

## Campaign '96 Final

### How TV News Covered the General Election

#### Major findings:

■ **See No Evil...** Election news airtime dropped 50% per night from Campaign '92 totals.

*Page 1*

■ **Hear No Evil...** Journalists got six times as much airtime as presidential candidates. *Page 1*

■ **Speak No Evil** Bill Clinton got the best press of his entire presidency during Campaign '96. *Page 3*

■ **You're No Good...** Two out of three sources panned Dole's policies; over nine out of ten criticized Clinton's character. *Page 3*

■ **But We're No Better** Voters rated the media's performance this year lower than in 1988 or 1992. *Page 6*

How did TV news cover the 1996 general election? How did this year's campaign compare with those in 1992 and 1988? This month's *Media Monitor* reports how the presidential campaign was portrayed on the network evening news. This is one of a series of reports from the Markle Presidential Election Watch, sponsored by the John and Mary Markle Foundation.

From Labor Day until Election Day, the network evening news shows devoted 483 stories and 13 hours 8 minutes of airtime to the presidential campaign — 44 percent less than in Campaign '92 (23 hours 20 minutes), and 30 percent less than in Campaign '88 (18 hours 36 minutes). The Campaign '96 total represents an average airtime of 12.3 minutes per night, exactly half the nightly average during Campaign '92 — 24.6 minutes/night. The drop in coverage cut across all three networks: ABC offered viewers 169 campaign stories, totalling 4 hours 26 minutes of airtime, while CBS broadcast 159 stories (4 hours 28 minutes) and NBC aired 155 stories (4 hours 14 minutes).

This year's downsizing gave the presidential candidates little time to present themselves directly to viewers (and voters). Nearly three-fourths of the campaign airtime (73%) was consumed by network anchors and reporters discussing the campaign, while only 13 percent featured comments from the candidates themselves. Thus, viewers heard nearly six times as much campaign talk from journalists as they did from candidates. The biggest loser in the battle for airtime was Ross Perot, whose on-air speaking time shrank from 23 minutes in 1992 to less than five minutes this year.

(continued on page 2)

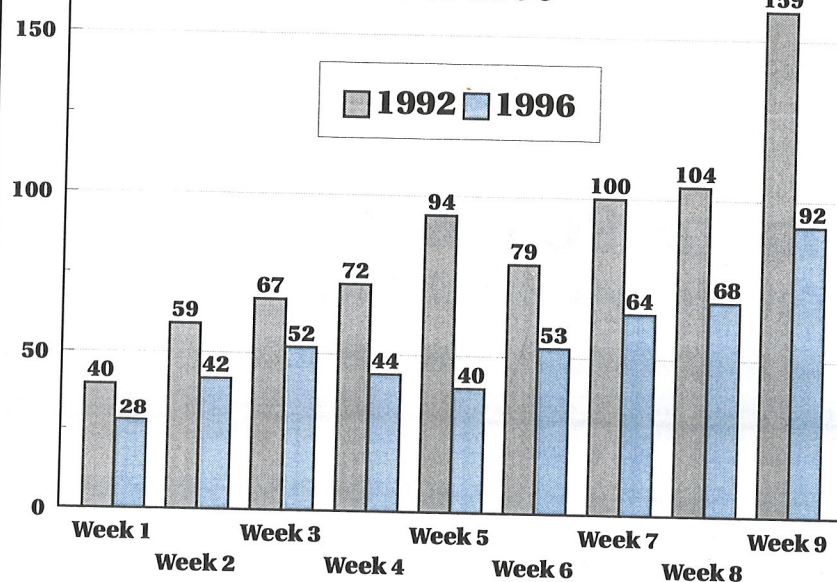


## Politics As Usual

Less than half of all general election stories (48%) focused on the horse race, compared with 58 percent of election stories in both 1992 and 1988. Less news about the horse race, however, did not mean more news about substantive issues. Just over a third of all campaign stories (37%) featured discussions of policy issues, compared with 32 percent in 1992 and 39 percent in 1988. In fact, the overall drop in campaign news meant that the total number of policy stories declined by 23 percent, from 233 in 1992 to 179 this year.

