

Whose Campaign Did You See?

Primary Perspectives from the Press, the Poles, the Polls, and TV's Pranksters

Major findings:

- **Off and Running** Horse race news tripled from 1992 levels during Iowa and New Hampshire. *Page 2*
- **Where's the Beef?** The candidates discussed their policies three times as often as TV news did. *Page 3*
- **Voter Tunout** Only one in three voters rated election news coverage above average. *Page 4*
- **You Be the Judge** Most Democrats said the TV coverage was fair; most Republicans disagreed. *Page 4*
- **Bob Droll** Latenight TV comics are zapping Dole twice as often as Clinton. *Page 5*

How you view this year's presidential election race depends on whose eyes you see it through. Very different images of the 1996 Republican primaries emerge from the contestants themselves, the voters, and the news and entertainment media that covered the show. This special issue of *Media Monitor* compares the pictures that the primary trail produced from the candidates, the public, the journalists, and the latenight television comedians whose monologues poke fun at politicians.

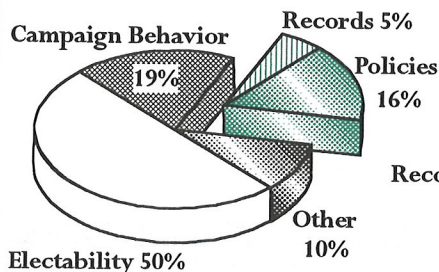
More than half (51%) of all network evening news coverage of the 1996 primaries focused on the New Hampshire contest and the Iowa caucuses that immediately preceded it. The most important decisions, the heaviest news coverage, and the most intense voter interest came during the crucial period from the campaign's unofficial kickoff on New Year's Day through the New Hampshire vote on February 20. During those 50 days, the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows together broadcast 315 election stories with an average airtime of more than 12 minutes per night.

To find out what the voters saw and heard of the campaign, we analyzed the topics that were discussed in these newscasts, in the candidates' speeches, and paid political commercials. We examined 28 speeches delivered by the four leading GOP contenders — Dole, Forbes, Buchanan, and Alexander — as well as all 59 ads that their campaigns broadcast on New Hampshire's leading television station, WMUR in Manchester. Finally, we tallied all jokes about the candidates from the stand-up routines of Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Conan O'Brien on latenight television.

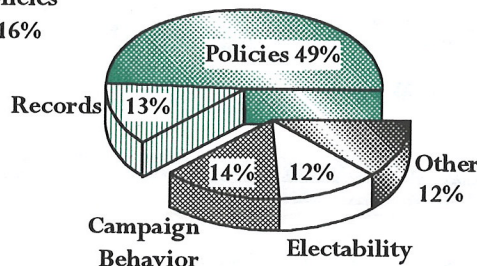
(continued on page 2)

Focus of Candidate Discussion Media vs. Candidates

TV News
(n=1,831)



Ads & Speeches
(n=837)



Based on discussions of candidates in news stories, speeches and ads.

of his proposal to privatize Social Security in order to protect younger workers from expected shortfalls in the trust fund: "Why not, while we still have time, put in a new system for younger people, where... part of their payroll tax that now goes to Washington and subsidizes the national debt at a below market interest rate, would instead go to their own individual savings or retirement account?"

Forbes's proposed Social Security reforms, like many of the candidates' proposals, were *never* featured on the evening news. TV's main focus during this period was the campaign horse race and the candidates' campaign-trail conduct. Of the fourteen topics discussed in at least five election news stories, only five (36%) concerned policy issues. Among the stories that displaced the issues during this period were the negative tone of the campaign, the Whitewater investigations, Forbes's heavy spending on negative commercials, and allegations that Pat

welfare reform, education policy, Social Security, and the devolution of government functions to the state and local level. In a speech in Manchester on the eve of the New Hampshire primary (2/19), for example, Steve Forbes offered an extended discussion

News You Can't Use

Substantive information about the candidates' policy proposals and qualifications for the presidency was in short supply. Instead, the networks concentrated on the Republican candidates' standing and prospects in the campaign horse race. ABC, CBS and NBC together aired 175 stories on the horse race (including the candidates' strategies and tactics), more than three times as many as in Campaign '92. This increase is all the more striking because *both* parties had contested primaries in 1992. The candidates' policies and proposals received barely half as much coverage (88 stories) as their election prospects.

