

# Campaign 2000: Early Returns

## Network News Coverage of the Campaign "Preseason"

### Major findings:

- **What Election?** The Networks gave the campaign pre-season only half as much airtime as four years ago. *Page 1*
- **What Media Darling? (1)** Bush got better press than McCain. *Page 3*
- **What Media Darling? (2)** Gore got better press than Bradley. *Page 4*
- **Hillary's Ups...** Mrs. Clinton's Senate candidacy got more coverage than any presidential candidate. *Page 4*
- **...And Downs** Mrs. Clinton's on-air evaluations slumped from 5 to 1 positive last spring to 3 to 1 negative this fall. *Page 5*
- **Hillary Humor** TV's late night comics zapped Mrs. Clinton more often than either Bush or Gore. *Page 5*

With the 2000 presidential campaign already under way, what sort of coverage can we expect from the major television networks? This month's *Media Monitor* examines how the 2000 presidential election pre-season has been covered on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts, along with the closely watched New York Senate race. Finally, we look at which candidates proved most laughable in the late night talk show monologues of Jay Leno, David Letterman, Conan O'Brien and Bill Maher.

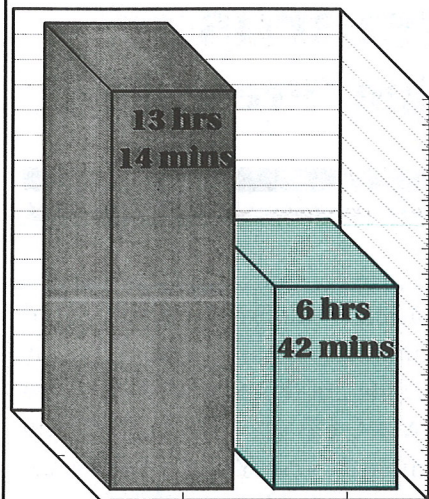
**T**his presidential election pre-season has proved highly eventful. In the Democratic race, Bill Bradley mounted a surprisingly strong challenge to Vice President Gore. In the GOP race, the number of candidates dropped from 12 in early summer to just six by year's end, a month before the official primaries and caucuses even begin. Meanwhile, longtime Republican Patrick Buchanan defected to the Reform party, and millionaire Donald Trump and actor Warren Beatty also expressed interest in the party's nomination.

### The Invisible Preseason

Despite all this early activity, however, the network evening news shows devoted only half as much airtime to the campaign pre-season as they did four years ago – 6 hours 42 minutes from January through November 30, 1999 vs. 13 hours 14 minutes during the same period in 1995, when only the Republicans faced a contested primary season. NBC led the pack this year with 2 hours 33 minutes, while ABC and CBS both featured 2 hours 4 minutes of

presidential election news. The margin was slightly closer when measured by story counts – 256 this year vs. 463 four years ago. By

### Campaign Preseason Coverage



Note: Number of stories from January to November 30 each year

comparison, the Littleton, Colorado school shootings generated 298 stories, and the presidential impeachment proceedings, which concluded on February 12, nonetheless produced 405 stories during 1999. Even the New York Senate race at times overshadowed the presidential campaign, producing 107 stories overall.

The campaign got heavy coverage in the prestige press and the cable networks, but this was rarely carried to the mass public by the big three. For example, three Republican primary debates in December were carried on Fox News Channel, CNN, and MSNBC respectively; the first two went without mention the following nights on the broadcast network newscasts, the December 13 debate on MSNBC garnered one story on CBS's "Evening News."

