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WAS TV ELECTION NEWS BETTER THIS TIME? A Content Analysis of 1988 and 1992 Campaign Coverage

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INTRODUCTION

More than any recent presidential campaign, the 1988 campaign was criticized for shallowness and negativity, on the part of both the candidates and the news media. According to surveys, considerable numbers of voters were displeased with the campaign coverage. An October, 1988 poll showed nearly four voters in ten rated the press's campaign performance as only fair or poor. (Times Mirror, 1988) A majority of voters (57%) believed that news organizations tended to favor one side when reporting political issues, and half believed that news reports "are often inaccurate." (Times Mirror, 1989).

It was not just the public that was displeased. Various critics—among them academics, journalists, and even a few campaign handlers—cited a now-familiar litany: shrinking sound bites, a preoccupation with polls, intrusions into candidates' private lives, and a dearth of substantive policy coverage. The voters' ability to make an informed choice was the main casualty of this type of coverage.

According to these critics, candidate rhetoric focused on the trivial and the negative. Instead of challenging this trend, television news magnified it. Some candidates in 1988, notably then-Vice President George Bush, ran negative campaigns, but were not called to account by the news media. Television adopted an insider's perspective that relished describing and assessing the tactics of modern campaigns, while ignoring normative concerns about those tactics. Writing after the election, Marvin Kalb, a former network correspondent who now directs Harvard's media studies program, called the coverage "shallow and distinctly timid." (Kalb, 1988) He faulted television for not challenging the

candidates, particularly Bush.

Kalb and others argued that, with the decline of other political institutions, television had "acquired new responsibilities it did not seek and is poorly equipped to handle." (Kalb, 1988; also Germond and Witcover, 1989; Broder, 1990) According to this view, the atrophy of party organizations has left the media, particularly network television, responsible for instructing voters about the major issues, screening candidates for their qualifications, and disciplining those candidates whose tactics crossed the threshold of fairness. In 1988, these critics charged, television failed to meet its new obligations.

This indictment of 1988 became the intellectual foundation for efforts to reform coverage in advance of the 1992 election. Myriad articles, speeches, books and symposia were dedicated to this effort during the three years between the two campaigns. The result was an unusual consensus on some initial steps to improve political campaigns by changing television's approach to covering them. These included calls for more news coverage of substantive issues, increased vigilance against deceptive campaign advertising, and increased assertiveness in setting the campaign agenda. (Broder, 1990; Russert, 1990) The *Washington Post's* influential reporter/columnist David Broder called on political reporters to "become partisan—not on behalf of a candidate or party—but on behalf of the process." (Broder, 1990).

Our content analysis of 1992 network news campaign coverage provided an unusual opportunity to examine these attempts to change the focus of election news. The coding scheme was virtually identical to that used in our previous analysis of 1988 election coverage. (Lichter, et al., 1988; Lichter, et. al, 1989) This permits a direct comparison of television's campaign coverage in 1988 and 1992, specifically in the areas of fairness and substance. Was the coverage better in 1992? And, at the end of the campaign, did it leave the public more satisfied than it was four years earlier?

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Content analysis research on television's campaign coverage has

concentrated on two areas. First, most studies seek to measure the relative amount and tone of coverage received by the various candidates. Second, many have measured the relative proportions of news going to matters of substance (i.e., policy issues) and hoopla (i.e., the campaign horse race). Early content studies concluded that, in its topical approach to campaign news, television is preoccupied with news about the "horse race," and much less likely to broadcast stories about public policy concerns. (Patterson and McClure, 1976; Patterson, 1980; Robinson and Sheehan, 1983) Critics have decried the superficiality of such a "horse racist" approach to coverage, which schools the electorate in the processes and stratagems of campaigns rather than informing them of the substantive consequences of their outcomes. Such coverage, it is argued, diminishes the value and meaning of the electoral process.

Effects researchers have documented the consequences of this paucity of policy coverage on voter learning. In 1976, Thomas Patterson found that, while voters learned about policy issues from watching extended coverage of the party conventions and the presidential debates on television, there were no increases in knowledge associated with daily news coverage. (Patterson, 1980) Analyzing the 1988 campaign, Drew and Weaver (1991) reported similar findings: voters learned a great deal from watching televised debates, but little from television's routine coverage.

Beginning with the 1984 campaign, however, researchers began to document a shift away from intense coverage of the campaign horse race. Reviewing the Reagan-Mondale contest, Clancey and Robinson (1985) discovered that "horse race journalism did not represent the most prevalent form of campaign reporting. Campaign issue pieces were emphasized instead." They defined campaign issues as non-policy concerns about how candidates and their campaigns should behave. Such campaign trail controversies frequently seem ephemeral or trivial. For example, in the 1984 general election, they found that nearly 40 percent of campaign news focused on campaign issues such as Reagan's "inaccessibility" to reporters and Bush's post-debate

boast about "kicking ass."