By contrast the major candidates all stressed substantive themes in their appeals to voters. Out of fourteen topics that they discussed at least five times in campaign speeches and ads, all but two (86%) concerned policy issues. On the campaign trail, the candidates frequently addressed the role of government in American life,

Competing Campaign Agendas Number of Discussions

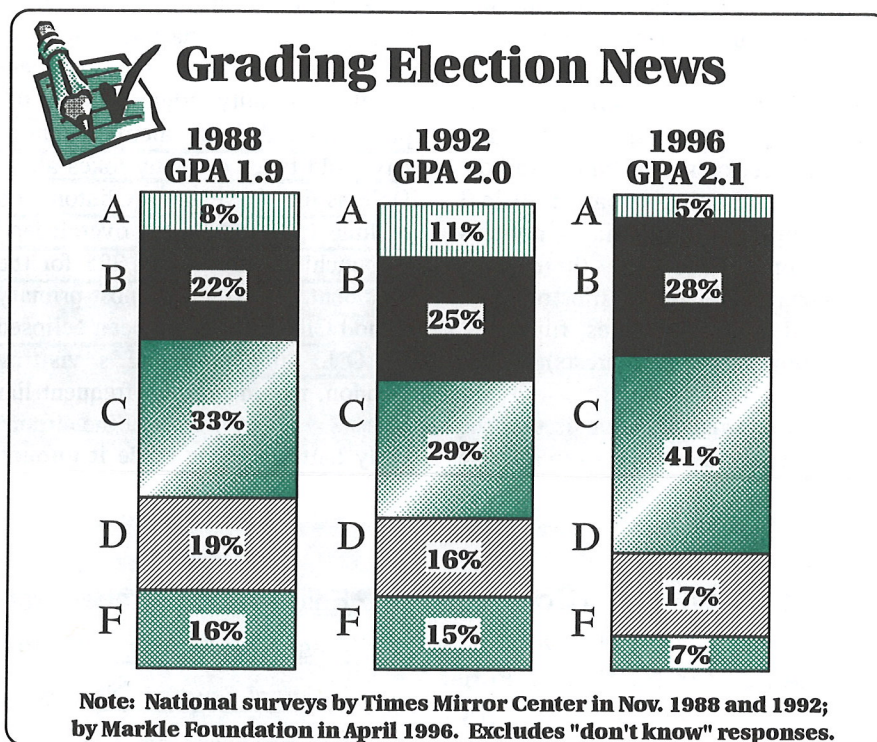
TV News		Candidates	
Tone of Campaign	32	Taxes	21
Taxes	28	Budget	14
Whitewater	17	Role of Government	11
Budget	15	Welfare Reform	9
Abortion	12	"Traditional Values"	8
Forbes's Spending	10	Education	7
Forbes's Negative Ads	9	Social Security	7
Dole's Smear Campaigns	7	Devolution	6
Economy	6	Foreign Policy	6
Buchanan's Bigotry	6	Economy	5
Costs of Campaigns	6	Trade	5
Dole's Negative Ads	5	Jobs	5
Voter Alienation	5	Alexander's Electability	5
Affirmative Action	5	Tone of Campaign	5

Based on discussions within a news story, speech, or ad.

Buchanan was prejudiced against women, minorities and gays.

TV's tendency to spotlight the conflicts and downplay the substance of Campaign '96 also emerges from a statement-by-statement analysis of the campaign debate. Taking all statements about the candidates' policies and records as an index of substantive discussion, the candidates were three times as substantive as the media — by 62 percent to 21 percent of their respective presentations. In their speeches and ads, the candidates debated the merits of each other's policies (49% of all evaluations) and records (13%). On TV, the majority of evaluative statements focused on the candidates' standing in the horse race (50%) and their campaign behavior (19%).