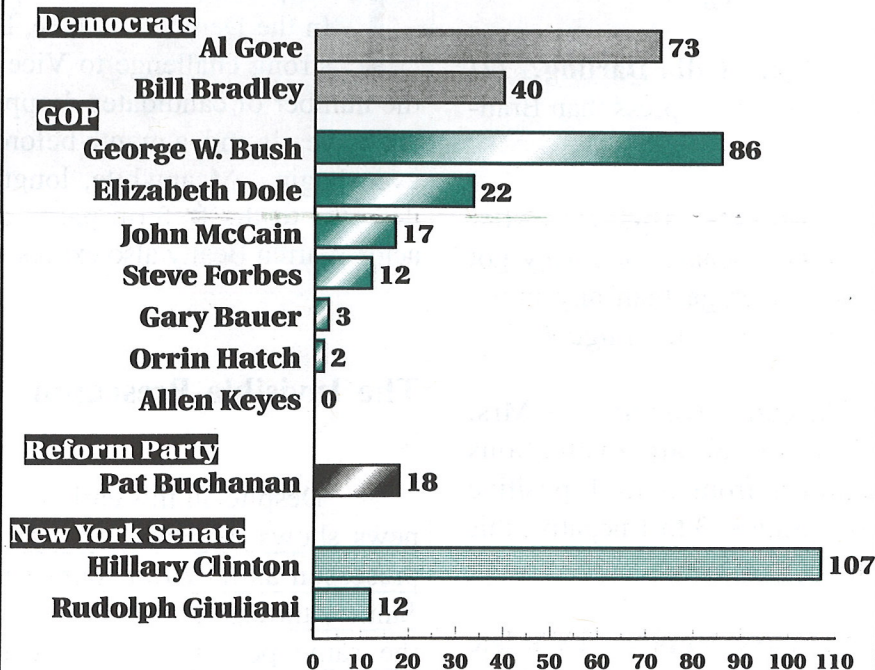
Among all the announced and unannounced candidates, only the major party frontrunners have received much coverage. Republican George W. Bush was featured in the most stories (86), followed by Vice President Al Gore (73 stories). Former Senator Bill Bradley, Mr. Gore's only major competitor, appeared in 40 stories, more than twice the number of Bush's closest opponent in the polls, Senator John McCain (17). Elizabeth Dole, who dropped out of the race on October 20, was the focus of 22 election stories, more than any of Gov. Bush's other challengers. Pat Buchanan's debate over leaving the Republican party and his eventual defection generated 18 stories. Millionaire Steve Forbes was the focus of 12 stories, while the other candidates trailed far behind (Gary Bauer, 3 stories; Senator Orrin Hatch, 2 stories; and Allen Keyes, 0 stories). Undeclared candidate Donald Trump was featured in eight stories, more than Bauer, Hatch, and Keyes combined.

### Rating the Candidates

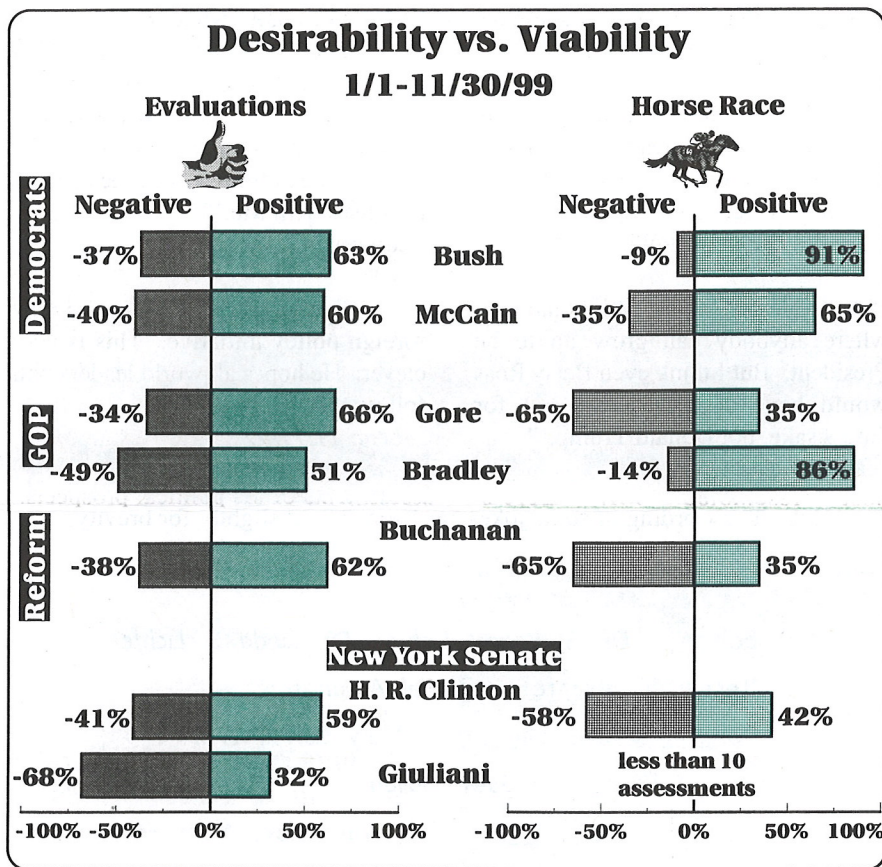
To determine how much good or bad press the candidates receive, we note every positive or negative evaluation of their record, policies, personal character and performance on the campaign trail. Our tallies include all on-air opinions expressed by sources and reporters. The result measures the candidate's perceived desirability rather than his or her viability. On-air evaluations of election prospects are tallied separately as "horse race" ratings.

