

Take This Campaign — Please!

TV News Coverage of the 1996 Presidential Election

Major findings:

■ **What Election?** Campaign coverage is down 40 percent this fall from 1992 levels. *Page 1*

■ **What Race?** Horse race news is down and policy news up since the primaries ended. *Page 2*

■ **Advantage Clinton** The president's coverage is over twice as heavy and nearly twice as positive as Bob Dole's this fall. *Page 4*

■ **Easy as ABC** Both candidates are getting their best press on ABC. *Page 4*

■ **Media Turn Bullish** News reports on the economy are over 90 percent positive this fall; they were over 90 percent negative throughout campaign '92. *Page 3*

How has TV news covered Bill Clinton and Bob Dole during Campaign '96? Have viewers heard more from the candidates or the reporters who cover them? This month's *Media Monitor* looks at how this year's presidential campaign has been portrayed by the networks. This is one of a series of reports from the Markle Presidential Election Watch, sponsored by the John and Mary Markle Foundation.

The networks are voting "no" on Campaign '96. From January 1 through September 30, the ABC, CBS and NBC evening news shows broadcast 1,553 stories on the 1996 presidential race, a decline of more than 20 percent from 1992. But this figure masks an even sharper decline of more recent vintage. During the primary season, network coverage of Campaign '96 actually exceeded the totals from four years ago (581 stories, compared with 512 during the first three months of 1992). However, after Bob Dole secured the GOP nomination in late March, election coverage dropped sharply. Since April, the amount of campaign news has dropped 30 percent below comparable 1992 totals (972 stories, down from 1,390). For September alone, the coverage was nearly 40 percent lighter than in 1992 (173 stories, down from 283).

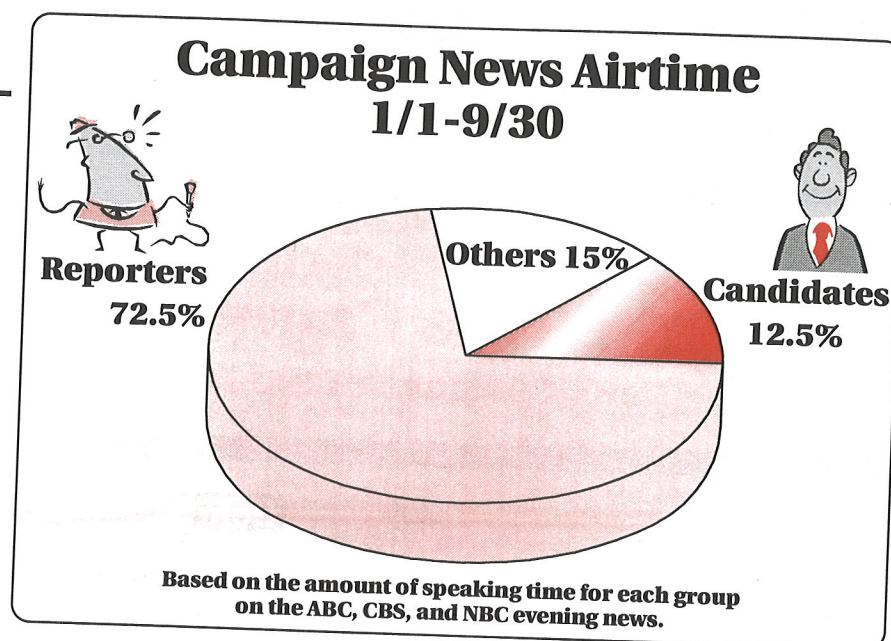
The dropoff is most noticeable on the *NBC Nightly News*. This year, NBC has broadcast barely 13 hours of campaign news, compared to 21 hours during the first nine months of 1992, a decrease of nearly 40 percent. The *CBS Evening News* has broadcast the most campaign news this year (16 hours, 51 minutes), down 13 percent from CBS's 1992 totals. Finally, ABC's *World News Tonight* has aired 15 hours, 55 minutes of campaign news, down 20 percent from 1992.

