

# The Boom in Gloom

## TV News Coverage of the American Economy 1990-1992

The economy -- its health and prospects -- has been the number one domestic news topic during the past two years. This month *Media Monitor* charts the course of TV news economic coverage from October 1990 through September 1992. The study covers 2,531 stories and 63 hours 36 minutes of airtime on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts. This issue also updates our continuing analysis of TV election news through the first month of the fall presidential campaign.

### Major findings:

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■ **Big News** The amount of economic news doubled during the past year; unemployment was the top story for eleven straight months. *Page 1*

■ **Bad News** Since July, 96 percent of economic evaluations and 83 percent of predictions have been negative. *Page 2,3*

■ **ABC Is Bullish** A majority of ABC sources gave optimistic forecasts; on CBS and NBC, two out of three sources were pessimistic. *Page 3*

■ **Economists Vote "No"** Most economists criticized both George Bush's and Bill Clinton's economic policies. *Page 6*

### Election Update

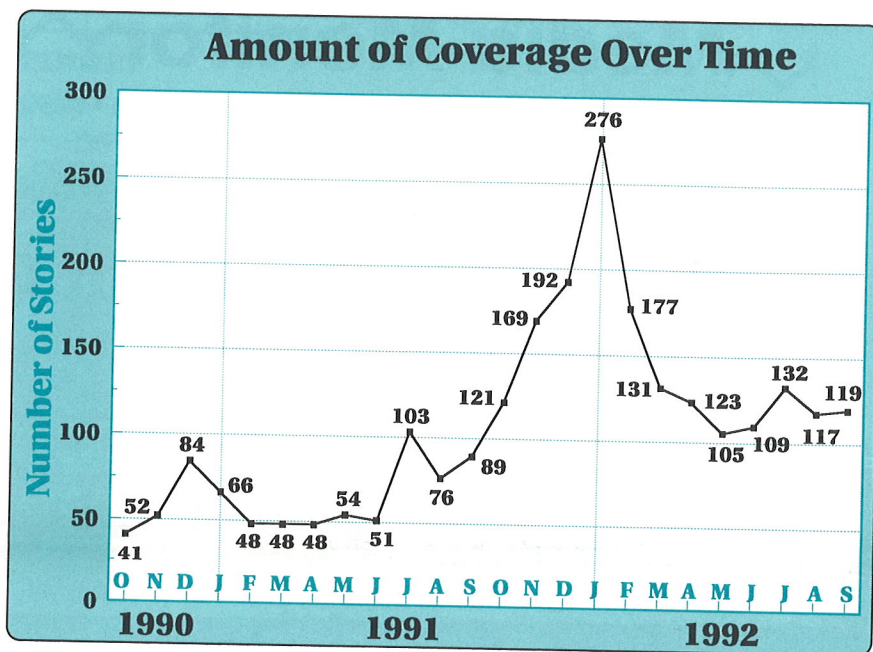
■ **Republicans Get More News...** In September the Republicans got nearly twice as much airtime as the Democrats. *Page 5*

■ **...But Enjoy It Less** Clinton/Gore continued to get better press than Bush/Quayle. *Page 5*

■ **CBS vs GOP** The coverage was most balanced on ABC and most one-sided on CBS. *Page 6*



The economy has been the top domestic story on TV news every year since CMPA began tracking the news agenda in 1989. Only the Gulf War and the revolutionary changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have attracted more coverage. This in-depth analysis of economic news covers the two year period from October 1990 through September 1992. During that time the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly newscasts have devoted 2,531 stories totalling 63 hours 36 minutes of airtime to the economy. NBC led the pack with 26 hours 11 minutes of airtime, about 40 percent more than either CBS (18 hours 52 minutes) or ABC (18 hours 33 minutes). Economic coverage more than doubled during the second year of the study, with the monthly average jumping from 63 to 148 stories. The coverage peaked at 276 stories in January 1992, driven by the president's Asian trade trip, the New Hampshire primary, and analysis of the holiday shopping season.

