

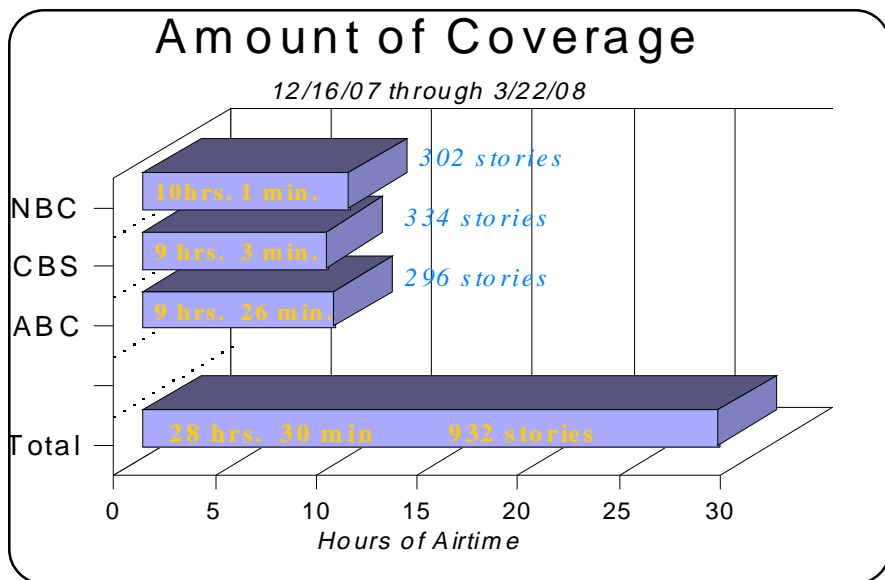
Election Watch '08: The Primaries

How TV News Covered the GOP and Democratic Primaries

How have the TV networks covered the presidential primary elections so far this year? This special report on Campaign 2008 shows how the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows covered the Republican and Democratic primaries from December 16, 2007, including the most intense phase of campaigning for the January 3 Iowa caucuses, until March 22, 2008, and all but eight of the fifty states had held primaries or caucuses, and the competitive phase of the primaries was effectively over.

Major Findings

- ◆ **Obama Leads** Barack Obama got 3 to 1 positive press *page 4*
- ◆ **Hillary Lags** Senator Clinton's coverage was about evenly balanced *page 4*
- ◆ **Last and Least** John McCain got the worst press and least coverage of the three *page 5*
- ◆ **Nobody Backs Clinton?** Hillary Clinton's press was 2 to 1 negative on NBC *page 6*
- ◆ **Dems Beat GOP** Coverage of all Democratic candidates combined was 2 to 1 positive; a majority of GOP candidates' coverage was negative *page 5*
- ◆ **Horse Race Wins** Over half of all stories featured the candidates' campaign strategies *page 3*
- ◆ **Issues Lose** Only one in seven stories dealt with their policies *page 3*
- ◆ **McCain's Issues Lose** 4 out of 5 sources criticized McCain's policies *page 6*



McCain. Obama leads Clinton by 358 to 342 stories, and McCain trails well behind with 234, about two-thirds as many as his Democratic counterparts. Obama and Clinton received virtually identical amounts of coverage prior to Super Tuesday (206 and 207 stories).

McCain has never held the spotlight for long – his 61 stories trailed his rivals Romney (68) and Mike Huckabee (70) in the Iowa and New Hampshire campaigns, and his 97 stories barely exceeded Romney’s 94 from New Hampshire to Super Tuesday. Since then McCain has stayed in the shadow of the Democratic race, receiving only half as many stories as Obama (76 v. 152).