(continued on page 2)

Equal Time?

Only a fraction of the total election news airtime this year (5 hours, 45 minutes) has featured comments from Bill Clinton, Bob Dole, or any other candidates for national office. Presidential candidates have been quoted more than 2,300 times this year, but their sound bites have averaged only 8.2 seconds in length. During the 1992 general election, the average sound bite for all candidates was almost exactly the same — 8.3 seconds. Although Bob Dole has received more cumulative airtime in campaign stories than Bill Clinton (138 vs. 75 minutes), the president's sound bites were longer — 10.5 seconds, compared to 8.0 seconds for Dole. (If all stories featuring Clinton as president are added to his campaign news totals, his cumulative airtime increases to 111 minutes, and his average sound bite increases to 11.1 seconds.)

Comments from reporters and anchors occupied more than 72 percent of

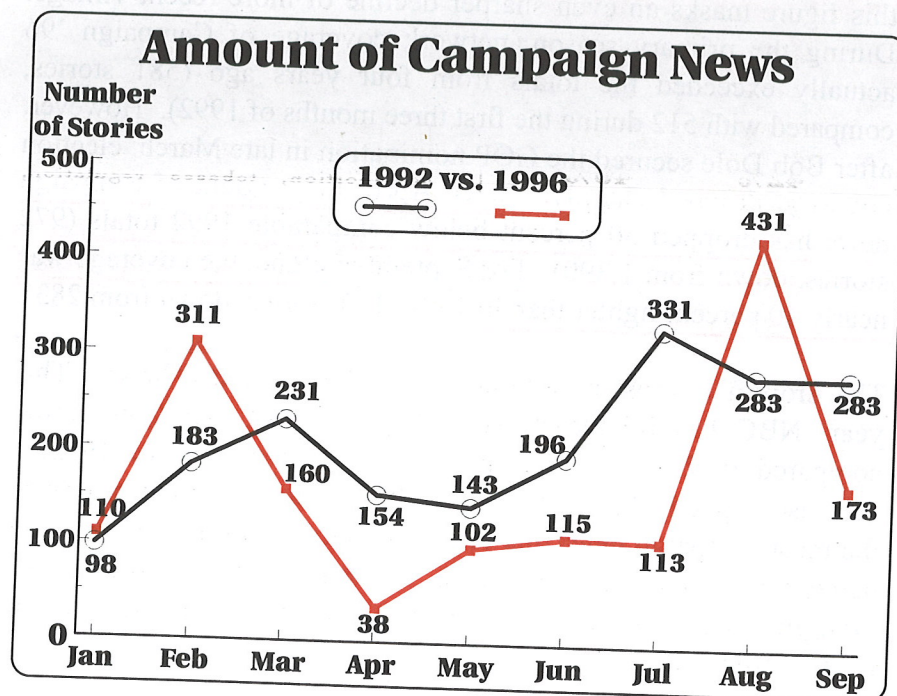


election news airtime — 33 hours, 11 minutes. For every eight second sound bite from a presidential candidate, reporters offered nearly a minute (52 seconds) of narration. (The remaining airtime contained quotes from all other sources, including voters, experts, campaign aides and interest groups.)