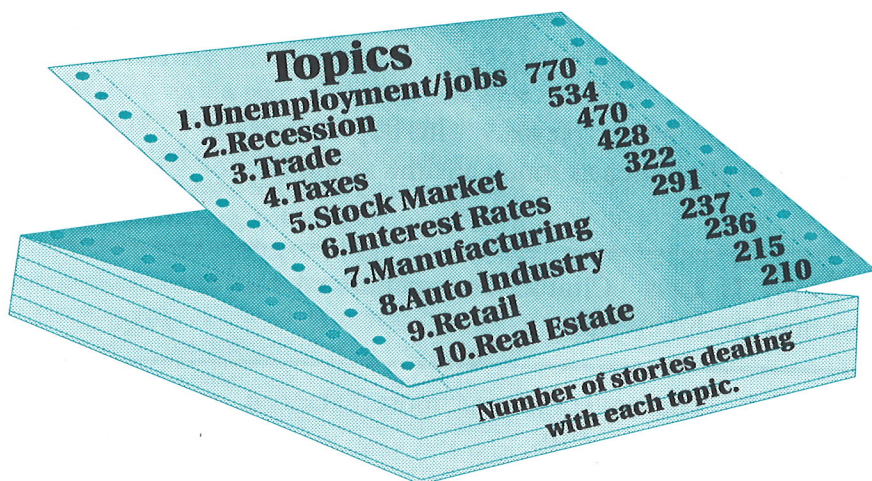


## Money Matters

The most frequent topic of economic news was unemployment and related job concerns. This subject alone generated 770 stories, over 200 more than any other. Unemployment was the most newsworthy economic topic for eleven straight months from October 1991 through August 1992, before being edged out by trade issues in September. Attention focused on the plight of job seekers, unemploy-

ment insurance claims, and corporate restructuring.

The second most visible issue was the recession itself, which appeared in 534 stories. The coverage was boosted during 1991 by controversy over whether we were in a recession, and by the 1992 election debate over economic stagnation. The 470 trade-related stories included Bush's trip to Asia in January 1992, the free trade agreement with Mexico, and discussions of our trade status with China. Taxes (428 stories) were frequently mentioned in election coverage, including both Democratic criticism of Bush's broken tax pledge and Republican criticism that Clinton would raise taxes. The gyrations of the stock market (322 stories) attracted attention throughout the study, and falling interest rates also made news regularly (291). Rounding out the top ten were the four most newsworthy industrial sectors - manufacturing (237 stories), automobiles (236), retailers (215), and real estate (210).



