

Clinton's the One

TV News Coverage of the 1992 General Election

How did TV news cover the final phase of election '92? And how did this year's general election coverage compare to 1988? This month's *Media Monitor* examines the 730 election stories that appeared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts from Labor Day (September 7) through election eve (November 2). We also compare this fall's campaign reporting with results from our previous study of the 1988 election. Finally, this issue tracks campaign humor from late night talk-show hosts Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Arsenio Hall.

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Major findings:

- **More News** The amount of TV news election coverage was up from 1988 levels. *Page 2*

- **But Less Substance** The networks gave less attention to the issues and more to the horse race than in 1988. *Page 2*

- **Peerless Perot** Ross Perot got the best press among the three presidential candidates. But Bill Clinton fared best among non-partisan sources. *Page 3*

- **Bye Bye Bush** George Bush got the worst press of any presidential candidate throughout election '92. *Page 4*

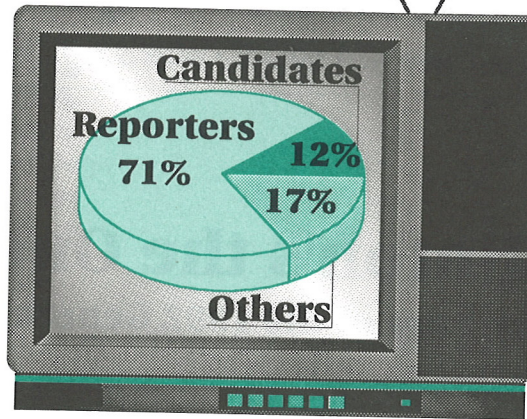
- **Campaign Follies** Most TV news sources criticized the campaign as well as the candidates. But post-election polls of voters tell a different story. *Page 5*

- **Ragging Ross** Perot edged out Bush as this fall's most joked-about candidate. *Page 6*

Eating Up the Airwaves

From Labor Day until election day, the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts broadcast 730 stories on the 1992 general election campaign, accounting for 23 hours 22 minutes of coverage--more than a third of all of the time available on their evening newscasts. The three networks provided almost identical amounts of coverage. These totals are up from 589 stories and 18 hours 36 minutes of airtime in 1988.

Campaign Airtime



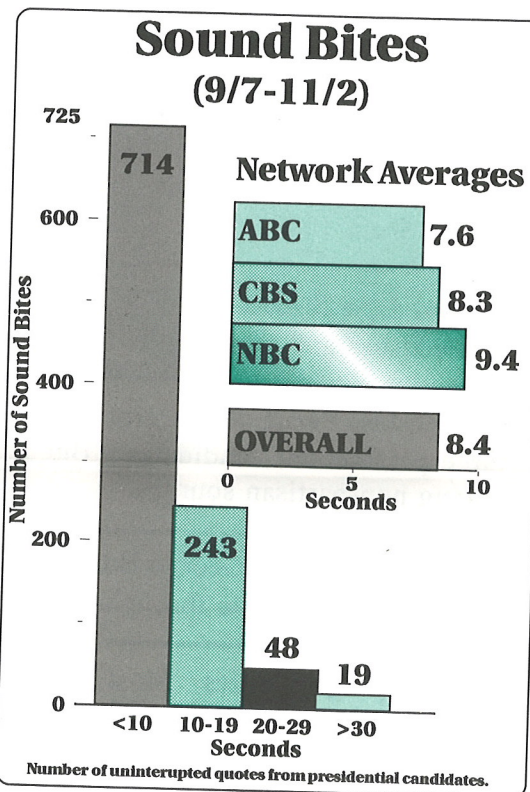
horse race was the leading topic of campaign news this fall. Boosted by a blizzard of media tracking polls, 40 percent of news stories after October 1 focused on the race, compared to only 27 percent during September. Overall, more than a third (35%) of election stories focused on the horse race this fall, compared to 25 percent during the 1988 general election.

If viewers saw more of the campaign this year, they heard less from the candidates. During the 1988 general election campaign, the average "sound bite" from a presidential candidate lasted 9.8 seconds. This fall, the average quote lasted 8.4 seconds, a 15 percent reduction. All three networks fell below the 1988 average. NBC came closest, with an average of 9.4 seconds, followed by 8.3 seconds on CBS and 7.6 seconds on ABC. Seventy percent of candidate sound bites lasted less than ten seconds, and only two percent exceeded 30 seconds.