No policy issue dominated the fall campaign in the way the economic debate pervaded Campaign '92 or crime and defense defined Campaign '88. As a result, discussions of the

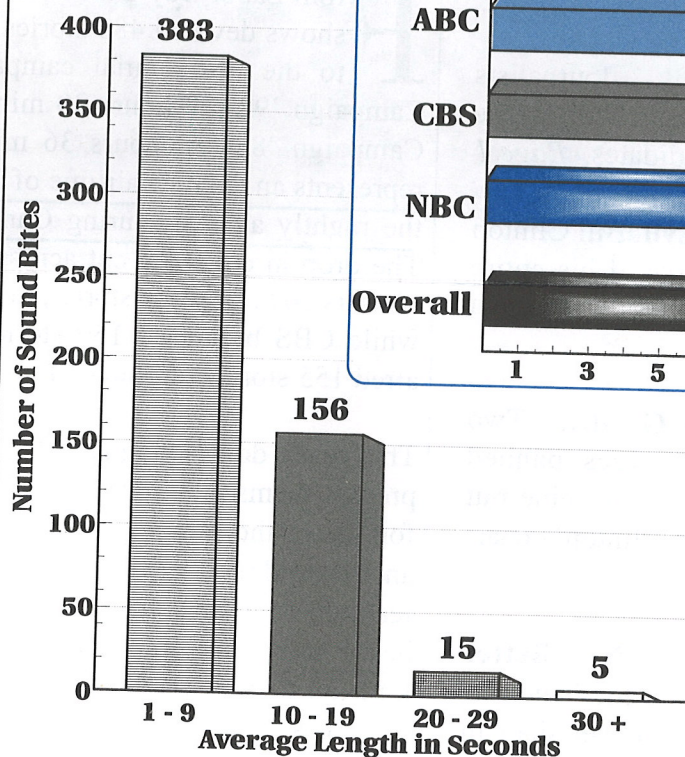
### Amount of Campaign News 1992 vs 1996



Note: Number of stories per week for the general election campaign, Labor Day through election day.

The CBS *Evening News* responded to calls for free candidate airtime by offering two and one-half minute time blocks to Clinton and Dole on four consecutive nights (October 21-24). Their appearances that week equalled the entire amount of airtime the two major party candidates had received on the program since the Labor Day campaign kickoff seven weeks earlier. These segments of candidate-produced speaking time were also notable for being uninterrupted. Apart from these unedited appearances, the average length of candidate sound bites on the evening news shows was 8.2 seconds, down slightly from 8.4 seconds four years ago and 9.8 seconds in 1988. More than two-thirds of this year's quotes lasted less than ten seconds; only four percent — 20 sound bites — exceeded 20 seconds in length.

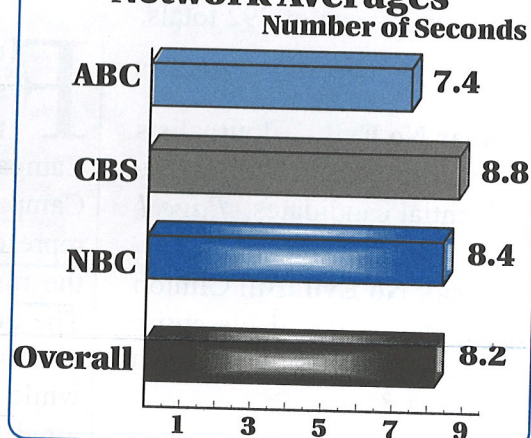
### Sound Bites (9/2 - 11/4)



Number of uninterrupted quotes from presidential candidates.

Note: Excludes 8 candidate-produced speeches aired on CBS *Evening News*.

### Network Averages





## Top Topics (9/2 - 11/4)

	<u>Number of Stories</u>
<b>Dole Strategy</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Clinton Strategy</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Tone of Dole Campaign</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Taxes</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>State of the Economy</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Clinton Character - General</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Perot Exclusion from Debates</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Foreign Contributions to Democrats</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Iraq</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Education</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Drugs</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Voter Interest/Involvement</b>	<b>19</b>

**Note: stories may have more than one topic.**

two candidates' strategies eclipsed the policy debate. Stories about Dole's shifting strategies (103 stories) outnumbered stories on tax policy and the state of the economy (26 stories apiece) by a four-to-one margin. Late-breaking allegations of improper foreign contributions to the Democrats generated more stories (22) than either education or anti-drug policies (19 stories each).

