

---

President for the nomination, begin to cultivate New Hampshire up to two years before the general election is held.

The process is both a vicious circle *and* a chain reaction. More television coverage implies more primary states, implies more primary voters, implies more primary delegates, implies more candidates, implies more television coverage, etc. We seem, in fact, to be moving toward a 50-state primary system adapted to the needs of television news and influenced by the whims of the voters in New Hampshire.

Television increased its coverage of the New Hampshire primary by 39 percent between 1972 and 1976. Between November 24, 1975, and February 27, 1976, there were 32 more delegate selection stories on weeknight network news than in the corresponding period for 1971-72. Twenty-nine of them focused principally on New Hampshire. Television's affinity for New Hampshire increases with each passing campaign.

The one positive thing that can be said of this system of choosing nominees is that it tends to ensure predictability as to who will win, several months before the nominating conventions take place. Political mavericks, retired governors, and social scientists should at least be able to appreciate—and capitalize—on that.



## TV News and the 1976 Election: A Dialogue

*The issues raised by Professors Patterson and Robinson were discussed at an "evening dialogue" at the Wilson Center on January 18, just two days before Jimmy Carter's inauguration. Among those present to confront the academics were NBC and CBS news executives (their ABC counterparts were unable to attend). CBS and NBC were not in total agreement. Edited excerpts from the transcript follow:*

**ROAN CONRAD**, *Political Editor, NBC News*: The central question posed by Professor Patterson is the proper relationship between what he calls "substance" (and what we'll call substance) and the "horserace" element in TV campaign coverage. I was surprised frankly, when I read his paper, that we did as well as

---

we did in terms of substance.

Now, from a newsman's point of view, the news is what happens. The news is what somebody says or does. The news is not a reporter's perception or explanation of what happens; it's simply what happens. That's horserace, granted. And I think there is a real question as to whether the proper role of an evening news service, 30 minutes long and much shorter than that (22 minutes) once we take out all the commercials, is to give people the kind of in-depth examination of political and policy issues that has been suggested, at least by implication.

What if the proportions were reversed? What if the networks had given twice as much emphasis to substance and only one-third to horserace? I bet you a nickel we'd be sitting in this building tonight discussing papers that said the networks had failed to report the news accurately and had devoted far too much attention to their own perceptions of the issues.

Network television news, it seems to me, is really not in the business of making assessments. We shy away from them. We get into trouble when we make assessments. Networks don't like to present themselves in the role of the arbiter of what is good and what is bad. It is safer, in all candor, to stick to the horserace elements of the election and not go wandering off into the thickets of substance.

Another point—there is a myth that networks enjoy great freedom of choice in what they can cover during a campaign, that they can choose not to film the arrival of Milton Shapp at North Ravenswood, New Hampshire, on a snowy winter morning.

Network executives would be very upset if a major event occurred and there was no one there to cover it. I'm talking about people getting shot. I'm talking about people making big mistakes, and I'm talking about every happenstance that can change the shape of a campaign in two minutes.

There is a problem of over-coverage of the New Hampshire primary that needs some explanation. The emphasis on over-coverage has proceeded from a faulty understanding of what the political process is like in an election year. The presidential primaries are a process. The process begins in New Hampshire [in February] and it ends in June. Last year, the process involved 30 or 31 different contests, depending on how you count, which have different weights. They have different weights because sometimes there are three or four contests on a single night and you can't cover them all adequately. You can't give them all equal weight. [Conrad noted the limited number of available correspondents and camera crews and the technical hazards that circumscribe

---

*what harried network producers can put into the "campaign" segment of a 22-minute evening news show.]*

Of course New Hampshire is emphasized and probably over-emphasized. There are several good reasons for that. First of all, you have to introduce to the country at large a new crop of candidates. That immediately produces more stories about New Hampshire than other states because you have a long lead time. The candidates are up there. Jimmy Carter was up there, God knows, in 1974 and '75. Ronald Reagan spent a considerable part—perhaps the major part of his total campaign time—in New Hampshire.

**ROBERT CHANDLER**, *Vice President, Administration, and Assistant to the President, CBS News*: We at CBS were concerned with the problem of making some sense for the public out of the preconvention campaign that involved coverage of 30 primaries within a 15-week period. But another concern of ours was the fact that in 1972 we had fallen prey to some degree to the so-called media event; to the balloons, the baby kissing, the marching bands, the hoopla, if you will. We were determined to put more substance into our reporting in 1976.

