

Dole's Summer Doldrums

TV News Coverage of the 1996 Presidential Election

Major findings:

- **Bill Bests Bob** Clinton gets better press than Dole for his policies and performance. *Page 3*
- **CBS vs. GOP?** CBS is toughest on Dole (and Newt... and Bush....) *Page 4*
- **Do Media Still Matter?** Clinton's media image no longer affects his public image. *Page 5*
- **Bigger Bites** Candidate sound bites now average 10 seconds, the longest since 1988. *Page 2*
- **Here's the Beef** Nearly half of all stories discuss policy issues. *Page 2*
- **The Humor Race** Dole replaces Clinton as the biggest joke on latenight TV. *Page 6*

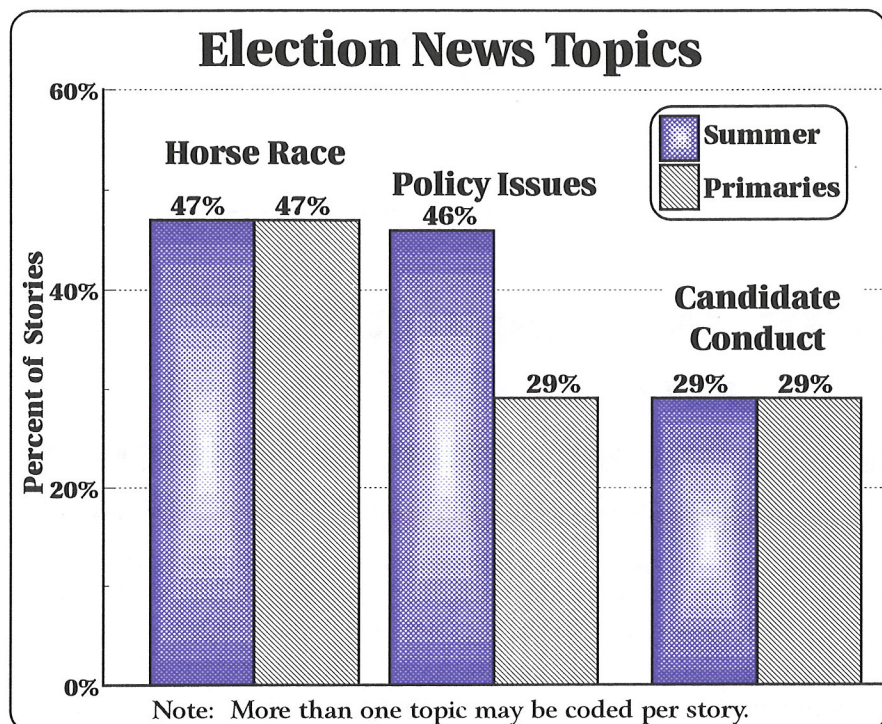
How have the networks covered the 1996 Presidential election since Bob Dole resigned from the Senate? This special report on Campaign '96 looks at how both Dole and President Clinton fared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts. It also updates our count of the latenight comedians' favorite joke targets. This is part of a series of reports from the Markle Presidential Election Watch, sponsored by the John and Mary Markle Foundation.

Presidential election campaigns feature a lengthy interim between the primary and general elections, punctuated by the party nominating conventions. But this interim has become an increasingly active period of campaigning for the prospective party nominees, as they try to set an early tone for the fall contest. In 1996 the campaign was reactivated by Bob Dole's resignation from the Senate on May 15. Throughout the summer he battled President Clinton to establish momentum going into the August conventions and set the agenda for the fall. To find out how the two contenders fared, we examined 289 election stories that appeared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news from May 15 through July 31. To insure fair comparisons, we also analyzed President Clinton's media profile in 216 additional stories on his other activities.

Doling Out Airtime

Election news proper focused mainly on the Dole campaign. Dole was the focus of 120 election stories, compared to 70 for Clinton. Of course, news about the incumbent's other activities

(continued on page 2)



gave him a much higher overall media profile. Even after including news about the presidency, however, Dole had more on-air speaking time than Clinton, by 43 minutes to 30 minutes. As usual, candidate speaking time was doled out in brief snippets. The average sound bite lasted 10.1 seconds for Dole and 9.3 seconds for Clinton, for an overall average of 9.8 seconds. These totals are up sharply from the primary period, during which the GOP contenders averaged only 7.2 second soundbites. If the summer sound bite average carries over into the fall, it will exceed the 8 second average of the 1992 general election and match the 9.8 seconds averaged by Bush and Dukakis in 1988. Even so, journalists continued to receive six times as much speaking time as the candidates.