## Selling Short

Evaluations of America's economic condition were consistently negative. Of the

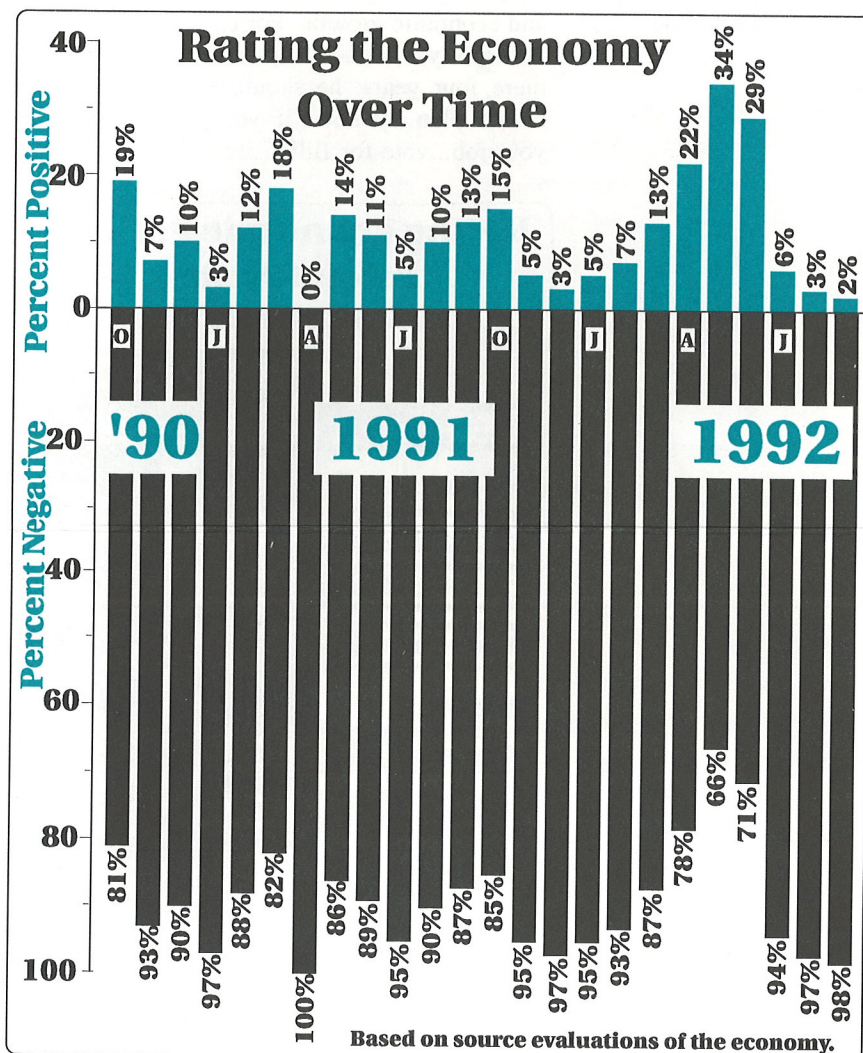


1815 assessments of the overall economy and its major sectors, 91 percent were negative. For example, a union worker told CBS, "We're in a depression. We're not in a recession. There's no work. There's no jobs." (4/5/91) During the most recent quarter (July-September) 96 percent of sources have focused on economic weaknesses and shortcomings; only six out of 145 sources have offered positive assessments of America's economic performance. Thus, economist Allan Sinai recently concluded, "We'll be lucky if we can keep our head above water." (CBS, 8/4/92)

Assessments of the national economy have been the most negative of all, with 94 percent of sources expressing pessimistic views. Evaluations of particular industries and economic sectors were only slightly more positive. At least nine out of ten sources turned thumbs down on the performance of the banking industry (94% negative), the auto makers (92%), and the trans-

portation sector (90%). Retailers, real estate, and the construction and aerospace industries were also frequently targeted for lackluster performance. The best ratings -- "only" 67 percent negative -- went to the manufacturing sector.

Portrayals of geographic regions were equally downbeat, with the greatest attention devoted to the most depressed areas. New England and the Pacific coast attracted more comment than all other regions combined, and assessments of these two areas were 96 percent negative. Only the industrial heartland (the north central and midwestern states) attracted more than an occasional favorable comment (44% positive), reflecting the relatively favorable assessments of manufacturing industries based in that region.



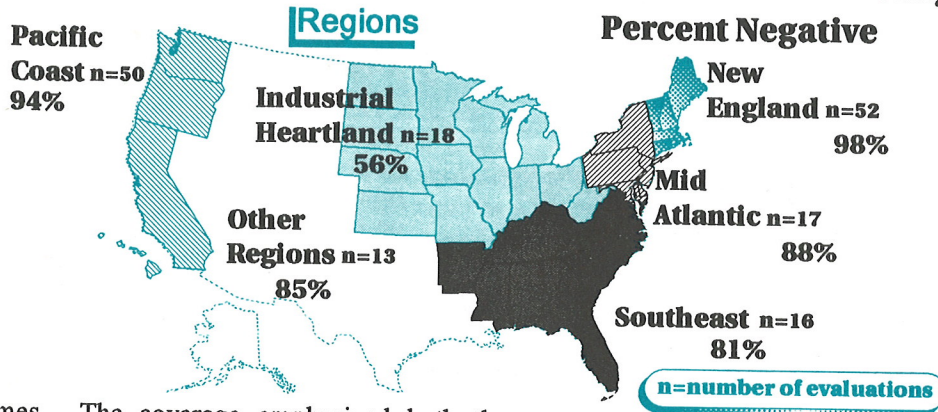
## Previews

Three out of five sources (60%) fore-saw more hard times ahead. For example, economist Philip Braverman called the outlook "pessimistic for jobs, and for income, and for the economy." (CBS 9/26/91) Nonetheless, assessments of America's economic future were both more positive and more variable than those of the present. Among the "yeasayers" was Paul Volker: "the United States economy is going to look better...be more productive, more efficient." (NBC 6/25/92) Predictions veered sharply back and forth over time, with the greatest optimism expressed early in 1991 and the greatest pessimism late in 1990 (in anticipation of a mideast war) and again in recent months. Since July five out of every six sources have expressed anxiety over future economic developments. This aspect of the coverage also produced the only major difference among the networks. A majority (53%) of sources on ABC expressed optimism about future developments, while 61 percent of sources on NBC and 69 percent on CBS were pessimistic.

