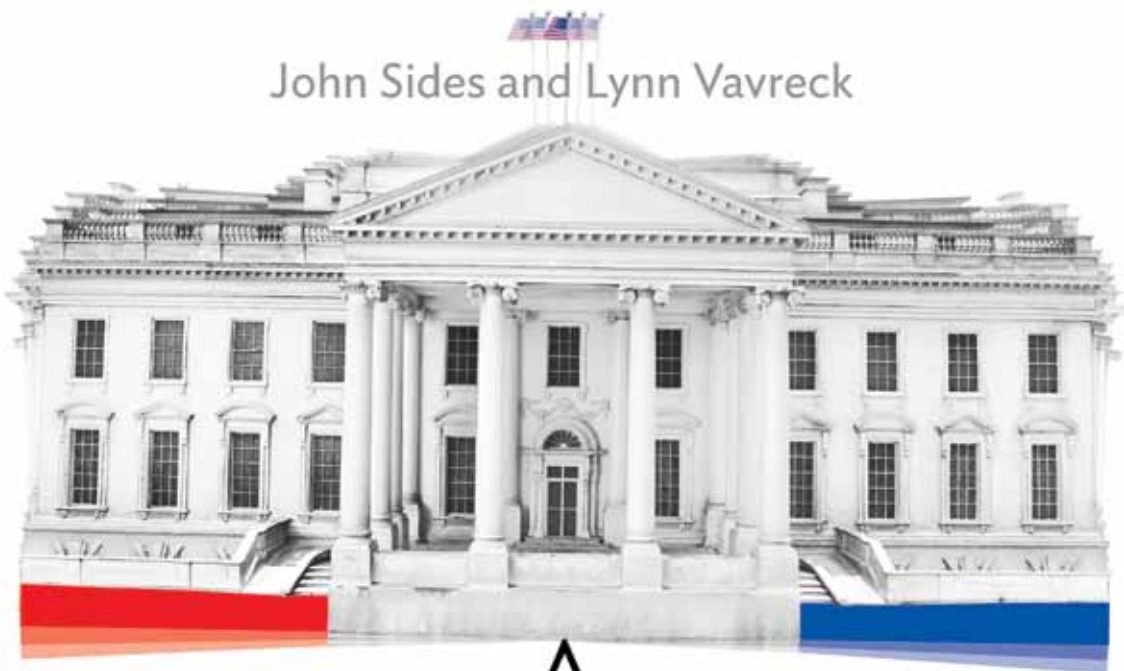
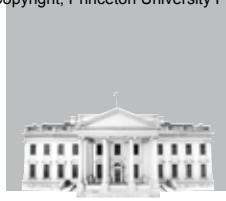


John Sides and Lynn Vavreck



THE GAMBLE

Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election



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Random, or Romney?

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THE GAMBLE

Random, or Romney?

During the Republican presidential primary, someone keeping up with the news might have concluded that Mitt Romney was doomed from the start. He was hopelessly out of step with his party and the Tea Party movement, having converted only recently to party orthodoxy on abortion and same-sex marriage and having championed reform to the Massachusetts health care system that became the literal model for “Obamacare.” He even endorsed TARP and a government stimulus in response to the 2008 recession and financial crisis. Conservative blogger Erick Erickson said that if Romney won the nomination, “conservatism dies.”² Moreover, Romney’s Mormonism made him alien to the evangelical wing of the party. In February 2012, evangelical leader Reverend Franklin Graham asserted that Mormons were not Christians, a stance supported by the majority of white evangelical Christians, according to a Pew Center poll.³ On top of that, there was Romney’s reputation as bland and robotic. Conservative *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer said that Romney was “not the kind of guy who sends a thrill up your leg,”

²Erick Erickson, “Mitt Romney as the Nominee: Conservatism Dies and Barack Obama Wins,” *Redstate*, November 8, 2011, <http://www.redstate.com/erick/2011/11/08/mitt-romney-as-the-nominee-conservatism-dies-and-barack-obama-wins/>.

³“Rev. Franklin Graham: Romney Not a Christian,” *Newsmax*, February 21, 2012, <http://www.newsmax.com/Newsfront/franklin-graham-Romney-Mormon/2012/02/21/id/430049>; “Romney’s Mormon Faith Likely a Factor in Primaries, Not in a General Election,” *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, November 23, 2011, <http://www.pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Romneys-Mormon-Faith-Likely-a-Factor-in-Primaries-Not-in-a-General-Election.aspx>.

Random, or Romney?

and the *National Review*'s Jonah Goldberg described Romney as “the most boring guy.”⁴

Conventional wisdom in 2011 was that Republicans had not warmed to Romney as a politician or a person. The lack of support for Romney led to speculation about a brokered party convention: for example, “Republicans might have to resort to a doomsday scenario and launch a frantic search for a 2012 savior at their nominating convention.”⁵ To be sure, there was no reason to rush Romney onto the throne and crown him the nominee. Republican leaders and voters were notably unenthused about all of their party's candidates for president. In that context, the Republican primary—with its eleven different front-runners—seemed like pure chaos.