George Bush's 66 minutes of speaking time was the most given to a presidential contender. Bill Clinton received 55 minutes of airtime, and Ross Perot 23 minutes. Overall, the presidential and vice presidential candidates accounted for only twelve percent of the airtime in campaign stories. Quotes from other sources (such as voters, political experts, etc.) comprised 17 percent of airtime. Reporters' own voices occupied the remaining 71 percent of airtime--nearly 16 hours of speaking time.

The candidates' strategies and tactics were covered in 33 percent of election stories this fall, down from 48 percent in 1988. Candidate controversies--such as Ross Perot's charges of dirty tricks and Bill Clinton's 1969 trip to Moscow--were another prominent topic throughout the race.

Policy issues accounted for under a third of campaign stories this fall (32%); in 1988, policy stories made up 40 percent of campaign news. Economic policy dominated the issue debate this year. The top issues: the state of the economy (84 stories), taxes (54 stories), unemployment (31) and the budget deficit (28). Absent from the agenda this time were the top two issues of 1988--crime and defense.



Polls & Policy

Earlier this year the networks made good on their promise of more substantive election coverage. During the general election, however, the coverage was less issue-oriented and more horse-race driven than in 1988. The

At the Finish Line

Throughout the fall, Clinton's campaign prospects were portrayed as favorable, while Bush's were seen as bleak. As election day grew nearer, Clinton was increasingly presented as the likely winner, while Bush was more and more seen as a long-shot. At one point, ABC's Brit Hume noted sarcastically that Bush's campaign "has succeeded so far in solidifying his position--10 or 15 points behind." (ABC, 10/12) In contrast, ABC's Chris Bury observed, "If a candidate's prospects can be gauged by the size and mood of his crowds, then Clinton has good reason to be confident." (ABC, 10/23) Although the race was portrayed as tightening at the end, Clinton was still presented as the overwhelming favorite. At its closest point, 75 percent of Clinton's

horse race evaluations were positive, compared to 37 percent positive for Bush.

In contrast to the major party candidates, assessments of Perot's standing in the race fluctuated from week to week. Perot received mainly positive horse race press when the coverage emphasized his improving image and his rising poll ratings. At other times, reporters focused on the likely futility of his long-shot candidacy. Soon after Perot's entry into the race, CBS's Bob Schieffer concluded, "Whoever he helps or hurts ... Ross Perot seems a long way from the force he once was." (CBS, 10/3) Less than three weeks later, NBC's Andrea Mitchell reflected the revised conventional wisdom: "Clinton and Bush should worry. Perot's exposure in the debates and his saturation media campaign have dramatically improved his image in a very short period of time." (NBC, 10/22) Overall, Perot's average horse race score during the fall was 49 percent positive, a figure much lower than Clinton's score (82% positive), but much higher than that of Bush (24% positive).

Election Topics			
	Number of Stories		
	Sept.	Oct.-Nov.	Total
Horse Race Standings	66	192	258
Campaign Strategy	81	158	239
Candidate Controversies	112	122	234
Policy Issues	96	137	233

Note: stories may have more than one topic.

porters), Bush received an equally dismal 71 percent negative score, while Clinton's evaluations were 52 percent positive (i.e., 48% negative).

This difference between partisan and non-partisan sources did not exist in 1988. That fall, Bush was criticized by 68 percent of partisan sources and 62 percent of non-partisans; Democrat Michael Dukakis was criticized by 65 percent of partisans and 69 percent of non-partisans. This year, each of the three networks broadcast comments from non-partisan sources

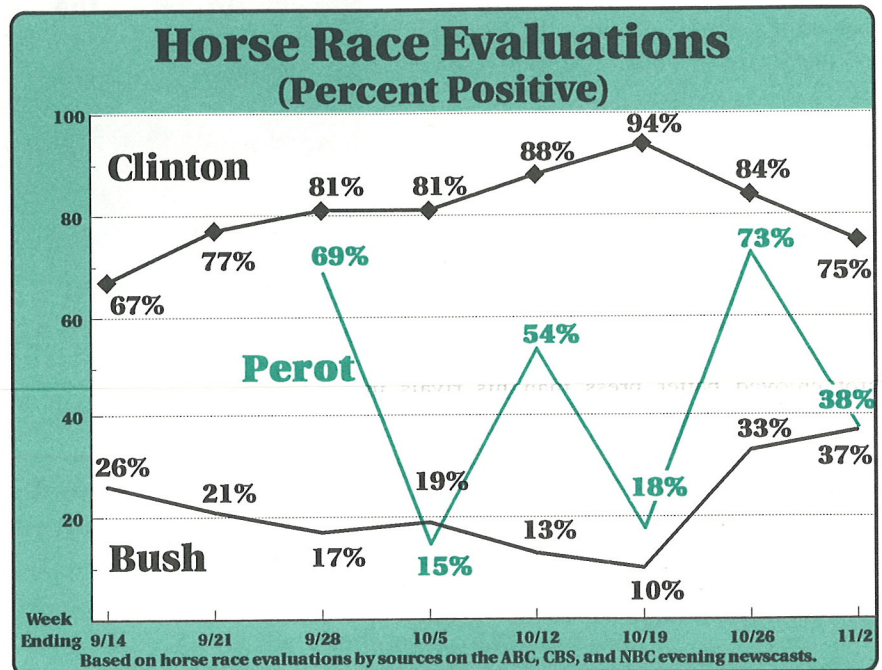
that were significantly less critical of Clinton than of Bush.