While campaign issues are arguably more relevant to voters than horse race news, they are seen by critics as no less a distraction from the real substance of a campaign. By focusing on campaign issues, the media shift the spotlight away from issues, parties and ideology, and instead highlight personalities and tactics. Coverage of campaign issues contributes nothing to voter knowledge of substantive policy issues.

In addition to the agenda of campaign news, much content analysis has addressed the tone and balance of candidate coverage. Many studies have found that the media report favorably on certain candidates while treating others more skeptically. (Graber, 1984; Robinson and Sheehan, 1983; Adams, 1984; Lichter, et. al., 1988) Robinson and Sheehan (1983) have suggested that a "frontrunner bias" accounts for much of this variation. They argue that candidates who lead in public opinion polls are subjected to more journalistic scrutiny than challengers or underdogs. Studies of both primary and general election contests have added considerable credence to this theory since 1980.

In 1984 challenger Gary Hart received a large volume of good press after the Iowa caucuses and then beat frontrunner Walter Mondale in the New Hampshire primary. After New Hampshire, the new frontrunner was the subject of a series of negative television reports, and Hart subsequently lost to Mondale in several Super Tuesday contests. (Adams, 1984) Later in 1984, frontrunner Reagan received substantially more negative press during the general election than underdog Mondale. (Robinson, 1985) Indeed, candidates and their campaign managers now attempt to influence news media perceptions of their viability. Campaigns routinely seek to pin the frontrunner label onto their rivals, at least until they have secured advantages that can withstand increased press scrutiny.

Thus, the idea of an anti-frontrunner bias, and the notion that television news avoids covering substance, have both become commonplace among politicians and media researchers. How well did these patterns of coverage hold up in the more self-conscious atmosphere of campaign journalism in 1992?

For both 1988 and 1992, we conducted a content analysis of all presidential campaign stories broadcast on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news programs between January 1 and election day. Stories were selected for analysis if they included references to the presidential campaign, or if they discussed one or more of the candidates as presidential contenders. Thus, if the story discussed Bush solely in his capacity as president, without mentioning the campaign, it was not included in the sample. This procedure produced a sample of 2,281 stories in 1988 and 2,386 stories in 1992.

To assess the substance of campaign news, we examined each report to see how much discussion there was of the campaign horse race, policy issues, and campaign issues, respectively. We calculated the share of coverage each topic received, using the total number of stories in each time period as the base. Each of these topics was coded independently. Thus, a story could have been coded as containing discussion of all three topics, or none of the three.

As Table 1 shows, campaign issues were more prominent in 1988 campaign coverage than were either policy issues or the horse race. Bush's choice of Dan Quayle as his running mate, and criticism over candidate tactics and the campaign process helped make campaign issues dominant during the conventions and general election phase. Horse race stories were dominant during the primary phase of the campaign, but were considerably less prominent during the fall.

Policy issues, however, were not neglected in 1988. Although the networks aired more stories about campaign issues and horse race over the course of the entire campaign, the share of news coverage devoted to policy matters increased significantly after the end of the primaries. From September through November, policy issues were extensively discussed in nearly 40 percent of network stories, double the rate of issue coverage during the primary phase. The networks aired more than 100 stories on the economy, national defense, and crime during the general election

Table 1
ELECTION NEWS TOPICS OVER TIME
1988 CAMPAIGN

	Primaries	Conv's	Gen. Election	TOTAL	(N)
Policy Issues	19%	30%	39%	28%	610
Campaign Issues	21%	44%	43%	35%	752
Horse Race	51%	12%	25%	31%	684
TOTAL STORIES	890	699	589	2,178	

Time Periods: Primaries 1/1/88-6/7/88; Conventions, 6/8/88-9/4/88; General Election, 9/5/88-11/7/88

Note — Totals do not equal 100% because more than one topic may have been coded per story, and table excludes less frequently covered topics such as past campaigns, nature of the electorate, etc.

phase alone. After the primaries, policy issues consistently received a greater share of coverage than did the horse race. Campaign issues overshadowed policy during the summer and fall, but they hardly drove them off the air.

