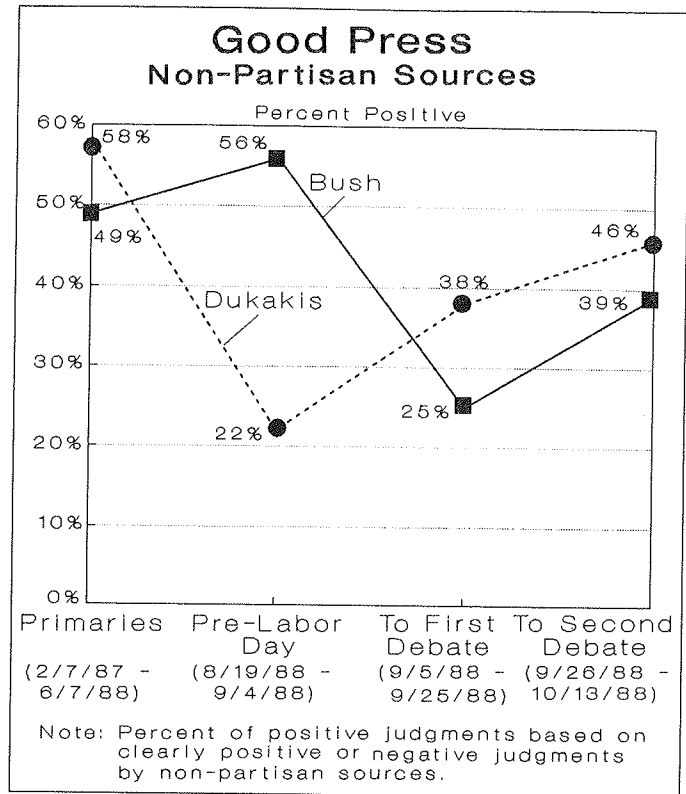
The Video Campaign
Network Coverage of the 1988 Primaries

Available from the Center for Media and Public Affairs for \$7.50.

As Time Goes By

During the primaries Dukakis received slightly better press than Bush (55% to 50% positive). Then, during the crucial two weeks after the Republican convention that kicked off the fall campaign, Bush forged ahead by 44% to 26%. This was the period when Bush made his comeback in the polls and surged into the lead. Since then the coverage has been about evenly balanced, with a slight advantage for Dukakis.

The changes were even more dramatic among nonpartisan sources. Dukakis's 9-point lead in good press during the primaries (58% to 49%) was replaced by a remarkable 34-point edge for Bush in late August (56% to 22%). Reporters and pundits discovered the "new"



post-wimp Bush after his acceptance speech in New Orleans.

After Labor Day the coverage returned to form, with journalists and analysts praising Dukakis more often than Bush. But the damage was already done. As ABC's Jim Wooten said last August 29, "When the days dwindle down to a precious few, the Governor may remember in November what he didn't do in August."

Media Monitor (Copyright 1988) is a monthly publication of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and nonprofit research organization. Subscriptions are available at a rate of \$36.00/year for institutions, \$18.00/year for individuals.

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