

## **Campaign 2000 Final**

### **How TV News Covered the General Election Campaign**

#### **Major findings:**

- **We Report...** The amount of campaign news dropped to half of 1992 levels. *Page 1*
- **You Decide** Voters gave campaign news its worst rating ever. *Page 5*
- **See No Evil...** Journalists got six times as much airtime as the candidates. *Page 1*
- **Hear No Evil** Candidate soundbites averaged less than eight seconds. *Page 2*
- **Bad News Bias** The coverage was balanced but negative toward both candidates. *Page 3*
- **Comedians Gore Bush** Late-night comics told 54% more Bush jokes than Gore jokes. *Page 5*

How did TV news cover the 2000 general election, and how did this year's campaign news stack up against coverage of previous contests? This issue of *Media Monitor* reports how the presidential campaign was portrayed on the three network evening newscasts from Labor Day through Election Day, with comparisons to our findings for the 1996, 1992 and 1988 races. Also in this issue, "Laugh Tracks" examines campaign humor from "The Tonight Show," "The Late Show with David Letterman," "Late Night with Conan O'Brien" and "Politically Incorrect."

**F**rom Labor Day (September 4) until Election Day (November 7), the three broadcast network evening news shows together devoted 462 stories and 13 hours 25 minutes of air time to the presidential campaign. This represents a slight increase in airtime over the 1996 totals (483 stories and 13 hours 8 minutes), but 43 percent less than Campaign '92 (23 hours 20 minutes), and 28 percent less than in Campaign '88 (18 hours 36 minutes). The Campaign 2000 total represents an average airtime of 12.6 minutes per night, similar to 1996 (12.3 minutes), but just half the nightly average for Campaign '92 (24.6 minutes). NBC had the biggest increase in coverage, up 11 percent from 1996 (145 stories, 4 hours 46 minutes), while ABC increased just 2 percent since 1996 (180 stories, 4 hours 38 minutes). In contrast, CBS's coverage dropped 10 percent from '96, (137 stories, totaling 4 hours).

Network news gave presidential candidates little time to talk to the public. Instead, reporters dominated the airwaves. Over six times as much campaign talk came from anchors and reporters as from the candidates themselves (74% versus 12%). All other sources combined

(continued on page 2)



(voters, pundits, campaign staffers, etc.) accounted for the remaining 14 percent of airtime. In another sign of shrinking candidate presence, the average length of their soundbites – just 7.8 seconds – continued its steady historic decline. It stood at 8.2 seconds four years ago, 8.4 seconds in 1992 and 9.8 seconds in 1988.

Voters had to bypass the newscasts for the TV talk shows to hear candidates in their own words. For example, George Bush was on-screen for a total of 13 minutes during one appearance on the David Letterman Show (10/19), which exceeded his entire speaking time on all three network news shows during the month of October. Similarly, Al Gore received more time on his September 14 Letterman appearance than on all the network newscasts for the entire month of September.

## Off to the Races

Stories about the campaign horse race – assessing each candidate's viability – soared this year, hitting a new high compared to previous elections. Five out of seven stories (71%) focused on the horse race, compared to fewer than half (48%) in 1996. (That election represented a dip from both 1992 and 1988, when 58 percent of stories dealt with the horse race.) In contrast, the amount of news about substantive issues held steady. Two out of five campaign stories (40%) featured discussions of policy issues, compared with 37 percent in 1996, 32 percent in 1992 and 39 percent in 1988.

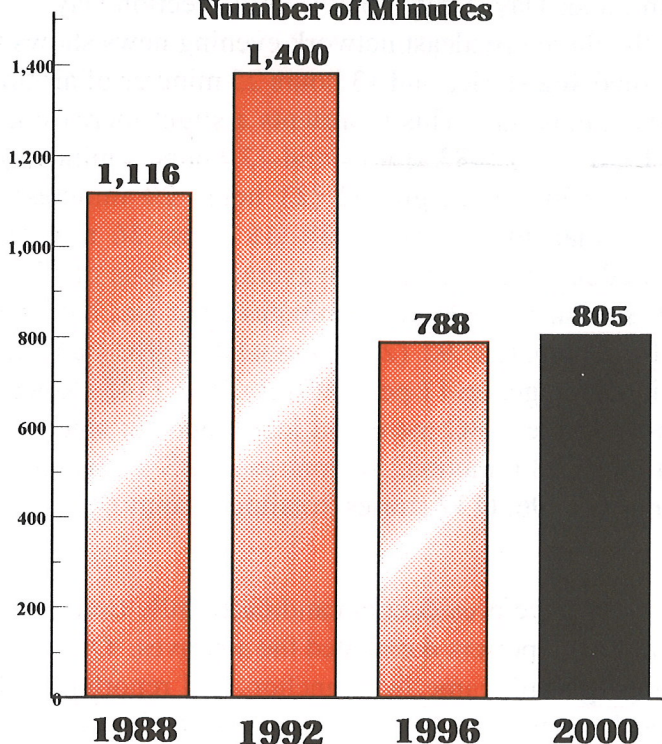
As in 1996, no policy issues dominated the fall campaign the way the economy pervaded public debate in Campaign '92 or crime and defense issues defined Campaign '88. Thus, discussions of the two candidates' strategies eclipsed the policy debate.