In many ways, coverage of the 1992 election began where the previous campaign had ended. As Table 2 shows, news coverage during the 1992 primaries contained more frequent discussions of both policy and campaign issues than had been the case in the 1988 primaries, and less time spent on the campaign horse race. The heaviest concentration of issue stories occurred during the weeks prior to the New Hampshire primary, when few campaign trail events demanded coverage and network control over the news agenda was greatest. The networks ran lengthy features detailing the candidates' positions on the economy, education, health care, and other important issues. The frequency of issue stories ebbed as the weekly circuit of primary contests began, but increased after the New York primary. Overall, policy stories were broadcast about as often as horse race stories during the 1992 primaries. In 1988, horse race stories outnumbered policy stories by nearly three to one during the same phase of the campaign.

Campaign issues also received heavy coverage during the 1992 primaries, mainly as the result of allegations about Bill Clinton's character. Through the New York primary, a total of 207 network stories featured the Democratic frontrunner; a majority of those (105) raised questions about his character. The character cloud over Clinton raised the specter of 1988. Even the charges—adultery and draft dodging—were an echo of the previous campaign. But Clinton's primary victories largely succeeded in ending the wave of stories about his character.

Campaign issues declined in frequency during the next two phases of the 1992 campaign, but they remained a visible presence on the evening news. Clinton's character was revisited on occasion, but after the primaries it was raised mainly by Republicans, not reporters. Journalists themselves raised questions about the propriety of the Bush campaign's focus on Clinton's character. Journalists also squared off against the Perot campaign,

Table 2
ELECTION NEWS TOPICS OVER TIME
1992 CAMPAIGN

	Primaries	Conv's	Gen. Election	TOTAL	(N)
Policy Issues	32%	40%	32%	35%	829
Campaign Issues	33%	28%	32%	31%	739
Horse Race	33%	15%	35%	27%	649
TOTAL STORIES	828	830	728	2,386	

Time Periods: Primaries 1/1/92-6/2/92; Conventions, 6/3/92-9/6/92; General Election, 9/7/92-11/2/92

Note — Totals do not equal 100% because more than one topic may have been coded per story, and table excludes less frequently covered topics such as past campaigns, nature of the electorate, etc.

raising questions about his character and ability to serve as Chief Executive. For the year, the networks aired 739 campaign issue stories, compared with 752 such stories during 1988.

Policy issues, on the other hand, were given much greater prominence by the networks in 1992. For the year, the number of policy stories increased from 610 in 1988 to 829 in 1992, representing an increase from 28 percent to 35 percent of all campaign news. This represents an increase of 36 percent in the number of policy stories, and a 25 percent increase in the proportion of election coverage devoted to policy issues. Economic issues dominated the campaign, from New Hampshire through the fall presidential debates. The state of the economy was featured in 220 election reports, or nearly 10 percent of all campaign stories. Other economic matters also received heavy coverage, including taxes (147 stories), jobs (76 stories), and the deficit (71 stories).

The general election period saw the least attention paid to policy issues and the most given to the horse race, reversing the dynamics of coverage in 1988. Even the concentration of debates between October 11 and 19 seems to have increased horse race coverage at the expense of policy issues. Most stories during those eight days focused on who won or lost the debates, and any subsequent movement detected in public opinion polls. The substance of the debates was usually not repeated in post-debate coverage, except in stories detailing factual errors made by the candidates.

At first glance, it is difficult to explain why the amount of horse race coverage during the general election increased from 1988 to 1992. In each case, the frontrunner held a lead of about 6 to 10 percentage points throughout the fall. Bush took the lead in 1988 polls following the Republican convention in August, and his lead remained fairly solid during the general election. In 1992, Clinton took the lead after his July convention, and it remained intact for the rest of the campaign. For the most part, polling results showed no more variation in the fall of 1992 than they had in the fall of 1988. (Public Opinion, 1988; Roper Center, 1992)

The data show a substantial increase in horse race news after October 1, apparently the result of Perot's re-entry into the

race combined with the unique concentration of debates. For the last month of the campaign, the networks aired 196 horse race stories (compared to 137 on policy issues). During that time, the three major network news organizations generated their own new polls at the rate of nearly one per day (Roper Center, 1992), while also airing the results of polls conducted by rival networks (especially those of CNN). This cross-reporting of polls, which was not done in 1988, greatly increased horse race coverage in the campaign's final days.

Despite the attention given to the horse race in the final weeks of the campaign, the amount of policy coverage marks a shift from past network practices. This increase clearly represents a shifting of news priorities from 1988. Could this simply reflect changes in candidate behavior or real world events? Certainly, much of the issue agenda of the campaign had its basis in events, particularly the economic recession. Also, the 1992 race featured candidates such as Paul Tsongas, Ross Perot, and Bill Clinton, whose campaigns touted issues and policy proposals to a greater degree than typical candidates have in recent years (although past elections saw their share of issue-oriented candidates, in particular Reagan in 1980 and Jackson in 1984). These factors added to the amount of issue coverage in 1992, and helped shape the agenda of policy coverage.