When the networks focused on policy matters, the references were usually brief — 60 percent of them lasted less than 20 seconds. Reporters were also more likely to stress the political calculation behind a policy (70% of all issue mentions) than their real-world implications (50%) or any specific details (31%). CBS's Rita Braver, for example, reported on an environmental initiative this way: "President Clinton came here, to the splendor of the Grand Canyon, to stake his claim as the environmental president by staging the mother of all photo-opportunities.... The White House said Mr. Clinton made the

announcement here in Arizona because the Utah area was too remote to reach. But the real reason may have been that the president has almost no chance of winning in Utah, while he does have high hopes of taking the Republican stronghold of Arizona." (CBS, 9/18/96) Such stories told voters less about the candidates' policies than about their political strategies.

## Advantage Clinton

Incumbent presidents typically endure highly negative media coverage when they run for a second term. Studies have documented the aggressive press scrutiny faced by George Bush, Ronald Reagan, and Jimmy Carter on the road to reelection. This year, however, Bill Clinton has enjoyed the best press of his presidency. Prior to Labor Day, the president received 47 percent positive evaluations; during the fall

campaign that improved to 50 percent positive. During his first three years in office, by contrast, Mr. Clinton received much less favorable coverage (38% positive in 1995, 27% in 1994, and 29% in 1993). Conversely, Bob Dole received his worst press of the year after Labor Day — just 33 percent positive, compared with 44 percent positive earlier in the campaign.

(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 any candidate or party. "Good press" does *not* include opinions about a candidate's prospects in the horse race, which we tally separately.)

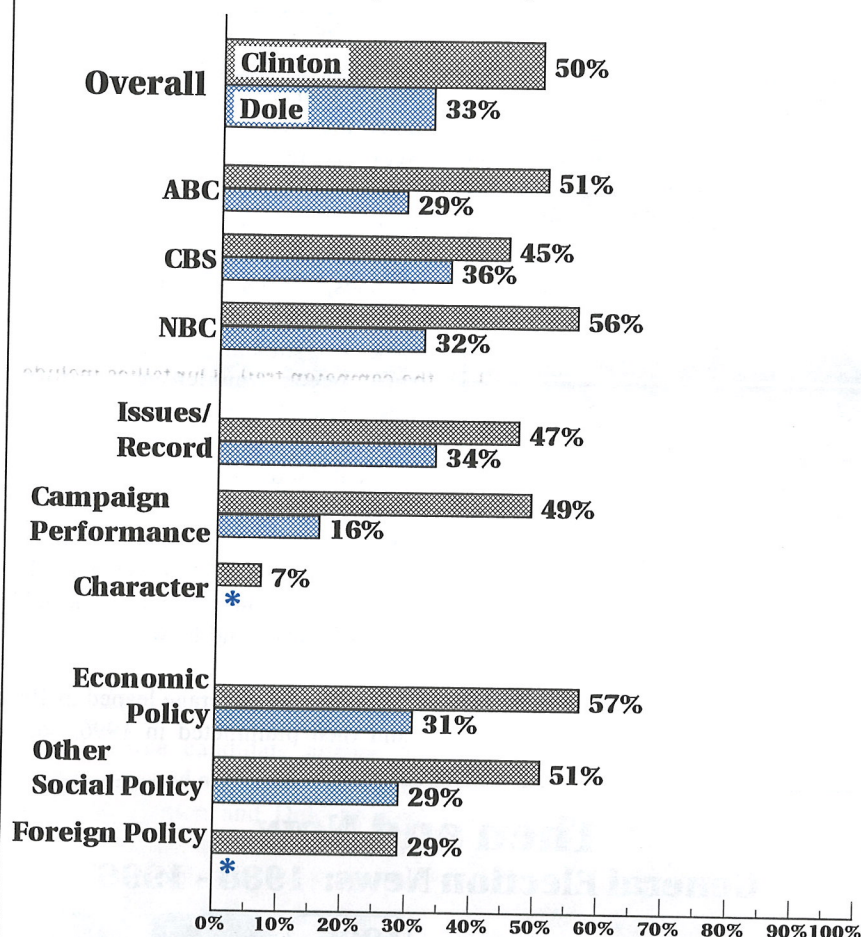
The president was treated more favorably than his GOP rival on all three network newscasts, although he fared best on NBC (56% good press, compared to just 32% positive for Dole). For example, NBC aired reactions from focus group members following the second presidential debate. They praised Clinton as "professional... gentlemanly... presidential," while criticizing Dole as "petty" and "just plain mean." (NBC, 10/7/96) Dole fared best on CBS, although his 36 percent good press was still less than Clinton's 45 percent positive. Dole fared worst on ABC — 29 percent positive, far behind the president's 51 percent positive rating.