Stories about the Gore and Bush campaigns' strategies (136 and 127 stories respectively) each outnumbered stories about their competing economic policies (44 stories) by a three-to-one margin. Other substantive topics that were featured most frequently included health care (27 stories), social security (22), education (18) and energy policy (16). Notably, late-breaking allegations of Bush's 24-year-old drunken driving arrest generated more stories in the last three days before the election (16 stories) than all foreign policy issues received throughout the entire campaign (10 stories). Other controversies that were covered on the evening news included Gore's alleged penchant for exaggeration (8 stories), the GOP's controversial "Rats" ad (5 stories) and Bush's inadvertently public cursing of *New York Times* reporter Adam Clymer (5 stories).

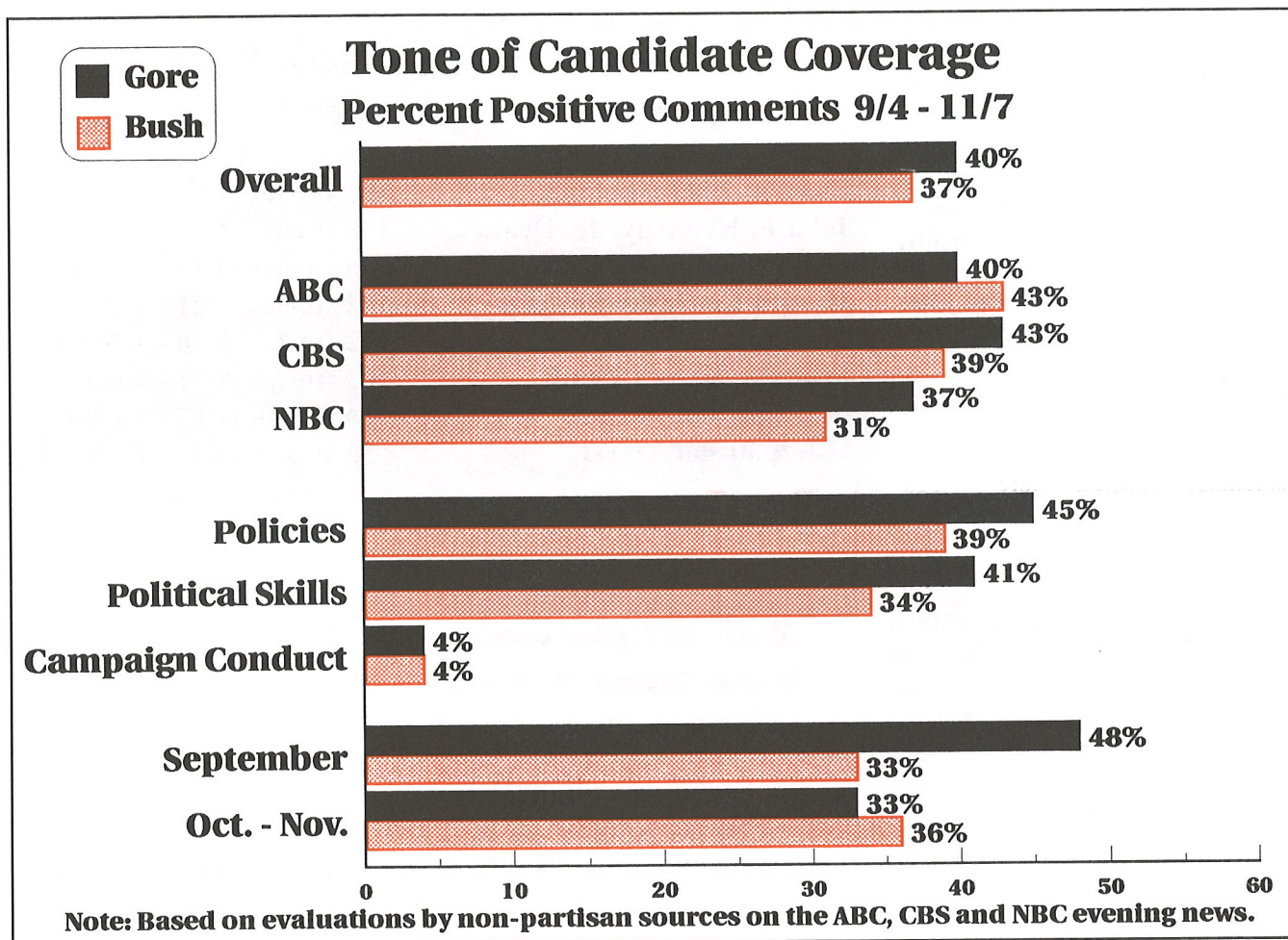
## Two Thumbs Down

Although some aspects of the recent campaign echoed previous presidential elections, there was a marked change in the tone of the coverage. During the past two general election campaigns, Bill Clinton received better press than his GOP opponents. Clinton enjoyed 50 percent positive evaluations in 1996 versus only 33 percent for Bob Dole; in '92, Clinton bested President Bush's good press by 52 percent to 29 percent positive evaluations. This "good press" gap narrowed sharply this year, as Al Gore received 40 percent positive press, compared to 37 percent for George W. Bush. (Good press was calculated by tallying every positive or negative on-air evaluation of a candidate's record, policies, personal character and behavior on the campaign trail.

**Amount of Campaign News  
Number of Minutes**