Curiously enough, we now find ourselves attacked for having done that very thing; Mr. Patterson talks about our narratives dealing with campaign tactics. Those narratives came about because we instructed our reporters and our producers not to use the hoopla, but to tell the people what was going on. Forget the pictures, but report. That's exactly what we did.\*

Mr. Patterson tells us that our "issue" content was much lower during the primary campaign than during the general election campaign. Let me tell you a story. In April of last year, Governor Carter kindly consented to have lunch with a number of our correspondents and executives in New York. One of us asked him why he had not put forth any position papers during the primary campaign, why he had not taken definitive stands and put out white papers and made specific proposals. His response was that the only Presidents he knew of who had done that dur-

---

\*According to information provided by network officials, CBS initially assigned 15 correspondents to cover presidential primary candidates (1 to each of 10 Democrats, 3 to Ford, 2 to Reagan); NBC employed a maximum of 11 (8 with the Democratic contenders, 2 with Ford, 1 with Reagan) during the peak primary period, with 3 more correspondents "roving" in early January 1976. CBS and the *New York Times* conducted 20 polls: 6 to explore issues and candidate standings prior to June 1976, 10 to analyze voters' primary choices, and 4 to test post-convention trends. NBC ran 30 polls: 7 for pre-primary guidance on key issues, 14 to analyze voter primary choices, and 9 national phone surveys. ABC followed the same pattern, assigning a maximum of 15 correspondents and making use of some 7 polls provided by Louis Harris.—En.

---

ing the primary campaign were Presidents Dewey, Humphrey, and McGovern.

He had no intention of dealing with the issues. That was his privilege. But you tell us we have a responsibility to raise our issue content, when, indeed, the candidates will not deal with issues. I think this places something of an unfair burden on us.

One of the ways we attacked that problem was to pick up the ball on our own. In early November 1975, we took a public opinion poll and asked the public what national problems were of greatest concern to them. Then we did a series on the evening news called "The Candidates and the Issues," which began in late November of 1975 and carried through until we had covered all 12 candidates.

We did, as did NBC, a considerable amount of polling (with the *New York Times*—in our case) to see what public positions were on the issues, what problems in the country were bothering the public, what the public perception of the candidates was—because not only issues but qualities of character were fundamental to this first post-Watergate election.

I can't say we succeeded to the extent that we should have, but I suggest that we didn't succeed largely because the candidates didn't succeed.

What we have here is Mr. Patterson constructing an elaborate thesis to the effect that we failed in our responsibilities to report the substance of the campaign. As he represents our coverage of events, he slices out only a small part and says that's what we did. Well, we did a good deal more than that. What I find in Professor Robinson's paper is a political and journalistic vacuum; nice neat sets of data about quantities of stories without any consideration of the circumstances surrounding these stories and the reasons why they had to be covered in certain ways.

Professor Robinson attempts to prolong a popular myth that New Hampshire is unimportant, that it provides so few delegates to the nominating conventions, has so limited a population, and is so atypical that its real value in the political process is negligible. I think that's nonsense. New Hampshire is important. As long as we continue to have a presidential primary system, as long as New Hampshire continues to have the first primary contest, it is important.

As I said, the primaries account for 75 percent of the delegates. Secondly, the primary process is really a continuum because it's compressed into 15 weeks and because there are 30 primaries. No one state on its own remains unaffected by the others. It is a process; it is a continuum.

---

The real value of primaries is that they constitute tests for the candidates, and the public can examine the results of those tests. They put the candidates out front under stress, where their strengths and their weaknesses are exposed for all to see.

**DOUGLAS BAILEY**, *Political Consultant, Bailey, Deardourff, and Eyre, Washington, D.C.*: It seems to me from the perspective of a professional political planner that the New Hampshire primary is beyond belief in its importance, and one of the reasons for its importance is the inevitable coverage that the networks give to it. You can't run in New Hampshire without it affecting your campaign enormously, much more so than any other primary. That shouldn't be so, but that's not the fault of the networks. It is the fault of the political system that somehow allows that to happen.

**LAWRENCE LICHTY**, *Professor of Communications, University of Wisconsin*: You said, Mr. Conrad, that television is not in the business of making assessments. All of the emphasis on New Hampshire aside, it seems to me that the big difference between newspapers and television during the early primary coverage is that the "standup"—the concluding statement by a TV correspondent holding a microphone and facing the camera—is almost always an assessment of how the day went, who has "momentum," and so forth.

**CONRAD**: Perhaps I was reflecting only my own prejudice that assessments should be kept to the bare minimum in all news. I think that the number of times a correspondent says a candidate is gaining or losing is strictly limited, and I expect that most producers would not like that kind of flat-out assessment. That's one of the reasons why we go to the trouble of taking public opinion polls. It is much easier and much better from a journalistic standpoint to have some basis on which to make an assessment.

**CHANDLER**: I'm afraid I don't agree. I think the reporter's job is to make assessments. That's what he's paid for. A reporter, and particularly a reporter traveling with the candidate, has a far greater basis of comparison with the past and with what the candidate has said and done than the average citizen or even the average TV anchorman. It's his job to assess as he goes along. The basis of his story selection is assessment based on his own professional judgments and what he's seen and heard not only that day, but on previous days. It's not only a justifiable responsibility; it's a necessary one.