This lack of enthusiasm and apparent chaos led many to misunderstand the Republican primary's dynamics. To some commentators, the primary seemed like random commotion. To others, it seemed like a search for “anybody but Romney.” Neither was true. There was in fact a logic to the seeming randomness. A wide-open field meant that there were many undecided voters whose views could be shaped by news coverage. And the long campaign before the Iowa caucus gave the news media many moments—debates, straw polls, and the like—that changed the focus of their coverage. Whichever candidate performed well or said or did something newsworthy became prominent in media coverage, and often for the first time. The ensuing spike in news coverage helped that candidate rise in the polls. However, this boomlet proved temporary once the candidate faced the inevitable questions and criticism that a front-runner experiences. We describe this dynamic as a process of *discovery*, *scrutiny*, and *decline*.

⁴Ian Schwartz, “Krauthammer: Romney ‘Not the Kind of Guy Who Sends a Thrill Up Your Leg,’” *Real Clear Politics*, February 7, 2012, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2012/02/07/krauthammer_romney_not_the_kind_of_guy_who_sends_a_thrill_up_your_leg.html; Jonah Goldberg, “Most Boring Guy Wins Most Boring Debate?” *The Corner*, January 23, 2012, <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/289031/most-boring-guy-wins-most-boring-debate-jonah-goldberg>.

⁵Steve Holland, “Romney's Struggles Fuel Talk of a Brokered Convention,” *Reuters*, February 17, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/17/us-usa-campaign-convention-idUSTRE81G1ZF20120217>.

Random, or Romney?

This process explains the experiences of most Republican candidates with a notable exception: Mitt Romney. Romney was never “discovered” in 2011 because he had already been discovered during his 2008 presidential campaign. He had been through this process, whereas the other candidates had not. Familiarity with Romney was evident in public opinion polls: months before the Iowa caucus, most people could rate Romney favorably or unfavorably, whereas large numbers could not rate many of his competitors.⁶ Thus Romney never experienced a sharp spike in positive news coverage and a corresponding increase in the polls. The absence of this dynamic for Romney made him seem disliked by the party, which looked as if it were searching for anybody but Romney.

The truth, however, was different. Much like presidential general elections, presidential primaries have their own fundamentals, and by the end of 2011 Romney led in every category: attention from the news media, money raised, support in pre-primary polls, and endorsements by party leaders. He was popular with Republican voters, even conservatives, and—despite much commentary to the contrary—he was perceived by Republican voters as ideologically close to them. In fact, we show that the Republican electorate, regardless of which candidate they supported, was not really ideologically divided.

Although the period leading up to the Iowa caucus did not produce a dominant front-runner, by the eve of the caucus Romney had significant advantages. His lead portended his ultimate success.

The Spirit of 2010 and the Dispirit of 2012

On November 3, 2010, the Republican Party was excited and for good reason. The party had just won an historic victory—picking up 63 seats in the House of Representatives, the largest swing since 1948.

⁶ In a May 2011 YouGov poll, only 9% could not rate Romney, compared to the 72% who could not rate Huntsman and 40% who could not rate Pawlenty. Similarly, in a September 2011 Gallup poll, about half of Republican voters said they were not familiar with Herman Cain, Rick Santorum, or Jon Huntsman, and approximately a quarter were not familiar with Rick Perry. Only 14% said this of Romney.

Random, or Romney?

Even President Obama referred to it as a “shellacking” for the Democrats. And with unemployment at nearly 10% and the president’s approval rating at 45%, Republicans seemed on the cusp of achieving what Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell had declared to be their primary goal all along: to deny Obama a second term.

Not quite one year later, in the fall of 2011, Republicans found themselves in a very different place. The energy of the Tea Party movement and the Republican Party’s conservative wing, which was so important in the 2010 election, arguably became a liability. In Congress, conservative Republicans opposed the compromise House Speaker John Boehner sought with President Obama on the crucial issue of whether to raise the debt ceiling. The standoff took the country to the edge of default and resulted in the loss of a AAA credit rating for the United States.

Republicans shouldered most of the blame for this debacle. In an August 2011 *New York Times*/CBS News poll, 72% of Americans disapproved of the way Republicans in Congress handled the crisis, while only 47% disapproved of the way President Obama handled it. Opinions of the Tea Party movement and Speaker Boehner soured; one week after the downgrade, only 20% of Americans had a favorable impression of the Tea Party and nearly half thought the movement had too much influence over the Republican Party.⁷ At this point, the nominating process for the 2012 presidential election was about to begin in earnest. Even though the unemployment rate was only a little lower and President Obama was not any more popular, much of the enthusiasm of 2010 had dissipated. The Republican Party was less popular than the president, and the Tea Party movement was coming under fire even from within the party.

Adding to the party’s challenges were its presidential candidates. To be sure, there was no shortage of them: Minnesota congresswoman Michele Bachmann, businessman Herman Cain, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, former Utah governor and ambassador to China Jon Huntsman, former New Mexico governor Gary Johnson, Texas congressman Ron Paul, former

⁷Michael Cooper and Megan Thee-Brenan, “Congress Seen as Top Culprit in Debt Debate,” *New York Times*, August 5, 2011, A1.

Random, or Romney?

Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty, Texas governor Rick Perry, former Louisiana governor Buddy Roemer, former Massachusetts governor and 2008 presidential candidate Mitt Romney, and former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum were all in the race at some point. Real estate mogul Donald Trump also flirted with the possibility of running.

