

# Campaign 2000 - The Primaries

## TV News Coverage of the Democratic and GOP Primaries

### Major findings:

- **Where's the Story?** Primary coverage dropped 23% from 1996 levels.
- **Where's the Beef?** The coverage was only half as substantive as in 1996.
- **Disappearing Dems** - The GOP race got over four times as much coverage as the Dems after the NH primary.
- **The News Makes Nice** - Coverage of the candidates was more favorable than in 1996.
- **Best Press** - Bush got the best press before NH, McCain fared better after NH.
- **Worst Press** - Al Gore was the only candidate to get mostly negative press.
- **Elián, Media Star** - Elián Gonzalez has gotten nearly as much coverage as the Columbine shootings.

How did TV news cover the presidential primary elections this year? And how did this coverage compare to the 1996 primary season? This special report on Campaign 2000 examines how the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news covered the races for the Democratic and GOP nominations until Super Tuesday (March 7).

**F**rom January 1 until the March 7 Super Tuesday primaries, the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscast broadcast 550 stories on the 2000 presidential primaries, for a total of 14 hours 42 minutes of air time. This represents a decrease of 23 percent from the 1996 primaries through the same date (19 hours 12 minutes), despite the fact that both parties' nominations were contested this time around. CBS showed the sharpest decline in airtime (4 hours 18 minutes), down 39 percent from its Campaign '96 total. ABC aired 4 hours 37 minutes of campaign news, down 29 percent. NBC's 4 hours 50 minutes of coverage represented a relatively small decrease of 14 percent from 1996.

During the 1999 nominating contest "preseason," the network coverage focused mainly on the favorites for the two major parties' nominations, George W. Bush and Al Gore. (See *Media Monitor* November/December 1999.) From the unofficial "kick-off" of the primary season on January 1 through the eve of the New Hampshire primary on January 31, however, the network evening news shows were nearly as likely to feature the challengers, Bill Bradley (67 stories) and John McCain (58), as they were to show Gore (67

(continued on page 2)



stories) and Bush (66). As the primary season unfolded, however, media attention became much more dependent on party affiliation, as the Democratic race was increasingly overshadowed by the contest for the GOP nomination. After New Hampshire, the GOP race generated almost five times as much coverage as the Democratic race. This occurred partly because the Democrats had no primary battles between New Hampshire and Super Tuesday and partly because journalists and pundits no longer considered Bill Bradley a threat to the vice president. Sen.

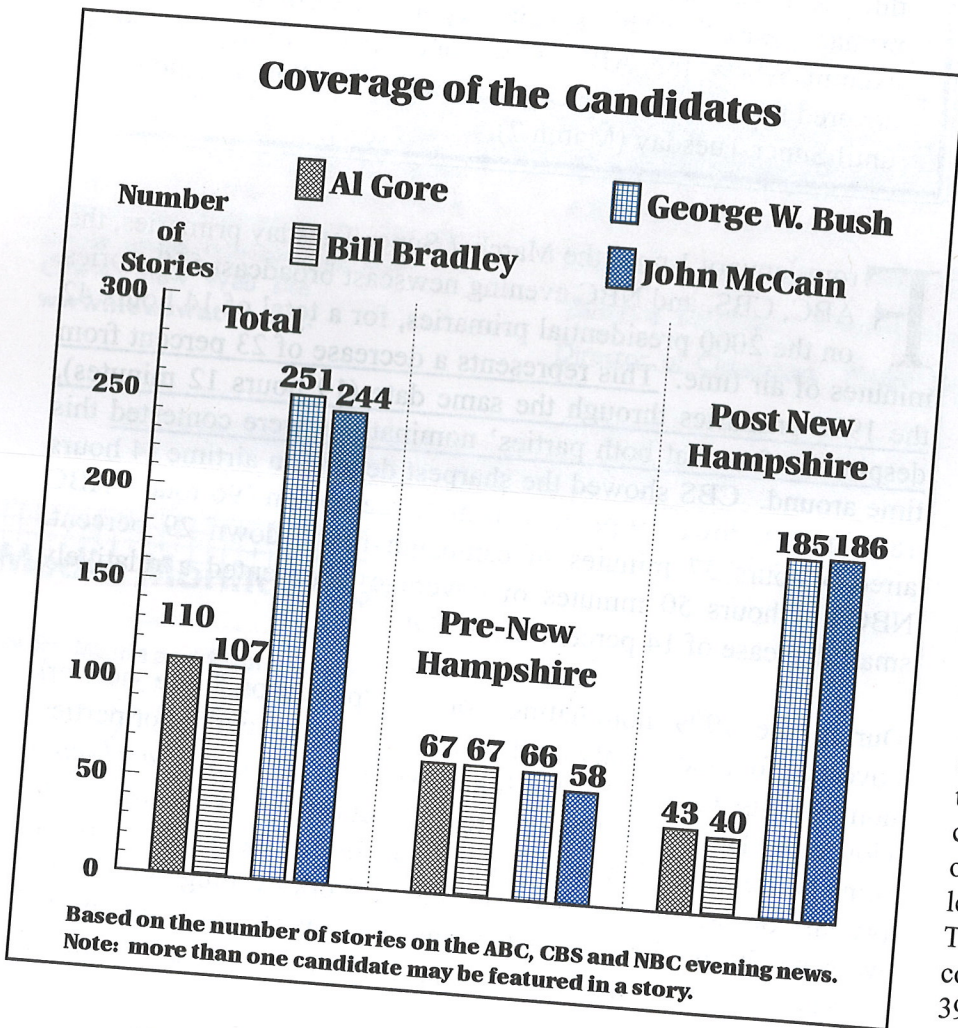
McCain was featured in 186 stories and Gov. Bush in 185 stories during the five weeks between New Hampshire and Super Tuesday. By contrast, Vice President Gore was featured in only 43 stories, and Senator Bradley garnered only 40 stories.