The candidates were also more likely to provide depth and context to their



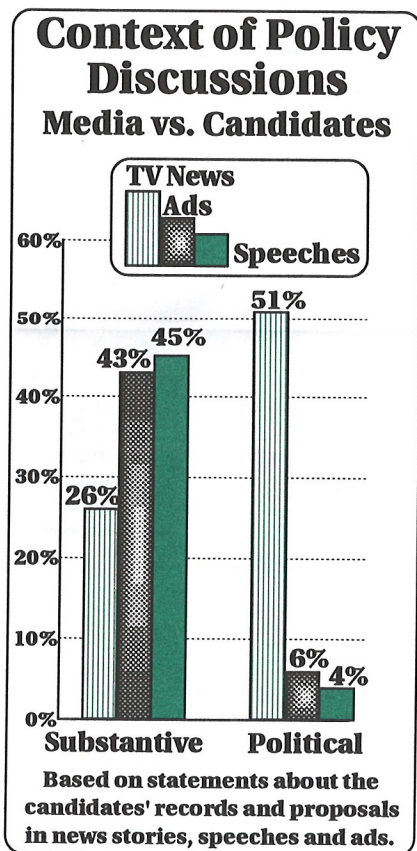
policy discussions, while the media usually assessed the impact of policy issues on the horse race. Ads and speeches were nearly twice as likely as TV news to include information about a proposal's substantive implications. More than two-fifths (45%) of all issue mentions in the speeches and ads discussed their real-world implications; only one of every four mentions on TV news (26%) did so. For example, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire on February 8, Sen. Dole argued that a balanced federal budget would create "lower interest rates, whether it's a car loan, home loan, student loan... The experts tell us that if we set on this path of a balanced budget for seven years, interest rates will drop two percent." In a TV ad, Forbes told Granite Staters that his plan for "Medical savings accounts can improve care, cut waste, and protect Medicare without reducing your benefits. You control your health care, not the politicians." (Aired on WMUR-TV, 2/15)

candidate's positions. More than half (51%) of all network news mentions of candidate policies noted their political motives or impact. The candidates made such connections in just six percent of their TV ads and four percent of their speeches. For example, CBS's Phil Jones reported on the candidates' various tax proposals: "Steve Forbes, who has managed to steal the thunder with his 17% flat tax, ridiculed exemptions... Senator Phil Gramm, looking for his own headlines, unveiled his own plan...oh, yes, Pat Buchanan doesn't want to be forgotten, either." (CBS, 1/17)

Voters Talk Back

The network coverage of the primaries flies in the face of what voters say they want from the media. A national survey taken in April for the Markle Foundation found that 60 percent of the public want election

Journalists instead stressed the political significance of each



news to highlight a candidate's stands on policy issues; only 2 percent want the news to focus on a candidate's electability. And only 38 percent say they were satisfied with the primary coverage. Public dissatisfaction with election news came across most clearly when the pollsters asked people to assign a letter grade from "A" to "F" to the media's performance. Only one out of three people gave the media a grade of "A" or "B" and the overall grade point average was 2.1 — the equivalent of a straight "C."

flashpoints of press criticism, fewer voters would flunk the media this year than in the past, but fewer would give it an "A" either.

This was the first election since 1984 in which only one party held contested primaries. That makes the ratings of Republican voters especially noteworthy this year. And a Freedom Forum survey found a massive difference in the way Republican and Democratic voters rated the fairness of network news

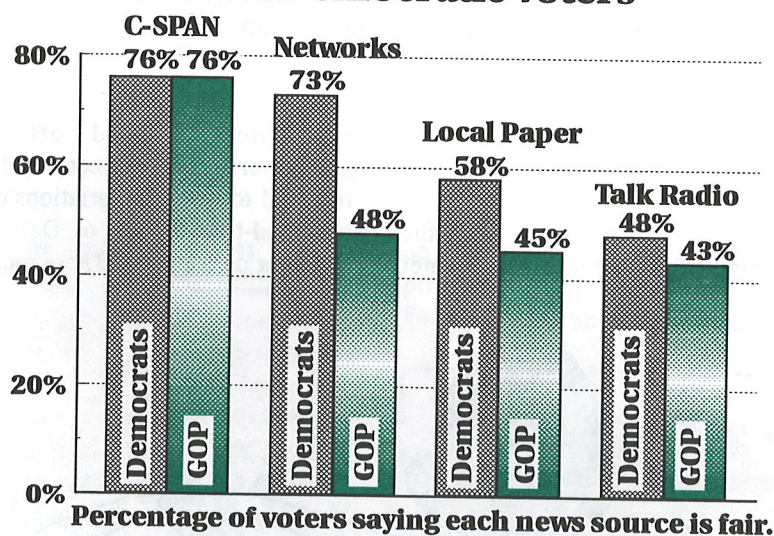
Campaign Punchlines

The hosts of network television's latenight talk shows have become the court jesters of American politics. In April, a Pew Research Center survey found that one in four Americans are learning about the presidential campaign from the latenight TV comedians.

NBC's Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien, and CBS's David Letterman, regularly incorporate political material into their opening monologues, zapping hapless politicians along with entertainment personalities, high-profile criminals and scandal figures, and other newsmakers. The leading target has been the President of the United States; in 1995 even O.J. Simpson finished a distant second to Bill Clinton in CMPA's annual joke tally.