The problem, however, was that these candidates apparently were not good enough. The phrase “weak field” was thrown around a lot. This was not an insult lobbed by Democrats. Charles Krauthammer said it.⁸ Even Rush Limbaugh joined the chorus.⁹ But the field was not wholly unimpressive. In any other year, five current or former governors, two members of the House, a former senator, and a former Speaker of the House would not seem all that weak. Commentators were more adept at simply declaring the field “weak” than at explaining why. After all, the résumés of the 2008 Republican field—three former or current senators, four former or current governors, three members of Congress, and the former mayor of New York City—seemed pretty similar. Krauthammer had called the 2008 candidates a “fine field.”¹⁰

However subjectively “weak field” is defined, it’s clear that in 2012 the field failed to excite many within the party. This would seem to leave the door open for other candidates to enter the race. So why did former Alaska governor and 2008 vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, New Jersey governor Chris Christie, Indiana governor Mitch Daniels, and South Dakota senator John Thune, among others, decide not to run? Of course, it is not easy to explain the potentially idiosyncratic decisions of possible candidates, but based on systematic studies of both presidential and congressional

⁸ Carl M. Cannon, “What Makes the 2012 GOP Field So Weak?” May 20, 2011, *Real Clear Politics*, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2011/05/20/what_makes_the_2012_gop_field_so_weak_109933.html.

⁹ Ryan Witt, “Rush Limbaugh Admits GOP Presidential Field Is Very Weak,” *Examiner.com*, March 7, 2011, <http://www.examiner.com/political-buzz-in-national/rush-limbaugh-admits-gop-presidential-field-is-very-weak-audio>.

¹⁰ Charles Krauthammer, “Relax, Republicans, It’s a Fine Field,” *Real Clear Politics*, October 26, 2007, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2007/10/relax_republicans_this_is_a_fi.html.

Random, or Romney?

elections, there are two factors that may have operated in this Republican primary.

First, as the political scientists Gary Jacobson and Samuel Kernell have shown, candidates for office, especially ones with strong credentials and qualifications, are choosy about when they run.¹¹ They are “strategic candidates,” seeking out election years in which the playing field is tilted toward their party or even toward them in particular. In 2012, it was far too early to count Barack Obama out, despite the striking defeat the Democratic Party had suffered in 2010. The advantages he retained may have dissuaded some candidates from challenging him.

For one, incumbent presidents are hard to beat. Since 1900, there have been only five elections in which the incumbent ran for reelection and lost versus fourteen where he ran for reelection and won.¹² Moreover, although the economic recovery after the 2008–9 recession had not been rapid, the economy was growing in 2011 when candidates needed to decide whether to run. As of the spring of 2011, when potential candidates probably needed to make a firm decision (if not yet a public one), economic forecasters were predicting growth rates of 2.7% in 2011 and 3.0% in 2012.¹³ As we showed in chapter 2, incumbent presidents running amid this level of economic growth are likely to win. There’s no reason to think that potential Republican candidates were running their own election forecasting models, but their intuitions and conversations with advisors may have led them to the same conclusion that the models implied: better wait until 2016 (if then). And even if

¹¹ Gary Jacobson and Samuel Kernell, *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

¹² Those who lost were William Howard Taft in 1912, Herbert Hoover in 1932, Gerald Ford in 1976, Jimmy Carter in 1980, and George H. W. Bush in 1992. The tabulation of winners and losers counts any sitting president who ran for reelection as an incumbent, even if he was not elected in the first place (i.e., he took office as a result of the president’s death or resignation).

¹³ Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia Research Department, “Forecasters Predict Slower Growth over the Next Four Years,” *Survey of Professional Forecasters*, May 13, 2011, <http://www.phil.frb.org/research-and-data/real-time-center/survey-of-professional-forecasters/2011/spfq211.pdf?CFID=35590062&CFTOKEN=60515431&jsessionid=ac30493448616b1b895822624b1db2a7c366>.

Random, or Romney?

other factors may have seemed favorable to the Republican Party at that point in time—such as the relatively high unemployment rate or Obama’s middling popularity—it may have been a worse bet to challenge Obama under those conditions than to assume he would win and then wait until the end of his second term—at which point, the historical pattern shows, the party controlling the White House often switches.

A second factor affecting whether potential candidates decide to run for office is efforts by party leaders to recruit them or perhaps discourage them. In presidential primaries, party leaders shape the nomination process, even in an era where voters, via primaries and caucuses, more directly determine which candidate wins the nomination. The efforts of party leaders are particularly important during the “invisible primary” that takes place before the caucuses and primaries are held. As an important recent study of presidential primaries argues, the invisible primary consists of conversations and negotiations among party leaders and potential or confirmed candidates.¹⁴ It is “invisible” because these conversations are not always known to the broader public or even to reporters and other professional observers of politics. To the extent that these conversations reflect differences of opinion within the party, it is probably in the party’s best interest to keep them invisible, lest all the party’s dirty laundry get aired.