Only two of the candidates for the Republican nomination have generated enough on-air debate to calculate a meaningful "good press" score. The frontrunner in the early presidential preference polls,

### Coverage of the Candidates Number of Stories



Number of stories featuring each candidate from January to November 30. More than one candidate may have been featured in one story.

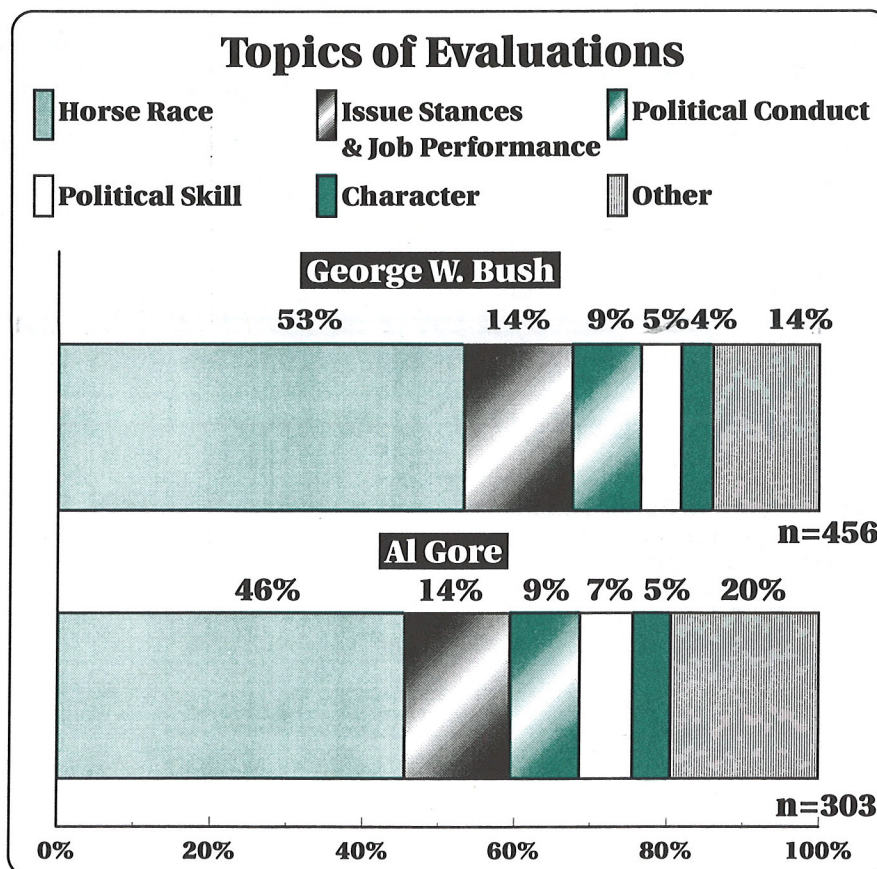


early absence from debates) and his job performance as governor of Texas (44% positive). Mr. McCain also fared well on the character issue (89% positive), and he received fairly good marks on his campaign conduct (57% positive) and his job performance as U.S. Senator from Arizona (54% positive). There were too few comments on his issue stands and political skills to permit meaningful comparisons. The gap between the two contenders was greater on evaluations of their prospects in the campaign horse race. A remarkable 91 percent of sources praised Mr. Bush's viability, while Mr. McCain generated a respectable 65 percent positive score.

Comparing the media images of the two declared Democratic candidates is more complicated. Vice-president Gore has gotten better press than the former Senator Bradley in terms of his desirability as a candidate, but Mr.