But some of the increase in policy coverage is clearly due to the actions of the news organizations themselves. Not only had the networks signalled their intentions during the years between the 1988 and 1992 campaigns (Russert, 1990), but they had already begun to shift to a feature-oriented format marked by diminished attention to the news of the day. During the campaign, feature segments such as ABC's "American Agenda," CBS's "Eye on America," and NBC's "America Close Up" routinely departed from the campaign trail to provide contextual and thematic coverage of the issues and candidates. The "American Agenda," in particular, provided discussion of policy issues that was untainted by talk of campaign strategy or horse race considerations. The increased attention to policy in 1992 seems as much the result of intentional changes in approach by the journalists

who cover the campaign, as the result of changes in the campaign itself.

1988 vs. 1992: FAIRNESS

In examining the tone of candidate coverage, we have sought to make our results as comparable as possible with data from past research. Our methodology is based in large part on the groundbreaking studies of Michael Robinson, whose calculation of each candidate's good and bad press excluded the implications of events, polls, and the remarks of partisan sources, including the candidates themselves. Robinson analyzed the remaining source and reporter statements to obtain an overall score and categorized each story as "positive," "negative," or "neutral," based on the ratio of positive to negative opinions expressed. (Robinson and Sheehan, 1983; Clancey and Robinson, 1985)

Our analysis was also based on the opinions expressed by any independent observers quoted in the story, or on the stated views of reporters themselves. We set aside partisan sources for the same reason Robinson did, namely, because voters tend to give them less credence (Robinson and Sheehan, 1983; cf. Page, et. al., 1987). We counted only statements which explicitly evaluated a candidate's issue positions, job performance, conduct as a candidate, ethics, or personal behavior. (We also noted all assessments of the candidate's status in the campaign horse race, but analyzed those statements separately from our measure of good press.)

Unlike Robinson, however, we did not sum the opinions of all non-partisan sources to provide a story-based analysis of good press. Instead, our unit of analysis was the individual evaluative statement (or sound bite) of a source or reporter. This method of data collection enhanced our ability to describe the building-blocks of campaign coverage, while avoiding the ambiguity of "neutral" or "balanced" stories that might contain widely varying amounts of evaluative material. For example, one story might have contained three favorable comments about Michael Dukakis from voters, two negative comments from political

analysts, and a third negative comment from the correspondent herself. Another story might contain only one positive and one negative comment about Dukakis from two voters. Unlike a story-based analysis that codes both reports as equally "balanced," our system captures the differing amounts of opinion expressed, as well as the source, target, and direction of each evaluation.

For each time period we calculated the ratio of positive opinions to the total of directional opinions expressed about each candidate. Scores could range from entirely negative (0% positive) to entirely (100%) positive coverage.

Table 3 demonstrates the variability of good press for the candidates in 1988. Despite these individual variations, however, there was no strong tilt in favor of one political party over the other. Among the Democrats, Jesse Jackson, Lloyd Bentsen and Bruce Babbitt fared best, while Gary Hart received the least favorable publicity. Republicans Jack Kemp and Robert Dole received mainly favorable coverage, while Pat Robertson received mostly unfavorable coverage.

While aggregate valuations of the Democratic field were more favorable than those of their Republican counterparts (by 54 to 43 percent positive), these differences disappeared during the general election, when the two parties' candidates are directly compared. Indeed, most of the Democratic margin is accounted for by coverage of Jesse Jackson. Although Jackson was not treated as a viable candidate in 1984 (Broh, 1987), his 1988 primary showings helped change that perception. The newfound strength of his candidacy gave his campaign an historical significance as the first "serious" black presidential candidate, which endowed his coverage with a uniquely positive cast. Excluding remarks about Jackson, the Democratic field received 46 percent positive coverage, nearly identical to that of the Republicans. Coverage of the two presidential nominees, George Bush and Michael Dukakis, was virtually identical in tone (43% positive each).