Thus it is difficult to say with certainty that party leaders discouraged candidates from running. But there is evidence that they may have. Consider Sarah Palin. She was as close to a bona fide rock star as the Republican Party had. In the run-up to 2010, she had aligned herself with the Tea Party movement and had seen that decision borne out in the Republican takeover of the House and the election of many Tea Party-affiliated candidates. Why did she not run? One possible reason is that Republican leaders did not want her to. In August 2011, the *Huffington Post* conducted a poll with 151 local party leaders in the key early primary states of Iowa, New Hampshire, and

¹⁴ Martin Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nomination Before and After Reform* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008).

Random, or Romney?

South Carolina.¹⁵ The poll was not a representative sample, but its results were notable nonetheless. Fully 81% of these leaders said that Palin should not run. Although the majority said they agreed with her on issues, these leaders were evenly split on whether she would “make a good president” and tended to doubt that she could beat Barack Obama (only 37% said she could). One leader said, “I love and admire Sarah Palin. I would vote for her for president should she get the nomination, but I do not believe she is electable as president.” Of course, these poll results come with many caveats. Perhaps other party leaders—particularly national party leaders—felt differently. Perhaps Palin did not even care what these or any party leaders thought. But the fact that such opinions exist within the Republican Party may have affected Palin—because she either heard them explicitly or saw the proverbial writing on the wall. The need to campaign for voter support in multiple states means that candidates need the help of party leaders at every level of office.¹⁶ Few party leaders appeared interested in helping Palin.

Of course, the Republicans who chose not to run could have had other motives for doing so, and certainly there was much speculation about these motives. We would only note that their decision not to run is consistent with what a strategic candidate might have thought in 2011 and may have reflected the views of other leaders within the party. A talented and relatively young Republican leader could easily have looked at the fundamentals in the summer of 2011 and decided to wait until 2016. Even if the economy were growing by then, the Democrat nomination would be up for grabs. Given that the incumbent party often loses the presidency after two terms in office, the chances of beating the Democrats probably would be better.

¹⁵ Mark Blumenthal, “Sarah Palin Can’t Win, Shouldn’t Run, HuffPost-Patch GOP Power Outsiders Say,” *Huffington Post*, August 31, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/31/sarah-palin-polls_n_943615.html.

¹⁶ See Cohen et al., *The Party Decides*, 170–72.

The Endorsements Trickle

Given the field they had, the Republican Party then faced the same challenge that parties have faced ever since winning primaries and caucuses became the way in which presidential candidates win delegates to the party conventions: finding a way to consolidate support behind a single candidate, ideally *before* the primaries even take place. This is the chief goal of the invisible primary, one that parties often execute quite well but sometimes struggle with, as they did in 2012. This struggle is probably the best evidence that the Republican presidential field was weak, even by the standards of those within the party.

Because the conversations and negotiations that go on among party leaders are generally private, we must rely on public statements by these leaders to signal whom they support in the nomination race—if anyone. Endorsements by party leaders are the most visible part of the invisible primary. When a party leader endorses a candidate, his or her statement is typically trumpeted by that candidate and then reported in the news media. It is a potentially costly decision by any leader, especially in this Republican primary, when there was real disagreement among party leaders about which candidate to support. Backing the wrong horse, as it were, can become controversial.¹⁷ Endorsements that occur during the invisible primary send a particularly strong signal; after all, anyone can wait until late in primary season and endorse the eventual nominee. Jumping on that candidate's bandwagon is easy at that point. It is riskier to endorse a candidate before the caucuses and primaries even begin.

Endorsements are a misunderstood aspect of primary elections. It is sometimes argued that endorsements do not matter at all. After John McCain and Bob Dole endorsed Mitt Romney, Jon Huntsman said, "You can get all the Doles and McCains in the world as Romney

¹⁷ See, for example, the reaction to South Carolina governor Nikki Haley's endorsement of Mitt Romney, which led Rush Limbaugh to issue a "blistering broadside" against her and attracted the ire of Tea Party leaders as well. Reid J. Epstein, "Nikki Haley's Mitt Romney Endorsement Catches Flak," *Politico*, December 16, 2011, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/12/11/70580.html>.

Random, or Romney?

probably will, but in the end, nobody cares.”¹⁸ Others argue that endorsements of specific individuals are somehow key—for example, both George H. W. Bush and Jeb Bush garnered headlines when they endorsed Romney in March.

Neither of these perspectives is correct. Endorsements do appear to matter in presidential nominations but not because of what a handful of high-profile politicians decide to do. In the 1980–2004 primaries, a candidate’s share of endorsements during the invisible primary was associated with how many delegates that candidate wins in the party convention months later—even after taking into account other things that might affect delegate share, such as fundraising, media attention, and victories in early caucuses or primaries.¹⁹ Why endorsements matter in this way is still unclear, but they are certainly a prominent and important signal about candidates’ standing within the party and ultimately whether a candidate can be the party’s standard-bearer.

The number and pace of endorsements through 2011 demonstrate just how different this nomination process was than many others, as well as how seemingly unenthusiastic Republican leaders were about all of the candidates. In Figure 1, we show the percentage of Republican governors, senators, and members of the U.S. House of Representatives who endorsed any Republican candidate for president. We include only endorsements before the Iowa caucus and break down the results by each quarter of the year before the election year.²⁰

What stands out about 2012 is not only the small percentage of these officeholders who endorsed but the slow pace at which the endorsements accumulated. Clearly 2012 was not like 2000, when a large number of Republican leaders endorsed George W. Bush—many doing so even early in 1999. The pattern in 2012 also differs

¹⁸ Jo Ling Kent, “Huntsman on Romney’s McCain Endorsement: ‘Nobody Cares,’” *First Read on NBCNews.com*, January 4, 2012, http://firstread.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2012/01/04/9952876-huntsman-on-romneys-mccain-endorsement-nobody-cares.