The GOP challenger received two-to-one negative press for his policy proposals (66% negative), including 69 percent negative comments on his economic ideas and 71 percent criticism of his other domestic proposals. ABC interviewed a physician who worried that the elderly would suffer under Dole: "I think the cuts in Medicare would have to be drastic in order to pay for this tax cut



## Tone of Candidate Coverage

### Percent Positive Comments (9/2 - 11/4)



\*Note: Dole received too few evaluations for valid comparison.

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

which he proposes." (ABC, 10/9/96) And a "soccer mom" told NBC, "I'm just not sure if [Dole's] in touch with reality..." (NBC, 10/15/96) An even higher proportion of sources (84%) criticized his performance as a candidate.

Clinton received more balanced reviews (47% positive, 53% negative) of his policy record and proposals, including a majority of favorable comments on his economic (57% positive) and other domestic policies (51% positive). For example, one voter told NBC's Lisa Myers, "I think

he's in touch with children and youth and the issue of education and families." (NBC, 10/15/96) By contrast, the president received mostly negative reviews for his personal character (93% negative) and for his campaign's finances (82% negative). For example, a former Watergate investigator told ABC, "there is probable cause to hold the president accountable for a wide variety of illegal acts on the part of his subordinates." (ABC, 10/31/96) The most frequently discussed allegations involved questionable campaign contributions from Indonesian sources

(20 stories), questions about whether the president might pardon his former Whitewater associates (10 stories), and revived charges that he once experimented with illegal drugs (6 stories).

For his part, Ross Perot was TV's invisible man, featured in only 52 campaign stories (compared with 250 for Dole and 324 for Clinton). Nearly half those stories (23) concerned the decision by the Commission on Presidential Debates to exclude Perot from this year's debates. Four years ago, Perot was featured in 189 general election stories, and he enjoyed nearly balanced coverage (45% good press). This year, the tone of Perot's coverage was two-to-one negative (32% good press vs. 68% bad press). Typical was NBC's interview with a former Perot supporter who charged, "he's not serious about politics. It's a game to him... and I don't appreciate the distraction of him in this election." (NBC, 10/5/96)

