



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
SEPTEMBER 16, 1992

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## More Substance But Less Balance in TV's Election News

Policy issues are receiving more TV news attention than the campaign horse race this year, a distinct change from the networks' much criticized 1988 coverage, according to a new study by the **Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA)**. NBC has had the most coverage of the issues, ABC the least. However, the study also found that Bill Clinton continues to receive more favorable TV news coverage than President Bush.

These are among the latest findings from CMPA's ongoing scientific study of TV's election news, which uses content analysis to assess the coverage. From January 1st through Labor Day, researchers examined 1,660 election stories broadcast on the evening news shows. The amount of coverage was nearly identical across the three networks: 565 stories on ABC; 562 on NBC; and 533 on CBS. The CMPA study will continue through Election Day.

### Major Findings:

#### More Substance ...

\*The networks have aired 596 stories on policy issues during the campaign this year and 391 stories on the candidates' prospects. In 1988, the figures were virtually reversed (538 stories on the horse race, 376 on policy).

\*NBC has run the most stories on policy issues, and the fewest on the horse race. Of NBC's election stories, 43% focused on policy, compared to 37% for CBS, and 28% for ABC. Horse race news accounted for 25% of CBS's stories, compared to 24% for ABC, and 22% for NBC.

\*Since the primaries ended, the top issues have been the economy (65 stories), abortion (53), taxes (45), family values (38) and the Persian Gulf (34). The greatest increases in coverage from 1988 were on abortion (up 395%), health care (up 250%), the budget deficit (up 142%), education (up 116%), and the environment (up 108%).

#### ... Less Balance

\*This year, 44% of TV news sources have provided positive opinions of Bill Clinton (56% negative), while similar evaluations of George Bush have only been 31% positive (69% negative). After

(more)

excluding comments from Republicans and Democrats (leaving only “non-partisan” sources such as pundits, voters and reporters), Clinton’s edge was even greater, at 49% positive to Bush’s 24% positive.

\*Since the primaries, the overall gap in favorable coverage has closed, with Bush receiving 39% positive comments compared to Clinton’s 45% positive. But again, when partisan sources are filtered out, the gap is as wide as ever, with Clinton receiving 53% positive reviews, to Bush’s 29%.

\*In the three weeks following the Republican convention (8/21 to 9/6), Bush and Clinton each received 32% positive evaluations. This virtually mirrors the 34% positive coverage both Bush and Michael Dukakis received for the entire general election in 1988. But Clinton still edged Bush among non-partisans during that time period (48% to 31%).

#### **Examples of positive and negative evaluations:**

**Bush:** “He has articulated no vision of where this country should go in an economic sense.”

-economist, ABC, 8/17

**Clinton:** “He has my vote. I think he’s fantastic.”

-voter, CBS, 8/20

The **Center for Media and Public Affairs** is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that conducts scientific analysis of news and entertainment media. These figures are the latest from CMPA’s ongoing study which appears in the current issue of *Media Monitor*, the Center’s monthly newsletter. Copies are available upon request.

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