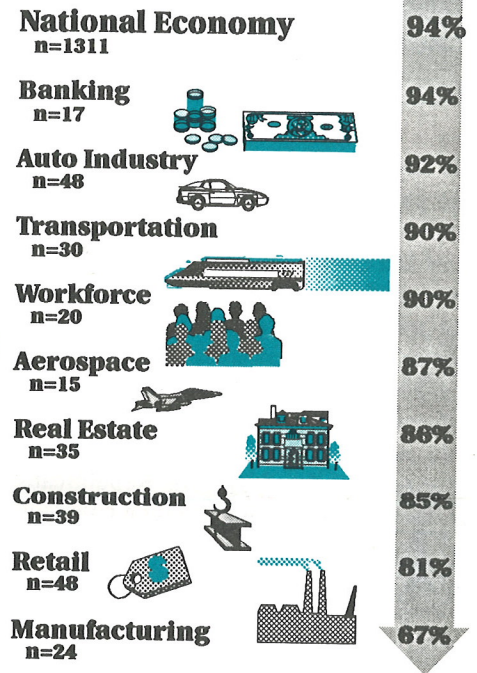
The downbeat aura of economic news extended to descriptions of the recession and predictions of recovery. During the eighteen months since we began noting these aspects of the coverage, reporters mentioned the word recession 663



# Health of the Economy

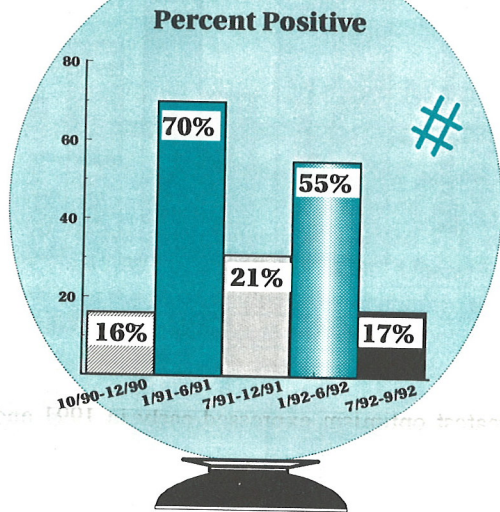


## Sectors



times. The coverage emphasized both the strength of the recession and the expected weakness of the eventual recovery. Seven out of ten sources characterized the recent recession as harsh rather than mild, while 97 percent (111 out of 115) depicted the coming recovery as weak or slow to develop. For example, an unemployed professional told ABC, "This recovery is a crock. This is not a real recovery." (6/5/92)

## Economic Predictions



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

## Main Features

The networks personalized economic news in 396 features about the economic fortunes of companies, families, and individuals. These anecdotal presentations were often contained in the networks' special segments, such

as ABC's "American Agenda," CBS's "The Money Crunch," and NBC's "Daily Difference." Overall, three out of five features (61%) were negative in tone. But this masks a sharp distinction between features about business, which were somewhat positive, and those about individuals, which were highly negative.

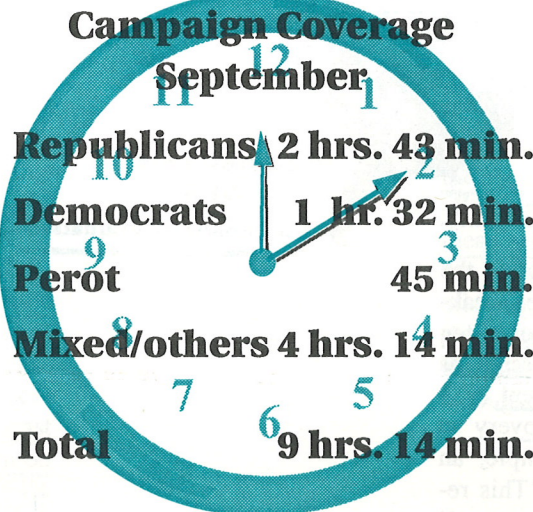
A majority (56%) of anecdotal treatments of business were success stories, often describing how individual companies were bucking a downward trend. For example, on April 15 NBC profiled an exercise in what Tom Brokaw called "workplace democracy." Reporter Mike Jensen described a company called Nucor, where "bosses and workers are treated the same" and "everyone's pay depends how much steel is produced." He concluded, "in more than twenty years, Nucor never has laid off a single employee or closed a single plant for lack of work."