Our tallies include all opinions expressed by reporters and sources not affiliated with the two campaigns. This measure of good press does not include opinions about a candidate's prospects in the horse race, which we tally separately.) Gore fared best on CBS with 43 percent good press compared to 39 percent for Bush; NBC's evaluations also favored Gore by 37 percent to 31 percent; and Bush fared best on ABC, where he garnered a 43 percent positive rating compared to Gore's 40 percent positive.

Although the coverage was even-handed over the active general election period, it shifted in mid-course. During September, Gore fared better, receiving about evenly balanced evaluations (48% positive vs. 52% negative), compared to an unfavorable ratio of two-to-one (67%

negative) for Bush. But the coverage became more negative toward Gore after the first presidential debate. From October through Election Day, Gore's press was 65 percent negative, slightly more than Bush's 61 percent.

Reflecting the overall trend, assessments of the candidates' policies and proposals were slightly more negative toward Bush (61%) than toward Gore (55%). For example, on NBC a voter praised Gore's ideas on education: "I like his proposals because I feel like he wants to fix the system that's there." (9/8/00). Both candidates fared especially badly on their economic proposals. Nearly three quarters (72%) of comments about Bush's policies were negative, as were 64 percent for Gore. Much of the criticism for both candidates' economic plans centered on

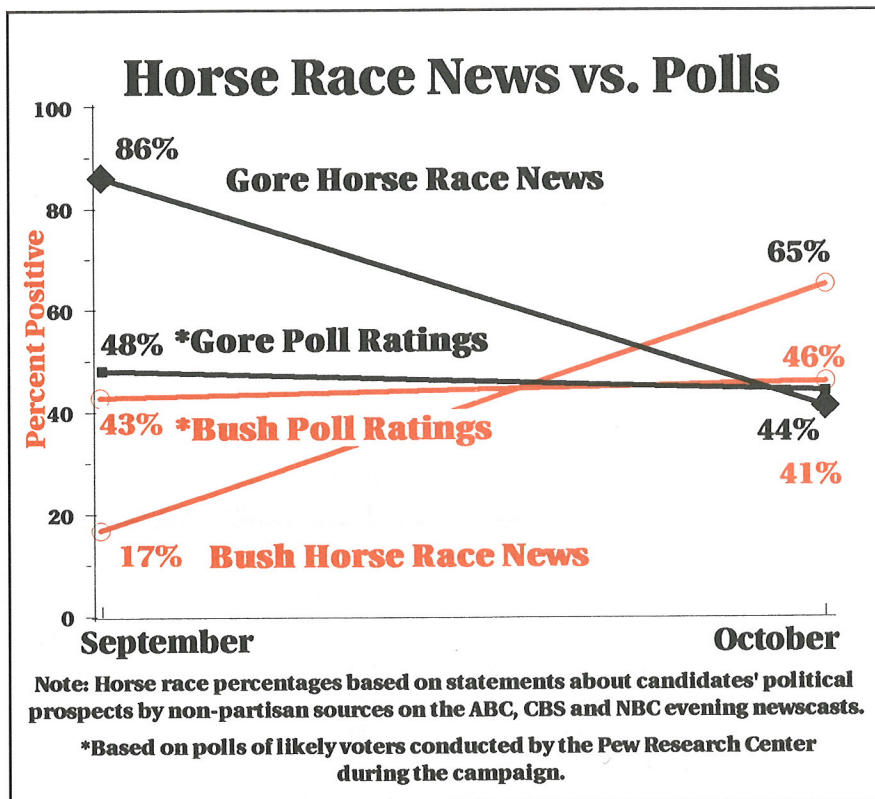
predictions about the budget surplus. For example, NBC quoted *Business Week* on 10/3/00, "Neither Al Gore nor George W. Bush will be able to deliver on their promises."