So far during 1996, however, Republican nominee-presumptive Bob Dole is giving President Clinton a run for his money. During the primaries, Dole ran neck-and-neck with Clinton in the humor race and well ahead of his GOP competitors for the nomination. With 135 jokes prior to the California primary (3/26) that sealed his nomination, Dole trailed Clinton by only six jokes and was well ahead of Buchanan (113) and Forbes (78). After Buchanan's New Hampshire victory, allegations of extremism and nativism proved fertile ground for comedians. During late February and March, he became the most joked-about individual on latenight TV. The Buchanan jokes provided unusually biting critiques of his political agenda. Examples: "In his victory speech Buchanan said, 'today New Hampshire, Louisiana; tomorrow Poland, Czechoslovakia...'" (Leno) "Today Buchanan called for getting rid of the International House of

Rating Media Fairness GOP vs. Democratic Voters



Source: Freedom Forum national survey of voters, Jan-Feb '96.

This is almost identical to the results of national polls taken by the Times Mirror Center following the 1992 and 1988 general elections, which generated media GPA's of 2.0 and 1.9 respectively. The lack of improvement in public perceptions is surprising, since this year's campaign so far lacks the feeding frenzies, scandal coverage and charges of bias that marred Campaign '88 (e.g. Gary Hart, Dan Quayle, Dan Rather vs. George Bush) and Campaign '92 (e.g. Gennifer Flowers, the Clinton draft evasion and drug use stories, "Annoy the media, re-elect Bush" bumper stickers). In the absence of such

election coverage. Nearly three out of four Democrats (73%) found the networks to be fair, compared to only a minority (48%) of their GOP counterparts. Republican voters were also more critical of their local newspaper's election coverage, while both groups gave equally high fairness ratings (76%) to C-SPAN. Surprisingly, Democrats were slightly more likely than Republicans (by 48% to 43%) to rate talk radio coverage as fair — a reminder that this medium includes far more voices than Rush Limbaugh's.

Sample Zingers

☺ Bob Dole is so old that he won't leave home without his Pony Express card. -- Letterman

☺ Rumors are circulating that when he was in college Dole may have experimented with facial expressions. -- Leno

☺ Polls show that if the election were held today Bob Dole would lose to Susan Lucci. -- Leno

☺ One day Dole quits his job and the next day he blames Clinton for unemployment. -- Leno

☺ Dole quitting the Senate is the greatest sacrifice a politician has made to run for president since Bill Clinton stopped dating. -- Leno

☺ It would be easy for Bill Clinton to adjust to having another child. He already gets up for his 2 a.m., 3 a.m., 4 a.m. feedings. -- Leno

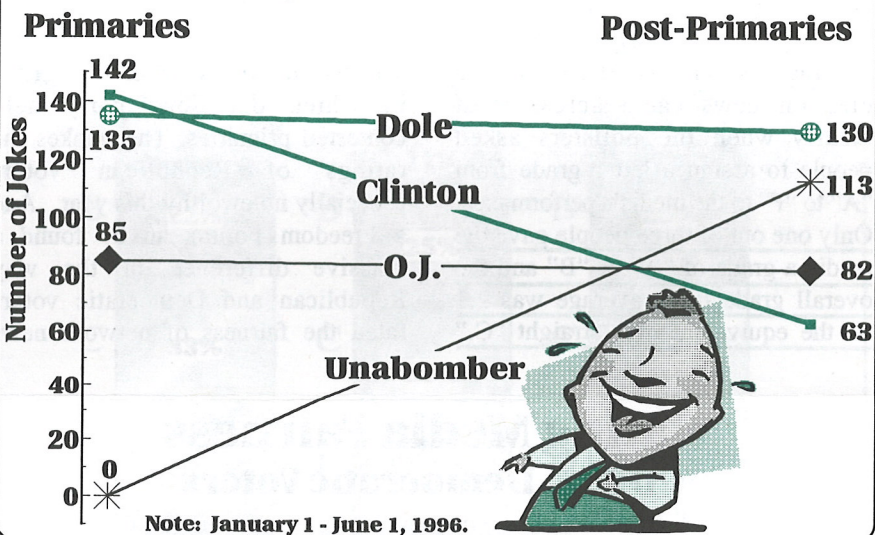
☺ The Paula Jones lawsuit has reached the Supreme Court. Imagine, Clinton's sexual harassment case could be decided by Clarence Thomas. -- Leno