Among partisan sources, Bush actually fared better than Clinton in many categories. The president received marginally better press on domestic issues, and substantially better press on foreign policy and character issues. But among non-partisan sources, Clinton was favored on domestic issues, and Bush's character was more heavily criticized. Non-partisan

Rating the Players

During the fall campaign, we tabulated nearly 2,000 evaluations of the three major candidates--explicit statements by news sources that rated a candidate's ideas, job performance, campaign conduct, or general desirability. (These figures exclude the "horse race" judgments listed above.) By a substantial margin, Bill Clinton and George Bush each received more bad press than good (63% and 69% negative, respectively), while Ross Perot was treated to more balanced reviews (54% negative).

Clinton's negative score reflects the criticisms that the rival campaigns leveled at him. Among "partisan" sources affiliated with one of the three campaigns, Bush was criticized two-thirds of the time, and Clinton three-quarters of the time. But among the remaining "non-partisan" sources (such as voters, experts and re-



sources--often reporters--frequently criticized each candidate's campaign conduct. For example, CBS's Eric Engberg took the Clinton campaign to task on October 19 ("some of the rough stuff the Democrats are using [in their radio ads] hits well below the belt"); two days

Rating the Candidates - Percent Positive Evaluations

All Sources	Bush	31%	Clinton	37%	Perot	46%
	(n=929)		(n=681)		(n=351)	
Non-Partisan Sources	Total (n=412)	29%	Total (n=296)	52%	Total (n=217)	45%
	ABC	33%	ABC	54%	ABC	57%
	CBS	24%	CBS	55%	CBS	43%
	NBC	30%	NBC	46%	NBC	42%
	Domestic Policy	28%	Domestic Policy	43%	Domestic Policy	62%
	Foreign Policy	57%	Foreign Policy	*	Foreign Policy	*
	Character	17%	Character	4%	Character	23%
	Campaign Conduct	7%	Campaign Conduct	15%	Campaign Conduct	35%
Partisan Sources	Total (n=517)	32%	Total (n=385)	25%	Total (n=135)	49%
	ABC	36%	ABC	33%	ABC	47%
	CBS	28%	CBS	23%	CBS	61%
	NBC	34%	NBC	20%	NBC	37%
	Domestic Policy	32%	Domestic Policy	26%	Domestic Policy	29%
	Foreign Policy	48%	Foreign Policy	8%	Foreign Policy	*
	Character	36%	Character	6%	Character	*
	Campaign Conduct	16%	Campaign Conduct	24%	Campaign Conduct	45%

*Categories with fewer than ten evaluations are excluded.

Based on evaluations by sources in election stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts.

later he criticized the Bush campaign ("In trying to paint Clinton and Gore as environmental extremists, the Bush campaign has taken a single study sponsored by vested interests, then festooned it with make-believe assumptions. There's a word for such tactics: slick.") Ninety-three percent of non-partisan comments about Bush's campaign conduct were negative, as were 85 percent toward the Clinton campaign.

Perot enjoyed better press than his rivals in nearly every category. Perot's relatively high standing among partisan sources reflected the reluctance of his rivals to criticize him directly, although Republicans often criticized Perot's tax hike proposals. Among non-partisan sources, Perot was often praised by voters, and he scored much better than Clinton and Bush on the conduct of his campaign. For example, one voter asserted, "This country owes Ross Perot a great debt of gratitude because he's saying some things that need to be said." (CBS, 10/16)

Reporters were among Perot's harshest critics, especially on the subject of his character. CBS's Bill Lagattuta faulted Perot's TV ads

because "they don't show how temperamental, thin-skinned, and downright mean Perot can be." (CBS, 10/22) NBC's Lisa Myers agreed, "The dark side of Perot can be ruthless." (NBC, 10/26) Although reporters made relatively few evaluations, they were even more critical of Perot (81% negative) than Bush (71% negative) or Clinton (54% negative).