Here's The Beef

Policy issues were discussed in 46 percent of all election stories

this summer, up sharply from only 29 percent of stories during the GOP primaries. Issue coverage almost equalled the 47 percent of all stories that discussed the candidates' standings and strategies in the campaign horse race. The only other major area of coverage concerned the candidates' behavior on the campaign trail (such as Dole's rejection of an invitation to speak at the NAACP annual convention), which was

discussed in 29 percent of all stories. (More than one topic can be addressed in a story, so the numbers do not sum to 100 percent. We count all topics that are discussed for at least 20 seconds.)

The proportion of stories that dealt with the horse race and the candidates' conduct did not change from the primary period. It was only policy issues that received more attention in recent months. Issue coverage is often heaviest during the "preseason" periods before the primary and general election campaigns begin in earnest, because there are fewer polls and campaign events to cover. Ironically, this means that the substance is highest when public interest in campaign news is lowest.

Despite the more substantive focus, much of the coverage dealt with topics that are very different from the issues that most concern voters. The issue that most dominated election coverage was abortion. Spurred by heavy coverage of conflicts between Republican pro-choicers and pro-lifers, the abortion issue garnered 33 stories -- one out of every nine election stories this summer. The other standout election issue was the "filegate" scandal; charges that the



Top Ten Issues Number of Stories

1. Abortion	33
2. Filegate	21
3. Taxes	15
4. Crime	14
4. Tobacco	14
4. Whitewater	14
7. Welfare Reform	13
8. Terrorism	8
8. Economy	8
8. Education	8

White House had collected information on Republicans from confidential FBI files generated 21 stories. Only five additional issues averaged more than one election story per week -- tax policy (15 stories), crime (14), tobacco (14), Whitewater (14), and welfare reform (13). Rounding out the top ten issues was coverage of terrorism, education, and the state of the economy, with eight stories apiece. The virtual absence of debate over the state of the economy contrasts sharply with the networks' concentration on this issue to the near exclusion of all others four years ago.

Dole vs. Clinton

A majority of TV news sources have said favorable things about Bill Clinton in election news stories, while three of five comments about Bob Dole have been unfavorable. Thus, Clinton leads in the race for good press with 54 percent positive judgments compared to Dole's 42 percent positive.

We calculate good press by tallying every positive or negative evaluation of a candidate's record, policies, personal character and behavior on the campaign trail. Our tallies include all on-air opinions expressed by reporters and sources who are not affiliated with a candidate or party. "Good press" does *not* include opinions about a candidate's prospects in the horse race, which we tally separately.

Clinton does worse outside the context of election news, with only 40 percent

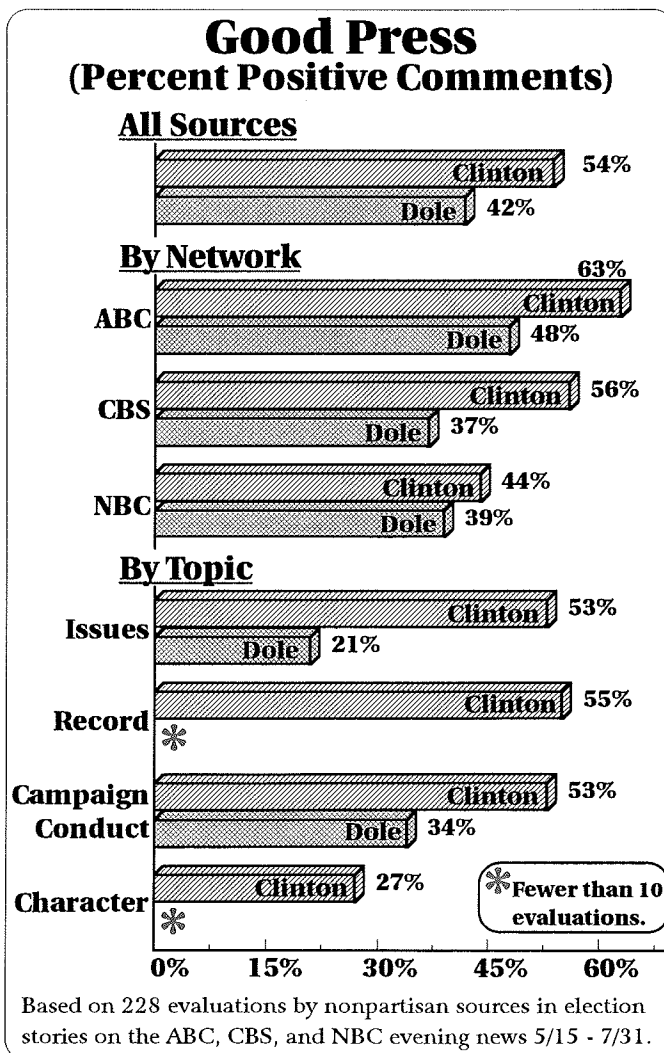
positive evaluations. Nonetheless, that gives him an overall level of 48 percent good press. That not only exceeds Dole's total, it is also better than Clinton received during any comparable time period throughout the first three years of his presidency.