up the largest proportion of campaign news. Nearly half (45%) of all election stories contained extensive discussions of the horse race, up from 37 percent in Campaign '96. Discussions of campaign strategies, such as McCain's decision to forgo Iowa and concentrate his resources on New Hampshire, followed close behind the horse race this year, accounting for nearly two out of every five stories (38%).

### Off to the Races

Stories about the campaign horse race – assessing each candidate's viability – made

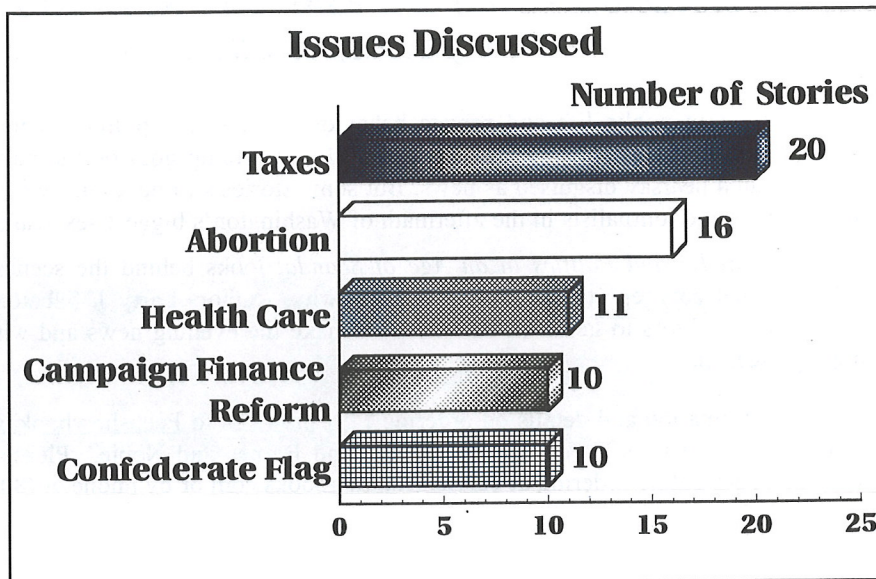
The proportion of substantive coverage fell by half this year compared to 1996. From January 1 through Super Tuesday, 44 percent of Campaign '96 stories discussed either policy issues or the candidates' records and qualifications for public office. This year that percentage dropped to only 22 percent of all election stories. Much of this difference can be attributed to the change in coverage following McCain's big win in New Hampshire. Before New Hampshire, 35 percent of all stories included substantive discussions; thereafter the substantive share of election news fell to just 16 percent. The most dramatic decline occurred on CBS, where the coverage of the candidates' records and issue stands made up a majority (51%) of election stories in 1996. That figure fell to only 24 percent of stories in campaign 2000. The decline on the other two networks was less dramatic but still significant. The proportion of substantive coverage on ABC dropped from 39 percent in 1996 to 21 percent