Overall, though, George Bush was the big loser in election coverage throughout Campaign '92. During the primaries, the summer, and the general election, Bush received more negative evaluations than his rivals. Bush's 22 percent negative press during the primaries was worse than that received by any other candidate in the field. His upswing in good press during the conventions and the general election mainly reflected the increased visibility of partisan Republican sources. Yet even during his best period (the general election), more than 70 percent of non-partisan news sources criticized Bush, a figure no other candidate matched even during their worst periods.

Democrat Bill Clinton fared poorest during the primaries, when his coverage was dominated by questions about his character, and when

Ross Perot was getting highly positive press. But as criticism of Perot increased during the summer months, Clinton began receiving mostly positive evaluations from non-partisan sources. Clinton's continued good press among non-partisan sources helped to sustain his more favorable media image after Republicans went into attack mode in August. Thus, partisan Republican criticism of Clinton was balanced by praise from voters and pundits, while partisan Democratic criticism of Bush was echoed by non-partisan sources all year.

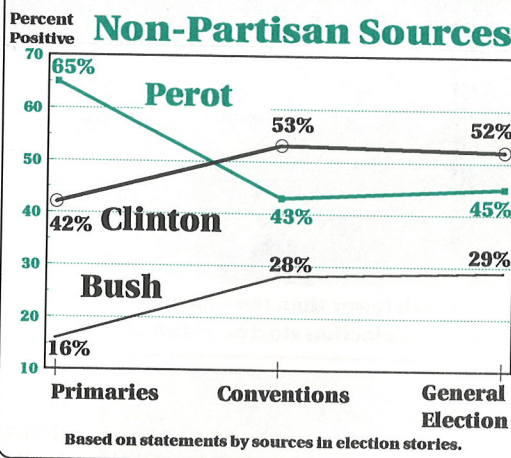
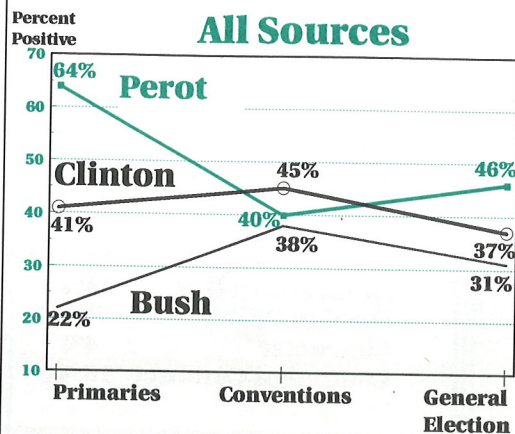
Rating the Campaign

While the candidates faced much criticism this fall, other actors in this election drama faced even more. By heavy margins, news sources turned thumbs down on the Democratic Party (82% negative evaluations), the Republican Party (87% negative), the Congress (90% negative), and the federal government (93% negative). The quality of this year's campaign was criticized by 93 percent of sources. On October 6, a voter told ABC's Peter Jennings that the campaign was "screwed up. It's messed up." Another added, "I think that the politicians are looking out for themselves and not looking out for my interests."

The candidates were frequently disparaged collectively as well as individually. All 55 sources who evaluated the field of presidential candidates found the choices unsatisfactory. Similarly, campaign advertisements in general were criticized by 94 percent of sources. Individual ads were less frequently targeted, but were criticized by 76 percent of sources who evaluated them. Most of those attacks were levelled at Bush's ads, which were criticized by 83 percent of sources. (There were not enough evaluations of Clinton and Perot's ads to report data.)

Concerns over the conduct of the campaign led to greater efforts at the networks to correct

Good Press Over Time



perceived candidate misstatements. We noted 152 instances when reporters drew into question or refuted campaign statements. More than half (52%) of these corrections targeted the Bush campaign; the remaining 48 percent were divided evenly between the Clinton and Perot camps. But criticism of the campaign process extended to the media itself. More than three out of four sources (78%) described the media's role in the process this year as negative. Most of the criticism came from the Perot and Bush camps, as when the president asserted that the media "wouldn't know good news if it hit them in the face." (CBS, 10/24)

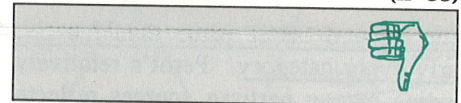
Despite the negative tone of the coverage, a Times-Mirror poll taken after the election found that sizable majorities of citizens expressed satisfaction with their choice of candidates (61%) and said that they had learned enough from the campaign to make an informed choice (77%). The same poll asked voters to grade the news media's role in the campaign, on a scale from "A" through "F". The public gave journalists a straight "C", rating them

slightly below talk show hosts and campaign consultants.