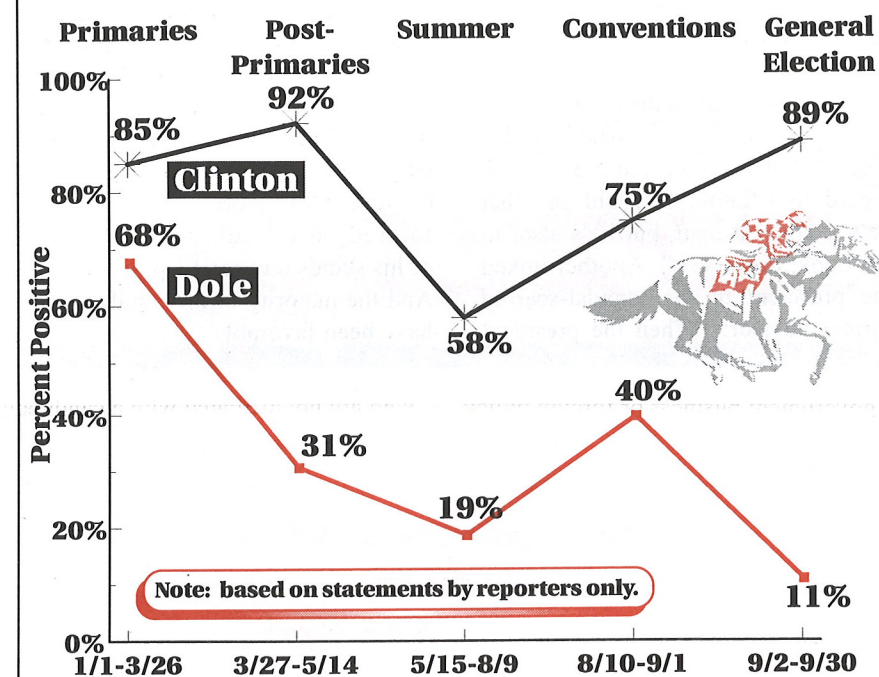
Where's the Race?

One reason for the diminished TV coverage may be that reporters don't believe there is much of a race. During the primary season, nearly half of all campaign stories (47%) focused on the "horse race" — reporting who's ahead, who's behind, etc. Since then, horse race news has been the focus of just 18 percent of all campaign news. Only one out of five campaign stories since the primaries has contained any reference to public opinion polls.

Nonetheless, network reporters have offered more than 1,500 on-air assessments of how Clinton and Dole stand in the horse race. By increasingly wide margins, President Clinton's election prospects have been portrayed as favorable and Mr. Dole's as bleak. Only during the summer months, when media reports focused on Whitewater, Travelgate, the FBI files controversy, and the Paula Jones sexual harassment case, did reporter comments about Mr. Clinton's viability dip below 75 percent favorable. In June, for



Horse Race Assessments Over Time



It's Not the Economy

As the horse race faded from the headlines, the networks reported more of the substance of Campaign '96. Policy issues, which accounted for less than a third (29%) of all primary news, have been featured in nearly half (46%) of all campaign stories since April. Economic issues, which dominated Campaign '92 and this year's primaries, have given way to wide range of social policies — abortion, welfare reform, crime, drugs, anti-smoking policies, children's issues, and education. Only taxes and the state of the economy remain the subject of much discussion on the evening news shows. Meanwhile jobs, international trade, and the budget deficit — which dominated the GOP primary debate — have practically vanished from TV screens.

Complaints about the economy have also become less evident during the

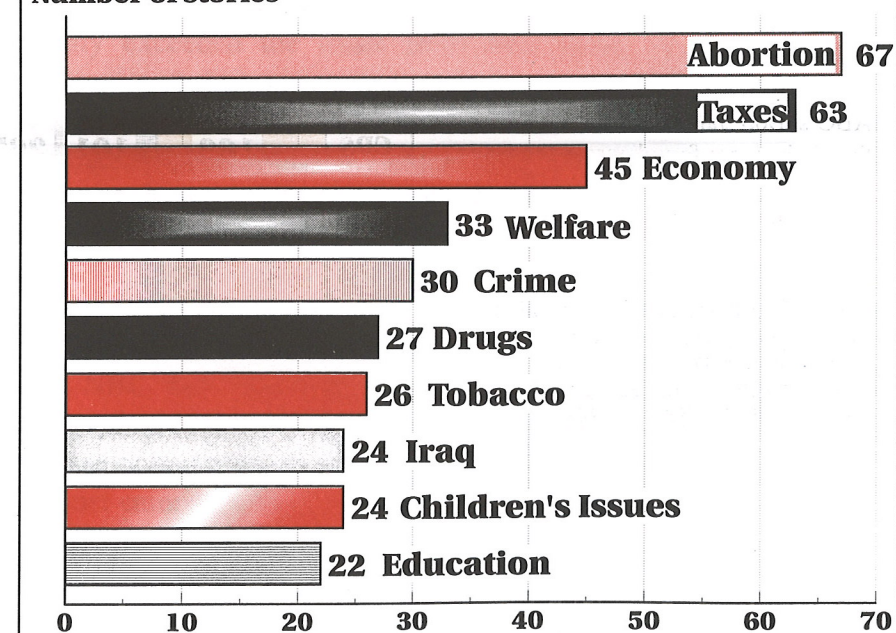
example, NBC reported, "there is no letup tonight in the parade of bad news for the White House... a hellish political week [for] President Clinton." (NBC, June 21, 1996)