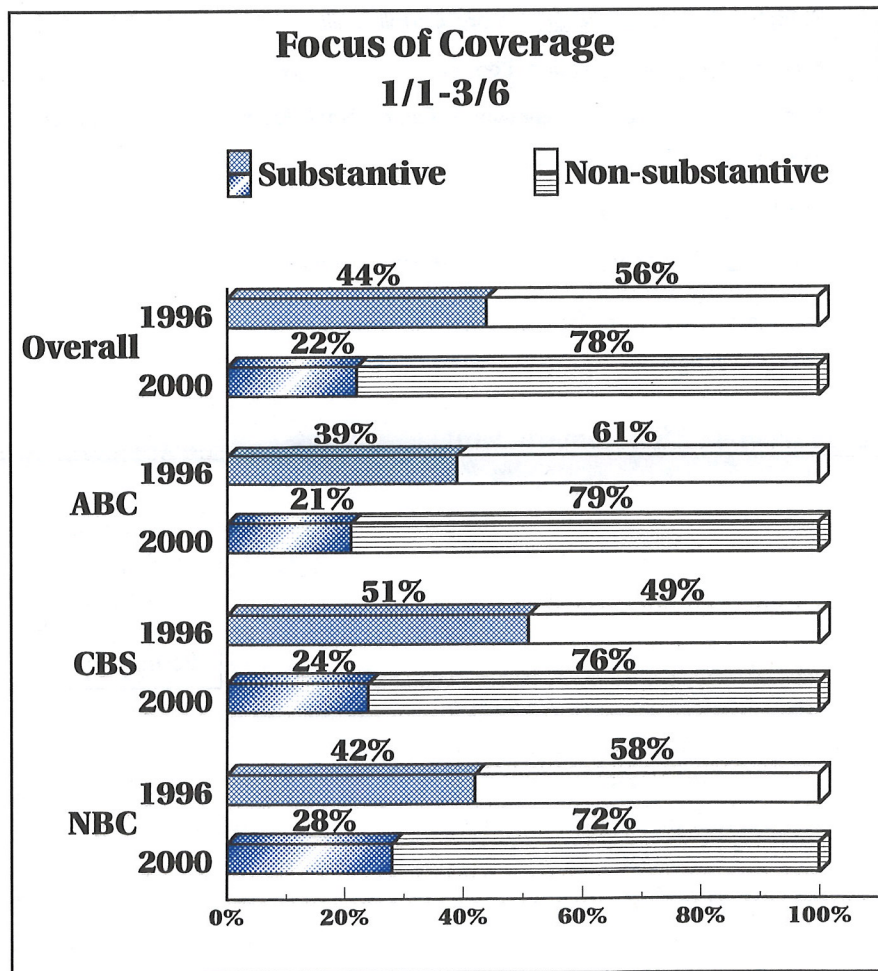


in 2000, and on NBC it fell from 42 percent to 28 percent of all stories.

The issues covered most frequently during the primaries were taxes (20 stories), abortion (16), health care (11), campaign finance reform (10), and the Confederate flag controversy in South Carolina (10). The debate over taxes came mostly from the GOP candidates arguing over how large tax cuts should be in light of a budget surplus. Discussions of abortion came mainly from Bill Bradley as he tried to show that Gore's record on abortion has not been consistent over time. The health care debate was also generated



by Gore and Bradley, as they disagreed on the extent and financing of government mandated increases in coverage. Campaign finance reform was the issue du jour for the challengers in both parties before New Hampshire. After Bush adjusted his strategy in response to McCain's surge, however, it was discussed by all the major candidates.



### Rating the Players

Coverage of the candidates was generally more positive during the 2000 primary contests than it was four years ago. The four leading Republican contenders (Bob Dole, Steve Forbes, Pat Buchanan, and Lamar Alexander) received more bad press than good press during the



1996 primary season (See *Media Monitor*, March/April 1996.) By contrast, three of the four major candidates this year received mostly positive press through Super Tuesday. (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. This tally includes all on-air opinions expressed by reporters and sources who are not affiliated with a candidate or party. It does not include opinions about a candidate's prospects in the horse race, which we tally separately as an indication of viability.)