A notable feature of this year’s

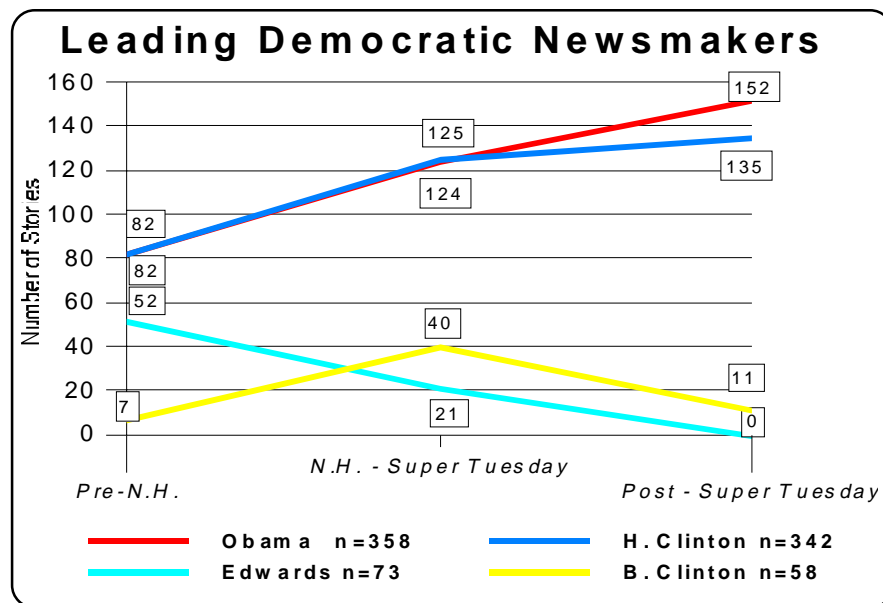
Amount of Coverage

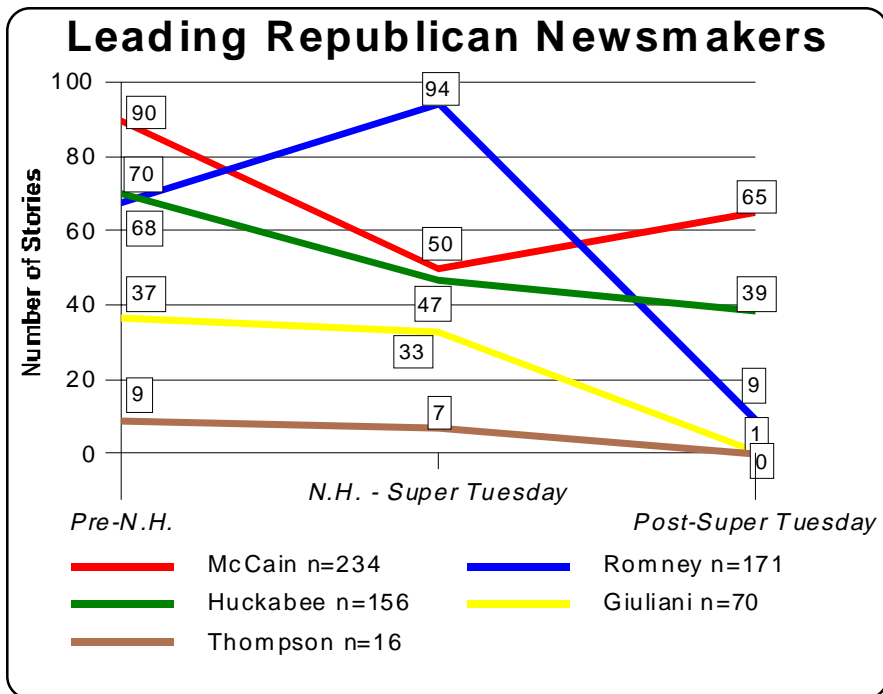
As of March 22, the three networks have devoted a combined 932 stories and 28 hours 30 minutes of airtime to the presidential primaries. CBS carried the largest number of stories (334), but NBC devoted the most airtime to election news (10 hours 1 minute).

Note: Our election year tallies from 1988 to 2004 began on Jan. 1. This year we began two weeks earlier, on Dec. 16, 2007, as a result of the historically early dates of the Iowa caucuses (Jan. 3) and New Hampshire primary (Jan. 8). This Media Monitor covers the period December 16 to March 22.

Candidate Coverage

The extended Democratic race has produced more coverage for both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton than for GOP nominee-designate John