¹⁹ Cohen et al., *The Party Decides*.

²⁰ Endorsements that were made earlier than this—for example, in 1994 for the 1996 primary and 2010 for the 2012 primary—appear in quarter 1. Endorsements that were made in the election year itself but before the Iowa caucus appear in quarter 4.

Random, or Romney?

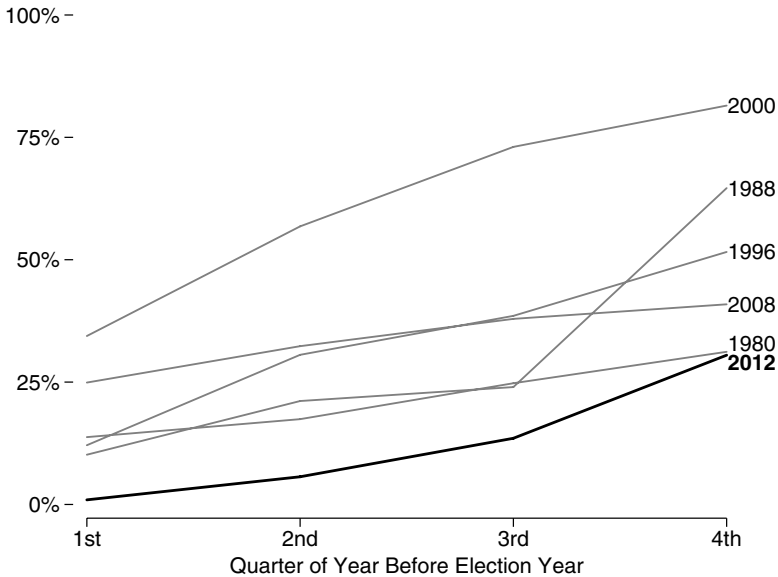


Figure 1. Percent of Republican governors, senators, and House members endorsing a Republican candidate for the presidential nomination.

from that in in other years, such as 1988 or 1996, when there were fewer leaders converging on a single candidate such as Bush. In fact, the pace of endorsements in 2012 was even slower than it was in 2008—another year in which Republican leaders struggled to coalesce around a single candidate. It might be surprising to some—given the status that Ronald Reagan has come to have within his party—but 2012 looks more like 1980 than any other Republican presidential primary. It is worth exploring that comparison as a way to figure out why the pace in 2012 was so slow.

In any election year, party leaders are looking for a nominee who meets two criteria. First, the person has to be at least acceptable to various factions within the party. “Acceptable” is the key word, as no single candidate is likely to be the first choice of every faction. Political parties are diverse coalitions of interests, and not every group will favor the same nominee. Many groups may end up compromising. Second, that person needs to be perceived as electable. Although there are always conflicts within any party over how to prioritize

Random, or Romney?

ideological fealty versus electability—and, indeed, over how much those two qualities are really in tension—electability remains a crucial consideration. Compromising one's principles is never fun, but it usually hurts even more to lose an election. So party leaders make judgments about how well any candidate is likely to fare against the opposition in the general election.

In both 1980 and 2002, it was hard for the Republican Party to find a candidate who met both criteria. Ronald Reagan, by dint of his many years of work for the party, had built up a substantial base of support among conservatives. But he was not necessarily “acceptable” to moderates within the party, even as he reached out to them in various ways. Moderate Republican leaders shopped around, considering Gerald Ford, George H. W. Bush, and Tennessee senator Howard Baker. Ultimately it was Bush who campaigned the hardest and became the leading moderate candidate—famously calling Reagan's economic plan “voodoo economics”—but there remained concerns about whether he could win the general election. Bush had previously served two terms in the House but had lost two U.S. Senate races and had never held any other elective office, serving instead as chair of the Republican National Committee and director of the Central Intelligence Agency, among other positions. In short, his “record as a vote-getter was weak.”²¹

In 2012 something similar occurred. Although there were far more Republican candidates than in 2008, Republican leaders could not find a candidate who was both broadly acceptable within the party and viewed as electable. In particular, it was difficult for leaders to find a candidate who would be acceptable to conservative activists within the party, including those affiliated with the Tea Party, who were arguably an even larger part of the Republican coalition than they were in 1980. But the candidates with solid conservative credentials were not seen as electable.

Consider, for example, the contrasting views that party leaders had of Sarah Palin. As we have noted, Republican leaders said that they tended to agree with Palin on issues: 37% said that the phrase “takes stands on issues that you agree with” described her “very well.”

²¹ Cohen et al., *The Party Decides*, 194.

Random, or Romney?