In general, the 1988 data lend greater support to a hypothesis of "frontrunner bias" than to one of partisan bias. Democratic

Table 3
EVALUATIONS OF CANDIDATES OVER TIME—1988
(PERCENT POSITIVE)

	Primaries	Conventions	Gen. Election	TOTAL	(N)
BUSH	52%	46%	37%	43%	318
QUAYLE	—	41	19	34	83
DOLE	62	—	—	62	37
ROBERTSON	37	—	—	37	57
KEMP	56	—	—	56	9
DUKAKIS	57	47	32	43	336
BENTSEN	—	87	100	92	24
JACKSON	73	92	—	76	171
GORE	48	—	—	48	21
GEPHARDT	62	—	—	62	39
SIMON	63	—	—	63	8
BABBITT	80	—	—	80	5
HART	10	—	—	10	21
ALL REPUBS	50	44	34	43	508
ALL DEMS	<u>62</u>	<u>63</u>	<u>35</u>	<u>54</u>	<u>625</u>
ALL CANDS	57%	53%	34%	49%	1,133

Time Periods: Primaries 1/1/88-6/7/88; Conventions, 6/8/88-9/4/88; General Election, 9/5/88-11/7/88

Note — No report for candidates with fewer than five evaluations.

frontrunner Dukakis consistently received more negative coverage than Jackson, his nearest rival. Republican frontrunner Bush received heavy criticism (72% negative) prior to the Iowa caucuses, where he placed third behind Dole and Robertson. After Iowa, however, Bush was no longer considered the frontrunner, and he received his first good press of the primary season (79% positive). After Bush's New Hampshire victory a week later, his coverage became less positive (57% positive for the remainder of the primaries).

But some candidates were given largely unfavorable press in spite of their longshot status. News coverage of Democrat Gary Hart and Republican Pat Robertson was mainly negative. In Hart's case, much of the criticism came during the spring of 1987, when he was still the putative frontrunner in the still-forming Democratic field (Lichter et. al., 1988). But coverage of Hart remained distinctly critical after he re-entered the race in late 1987, despite the fact that his support in the polls was much reduced. Only ten percent of evaluations of Hart were favorable during the primary season, the lowest of any candidate.

News coverage of Robertson was also mainly negative, even after his New Hampshire loss effectively ended any chance of his securing the Republican nomination. The candidate continued to receive considerable scrutiny of his ministry, his beliefs, and questions over the factual accuracy of many of his statements. After New Hampshire, only 18 percent of the opinions expressed about Robertson on the news were positive.

The cases of Hart and Robertson refute the notion that the press failed in 1988 to accept the responsibility of screening out unacceptable candidates, a function once performed by political party bosses. Coverage of both men was dominated by questions about their personal character and temperamental ability to serve as president. Both also received a large volume of news coverage, far more than other candidates with similar poll standings.

But the most striking feature of the 1988 general election is the precision with which coverage of the two presidential nominees was balanced. Dukakis and Bush received a nearly identical number of evaluations (318 to 336, respectively), and

virtually identical proportions of unfavorable press (57% negative).

This balance, once the sort of statistic journalists would cite to prove their political independence, was condemned by some critics of the 1988 coverage. Writing in *Newsweek* shortly after the election, Jonathan Alter stated that "By almost any standard, Bush slung several tons more mud than Dukakis, who for weeks was criticized for not fighting back. But misguided ideas of fairness required that reporters implicate both equally, lest they be seen as taking sides. . . . Fear of seeming slanted overcame any interest in reporting a larger truth." (Alter, 1988) Others shared this view of a press corps that "bent over backwards not to seem at all critical of the Republicans." (Miller, 1988) In this view, it would have been more "fair" to subject Bush to greater criticism, and thus give Dukakis more favorable coverage in light of Bush's campaign conduct.

The rejection of mechanistic "balance" in favor of more subjective "fairness" permeated many of the reform proposals which followed 1988. In particular, journalists were encouraged to take issue with campaign statements or advertisements which were clearly unfair, incomplete, or misleading in their depiction of the facts. Such an approach, it was hoped, would prevent future candidates from dominating the agenda with messages considered beyond the bounds of fairness. Coupled with calls for increased attention to policy issues and less discussion of the campaign horse race, these changes offered television viewers the prospect of a markedly different view of the campaign and the candidates in 1992. (Broder, 1990; Russert, 1990; Barone Center, 1991)

As Table 4 shows, the two parties received substantially different coverage in 1992. Every Democratic candidate received more favorable coverage than any Republican. While some Democrats, notably Albert Gore, Paul Tsongas and Bob Kerrey, did better than others, no Democrat fared as poorly as independent Ross Perot (48 percent positive evaluations). Perot, in turn, received much more favorable coverage than either George Bush or Dan Quayle, who each received roughly three times as many

Table 4
EVALUATIONS OF CANDIDATES OVER TIME—1992
(PERCENT POSITIVE)