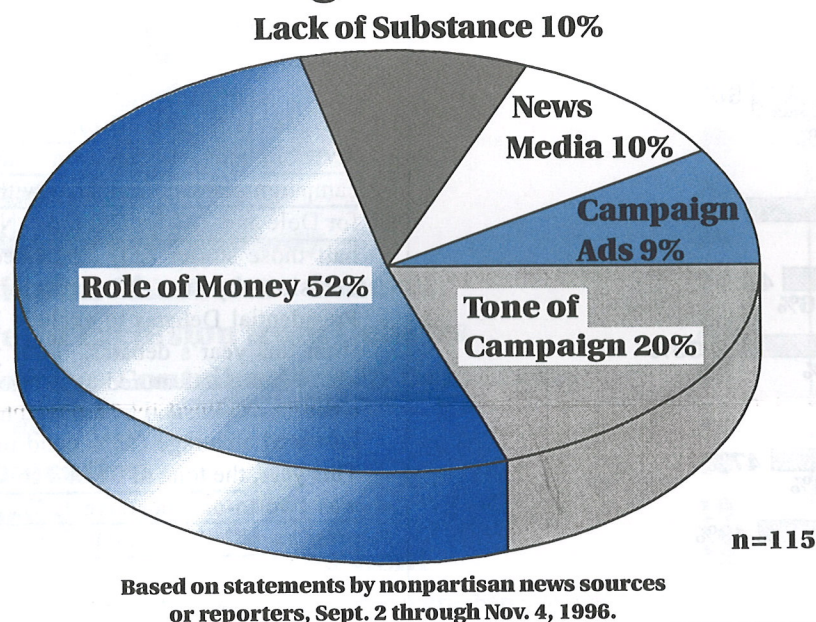
## Panning the Process

Although the candidates were the most frequent targets of criticism, the campaign itself was also widely panned. Tom Brokaw opened one NBC newscast with the comment, "If this campaign has an unofficial motto, it is this — wake me when it's over." (NBC, 10/29/96) Campaign '96 had few defenders on TV, as more than five out of six sources (86%) criticized the manner in which the campaign was conducted. In past elections, such complaints emphasized the negativity or superficiality of the candidates' appeals to voters. This year, however, a majority of criticisms (52%) concerned campaign fund-raising practices.

The networks helped fuel the debate over campaign finance even before



## What's Wrong with the Process?



allegations of improper Democratic fund-raising reached the airwaves. ABC's Brian Ross reported his network's recurring "Money Watch" segment, while Linda Douglass did similar duty for CBS's "Follow the Dollar" feature. Both series, as well as NBC's "Money Trail," prominently featured the views of campaign finance watchdogs such as the Center for Public Integrity and Common Cause.

Representatives from Common Cause were featured in nine campaign stories, more than any other interest group. An October 9 CBS report quoted the organization's founder, Fred Wertheimer: "We have seen the campaign finance system collapse in 1996, and a fundamental reason for that is the lawlessness that prevails." After allegations of specific violations by the Democrats surfaced in mid-October, the criticisms intensified. On NBC, Common Cause President Ann McBride argued that "these kinds of contributions put the presidency on the auction block." (NBC, 10/21/96)

## That Was Then...

Over the past eight years, CMPA has analyzed network evening news coverage of three consecutive presidential elections. In 1988 we noted the predominance of horse race over issue news, the negative treatment of both major party nominees, and the shrinkage of candidate sound bites to less than ten seconds. After Campaign '88 was widely criticized for its negativity and lack of substance, the networks introduced numerous reforms designed to produce campaign coverage that was more serious, fair-minded, and informative to voters. Unfortunately, our studies of the next two presidential campaigns provide little evidence of improvement. The key comparisons appear in the table entitled "Then and Now."

Although the coverage leaped in 1992 and then plummeted in 1996, sound

## Then and Now General Election News: 1988 - 1996

	1996	1992	1988
<b>Amount of Coverage</b>			
<b>Number of Stories</b>	483	728	589
<b>Minutes per Day</b>	12	25	17
<b>Average Soundbite (seconds)</b>	8.2	8.4	9.8
<b>Focus of Coverage (percent of stories)</b>			
<b>Horse Race</b>	48%	58%	58%
<b>Policy Issues</b>	37%	32%	39%
<b>Tone of Coverage (percent good press)</b>			
<b>Dem Nominee</b>	50%	52%	31%
<b>GOP Nominee</b>	33%	29%	38%

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



bites continued to shrink. The proportion of horse race news declined in 1996, reflecting the absence of a close race, but the attention given to the candidates' proposals and records on policy issues remained below the level we recorded in 1988. The tone of coverage was highly negative toward both Bush and Dukakis in 1988, although slightly more favorable toward Bush. In both presidential elections since then, the coverage has been markedly less balanced, as Clinton received far more positive evaluations than first Bush and then Dole. (These tallies exclude evaluations of a candidate's prospects

for election; they measure perceptions of desirability rather than those of viability.)

Thus, it does not appear that election news has changed for the better, despite the efforts of journalists to reframe the campaign agenda with such reforms as "Ad Watches," "Reality Checks," and a renewed commitment to truth-telling rather than neutral description. The coverage has become less candidate-centered but no more substantive, and its tone has remained highly negative toward the election process while becoming less balanced toward the

major party nominees. Nor have the voters noticed any improvement. In post-election surveys conducted this year by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, the public rated the media's performance below that of the parties, the candidates, and even the campaign consultants, just as they did after Campaign '88. When voters were asked to give letter grades on a scale of A to F, the press received an average grade of C- this year, with a "grade point average" of 1.8, compared to 2.0 in 1992 and 1.9 in 1988.

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