The biggest gap between the two candidates appeared in comments on their policies and issue positions -- 53 percent positive for Clinton vs. only 21 percent positive for Dole. For example, on June 6 CBS's Rita Braver described how one family benefitted from a new program: "The Kastens of Holland, Michigan ... said the president's cuts in closing costs on government-backed mortgages helped

them afford their first house: 'So now we have a place to raise our family. We have the home of our dreams.'"

The president also got better marks for his campaign abilities and his behavior on the campaign trail -- 53 percent positive vs. 34 percent positive for his GOP opponent. For example, after Dole declined to speak at the NAACP annual convention, NBC's Jim Miklaszewski concluded his July 10 story, "By not showing up here, Bob Dole may reinforce those racial divides along party lines and fuel the anxiety among some Republicans that in this presidential campaign, Bob Dole may not be up to the challenge." The only downside for Clinton came in evaluations of his character. Source comments were only 27 percent positive at a time of continuing Whitewater-related investigations and new criticism over the White House obtaining FBI files on Republicans.

Not surprisingly, in light of preference poll results, Clinton fared far better in assessments of the campaign horse race. (We calculate these separately from good press, which measures a candidate's desirability rather than viability.) When reporters evaluated the standings and prospects of the two contenders, they rated Clinton's chances positively 53 percent of the time, compared to only 19 percent positive horse race judgments for Dole.



CBS vs. GOP?

The networks varied in their assessments of the two candidates. Although all three gave better press to Clinton, the margin varied from only a five point difference on NBC (44% to 39% positive) to 19 points on CBS (56% positive for Clinton vs. 37% for Dole). Both candidates got their best press on ABC, where Clinton bested Dole by 63 percent to 48 percent positive evaluations. Dole's poor showing on CBS continues a long-term trend in which the GOP presidential candidate fared worst there. In previous CMPA studies, George Bush got his lowest levels of good press on CBS in the 1992 general election (24% positive vs. a combined 32% positive on ABC and NBC); the 1992 primaries (19% positive vs. 28% on the other networks); and the 1988 general election (30% positive vs. 36%