	Primaries	Conventions	Gen. Election	TOTAL	(N)
BUSH	16%	30%	31%	27%	926
QUAYLE	22	35	16	28	65
BUCHANAN	48	—	—	48	54
CLINTON	44	53	52	50	644
GORE	—	95	54	78	32
BROWN	51	—	—	51	89
TSONGAS	73	—	—	73	62
HARKIN	54	—	—	54	13
KERREY	71	—	—	71	21
PEROT	65	43	45	48	426
STOCKDALE	—	—	57	57	16
ALL REPUBS	22	31	30	28	1,045
ALL DEMS	52	57	52	53	861
ALL PEROT	<u>65</u>	<u>43</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>48</u>	<u>442</u>
ALL CANDS	42%	40%	41%	41%	2,348

Time Periods: Primaries 1/1/92-6/2/92; Conventions, 6/3/92-9/6/92; General Election, 9/7/92-11/2/92

Note — No report for candidates with fewer than five evaluations.

unfavorable as favorable evaluations. The differences between the parties existed in the primary, convention, and general election phases of the campaign.

As in 1988, coverage during the primaries was typically most negative toward frontrunners. Bush received less favorable coverage than his main challenger, Pat Buchanan, while Democrat Bill Clinton received less favorable coverage than his chief rivals, Paul Tsongas and Jerry Brown. During the primaries, only 44 percent of sources expressed favorable opinions about Clinton, while his rivals combined for 61 percent favorable evaluations.

Even Perot's coverage fits the frontrunner hypothesis. Perot began to receive coverage as a prospective candidate in late March. Through the end of the primaries on June 2, Perot had received largely favorable coverage (65% positive). On June 3 large percentages of primary voters in several states told exit pollsters that they would have voted for Perot had he been on the ballot. Results indicated Perot might have beaten Bush among California Republicans and Clinton among Ohio Democrats. A CNN poll taken June 3-4 showed Perot with 37 percent of the general election vote, compared with 24 percent each for Clinton and Bush.

Despite the fact that no third candidate had ever won the presidency before, the poll results validated perceptions of Perot as the frontrunner of a three-way race. For the next six weeks, until he withdrew from the race on July 16, the tone of Perot's media coverage grew increasingly critical. Reporters began investigations into his business practices and perceived inconsistencies in his stated record. In the final week of his campaign, televised comments about Perot were nearly 80 percent negative.

Thus, the Perot candidacy fit the pattern: a candidate develops support while receiving mainly good press, but then reaches frontrunner status, receives increased criticism, and loses support. This is the same pattern described by content analysts reaching back to 1980. Candidates from John Anderson to Gary Hart to George Bush (in 1980 and 1988), Bob Dole, Jesse Jackson and Paul Tsongas have alternately benefitted and suffered from its consistent application over the years.

But an interesting development occurred during the 1992 conventions and general election period. In 1988, the tone of Dukakis' and Bush's coverage had converged during the convention phase, and remained in synch for the rest of the campaign. But during the convention phase in 1992, Bush received only 30 percent positive evaluations, compared with over 50 percent positive evaluations for Clinton. During the general election phase, the situation was virtually unchanged, with 31 percent good press for Bush, compared with 52 percent positive press for Clinton.

While other phases of the 1992 campaign also showed wide variations in the favorable coverage of various candidates, what makes this discrepancy noteworthy is the relative polling positions of Bush and Clinton. Clinton led, and Bush trailed, in every poll taken after the Democratic convention, and Clinton's lead averaged over 10 percentage points during the fall. (Roper Center, 1992)

It was not only polls which painted Clinton as a likely winner. As Table 5 shows, comments by reporters themselves on television newscasts also described Bush as badly trailing the Democrat. After the primaries ended, fewer than one in four reporter statements ever reflected favorably on Bush's status or chances in the presidential race. After the Democratic convention, when Clinton solidified his lead in opinion polls, never less than three out of four reporter statements rated favorably Clinton's chances or status in the campaign horse race.

Thus, Clinton remained the frontrunner throughout the final four months of the 1992 campaign, both in the statistical findings of public opinion polls, and in the perceptions of reporters following the race. Yet, as Table 6 shows, the tone of Clinton's coverage was more favorable than that of Bush during every phase of the campaign (and, following the Democratic Convention, more favorable than that of Ross Perot). In no other content analysis of a presidential election has a clear frontrunner received, over a sustained period of time, more favorable coverage than his rivals.