Three months later, Mr. Clinton's situation was presented more favorably. NBC's Jim Miklaszewski reported that "with most of the political breaks seeming to go the president's way, it's getting harder now for White House officials not to become too overconfident." (NBC, September 24, 1996) In September, reporters were nearly unanimous (89% positive) in portraying Clinton as the likely winner, while an identical percentage cast Dole as a dead duck. "Right now, all the stories are about how far behind Dole is," reported Jeff Greenfield. "Words like 'faltering' and 'struggling' are popping up every day. The stories may turn out to be wrong...but it's hard to get people juiced up about an election that doesn't look close." (ABC, September 15, 1996)

Top Campaign Issues

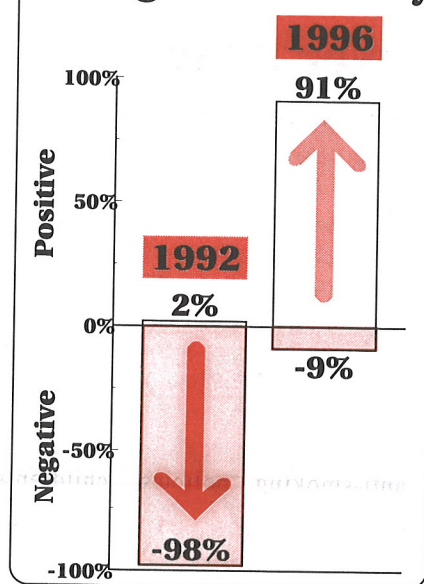
5/15-9/30

Number of Stories



Note: stories may include more than one issue.

Rating the Economy



past six months. During the primaries the state of the economy was usually portrayed as poor or in need of improvement. One out of three comments (69%) — many from voters in early primary states — expressed pessimism about either current or future economic conditions. Since then, the optimists have prevailed — nearly four out of five sources (79%) have asserted that the economy is in good shape.

In September, fully 91 percent of sources said the economy was healthy. The politics of economic prosperity were not lost on reporters such as ABC's Bob Jamieson, who reported that "jobs were found across the wage spectrum... very good news for one man [Bill Clinton] hoping to keep his job." (ABC, September 6, 1996) Such assessments contrast sharply with economic reporting during the previous presidential election. In September 1992, 98 percent of all sources on the evening news criticized the state of the economy. (Media Monitor, October 1992)

Clinton vs. Dole

As Election Day nears, Bill Clinton has been both more visible and more favorably portrayed than Bob Dole on the evening news. Since Mr. Dole announced his resignation from the Senate on May 15, he has been the subject of 438 campaign news stories, slightly fewer than Mr. Clinton (443 stories). However, the president was also featured in an additional 261 non-campaign stories during this period. Many of these stories dealt with either routine government business or foreign policy crises such as the recent confrontation with Iraq. Overall, the president was featured in 704 evening news stories, or 60 percent more than Dole.