The two dark horses, John McCain and Bill Bradley,

received the highest proportions of positive comments (63% and 62% respectively) from nonpartisan sources. Accolades included Dan Rather's profile of McCain as "a reformer and hero... a shrewd politician... stirring up voters [with] his style and a heroic bio." (CBS, 3/1/00) Similarly, ABC aired the sentiments of one South Carolina voter: "Intellectually, my head tells me I'm a Democrat. And yet, my heart tells me I like McCain a lot better than I like Al Gore." (ABC, 2/17/00.) Although McCain's good press was widely noted during the campaign, Bill Bradley was nearly as likely to receive on-air praise. For example, NBC quoted the Des Moines Register's endorsement that

described him as having "a compelling vision and fundamental decency..."

GOP front-runner George W. Bush trailed both the Democratic and GOP challengers in the race for good press, but he still received slightly more positive than negative evaluations (53% positive vs. 47% negative). Much of the criticism directed toward Bush was aimed at his campaign tactics. For example, CBS's Bill Whitaker called Bush "a quick-change artist. The conservative with compassion turned hard right down South and stood uncritically at Bob Jones University, which has been criticized for antiblack and Catholic views." (2/21/00)

### Rating the Candidates Percent Positive Evaluations

	Total	Pre-New Hampshire	Post New Hampshire
George Bush	53%	65%	51%
John McCain	63%	53%	64%
Al Gore	40%	40%	*
Bill Bradley	62%	52%	*

Ratings based on evaluations by nonpartisan source and reporters on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news.

\*Note: For Bradley and Gore there were not enough on-air evaluations for meaningful analysis.



Only Al Gore, the Democrats' heir apparent, was the target of more negative than positive comments (60% negative to only 40% positive). He was criticized for both his politics and his personal style. For example, ABC's Terry Moran observed, "Gore's critics say he goes too far in exploiting personal tragedies. ...All [this] sparks a question — is he fighting for people or using them?" (2/28/00)

The New Hampshire primary proved the turning point in the tone of coverage of the GOP

race. During the 1999 preseason, Bush got an overwhelming 79 percent positive comments from nonpartisan sources, compared to McCain's still-impressive 63 percent positive. The trend continued into January. From January 1 until the February 1 New Hampshire primary, Bush continued to lead McCain in terms of positive evaluations, by 65 percent to 53 percent. But after McCain's New Hampshire victory, their positions were reversed: On-air evaluations of George W. Bush were only 51 percent positive, compared to 64

percent positive for John McCain during the rest of the campaign.

On the Democratic side, Bill Bradley led Al Gore by an even wider margin in 1999 (73% positive vs. 47 % positive). The spread narrowed in January, as Bradley's proportion of good press sank to 52 percent positive comments, and Gore's dropped to 40 percent. After New Hampshire neither candidate generated enough on-air evaluations to permit meaningful comparisons.

## Elián Watch

Coverage of the Elián Gonzalez saga has overtaken some of the biggest media feeding frenzies of the past decade, as reported in CMPA's web magazine NewsWatch.org. From the time the story broke November 25 through April 19, the network evening news shows aired 295 stories on the international struggle for the right to keep the six-year-old boy. That exceeds the 200 evening news stories on the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, from the date of her fatal accident on August 31 through the end of 1997, and the 161 stories on the death of John F. Kennedy, Jr. from July 16 to December 1999. It will soon

surpass the 319 stories on the Columbine school shootings during the past year. But Elián's coverage still trails the O.J. Simpson case, which produced

431 pre-trial stories from June 12 (the day Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman were murdered) through the end of 1994.

### Number of Elián Gonzalez Stories Over Time

November 25, 1999 through April 19, 2000

	ABC	CBS	NBC	TOTAL
NOV	1	2	4	7
DEC	13	7	12	32
JAN	36	31	26	93
FEB	3	4	1	8
MAR	13	10	11	34
*APR	46	41	34	121
<b>Total</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>295</b>

\* through April 19



# Peepshow: Media and Politics in an Age of Scandal

by Larry Sabato, Mark Stencel and S. Robert Lichter

The line dividing public life and private behavior in American politics is more blurred than ever. When it comes to questions about sex, substance abuse and family life, anything goes on the political desk in many newsrooms, including uncorroborated hearsay disguised as news. But some stories still never make it into print or on the air. What are the rules for politicians and journalists in the aftermath of Washington's biggest sex scandal?

*Peepshow: Media and Politics in an Age of Scandal* looks behind the scenes at news coverage of political scandals, analyzing what gets reported, what doesn't, and why. Authors [Larry J. Sabato](#), [Mark Stencel](#) and [S. Robert Lichter](#) talk with top news editors to get a fix on what will make the evening news and what we're likely to read about in the 2000 campaign season.

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