How could a hypothesis that has proven so accurate in the

Table 5
REPORTER ASSESSMENTS OF CANDIDATES STATUS'
IN HORSE RACE—1992
(PERCENT POSITIVE)

(N)	Pre-Dem Conv	Dem Conv	Pre-Rep Conv	Rep Conv	Pre- Perot	Pre- Debate	Debate	Final Days
BUSH 980	14%	12%	23%	9%	19%	16%	5%	23%
CLINTON 752	41	90	90	89	75	82	98	78
PEROT 484	70	16	—	—	69	16	42	55

Time Periods: Pre-Democratic Convention, 6/3/92-7/10/92; Democratic Convention, 7/11/92-7/19/92; Pre-Republican Convention, 7/20/92-8/14/92; Republican Convention, 8/15/92-8/23/92; Pre-Perot, 8/24/92-9/30/92; Pre-Debate, 10/1/92-10/10/92; Debates, 10/11/92-10/19/92; Final Days, 10/20/92-11/2/92

Table 6
EVALUATIONS OF CANDIDATES OVER TIME—1992
(PERCENT POSITIVE)

(N)	Pre-Dem Conv	Dem Conv	Pre-Rep Conv	Rep Conv	Pre- Perot	Pre- Debate	Debate	Final Days
BUSH 694	16%	47%	22%	38%	25%	43%	24%	41%
CLINTON 454	34	55	65	62	39	61	83	52
PEROT 346	52	21	—	—	37	07	67	51

Time Periods: Pre-Democratic Convention, 6/3/92-7/10/92; Democratic Convention, 7/11/92-7/19/92; Pre-Republican Convention, 7/20/92-8/14/92; Republican Convention, 8/15/92-8/23/92; Pre-Perot, 8/24/92-9/30/92; Pre-Debate, 10/1/92-10/10/92; Debates, 10/11/92-10/19/92; Final Days, 10/20/92-11/2/92.

past fail to predict the tone of candidate coverage in this instance? One explanation might be that the anti-frontrunner bias in general election contests has actually been a surrogate for partisan bias. From 1980 through 1988, the frontrunner in the fall campaign has been a conservative Republican; only in 1992 was there a Democratic frontrunner. But this explanation falls short. In 1980, Reagan and Carter each received roughly equal amounts of negative coverage (Robinson and Sheehan, 1983); in 1988, Bush and Dukakis received equally of unfavorable coverage (Lichter, et. al., 1989) If there is a bias against conservative Republicans, it should have been evident in both those years as well.

Alternatively, there might be an anti-incumbency bias at work. Thus, incumbent Reagan received far more negative coverage than challenger Mondale in 1984. (Clancey and Robinson, 1985; Graber, 1987) Once again, though, that fails to explain the roughly equal amounts of bad press that Carter the incumbent and Reagan the challenger received in 1980.

Could Bush have been perceived as the frontrunner in spite of the polls, perhaps because of the power of his incumbent status? As we noted earlier, in the last four months of the campaign, reporters themselves spoke negatively about Bush's chances of winning by margins of between four-to-one and ten-to-one. (See Table 5) By the fall, campaign reporters clearly perceived Bush to be the underdog in the race, and said as much.

Perhaps 1992 was an aberration; only the 1996 campaign and those beyond will tell us whether this is the case. But we believe that another explanation is in order: Television has changed the rules of its campaign coverage. In attempting to referee the campaign, reporters have unwittingly created an environment in which their own values and beliefs take on increased importance. Further, in attempting to force the campaign to meet their own perceptions of fairness, reporters may actually have damaged their own credibility and public image.

SUMMARY/DISCUSSION

Much of what was new in television's coverage of the 1992

campaign came about in reaction to what was perceived as wrong with coverage of the 1988 campaign. Television news was criticized for being too constrained by campaign trail events, covering candidate sound bites, photo-opportunities, and attacks to the detriment of both substance and fairness. Our content analysis of that campaign casts doubt about this indictment of television's campaign role. We found that television's coverage of policy issues increased as the 1988 campaign progressed, while coverage of polls and the campaign "horse race" received diminished coverage over time. We also found no evidence that television coverage favored George Bush over Michael Dukakis.

Nonetheless, the perception that they had served the public poorly proved powerful enough to mobilize the networks to reform their coverage. In 1992, the coverage moved away from transmitting the events of the day in order to provide more discussion of policy, and a more independent and disinterested assessment of the candidates.

The networks certainly achieved their goal of more policy coverage (at least until the presidential debates took place). But the question of fairness is harder to assess. What was perceived as "unfair" about 1988 had been the ability of a candidate (in that case, George Bush) to control the news agenda with his attacks on his opponent. Those attacks were seen by reporters (among others) as lacking in the necessary substantiation in reality to be considered "fair." In 1992, the goal of the networks was to check the ads, check the facts, counter the rhetoric, and discipline candidates who roamed too far out of bounds.