In contrast, 69 percent of the individuals and families who were profiled were victims of hard times. By far the most frequent theme of these anecdotes was the plight of the unemployed. For example, in January CBS profiled Marie and Bob Mulligan, an unemployed New Hampshire couple. On April 24 Richard Threlkeld returned to find that, "the Mulligan's are still out of work." A tearful Marie then asked, "Can Mr. Bush honestly say that he knows how we feel? He can't."



# Election Update - The Fall Campaign

As campaign '92 moved into its final phase, the networks picked up the pace. In September the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows broadcast 285 stories on the presidential election, with a total airtime of nine hours, 14 minutes -- nearly one-third of the entire monthly newshole. ABC led the pack with 120 stories and 212 minutes of coverage, well ahead of both NBC (80 stories, 173 minutes) and CBS (85 stories, 168 minutes). The Republicans attracted nearly twice as much coverage as the Democrats - two hours 43 minutes of airtime vs. one hour 32 minutes. Temporary non-candidate Ross Perot received half as much airtime (45 minutes) as the Clinton/Gore ticket. Throughout the first nine months of 1992, the nightly newscasts have devoted 1,805 stories and 58 hours, 29 minutes of airtime to the presidential election.



with 117 stories. The issue coverage reflected TV's more general emphasis on economic news. The top election issue in September was the state of the economy (41 stories), followed by the candidates' policies on taxes (34), the budget deficit (17) and unemployment (12). The only non-economic issues to make the top five were the health care crisis and the family values debate (12 stories apiece). Attention to matters of substance thus exceeded coverage of campaign strategy and tactics (91 stories) and the candidates' popularity and prospects (75).

## September Songs

The greatest media attention in September (126 stories) went to campaign trail controversies. These short-term flare-ups included disputes over Clinton's draft record, Perot's on-again, off-again candidacy, Bush's veracity on his Iran-contra role, and the Republicans' allegedly low-road campaign tactics. Policy issues finished a close second,

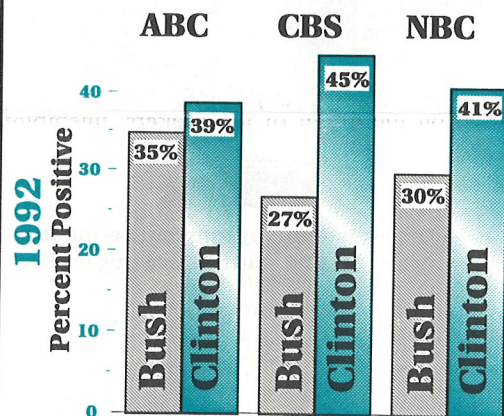
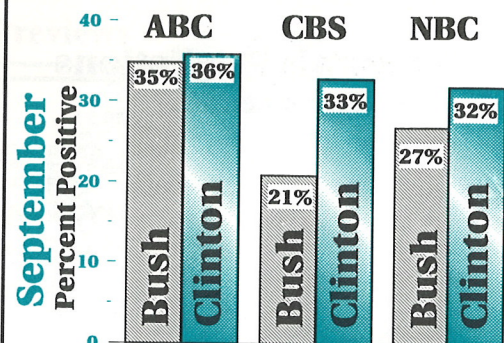
### Topics-September

Campaign Controversies	126
Policy Issues	117
Campaign Strategy	91
Horse Race Standings	75
Debates	38
Voters	37

1. Economy	41
2. Taxes	34
3. Deficit	17
4. Jobs	12
4. Health Care	12
4. Family Values	12

Note: Stories may cover more than one topic and issue.