Fewer, however, said this of Romney (27%).²² But whereas the majority of leaders did not consider Palin electable, the vast majority thought Romney was. The same contrast emerges when comparing views of Michele Bachmann and Romney.²³ To be sure, most leaders did not say that they disagreed outright with Romney—a fact that we will return to—but clearly they were less than enthusiastic, as the earlier quotes from prominent conservative pundits illustrate. In the early going, there was only one candidate who met both criteria, at least according to these surveys: Rick Perry. As of early September, he was perceived both as taking the right stand on issues and as someone who could beat Obama.²⁴ His standing, however, would plummet quickly.

The upshot, then, was that party leaders adopted a “wait-and-see” approach, sitting on the sidelines rather than signaling their unequivocal support for any one candidate. This left the race wide open, setting the stage for the multiple front-runners that emerged and the volatile polls that puzzled many observers throughout the primaries.

“Nobody Knows Anything”?

On February 21, 2012, Patrick Ruffini, a Republican political consultant, tweeted a picture of the Republican primary polling trends, with their many ups and downs, and wrote, “My two year old could draw a chart that makes more sense than this.”²⁵ Ruffini was not alone. Political reporting and commentary on the GOP primary often saw it as incomprehensible. Former Bush strategist Karl Rove

²² Mark Blumenthal, “Mitt Romney Is Presidential, Electable, HuffPost-Patch GOP Power Outsiders Say,” *Huffington Post*, September 14, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/14/mitt-romney-presidential-electable-power-outsiders_n_962167.html.

²³ Mark Blumenthal, “Michele Bachmann Can’t Win, HuffPost-Patch GOP Power Outsiders Say,” *Huffington Post*, September 21, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/21/michele-bachmann-polls_n_973995.html?ref=power-outsiders.

²⁴ Mark Blumenthal, “Rick Perry Is a Leader Who Can Beat Obama, HuffPost-Patch GOP Power Outsiders Say,” *Huffington Post*, September 7, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/07/rick-perry-polls-huffpost-patch-gop-power-outsiders_n_952823.html?ref=power-outsiders.

²⁵ The picture can be viewed here: <http://instagr.am/p/HP8bWNLdxN/>.

Random, or Romney?

called it “the most unpredictable, rapidly shifting, and often down-right inexplicable primary race I’ve ever witnessed.”²⁶ A Bloomberg article suggested that voters were “shredding the rulebook.”²⁷ But the *New York Times*’s David Carr perhaps put it most starkly, in a blog post titled “Who’s Leading the Republican Presidential Race? Mr. Random, of Course”:

The dynamism and unpredictability of the race might be assigned to some weakness in Mr. Romney’s appeal, or the collective fickleness of the Republican electorate, but we also need to acknowledge that when it comes to this race, William Goldman’s observation about Hollywood—“Nobody knows anything”—applies to the business of politics as well.²⁸

The volatility in the polls had its roots in the lack of enthusiasm among party leaders, which was mirrored in Republican voters. In a May 2011 Pew Research Center poll, only a quarter of Republican registered voters called the 2012 field “excellent” or “good”—demonstrating less enthusiasm than they did in previous campaigns in both 2007 and 1995.²⁹ Unsurprisingly, then, many voters had not made a firm decision about whom to support by the fall of 2011. This is hardly unusual in presidential primaries because many of the candidates are not national figures and unknown to many voters, who may not be paying much attention to the presidential primary to begin with. Voters are thus prone to change their minds during primary campaigns or to

²⁶ Karl Rove, “Donald Trump and Our Debate Mania: Why This Presidential Contest Has Been the Most Unpredictable Contest of My Lifetime,” *Rove.com*, December 15, 2011, <http://www.rove.com/articles/355>.

²⁷ Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Michael Tackett, “Romney’s Road to Nomination Rocked by Voters Shredding Rulebook,” Bloomberg, February 17, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-02-17/romney-s-road-to-republican-nomination-rocked-as-voters-shredding-rulebook.html>.

²⁸ David Carr, “Who’s Leading the Republican Presidential Race? Mr. Random, of Course,” *New York Times Media Decoder*, February 21, 2012, <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/21/whos-leading-the-republican-presidential-race-mr-random-of-course/>.

²⁹ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Republican Candidates Stir Little Enthusiasm,” June 2, 2011, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/2012/poll-republican-presidential-candidates-2012-romney-palin-gingrich-paul-cain>.

make up their minds quite late. In 2011 and 2012, they did both, as the eleven different front-runners would suggest.

But volatility does not make the 2012 Republican primary incomprehensible. Contra Carr, we do “know something.” Voters may have seemed fickle, in that some were changing their minds, but they were not doing so randomly. Polls do not move for no reason, and voters are not simply rolling the dice. Polls move in response to new information about one or more of the candidates. In 2011 and continuing into 2012, news media coverage was a key source of that information—something that studies of public opinion and elections have routinely found to be true.³⁰ By charting news coverage and how it responded to events in the campaign, the volatility of the GOP primary polls becomes far more explicable.