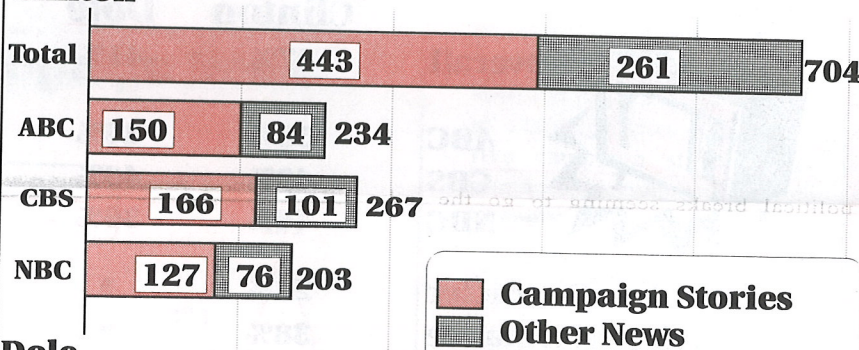
Mr. Clinton has also been winning the battle for good press, especially since the Democratic convention ended. Since Dole quit the Senate in May,

the former Majority Leader has received mostly (59%) negative reviews on the evening news, while the president's coverage has been slightly more balanced (53% negative). Since Labor Day, however, the gap between the two men's media images has widened — 54 percent good press for Clinton vs. only 30 percent for Dole. (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.)

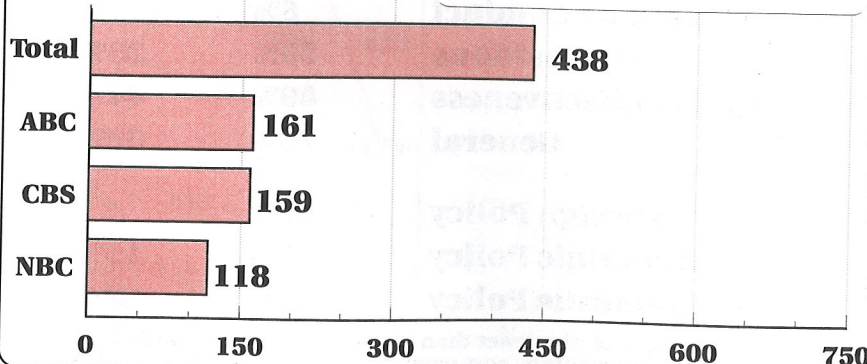
Both Clinton and Dole fared best on ABC (with 58% and 46% good press, respectively). The president's worst press came on CBS (42% positive),