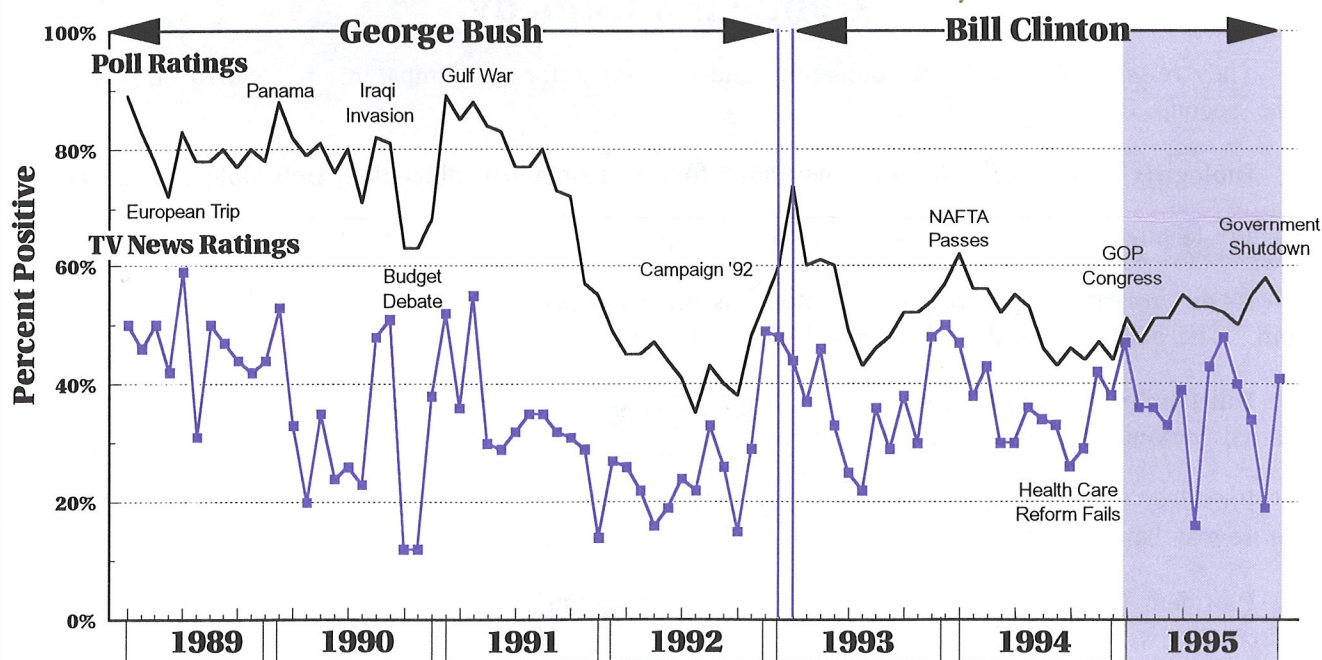
elsewhere). The comparable figures for Dole so far this summer are 37 percent positive on CBS vs. 44 percent positive on ABC and NBC.

CBS also gave the lowest marks to Republican candidates during the 1994 congressional elections -- 20 percent collective positive comments, vs. 35 percent on ABC and NBC. By contrast, Democratic candidates have not always fared better on CBS than on the other two networks. Due to the consistently poor Republican showing on CBS, however, the difference in good press between the two parties has consistently been greatest there, with the Democrats always holding the advantage.

Do Media Matter?

Since 1989 CMPA has tracked the president's media image by tallying positive and negative comments about him on the network evening news shows. Throughout the Bush administration and during the first two years of Bill Clinton's term in office, monthly changes in the president's good press/bad press ratio were directly related to his public approval ratings as measured by the Gallup poll. The shifts in presidential approval followed the changes in media coverage, suggesting that the news drives public opinion rather than responding to it. When the president's press improved, he usually fared better in the next Gallup poll; when his coverage worsened, his subsequent approval rating followed suit. The correlation was about equally high for both Bush ($r=.64$) and Clinton ($r=.61$). [The range of possible values

TV News & Public Approval Ratings






Poll Ratings based on Gallup Poll question, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way George Bush is handling his job as president?"

TV News Rating is based on the percentage of positive evaluations by sources on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news programs.

varies from .00 (no correlation) to ± 1.0 (a perfect correlation).]

In 1995, however, the correlation abruptly disappeared -- for the first time, Clinton's public approval ratings did not follow the rise and fall of his media ratings. This change coincided with the Republican takeover of Congress, which shifted the media spotlight from the White House to Capitol Hill. For the first time in recent memory, the President of the United States ceased to be the touchstone of political news. Throughout 1993 and 1994, the networks gave more coverage to President Clinton than to the Congress; during the first four months of 1995, the new GOP Congress got twice as much coverage as the president.