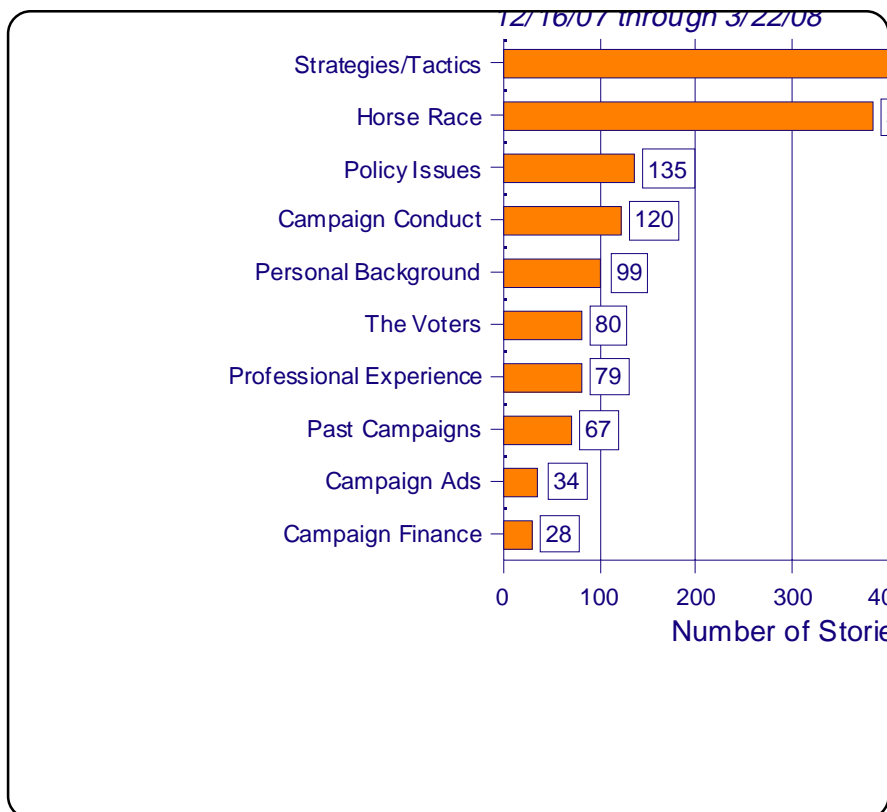
race were the topics of 383 stories. Stories that debated policy issues finished a distant third with 135 stories.

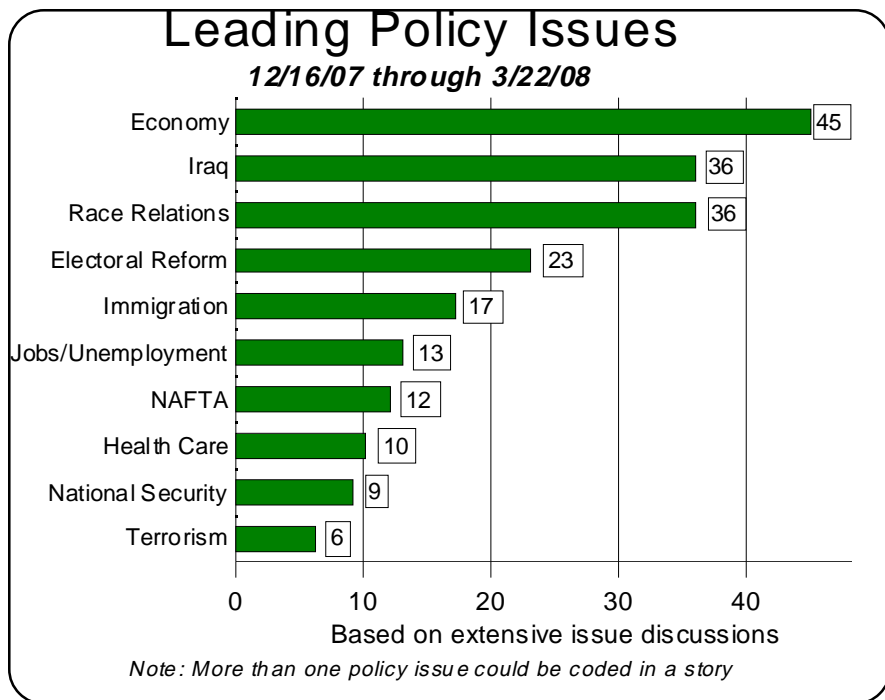
Other frequent topics included the candidates' personal backgrounds, professional experience, and behavior on the campaign trail, along with the electorate and past campaigns. Campaign ads and campaign finance issues, hot topics in some previous election cycles, barely made the top ten so far in 2008.

Democratic primaries was the role played by former president Bill Clinton. He has been the subject of 58 stories, nearly as many as two of the major candidates — John Edwards (73) and Rudy Giuliani (70). Mr Clinton's coverage was concentrated in the New Hampshire to Super Tuesday period (40 stories).

Campaign Topics

In a campaign that featured relatively few ideological clashes, the horse race dominated the coverage. The candidates' strategies and tactics produced 527 stories, and their standings and prospects in the





Battle for Good Press

Our study confirms the widespread perception that Barack Obama has benefited from positive press coverage. He led all candidates in the race for good press with 75% positive evaluations from reporters and nonpartisan sources.* In contrast to Obama's 3 to 1 ratio of good to bad press, Hillary Clinton's coverage was relatively balanced with 53% positive and 47% negative comments. (John Edwards received too few evaluations for meaningful comparisons.)