Network Coverage of Candidates 5/15-9/30

Clinton

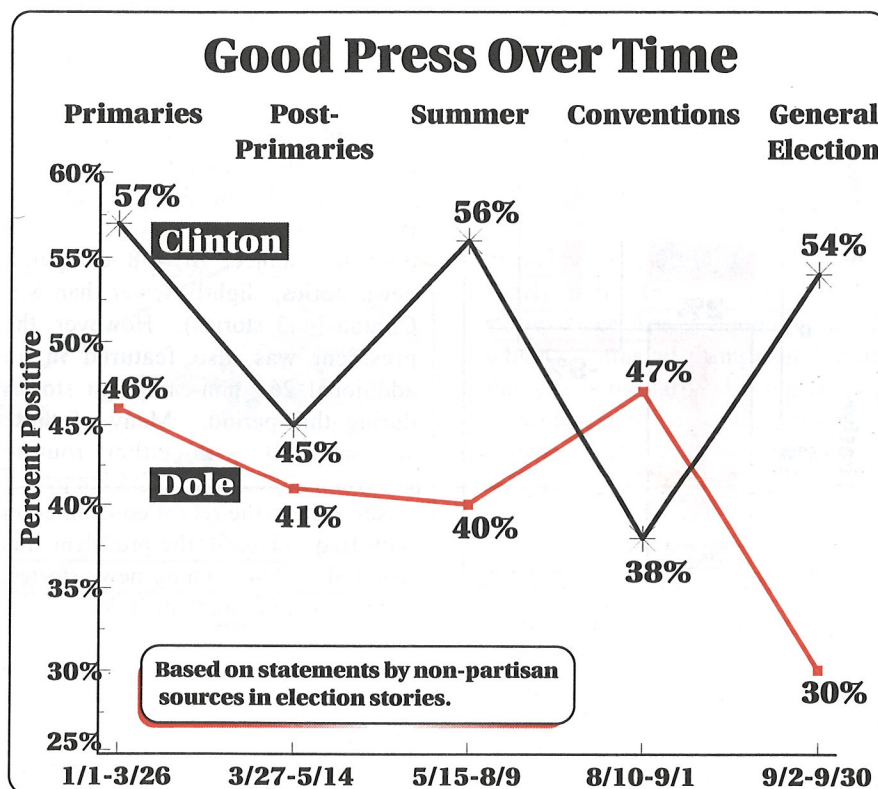


Dole



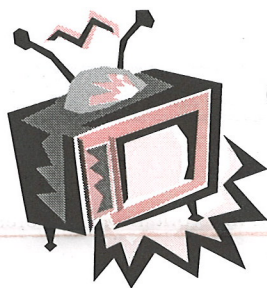
while the GOP nominee was criticized most often on NBC (only 36% positive). Dole's only period of relatively good press came during the party conventions, when he received almost evenly balanced coverage (47% positive vs. 53% negative). On CBS, one voter enthused that Dole "is twice the candidate that Clinton is," although one of her neighbors expressed more ambivalence: "We're not Clinton advocates, but we're kind of on the fence as far as Dole is concerned." (both CBS, August 12, 1996)

Ever since he left the Senate to campaign full-time, Mr. Dole has been heavily criticized for his economic policies (81% negative), his social policies (78% negative), and his conduct as a candidate (81% negative). NBC's Mike Jensen stated that the GOP nominee's tax plan "would favor the rich and the well



Rating the Rivals

Percent Positive (5/15-9/30)



	Clinton	Dole
Overall	47%	41%
ABC	58%	46%
CBS	42%	40%
NBC	46%	36%
Character	26%	*
Job Performance	38%	*
Candidate Conduct	6%	19%
Issue Positions	50%	23%
Campaign Effectiveness	89%	44%
General	79%	60%
Foreign Policy	47%	*
Economic Policy	56%	19%
Other Domestic Policy	40%	22%

*Categories with fewer than 15 evaluations are excluded.
Based on statements by non-partisan sources in election stories.

off... [and] is not good economics." (NBC, August 5, 1996) ABC quoted a representative from the "bipartisan, deficit-cutting group Concord Coalition" as saying Dole's plan "will not work. It will blow a gigantic hole in the budget, and it will set us back, rather than lead us forward." (ABC, August 4, 1996) Dole also faced criticism for his stance on such issues as abortion, tobacco regulation, education and gun control. In addition, he has faced heavy criticism for his campaign behavior, such as his failure to appear before the NAACP convention in July. One disgruntled voter complained, "When you want to be president of the United States of America, you cannot afford to write any American off." (NBC, July 10, 1996)

Mr. Clinton's only period of relatively negative coverage came during the conventions, when he was criticized by 62 percent of news sources. Much of the president's bad press during this period focused on his signing of the

welfare reform bill. One welfare recipient told CBS, "I feel he [Clinton] betrayed us," while another complained that "Clinton is doing what all the right-wing politicians want him to do so that he can get re-elected." (CBS, August 27, 1996)

Overall, the president received mainly criticism for his handling of welfare (90% negative) and his anti-drug policies (100% negative), but mostly positive press for his anti-crime policies (81% positive). The head of

the Fraternal Order of Police told the president, "You have been with us the past four years and we intend to be with you the next four years." (CBS, September 16, 1996)

Mr. Clinton received mostly bad press on the "character issue" (74% negative). One voter told NBC, "with regard to Clinton, I would say that he's a brilliant man, but he's also, in my book, dishonest." Another linked the president to his scandal-scarred former advisor: "When the president

goes to bed with a skunk, as Clinton did with [Dick] Morris, some of that stench is going to rub off." (both NBC, August 30, 1996) A veteran said of Clinton, "I couldn't possibly vote for a draft dodger." (CBS, August 14, 1996) But discussions of the president's character amounted to only eight percent of all evaluations of him, while more than half (54%) focused on his conduct as president or his stands on specific policy issues. And the majority of these judgements have been favorable.

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.

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