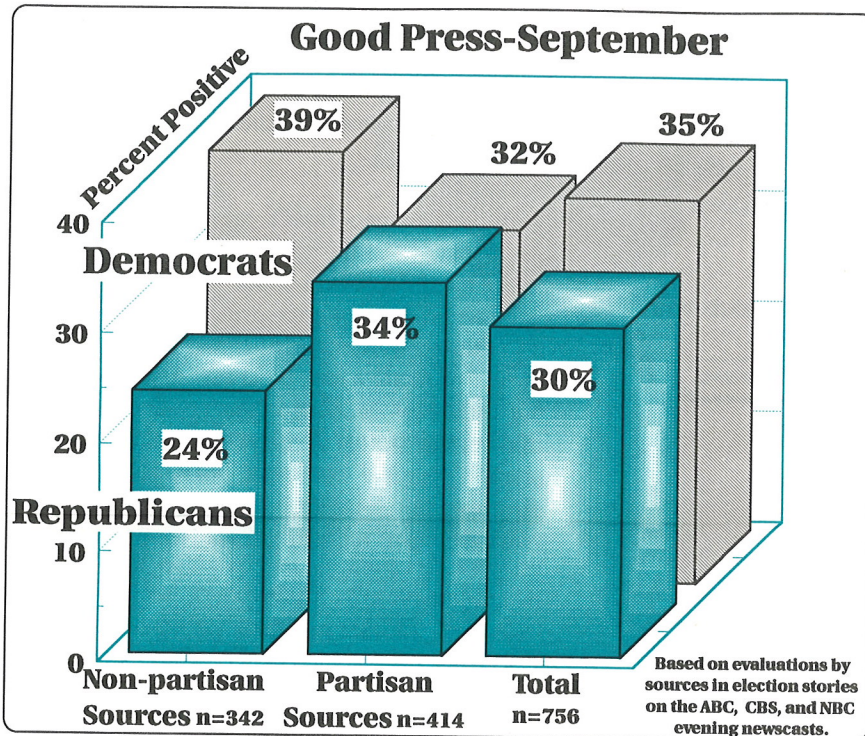
## Good Press By Network



Based on source evaluations in election stories.

However, these two aspects of the horse race together outnumbered stories on policy issues. Negotiations over the presidential debates (38 stories) and profiles of the electorate (37) rounded out the month's leading topics.





however, the coverage became more balanced in September.

### No Sale

Since the primaries ended, both candidates have drawn mostly criticism for their economic policies, though Bush has fared worse than Clinton (23% vs. 32% positive assessments). Once again, the difference was concentrated among non-partisan sources. Their judgments on economic issues were 38 percent positive toward Clinton, compared to 15 percent positive toward Bush. Economists split two-to-one against Clinton's policies but five-to-one against Bush's. For example, MIT's Lester Thurow concluded, "Bill Clinton is closest to the truth." (ABC, 9/20) Bush fared especially badly on the issues of job creation and economic growth. For example, economist David Wyss argued, "George Bush has been there four years; he should have had an economic plan by now...if you're worried about your job...vote for Bill Clinton." (ABC, 9/20).

### Rating the Rivals

The Republican ticket continued to receive worse press than their Democratic challengers, although most evaluations of both sides were negative. Sources from the two parties traded charges over the airwaves in about equal measure. The GOP disadvantage occurred among non-partisan sources such as voters, pundits, and reporters. Three out of four non-partisan sources (76%) turned thumbs down on Bush and Quayle, compared to three out of five (61%) who criticized Clinton and Gore. For example, one voter told CBS, "I will not trust my future and my child's future to someone who has done such a poor job for the past four years." (9/18) The same pattern appeared in September 1988, when Bush/Quayle and Dukakis/Bentson received about equal treatment from partisan sources, but the Democrats fared better among non-partisans. That year, however, evaluations of the two tickets evened out by election day. Continuing a year-long pattern, the networks differed in their treatment of the presidential contenders. The coverage has been most balanced on ABC and most critical toward Bush on CBS. On all three networks,

### Rating Economic Policies

#### Percent Positive

(6/3-9/30)

	Bush	Clinton
<b>Total</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>32%</b>
<b>By Source</b>		
<b>Partisan</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>29%</b>
<b>Non-Partisan</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>38%</b>
<b>Economists</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>By Issue</b>		
<b>Growth</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>46%</b>
<b>Jobs</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>50%</b>
<b>Budget</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>Taxes</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>22%</b>
	<b>n=741</b>	<b>n=609</b>

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