---

**NORMAN ORNSTEIN**, *Staff Member, Senate Select Committee on the Committee System*: The comments by the network people suggest that they're trying to have it both ways. They say: We cover the primaries because they represent 75 percent of the delegates. And then they say: But we don't cover the primaries that have the delegates because they aren't the important ones. The Wisconsin primary is important because it's a beauty contest, because it's a horserace, because it's one that's close. The New York primary isn't important because it's already decided. Jackson's already got it, and it's not really a primary in which candidates are running.

**MICHAEL J. ROBINSON**: There was 39 percent more coverage of the New Hampshire primary in '76 than in '72. Now I don't think that's a function of the fact that there were more candidates. The candidates are not foolish, and they do not operate in a political or journalistic vacuum. If in '68 they knew that New Hampshire was going to get the plurality of coverage, by '72 challengers would have said I'm going to New Hampshire, and the media in part stimulated that.

I'm convinced that the candidates are going to be in New Hampshire in 1980, and there are going to be more of them and they are going to be spending more and more days there. But the point is they're not operating in a vacuum; they're operating in response to what the media, especially television, is doing. If television is going to increase its coverage in New Hampshire, then the activity of the candidates will increase.

**CONRAD**: As you know, there is a great move toward regional primaries. A number of states gathered together this year. New Hampshire wouldn't go along, but Vermont and Massachusetts decided to have theirs the same day. There was no network coverage of the Vermont primary as far as I know.

I suggest the reason there were more candidates running for President in 1976 than in 1972 is that you had the curious situation of both party's nominations being open; we had an unelected incumbent President, and we also had federal money that went to 12 candidates for the first time, several million dollars, which made possible candidacies that otherwise could not have gotten off the ground.

**ROBINSON**: One of the reasons we moved to a primary system as rapidly and as totally as we have is that it fits the organizational needs of television network news to cover primaries.

---

**CHANDLER:** As one of the poor victims of this situation and as the man who is responsible for putting on our primary programs week after week after week, I can assure you those are terrible television programs.

**ROBINSON:** But they're not as bad as caucus states. Caucuses are hard to follow, and they're not very exciting.

**CHANDLER:** Sure, but I can assure you that those half-hours at 11:30 every Tuesday night when there was a primary were dreadful television.

**BURT HOFFMAN,** *Staff Member, Office of the House Majority Whip:* My problem with television news coverage, and indeed with newspaper coverage nowadays as well, is that we're getting far too much analysis and not enough of what the candidate has to say.\*

**CHANDLER:** I don't know what your experience is, but relating that observation to the presidential campaign, the problems our reporters had were that the candidates were saying the same thing every day, or nearly every day. We're trying to report news and when a candidate repeats the same thing day after day, at some point that no longer is news.

**CONRAD:** I really want to quash the notion that the networks have a vested interest of some kind in perpetuating or increasing the number of primaries. I believe the primaries are going to continue to increase, but it has nothing to do with the desires of television. It costs the networks more. It's a drain on resources, and it often doesn't turn out to be very good television.

It has much more to do with the continued democratization of our political parties, with the widespread desire among political professionals to spread the responsibility over a larger number of the people who determine who the candidates of their party are going to be. I shouldn't be surprised at all if we have 40 or more state primaries in 1980.

---

\*Paul Weaver, a *Fortune* editor and former assistant professor of government at Harvard, argues that "newspaper and television news are alike in being essentially melodramatic accounts of current events." Hence, the "generalized image of politics as a horserace." But while the newspaper story is an impersonal, "quasi-random" presentation of information, the brief TV film report is "thematic" (often to the point of distortion), superficial, highly personal, with the TV reporter striking a "pose of omniscience." Television news is "pre-eminently an instrument of symbolic politics." See Weaver's analysis, among others, in *Television As a Social Force* (Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies/Praeger, 1975).—Ed.

---

**THOMAS E. PATTERSON:** In the process of doing their classic studies of the 1940 and 1948 elections, Paul Lazarsfeld and Bernard Berelson did some content analysis [see Background Books, p. 91]. Their methods are not terribly clear, but I think a reasonable reader would conclude from their data that they do prove that the horserace accounted for about 25 to 40 percent of newspaper coverage in 1940 and 1948. In newspaper coverage of the 1976 campaign, it was about 50 percent. On television news, it was almost 60 percent.

Now, one can argue that there is very little choice involved on the part of the networks as to what facets of the campaign story they cover. But I think you have to confront a couple of facts if you're going to make that argument. First of all, there is almost 10 percent more horserace coverage on network news than in newspapers. And if one makes some judgment about the structure of those stories, one sees that the structure, the narrative theme that holds the TV story together, is very frequently the horserace.

My feeling is that in 1976, compared with 1972, there was a substantial difference in network news coverage during the post-convention period. It was more substantive. But from my personal bias, I don't think it was substantive enough.