Governor George W. Bush, received the most positive press: nearly two out of three sources (63%) praised his candidacy. For example, one voter told CBS why he supported Mr. Bush: "I believe I can trust what he says. It is as simple as that." (6/12/99) Despite his reputation as a media darling, Senator John McCain, Mr. Bush's closest challenger, trailed the frontrunner with 58 percent good press on the network evening news.

When these comments were broken down according to the specific topic that was praised or criticized, Mr. Bush fared best in evaluations of his political skills (79% positive), his personal character (74% positive) despite ongoing controversy over his unwillingness to deny past drug use, and his stands on policy issues (63% positive). He fared worst in judgments of his conduct on the campaign trail (only 37% positive, with jabs taken at the vagueness of his positions and his



Bradley out paced Mr. Gore in terms of his viability. On our general measure for good press, two out of three comments about Mr. Gore (66%) have been positive, while Sen. Bradley has received about evenly balanced coverage (51% positive). Mr. Gore received high marks for his performance in office (84% positive) and his issue stands (70% positive), but his character rating was only 47 percent positive – the lowest of any candidate – as sources panned his association with President Clinton and associated scandals. Mr. Gore’s campaign conduct was praised by only 36 percent of sources; the complaints were mostly about his failure to deal with important issues.

Mr. Bradley also scored best on his policies (69% positive) and worst on his campaign conduct (only 27 percent positive, with most of the criticism surrounding his initial avoidance of detail on policy issues); very few sources evaluated his job performance or personal character.

Mr. Bradley’s great advantage over Mr. Gore appeared in evaluations of the campaign horse race. Despite Mr. Gore’s frontrunner status, Mr. Bradley’s standing and prospects attracted praise from 86 percent of all sources, compared to a mere 35 percent positive for Mr. Gore. Thus, Mr. Gore’s two to one favorable margin of comments on his desirability was balanced by nearly a two to one margin of unfavorable comments about his electability.

The candidate whose media image most resembled Mr. Gore’s combination of good press and perceived poor prospects was Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan. He received 62 percent favorable comments about his candidacy (many from Republicans trying to keep him in the party and Reform party members who agree with his stance on trade) but only 35 percent positive comments of his chances to win the nomination and the presidency. Mr. Buchanan was evaluated too

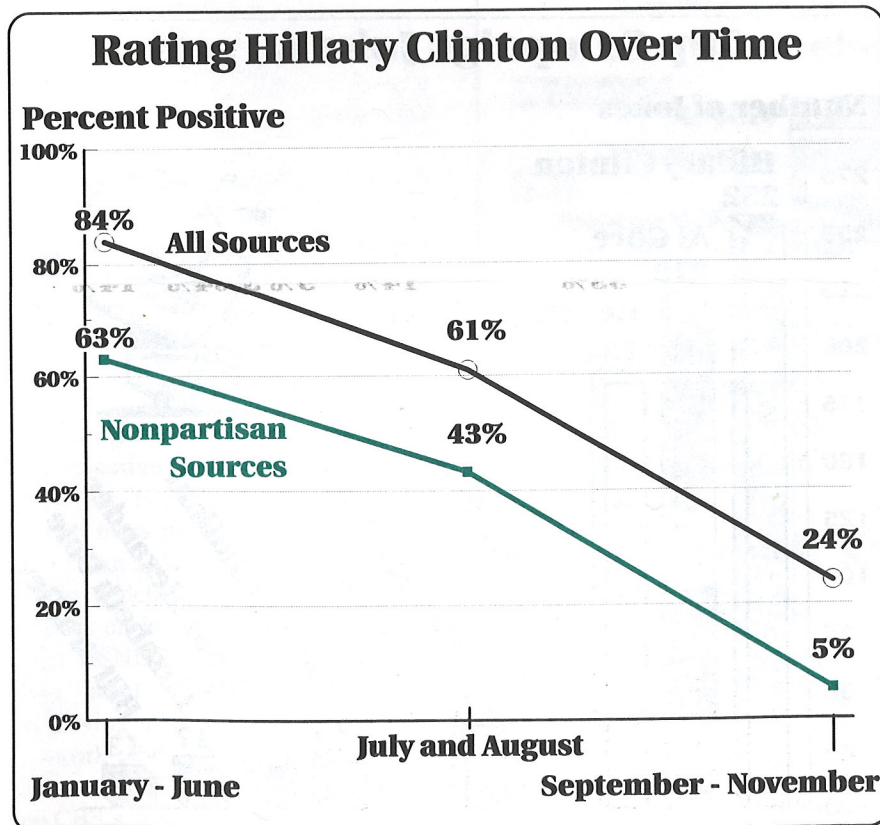
infrequently to permit further breakdowns of his media image. This was also the case for all other declared and undeclared presidential hopefuls.