CBS News instituted a new feature called the "Campaign '92 Reality Check." All three networks dedicated at least some resources to "Ad Watches." Candidate assertions were frequently contradicted by reporters. Tactics that reporters perceived as unfair were so labelled. Campaign trail reports no longer presented one campaign's point of view, balanced by the other side's corresponding report, but rather the reporter's critique of that candidate's day. Often they included a response from the other side as well.

In practice, George Bush was by far the most frequent

target of television's new assertiveness. We coded 152 instances during the general election in which reporters drew into question or refuted campaign statements. More than half of these (52%) focused on Bush campaign, compared with only 24 percent each for the Clinton and Perot campaigns. Ads were scrutinized in 1992, but they were mostly Bush's ads. Two-thirds (67%) of the assessments focused on Bush's ads, compared with 19 percent which targeted Perot's ads and 14 percent for Clinton's. And most of the comments about Bush's ads (83%) were negative.

Of course, it may be that Bush's actions deserved greater scrutiny, or more frequent rebuttals, than those of his rivals. If these differences were solely the result of reporters' attempts to monitor campaign conduct, however, then viewers should have been presented relatively balanced coverage of the various candidates' issue positions, personal character, and job performance. Yet, while Bush was heavily criticized for his campaign conduct—93 percent of sources criticized him on those grounds, compared with 85 percent who so criticized Clinton—television's coverage does not become more balanced when such comments are excluded. Indeed, the gap between the two nominees during the general election actually increases (34% positive coverage for Bush, compared with 57% positive for Clinton). If reporters had never broadcast criticisms of any candidate's campaign conduct, there would still have been a major imbalance in the tone of 1992 election coverage.

In contrast to 1988, reporters do not appear overly concerned about how the candidates conducted themselves during 1992. A poll of journalists taken in October, 1992, finds that more than half (55%) believed that Bush's candidacy was hurt by the way he was covered by the media. When asked why, most cited his record as president, or the prominence of the economy as an issue in the campaign; neither the tone nor fairness of Bush's campaign was cited. (*Times Mirror*, 1992) As *Newsweek* noted just before the election, "The main reason the president has received a bad press is that he's done badly." (Alter, 1992) Campaign conduct was not, in 1992, the high-profile issue it was in 1988. Bush's bad press was not compensation for an unfair

campaign; it was rooted in journalists' perceptions of a job poorly done.

Journalists were encouraged after 1988 to retreat from the campaign trail, provide more analysis and perspective, and keep the news from becoming hostage to the campaigns' competing agendas. In large part, this was accomplished. But the force behind such a shift in approach was concern over the conduct of the campaign. Reporters gave themselves license to referee the contest and make it "fairer." But this gave reporters permission to pick sides and settle disputes among the candidates. It was an environment where reporters felt freer to use their own judgment analyzing and assessing the campaign.

Despite qualms voiced during the primaries, most journalists now appear satisfied with this new role in the campaign process. The Times Mirror survey found that four out of five journalists rated the 1992 coverage as "good" or "excellent." The survey also reported that many of the top media people interviewed volunteered that the coverage was much improved from 1988. Two-thirds of reporters rated coverage of policy issues and particularly the economy as at least good; more than a quarter (27%) said that coverage of the economy was "excellent." (Times Mirror, 1992) Everette Dennis, director of Columbia University's Freedom Forum Center, recently pronounced the coverage "exemplary." (Dennis, 1993)

By contrast, public dissatisfaction with election coverage has receded far less. After 1988, 39 percent of the public believed the coverage to be only "fair" or "poor." (Times Mirror, 1988) A similar poll in 1992 found 38 percent who gave those ratings. Fifty-four percent believed that the press has too much influence on which candidate becomes president. Even worse for the press, most of the electorate believes that journalists "often" (49%) or "sometimes" (35%) let their own political preferences influence the way they report the news. Asked who they thought most reporters wanted to see win the election, more than half (52%) said Clinton; only one in six (17%) said Bush, and only about a quarter (26%) said they didn't know. (Times Mirror, 1992)

These poll results suggest that journalists may have con-

centrated in changing those aspects of campaign coverage that they were most concerned about, rather than what most concerns the public. The unexpected popularity of talk shows as an "unmediated" form of campaign information points in the same direction. All the changes failed to allay—and may have reinforced—the electorate's objections to intrusive, negativistic, and partisan news coverage. One result is that the public increasingly views the press as a partisan player in the electoral process, rather than as a fair and honest broker of the candidates' competing claims. In journalism as elsewhere, reforms may carry unanticipated consequences, and their costs must be weighed against their benefits. If journalists sacrifice their own credibility in an effort to improve the political process, then journalism, electoral politics, and governance will all share the costs of their good intentions.

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