☺ Doctors removed a growth from the end of Clinton's nose. It gets longer every time he promises not to raise taxes. -- Leno

☺ There was a major accident in Washington. Clinton was moving right, Dole was moving left, and they collided with each other. -- Leno

☺ O.J. Simpson has endorsed President Clinton. As a result, Bob Dole is trying to win over the Unabomber. -- O'Brien

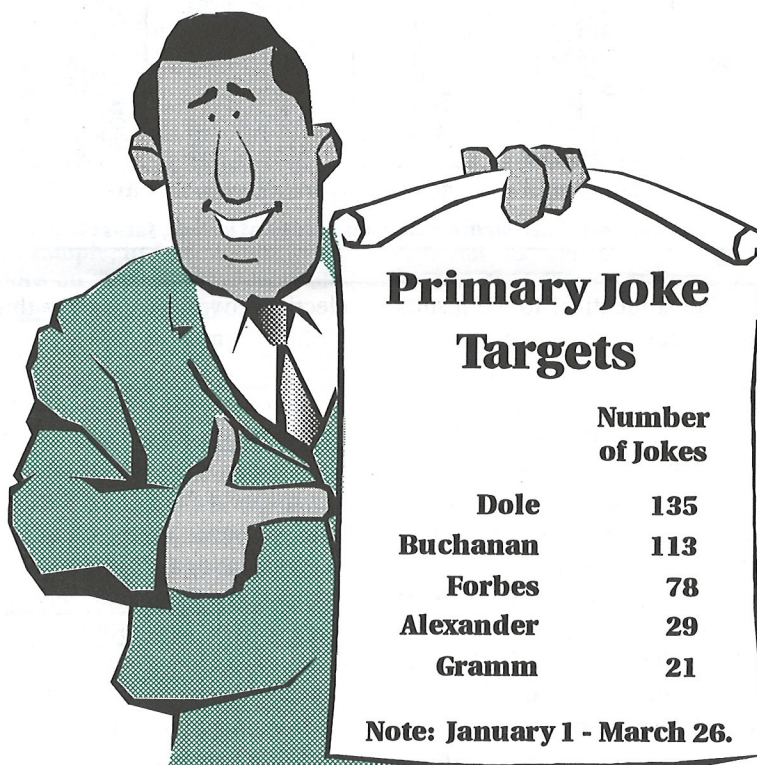
Big Jokes of 1996



Pancakes and replacing it with the American House of Pancakes." (Leno)

Once Dole wrapped up the nomination, however, his former

competitors dropped off the jokewriters' radar screen, and they returned to working variations on the tried-and-true themes of Dole's age and dour personality. These recurring



themes are often worked into the punchlines of jokes built around topical events. ("Dole leaving the Senate is like Grumpy leaving the Seven Dwarfs." — Leno) The focus on Dole's personal foibles and political weaknesses is typical of how latenight comics treat political candidates. A politician's policies are jeered less for their own inadequacies than for illustrating a personal failing (e.g., lies, flip-flops, pandering to special interests).

What is unusual this year is that the spotlight stayed on Dole even after he

clinched the Republican nomination, instead of returning to Clinton. During the GOP primaries, frontrunner Dole and incumbent Clinton were equal opportunity fallguys. Since the primaries ended, the latenight comics have told twice as many jokes about Dole as they have about Clinton. As of June 1, Dole held the overall lead in punchlines by 265 to 205 for the president. During the post-primary period Clinton has also been eclipsed by O.J. Simpson ("O.J.'s visiting London, racking up the frequent liar miles... He had trouble at the airport. Only half his alibis made it through

customs." — Letterman) and Unabomber suspect Ted Kaczynski ("Psychologists speculate the Unabomber may attempt suicide. Prison officials are on the lookout for any stamped, self-addressed envelope." — O'Brien) The jokes about Clinton have been as jaundiced as ever, attacking him for being oversexed, overfed, and underhanded. ("Heidi Fleiss is a free woman today. It's nice to see one friend of Bill Clinton isn't going to jail." — Leno) But there have been fewer of them in recent months.

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

Research Director: *Daniel Amundson*

Political Studies Director: *Richard E. Noyes*

Project Director: *Mary Carroll Gunning*

Research Assistants: *Steven Buttacavoli, Kathleen Iudicello,*

Joseph Pendry, Jill Sandor, Joanna Tepper

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

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