Policy Issues

It's no surprise that the economy and Iraq were the most frequent topics of policy debates. But Barack Obama's candidacy produced an unusual amount of attention to race relations – stories dealing with race were as frequent as stories about the Iraq war. (This time period includes the first appearance of Obama's controversial pastor in the campaign debate, but not Rev. Wright's return to the media spotlight in late April).

Coverage of electoral reform was occasioned by the Democrats' debate over seating convention delegations from

Michigan and Florida. No other policy issue garnered as many as 20 stories. This group of also-rans included such hot-button issues as health care reform, immigration, NAFTA, national security, and the war against terrorism.

* We report the evaluations by non-partisan sources, excluding comments by the candidates and campaigns about each other, because research shows that non-partisan sources have the most influence on public opinion, and they are also more subject to the discretion of reporters.

Good Press (% Positive Evaluations)

12/16/07 – 3/22/08

<u>Dems</u>	Total	N
Hillary Clinton	53%	195
Barack Obama	75%	275
All Dems	66%	483
<u>GOP</u>		
John McCain	46%	186
Mitt Romney	44%	59
Mike Huckabee	58%	76
All GOP	44%	349
ALL CANDIDATES	57%	832

Among the major Republican candidates, Mike Huckabee received the best press – 58% positive. The other major candidates both attracted a majority of negative comments – only 46% positive for McCain and 44% positive for Romney. McCain’s poor showing is especially noteworthy in light of his reputation as a favorite with reporters, which was borne out by his more favorable coverage (62% positive) during the 2000 primaries.

Overall, Democrats are leading in the battle for good press, with 66% positive evaluations of all candidates combined vs. 44% positive for the Republican field.

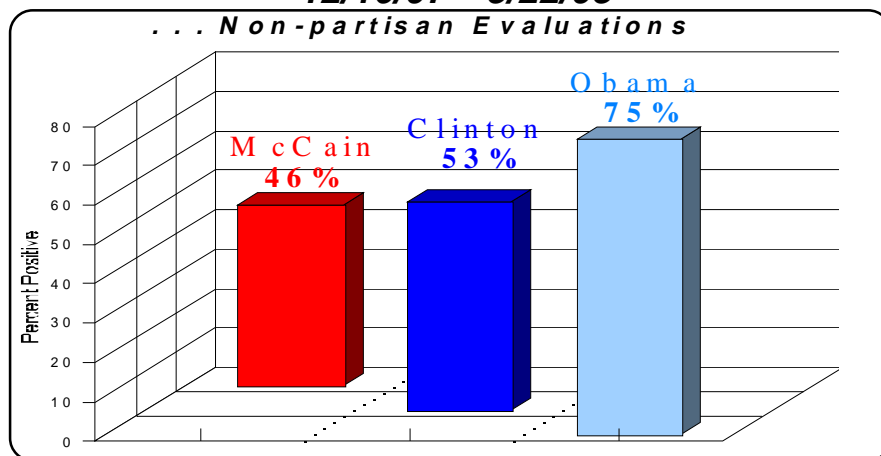
Examples:

[Obama’s] message is one of change and reconciliation, not protest and looking back at old wounds. – Donna Brazile, ABC

[Obama] represents a kind of racial overcoming... If [he] were to become president... America could say... “We are not a racist society.” — Author Shelby Steele, ABC

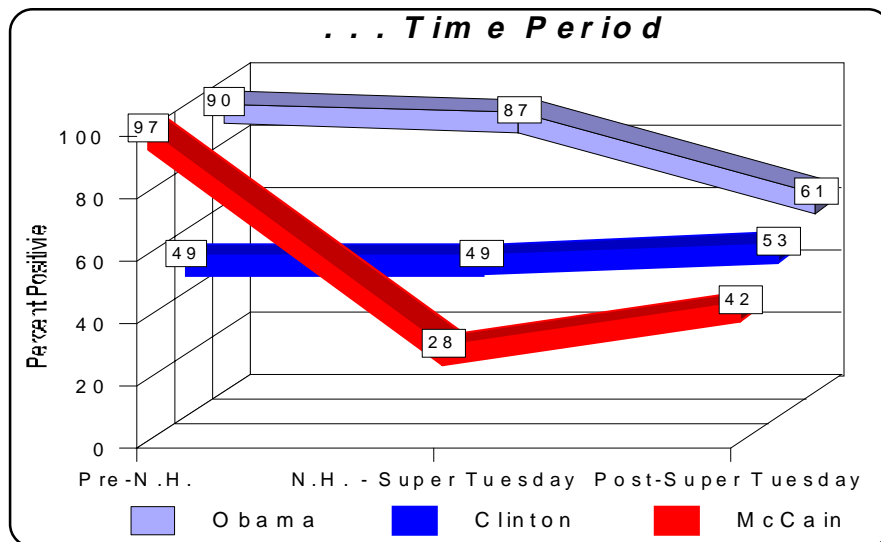
Critics say [Sen. Clinton’s] best-known Senate vote, on Iraq, was based on politics, not principle. – Andrea Mitchell, NBC