Horse race evaluations were especially significant in setting the tone of early election news. Throughout the campaign pre-season, viewers of the network nightly news saw discussions that focused more on the candidates’ viability than on their desirability. For instance, out of 456 evaluative statements directed toward Gov. Bush, more than half (53%) were assessments of his political prospects. Only 14 percent concerned his job performance or stance on policy issues. For Mr. Gore it was almost the same. Of the 303 evaluations that aired, 46 percent concerned his political status and only 14 percent were directed toward his job performance or policy stances.

## The Hillary Factor

One reason political news was light on the upcoming presidential primary season was the buzz generated by rumors that First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton would run for the New York Senate seat, left open by the retirement of Senator Patrick Moynihan. This shifted the campaign news spotlight onto her; 107 stories have focused on the First Lady as a potential candidate since January 1. By contrast, her probable but undeclared challenger, New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, was featured in only 12 stories. Indeed, Mrs. Clinton’s candidacy has attracted more coverage than any presidential candidate has received.

Mrs. Clinton’s media image proved exceptional not only in terms of the amount of coverage she attracted, but also in the dramatic shifts in the tone of her coverage. Overall, her on-air



evaluations conform to the same problematic pattern as that of Mr. Gore and Mr. Buchanan – fairly good ratings on desirability but poor marks on viability. Throughout the year, comments on the desirability of her candidacy were positive by a three to two margin (59% positive), but comments of her prospects for election (horse race ratings) were negative by about the same three to two margin (58% negative). The greatest strength in Mrs. Clinton’s media image has come from her policy stands, which generated 65 percent good press. Her greatest weakness has been her conduct on the campaign trail, which was rated favorably by only 30 percent of sources.

However, these overall totals mask a significant downturn in Mrs. Clinton’s media image since last summer. During the first half of the year, from January through June, she received a remarkable 84 percent desirability rating – better than any presidential candidate. During July and August her good press slipped to 61 percent positive and from September through November, it slumped to a mere 24 percent positive – a three to one negative margin during the fall. The falloff in good press was even more dramatic among nonpartisan sources, since many of Mrs. Clinton’s supportive sound bites came from Democratic party members. Among nonpartisans only, her good press fell from 63 percent positive (January through June) to 43 percent positive (July and August) and then to a mere five percent positive (September through November). Much of the criticism stemmed from her embrace of Mrs. Arafat, her response to her husband’s clemency offer to convicted Puerto Rican terrorists, and various allegations about her “carpetbagger” status as a nonresident of New York State. Mrs. Clinton’s horse race coverage has followed the same downward spiral, dropping from 60 percent positive evaluations from January through June, to 38 percent