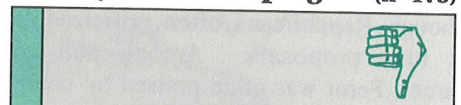
Rating the Process

(9/7-11/2)

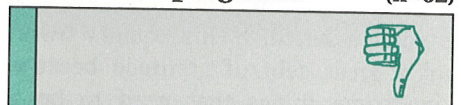
Voter Satisfaction (n=55)



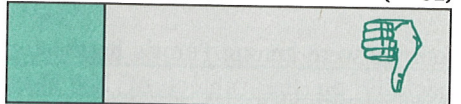
Quality of the Campaign (n=179)



Role of Campaign Ads (n=62)



Role of the Media (n=81)



Based on statements by sources in election stories.

Campaign Comedy

Although Bill Clinton won the election, he finished a distant third in the humor race, as Ross Perot edged out George Bush as the favorite target of comedians on late night television this fall. Bush, however, remained the most joked about individual during the entire course of campaign '92, with Perot, Clinton and Quayle clustered far behind him.

Bush

George Bush said that he has the road map to America's future. Why doesn't he pull over and give it to someone who can drive? --Jay Leno, 10/30

Bush said at a rally that he would never do anything to damage the integrity of the presidency. Then he got in a shouting match with a guy in a giant chicken suit. --Leno, 9/30

Bush keeps saying that we should reelect him because he has experience behind the wheel. So does the captain of the Exxon Valdez. --Arsenio Hall, 10/13

Is it just me or does Dana Carvey make a more convincing George Bush than George Bush? --Leno, 10/12

Perot

Perot is starting to remind me of a rerun of an old Andy Griffith show. He acts like Andy, he talks like Barney, he looks like Opie. --Leno, 10/27

Today Perot announced that he is blaming Republican dirty tricks for the fact that he is not taller. --David Letterman, 10/30

On the news tonight Perot denied he was paranoid. He said that was just a rumor started by people who were out to get him. --Leno, 10/30

I'd like to thank you all for being here tonight. I'd especially like to thank Ross Perot for not buying this time slot. --Leno, 10/30

Clinton

Bill Clinton has laryngitis, and his doctors are trying to get him to take some throat spray. But you know Clinton won't inhale. --Hall, 11/2

Madonna's new book on sex is out. One critic said the book offered no new real surprises. I bet Bill Clinton is breathing a sigh of relief. --Leno, 10/27

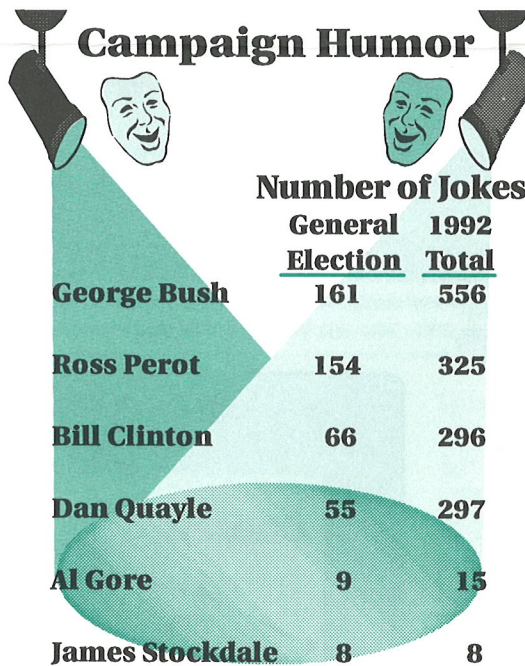
Yesterday Bill Clinton and Al Gore taped an episode of Donahue. The topic was men who do not look good in jogging shorts. -- Leno, 10/7

Dan Quayle

Last week Quayle wrote a letter and sent it to Murphy Brown's baby. He really did. This week the baby corrected the spelling errors and sent it back. --Leno, 9/22

We know Republicans have a sense of humor. They nominated Quayle. --Hall, 8/20

There was a lot of Quayle bashing on the Emmys. The Emmys is no place to make fun of Dan Quayle. This is the place to make fun of Dan Quayle. --Leno, 8/31



Last Words

Can you imagine being with these three guys when your car breaks down? Perot would be taking the engine apart, Bush would keep telling you the engine is fine, Clinton would keep trying to get you into the back seat --Leno, 10/8

Bush says when he's elected, no new taxes. Clinton says when he's elected he'll raise taxes. Now you can't vote for Bush because he might be lying and you can't vote for Clinton because he might be telling the truth. --Leno, 9/28

Note: The wording of some jokes has been altered slightly for brevity.