Clinton's media image did not improve in 1995 -- he received only 38 percent positive evaluations on TV news, almost identical to his previous totals of 36 percent positive in 1994 and 37 percent positive in 1993. But

Top Joke Targets					
	Gold 		Silver 		Bronze 
1996*	Dole 449		Clinton 299		O.J. Simpson 212
1995	Clinton 338		O.J. Simpson 145		Gingrich 103
1994	Clinton 556		Ted Kennedy 87		Quayle 56
1993	Clinton 761		Perot 100		Gore 97
1992	Bush 608		Clinton 423		Quayle 357
1991	S. Hussein 160		Quayle 150		Bush 111
1990	Quayle 162		Bush 147		S. Hussein 137
1989	Bush 143		Quayle 135		Reagan 79

*through July.

he was in the news far less frequently and was often overshadowed by Congressional Republicans, who got an even worse press -- only 32 percent positive evaluations during the heavily publicized first 100 days of

the new Congress. So the media frenzy over the self-proclaimed "Republican revolution" may have indirectly benefitted the president by diminishing the consequences of his own poor media image, and

Campaign Comedy

- ☺ They reissued the Bob Dole biography and updated it for the campaign. It's called "Bob Dole: The Second 100 Years" -- *Leno*
- ☺ Biologists announced today that they have found an organism older than Bob Dole. -- *Letterman*
- ☺ While attempting to smile today, Bob Dole sprained his face. -- *Letterman*
- ☺ It was revealed that President Clinton has an enemies list of Republicans who are a threat to him. The bad news is that Bob Dole isn't on it. -- *Leno*
- ☺ Bill Clinton is saying he may take a trip to China. We know he's serious, because he's already started looking at menus. -- *Letterman*
- ☺ President Clinton had an imaginary conversation with Eleanor Roosevelt. Now she's suing him for sexual harassment. -- *Leno*
- ☺ President Clinton says becoming a father was more important to him than becoming president. Of course, with both of them, he really enjoys going through the motions. -- *Leno*
- ☺ President Clinton once competed in the Olympics. He won gold medals in back-peddling, issue-straddling, and free-style waffling. -- *Letterman*

decoupling the public's media exposure from its opinion of presidential performance.

The Humor Race

Although Bob Dole is lagging in the presidential preference polls, he ranks first with TV's latenight comedians. In their opening monologues, NBC's Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien and CBS's David Letterman have already aimed 449 jokes at Dole this year (through July). That leaves him well ahead of runners-up Bill Clinton (299 jokes) and O.J. Simpson (212). Since the GOP

primaries ended in March, the latenight comics have aimed twice as many jokes at Dole as they have at Clinton (314 vs. 157). In fact, Dole has already surpassed Clinton's total of 338 jokes during all of 1995. He has also been the butt of twice as many "Saturday Night Live" comedy sketches as has Clinton (14 to 7).

Since 1989, CMPA has logged all jokes about public figures on the leading latenight talk shows. The number of political jokes increased sharply in 1992; since then annual totals have averaged nearly 50 percent higher than in previous years. In five out of seven years, the president has attracted the most jokes. The only

exceptions were Dan Quayle in 1990 and Saddam Hussein in 1991, the year the Gulf War was fought. At his current rate Dole will not only end Clinton's three-year reign as the top target of latenight zingers, he will eclipse the president's single-year record of 761 jokes, which he set in 1993. Both men are being targeted mainly for a few personal traits or foibles. Clinton is chided most often about his sex life (111 jokes this year), his alleged involvement in Whitewater and other scandals (44), and his eating habits (38). Dole is zinged for his age (221), poor showing as a campaigner (84), and dour personality (68).

Media Monitor (Copyright 1996) is published bi-monthly by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a non-partisan and non-profit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues. Yearly individual and organizational subscriptions are available.

Editors: *Dr. S. Robert Lichter, Dr. Linda S. Lichter*

Research Director: *Daniel Amundson*

Political Studies Director: *Richard E. Noyes*

Election '96 Research Assistants: *Kathleen Iudicello, Mike Passey, Lori Stengel, David Tritelli, Hardison Wood*

Latenight Comedy Research Assistants: *Amy Foutz, Irene Lin, Jill Sandor*

Production and Graphics: *Mary Carroll Gunning*

Executive Director: *John Thomas Sheehan*

Director of Circulation: *Jeanne Maynard*



Center for Media and Public Affairs

2100 L Street, N.W. Suite 300
Washington, D.C. 20037
Phone (202) 223-2942
Fax (202) 872-4014

FIRST CLASS
U. S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 827
Washington, D. C.