Good Press - Major Candidates* (% Positive Evaluations) 12/16/07 - 3/22/08



... by Network

	McCain	Clinton	Obama
ABC	42%	65%	70%
CBS	46%	56%	80%
NBC	49%	33%	73%



... by Attribute

	McCain	Clinton	Obama
Policies	19%	52%	49%
Campaign Behavior	0	32%	62%
Good President?	69%	45%	86%

* breakdowns are based on non-partisan evaluations

Bill Clinton's off-message remarks ... underscore Obama's key argument that ... Hillary Clinton is the past. – John Harwood, NBC

John McCain is not the choice of conservatives. – Rush Limbaugh, CBS

The Democrats will tie the war around [McCain's] neck and it will be almost impossible for him to win. – Stuart Rothenberg, ABC

Good Press - The Big Three

We examined the media images of the three remaining candidates in greater detail. Overall, Obama is far ahead with 75% positive press, compared to roughly balanced coverage for Clinton (53% positive) and McCain (46% positive). Both Obama and McCain received similar treatment on all three networks. But the picture was quite different for Clinton, whose image was favorable on ABC (65% positive) and CBS (56% positive) but unfavorable on NBC (only 33% positive).

Clinton's troubles on NBC are especially notable in light of the putative emergence of MSNBC as a liberal alternative to the conservative Fox News, with commentators like Keith Olbermann and Chris Matthews displaying on-air sympathy toward Obama's candidacy.

If Clinton's media profile varies by network, it has been constant over time, with almost no change in tone over the three month period we studied. By contrast, Obama's and McCain's levels of good press declined over time.

Obama sustained a remarkable proportion of good press – nearly 90% positive – through Super Tuesday. After that he faltered somewhat, suffering from his association with Rev. Jeremiah Wright and his comments about “bitter” small-town voters clinging to guns and religion. Even so, his post-Super Tuesday press remained 61% positive, still the best showing among the three remaining candidates in the race.

McCain's fortunes fell much harder and faster. Prior to New Hampshire his coverage was almost unanimously (97%) favorable, an even better showing than Obama's. After his New Hampshire victory, however, his proportion of favorable evaluations sank to only 28% positive, before rebounding slightly to 42% positive after Super Tuesday.

Although McCain's decline was unusually precipitous, it is in keeping with the historical tendency of campaign news to

focus the greatest scrutiny on frontrunners, which is what McCain became after New Hampshire. This makes Obama's continuance of mainly positive coverage, at a time when the press corps had already anointed him as the presumptive Democratic nominee, seem all the more remarkable.

Finally, the three candidates charted quite different media profiles according to the aspect of their candidacies that was being evaluated. In addition to general expressions of support or opposition, three categories of evaluations showed up most frequently in the coverage – evaluations of a candidate's policies and proposals, behavior on the campaign trail, and prospects for success in the White House.

Clinton actually bested Obama in evaluations of issue stances, by 52% to 49% positive comments. By contrast, four out of every five judgments of McCain's policies (81%) were negative. Obama shined on the other two dimensions – first, his portrayal as an inspirational figure on the campaign trail (62% positive), in contrast to Clinton's portrayal as a negative or divisive force (only 32% positive); and second, in predictions of what kind of presi-

dent he would make – 86% positive, compared to only 45% who expressed similar optimism about Clinton. This was also an area of strength for McCain, who garnered 69% positive projections of his abilities as the nation’s chief executive.