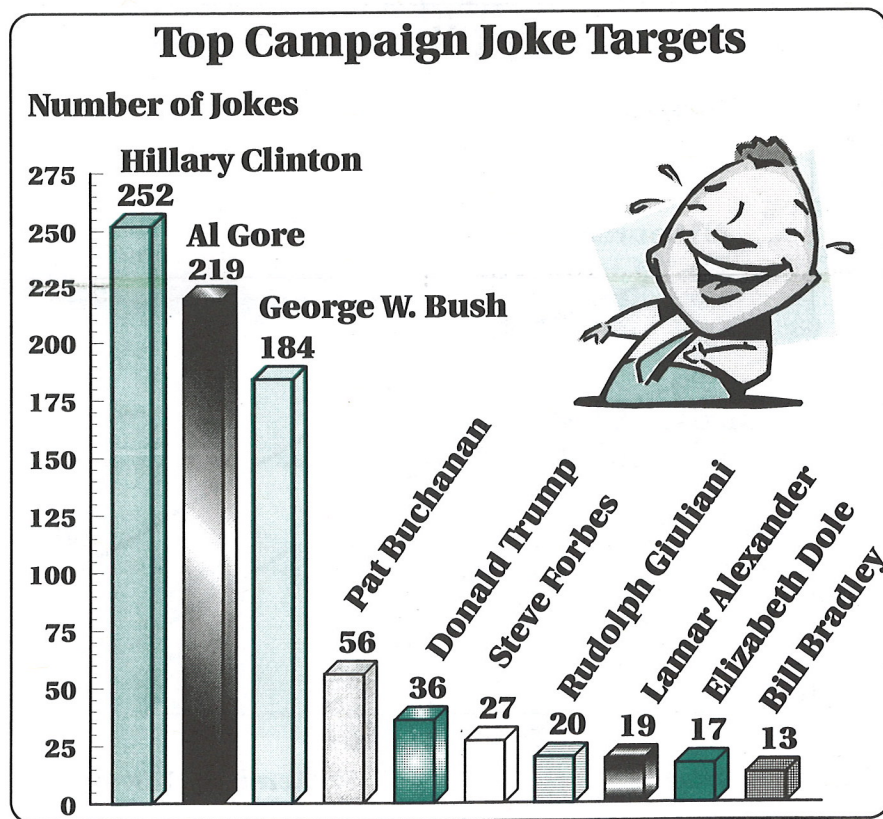
positive in July and August, and only 17 percent positive, a five to one negative ratio, since September.

Perhaps the best news for the First Lady in the trend line is that her network news image has nowhere to go but up. But the second best piece of news for her is that her prospective Republican opponent, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, has also gotten mostly bad press on the network news – only 32 percent positive comments, a two to one negative margin throughout 1999. However, Mr. Giuliani’s media profile is also much lower. He has received fewer than one-sixth as many evaluations as the First Lady during the election pre-season.

categorized jokes about public figures in the late night talk show monologues of Jay Leno, David Letterman, Conan O’Brien and Bill Maher (host of “Politically Incorrect”). The early start to the 2000 political season provided much material for them. Befitting her tendency to overshadow the presidential hoopla in the media, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton took top honors (252 jokes). Following close behind were the two frontrunners for the presidential nominations, Vice President Gore (219 jokes) and Governor George W. Bush (184 jokes). Thereafter, the joke totals dropped off sharply. Reform Party hopeful Pat Buchanan was the butt of 56 jokes, and his potential opponent Donald Trump was the recipient of 36. Rounding out the ten most joked about candidates were Steve Forbes (27), Rudolph Giuliani (20), Lamar Alexander (19), Elizabeth Dole (17), and Bill Bradley (13). But none of the presidential wannabees could compete with the comic

### The Joke’s On . . .

Throughout 1999 CMPA researchers have recorded and



potential of the current incumbent. President Bill Clinton has attracted 1,175 jokes this year, far more than all candidates for state and national elective offices combined.

**Sample Jokes:**

☺ “Did you see Hillary Clinton’s official campaign bumper sticker? It was released today. ‘I’ll pay more attention to your state than I do to my husband’.” –*Leno 7/26/99*

☺ “Hillary Clinton is in Israel – and kind of a surprise today – she

announced that she’s running for the Knesset.” –*Letterman 11/11/99*

☺ “Bill Bradley is a pretty boring guy. Give you an idea how boring he is – do you know what Bill Bradley’s Secret Service code name is? Al Gore.” –*Leno 10/19/99*

☺ “America, we’re told, is the land where anybody can grow up to be President. But I think even Betsy Ross would have added, ‘Yeah, but for God’s sake, not Donald Trump.’” –*Maher 10/24/99*

☺ “You know what is going on in New Hampshire tonight? The first presidential debate with Al Gore and Bill Bradley . . . The debate was so boring, the state is changing its official slogan from ‘Live Free or Die,’ to ‘Please Kill Me.’” –*Letterman 10/27/99*

☺ “Today, Bush introduced a new foreign policy initiative. This is very clever. He hopes all world leaders will follow this – name tags.” –*Leno 11/11/99*

Note: The wording of some jokes has been altered slightly for brevity.

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