When the discussion turned to their activities along the campaign trail, both candidates were criticized (in an overwhelming 96 percent of all evaluations) for their misleading comments, negative ads, "playing politics," etc. For example, a voter shown on NBC expressed doubts about Gore, "My biggest concern is that Al Gore will say about anything he needs to say to get elected President of the United States" (10/5/00). The "Rats" ad that appeared in September generated harsh criticism for Bush's campaign conduct. One voter shown on CBS said, "When I heard about that 'Rat' thing, the first



thing that came to my mind was Nixon and Watergate.”(9/15/00)

Despite polls showing a close race between the presidential candidates, the national newscasts initially portrayed Al Gore's prospects for winning as by far more promising than Bush's. During September, assessments of Gore's election prospects were positive by a six to one margin (86% to 14%), while Bush's were negative by five to one (83% versus 17%). By contrast, several Pew Research Center polls taken in September showed Gore's lead averaged only five percentage points (48% to 43%) among likely voters. For example, Bill Whitaker described Bush's campaign in September: "After a series of blows, many self-inflicted, [Bush] aides acknowledge their message has been muffled ..." (9/17/00, CBS). In another demonstration of the mercurial media assessments that characterized this campaign,



## Then and Now General Election News: 1988 -- 2000

Amount of Coverage		2000	1996	1992	1988
Number of Stories		462	483	728	589
Minutes per Day		13	12	25	17
Average Soundbite (seconds)		7.8	8.2	8.4	9.8
Focus of Coverage (percent of stories)					
Horse Race		71%	48%	58%	58%
Policy Issues		40%	37%	32%	39%
Tone of Coverage (percent good press)					
Dem Nominee		40%	50%	52%	31%
GOP Nominee		37%	33%	29%	38%

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



evaluations of Gore's prospects dimmed sharply in October (a 59% negative rating versus a 65% positive rating for Bush), at a time when averages of polls conducted by Pew showed Bush was barely leading Gore (by 46% versus 44% among likely voters). As Terry Moran of ABC observed, "Gore has suffered another stumble in what has become a campaign struggling to regain its stride." (10/12/00)

## That Was Then ...

CMPA has analyzed network evening news coverage of the past four presidential elections. In 1988 we noted the predominance of the horse race over substantive issues, the negative treatment of both major party nominees, and the shrinkage of the average candidate sound bite to

less than ten seconds, down from 42 seconds in 1968. After the 1988 campaign was widely criticized for its negativity and lack of substance, the networks introduced numerous reforms designed to produce coverage that was more serious, fair and informative to voters. But our studies show little evidence of improvement.

Regardless of the total air time devoted to campaign news, candidate sound bites continued to shrink. The proportion of horse race news declined in 1996, reflecting the absence of a close contest. But in 2000, with the closest race in recent memory, it shot back up above 1988 levels. While there was a slight increase this year in the attention to candidates' proposals and records on policy issues compared to 1996, substantive coverage still trailed 1988 levels. The current campaign was more balanced overall than the past two elections, but that balance was not consistent. Gore led the race for

positive press in September, and Bush was favored in October. Both candidates received a majority of negative on-air evaluations, although their combined ratings were slightly more positive than in 1988, when coverage of both Bush and Dukakis was highly critical. In 1992 and 1996, the coverage was less balanced, with Clinton receiving substantially more positive evaluations than either Bush or Dole.