The Horse Race

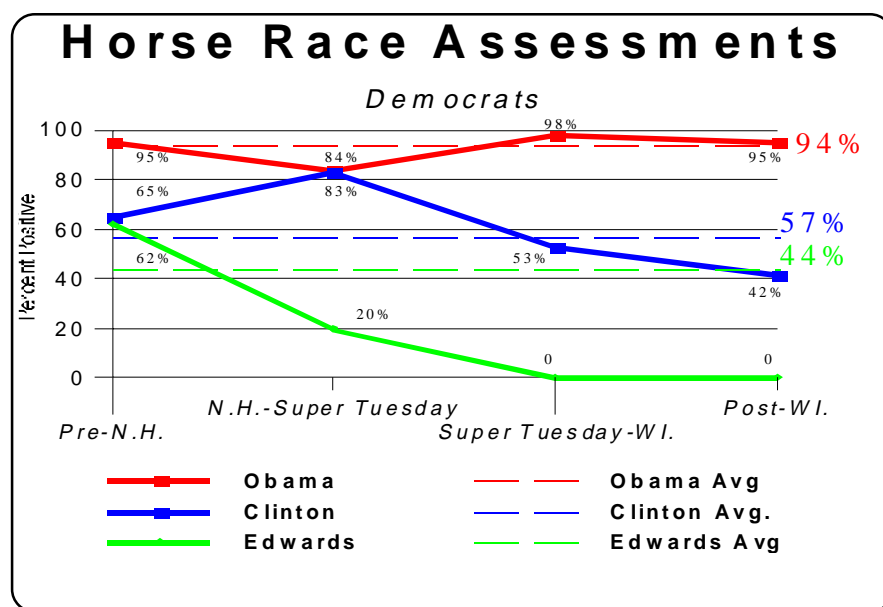
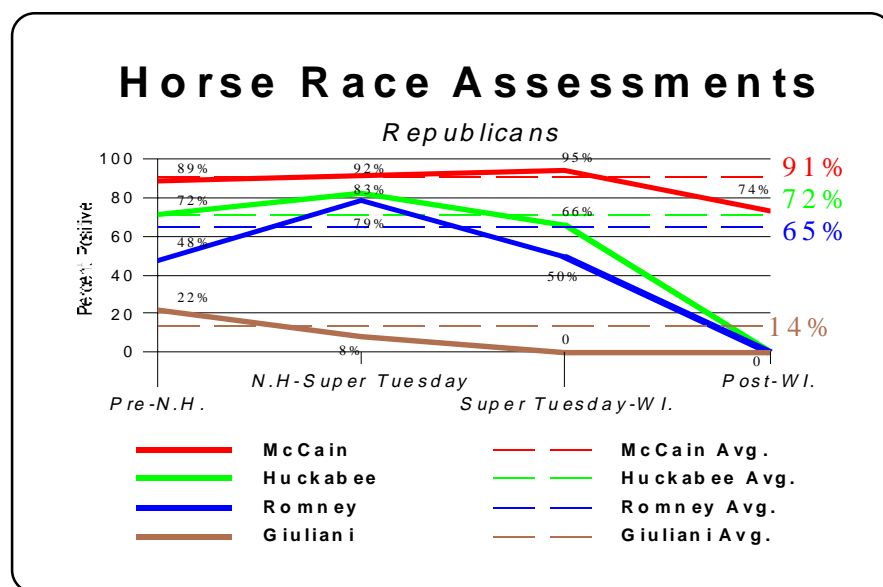
Our measure of good press is based on opinions about a candidate’s desirability, not his or her viability. We compute evaluations of the horse race separately. This year’s tally shows that Obama and McCain stood out for their uniformly positive horse race coverage throughout the study period.

Among the Democrats, John Edward’s brief surge of optimistic coverage couldn’t withstand his poor showings in Iowa and New Hampshire. Hillary Clinton received mostly positive horse race coverage early on, and especially after her victory in New Hampshire. Thereafter opinion on her prospects declined, while Obama was presented as the party’s nominee in all but name.

Although assessments of McCain’s chances stood out among Republicans, sources were also sanguine about the

candidacies of Huckabee and Romney until Super Tuesday. Thereafter it was all McCain, although Huckabee continued to be praised for his better-than-expected performance in

the race, in contrast to his better known competitors Romney and Giuliani.



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E-mail: Mail@cmpa.com • **On the Web:** www.cmpa.com • Phone: 202-223-2942 • Fax: 202-872-4014

Editor:

Dr. S. Robert Lichter

Research Director:

Daniel Amundson

Executive Director:

Donald Rieck

Production and Graphics:

Director of Administration:

Antonia Glynn

Research Assistants:

Matt Curry

**Center for Media
and Public Affairs**
2100 L Street, N.W. Suite 300
Washington, D.C. 20037