The Anatomy of Media Boomlets: Discovery, Scrutiny, and Decline

How does media coverage and voters’ dependence on the media for information help explain why, in 2011 and 2012, several candidates surged to become the front-runner, but only briefly? The answer begins with the news media’s well-documented focus on the “horse race” of the campaign.³¹ Horse-race coverage focuses on which candidate is ahead or behind or getting ahead or falling behind, which means focusing on metrics like polls and fund-raising and on the strategies that candidates are using. During the 2012 primary campaign, the Pew Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) estimated that nearly two-thirds of news coverage (64%) was framed around horse-race topics.³²

³⁰ See, among others, Larry Bartels, *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). More generally, see John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

³¹ See, for example, Henry E. Brady and Richard Johnston, “What’s the Primary Message: Horse Race or Issue Journalism?” in Gary R. Orren and Nelson W. Polsby, eds., *Media and Momentum: The New Hampshire Primary and Nomination Politics* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1987).

³² Tom Rosenstiel, Mark Jurkowitz, and Tricia Sartor, “How the Media Covered the 2012 Primary Campaign,” *Journalism.org*, April 23, 2012, http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/romney_report.

Random, or Romney?

Although the news media are frequently blamed for horse-race coverage, the media may simply be meeting the demands of news consumers. In one study by political scientists Shanto Iyengar, Helmut Norpoth, and Kyu Hahn, voters were sent CD-ROMs containing news coverage of the 2000 presidential campaign organized by various topics, including strategy and the horse race, candidate biography, and candidate issue positions.³³ As voters navigated this coverage, their reading behavior was recorded. What kinds of stories were read most frequently? Horse-race coverage. This is perhaps not surprising. Not many people would pass up “New Poll Shows Race Tightening” for “Candidates Release Plans for Entitlement Reform.”

The challenge for reporters is that the campaign may not produce newsworthy events or moments every day. Candidates give the same speeches over and over. (Indeed, we heard Romney give virtually the same speech twice in twelve hours on the night before and morning of the Iowa caucus. In the press gallery, reporters mostly hunched over their Blackberries, ignoring the speech for no doubt the umpteenth time.) Thus reporters may seek out any moment that seems novel or interesting.

One distinctive thing about contemporary presidential primaries, and 2012 in particular, is just how many more potential “moments” there are. In previous years, candidates could count on a spike in news attention when they won more votes than expected in primaries and caucuses. Now such moments include nonbinding “straw polls” and candidate debates—of which there were twenty-seven in 2011–12, far more than in any previous presidential primary.³⁴ Performance in primaries, straw polls, and debates cannot be established objectively. Instead, reporters and commentators use their own judgment, which is why performing better than their expectations can be so important. Their judgment may also correspond to how most people, in and out of journalism, would view a particular event, so the fact that news coverage entails subjective decisions does not imply any nefarious media conspiracy.

³³Shanto Iyengar, Helmut Norpoth, and Kyu Hahn, “Consumer Demand for Election News: The Horserace Sells,” *Journal of Politics* 66, no. 1 (2004): 157–75.

³⁴The debate schedule can be viewed here: <http://www.2012presidentialelectionnews.com/2012-debate-schedule/2011-2012-primary-debate-schedule/>.

Random, or Romney?

The ultimate goal for the news media is to generate a compelling narrative—one that not only draws on the skill and knowledge that reporters feel they have acquired as professional observers of politics but also engages consumers of the news, who are naturally interested in strategy, polls, and other elements of the horse race. This goal is readily acknowledged by reporters. Here, for example, is the *Washington Post*'s Dana Milbank, from a cheeky, but not entirely tongue-in-cheek, paean to Newt Gingrich that was published on January 31, 2012:

You're the only thing saving us from a long spring of despair, the only person who can, by extending the presidential race, drive up our audience and bring us the revenues we so desperately need. You give us exactly what political journalists crave. Sure, some of us are ideologically biased, but we are far more biased in favor of conflict—and that's why we're all in the tank for you.³⁵

We argue that in presidential primaries media coverage tended to follow a three-part sequence: discovery, scrutiny, and decline. This sequence described coverage of the 2012 GOP candidates—with one crucial exception: Romney. It also implied the pattern in the polling data: temporary “boomlets” for each of a series of candidates other than Romney.

Discovery

The process of discovery began when a candidate who had previously attracted little news coverage did or said something that reporters and commentators judged to be novel, important, and therefore newsworthy. As a consequence, news coverage of that candidate increased sharply.

Teasing out the subsequent relationship between news coverage and polls can be tricky. If voters do not change their minds absent widely disseminated information, then a surge in news coverage

³⁵ Dana Milbank, “The Media ? Newt Gingrich,” *Washington Post*, January 31, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-medias-codependent-relationship-with-newt-gingrich/2012/01/31/gIQArTADgQ_story.html.

should precede a surge in polls. However, an increase in the polls can also drive further news coverage because candidates who are surging in the polls will attract more attention from the press, thus creating a self-reinforcing cycle between news coverage and poll numbers.³⁶ We show that both things can happen. As best as we can tell from the available 2012 data, the initial increase in news coverage typically preceded the surge in the polls. The news media, responding to events in the campaign, tended to initiate any cycle of discovery, scrutiny, and decline. At the same time, polls and news coverage reinforced each other, as good poll numbers became a rationale for additional coverage. Demonstrating whether reinforcement occurs requires some statistical modeling, the details of which we report in the appendix.