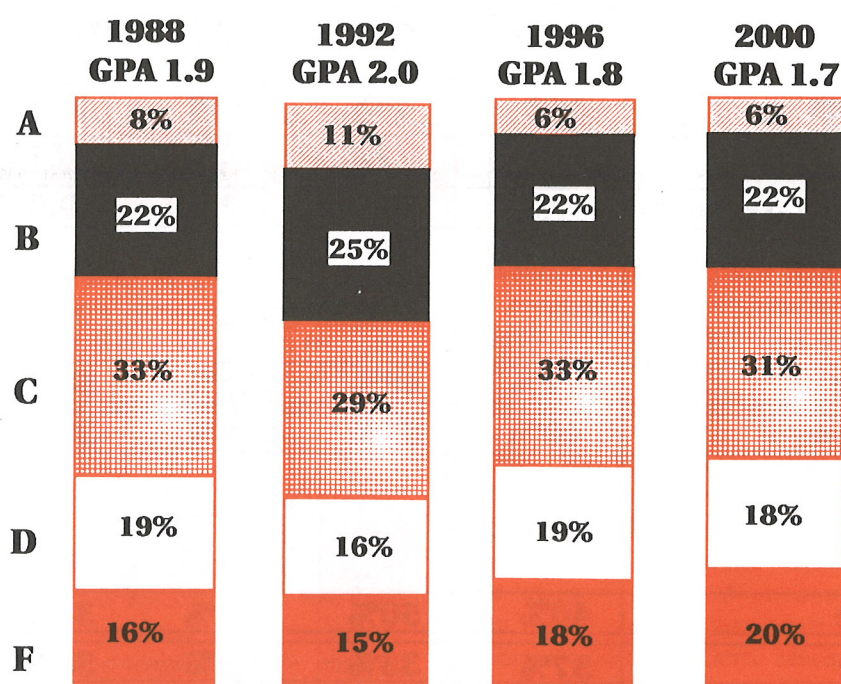
If our analysis suggests that campaign coverage has not improved since 1996, that is the conclusion that voters draw. In post-election surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center, the public graded the media's performance below that of political parties, the candidates, and even the campaign consultants, with the media receiving its lowest overall rating in the history of the poll.

## Laugh Tracks

The late night talk shows such as "The Tonight Show," "The Late Show with David Letterman," "Late Night with Conan O'Brien" and "Politically Incorrect," are playing an ever-increasing role in the public's perceptions of political campaigns. A Pew Research Center survey in January 2000 found that 28 percent of Americans learned about the presidential campaign from the late night TV comedians, including nearly half of those under 30 (47%). Even the nightly newscasts gave late-night jokes more attention, airing weekly summaries of political humor.

George W. Bush led the tally as the target of 254 jokes during the general election campaign, compared to 165 for Gore. In September, as news of the "Rats" ad and Bush's colorful description of a reporter circulated, he was panned nearly three times as much

## Grading Election News



**Note: National surveys by Times Mirror Center in Nov. 1988 and 1992; 1996 and 2000 by Pew Research Center. Excludes "don't know" responses.**



as Gore (94 to 34 jokes respectively). But in October, as the debates provided fodder against both candidates, Gore was targeted by nearly as many jokes (120) as Bush (126). By contrast, the '96 race was a split decision, with 242 jokes about Clinton and 228 about Dole. Finally, like father like son – former President Bush garnered 4 percent more jokes than Bill Clinton in 1992 (161 versus 66).

## Recent Big Stories

### Comparing the first week of coverage

<b>Election 2000 Deadlock</b>	<b>183 stories (11/8 - 11/14/00)</b>
<b>John F. Kennedy, Jr. Death</b>	<b>148 stories (7/17 - 7/23/99)</b>
<b>Oklahoma City Bombing</b>	<b>146 stories (4/19 - 4/25/95)</b>
<b>Monica Lewinsky Scandal</b>	<b>142 stories (1/21 - 1/27/98)</b>
<b>Columbine Murders</b>	<b>142 stories (4/20 - 4/26/99)</b>
<b>Princess Diana's Death</b>	<b>103 stories (8/31 - 9/6/97)</b>
<b>O.J. Simpson Verdict</b>	<b>64 stories (10/2 - 10/8/95)</b>
<b>O.J. Simpson Arrest</b>	<b>53 stories (6/12 - 6/19/94)</b>

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