We focus on news coverage because we think that it, and not the original event that catalyzed the increase in coverage, is what moves polls. These events would not be known to most voters except through news coverage. Few voters witnessed these events firsthand. Even the audiences for the nationally televised primary debates were typically small—between three and seven million people. Such events were not routinely the subject of campaign advertising either. Moreover, similar kinds of events—straw polls, say—had very different impacts depending on how much news coverage they generated. Finally, in many cases the meaning of these events was not obvious. Because there was no readily available standard by which voters interpreted a candidate's performance in a debate or a primary, the media “framed” these events and supplied an interpretation, as they do with many kinds of political events.³⁷ Their interpretations, expressed in the volume and tone of news coverage, affected whether and how voters respond.

³⁶ It is also possible that campaigning in individual caucus or primary states can lead to surges in state polls, which then drive national news coverage, which in turn drives national polls. This dynamic appears to characterize Santorum's surge before the Iowa caucus, as we document in the next chapter.

³⁷ There is a vast social science literature on media framing. One example is Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991).

Random, or Romney?

Why would news coverage have this effect on voters in the first place? Why would it push voters toward the candidate who was suddenly prominent in that coverage? The possible answers to this question have been spelled out by political scientist Larry Bartels in his book on presidential primaries.³⁸ It could happen because voters take cues from others: the more a candidate is discussed in the news, the more voters understand about that candidate's positions and chances of winning. It could happen because voters want to be on the winning team. The primary horse race—even, Bartels notes, actual horse races like the Kentucky Derby—may be more fun if spectators have a favorite. It could happen because voters behave strategically—believing that the candidate who is being discussed in the news media is likely to win and then gravitating to that candidate, even if that person is not their first choice, to avoid “wasting” their vote. It could also be simpler than this: voters may tell pollsters they support whichever candidate whose name they can most readily recall, without any other motivation for supporting that candidate. News coverage helps make a candidate's name more accessible in a voter's mind and more likely to be remembered when the pollster calls. We cannot necessarily determine which of these processes was at work, but they all could help explain why a sudden burst of news coverage for an otherwise unfamiliar candidate increased that candidate's poll numbers.

Scrutiny

The news coverage that accompanied the discovery phrase was very often positive. When a candidate turned in an “unexpectedly” strong performance in a straw poll, debate, primary, or caucus, that was framed as suggesting the candidate's strength and potential viability. In short, news coverage created a positive buzz.

But this did not last very long. Once a candidate seemed “serious” enough to pay attention to, that candidate was then subjected to increased scrutiny from both opponents and the news media. As Bartels put it in his study: “unknown candidates who broke out of the pack received very favorable coverage until they showed signs

³⁸ Bartels, *Presidential Primaries*.

Random, or Romney?

of becoming frontrunners; then they were scrutinized much more carefully.”³⁹ Huma Khan of ABC News described the same phenomenon when she wrote this about Newt Gingrich in mid-November 2011: “It remains to be seen whether Gingrich’s campaign can sustain his popularity. He’s already coming under increased public scrutiny with the recent rise in polls.”⁴⁰

This scrutiny took place regardless of what the candidates had done either in the past or in the campaign to date. It reflected two things: opposing candidates’ need to stop the surging candidates from solidifying their lead and journalistic norms about vetting candidates. The candidate’s opponents began to focus on the front-runner in debates and supplied reporters—on or off the record—with unflattering tidbits from their own research into the candidate.⁴¹ Reporters delved into the candidate’s personal history, issue positions, and performance in office and typically discovered a checkered past, controversial statements, and more than a few people willing to go on the record and be critical of the candidate.⁴² At times, the candidate him- or herself lent a hand, even unwittingly. He or she said or did things that opposing candidates and reporters judged to be provocative, problematic, or simply mistaken. These “gaffes” only invited further scrutiny. And so the fortunes of the candidate began to turn. Although news coverage of the candidate was still peaking, the tone of that coverage began to turn more negative.

The coverage then began to convey a different story about the horse race. Having heard enough of the candidate’s foibles and flaws, voters began to drift away, moving to support a different candidate or declaring themselves undecided. Perhaps the candidate’s poll

³⁹ Bartels, *Presidential Primaries*, 39.

⁴⁰ Huma Khan, “Newt Gingrich’s Moment in the Sun: Will It Last?” ABC News/*The Note*, November 15, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2011/11/newt-gingrichs-moment-in-the-sun-will-it-last/>.

⁴¹ That Ron Paul was never considered a front-runner may help explain why, as we show later, his news coverage was generally favorable. There was less incentive for either other candidates or the news media to scrutinize him.

⁴² This is one reason why it is misguided to assume that any other Republican candidate could have entered the race late and been a kind of savior for the unenthusiastic party. Scrutiny of those candidates would have likely revealed their shortcomings as well.

Random, or Romney?

numbers remained higher than they were before the candidate was first “discovered,” but they no longer suggested a surge of any significant duration.

Decline

Having devoted some time to writing about a particular candidate, the media had a natural incentive to move on and find a storyline that was novel and more exciting. Unless the candidate did something else that was considered newsworthy, his or her news coverage began to decline, which in turn further drove down the candidate’s poll numbers. Then as soon as a different candidate did something judged to be newsworthy, a new cycle of discovery and scrutiny began again.

As we will see, the volatility in 2012 corresponds to this pattern of discovery, scrutiny, and decline. To be sure, establishing this pattern does not help us predict beforehand which candidates would surge when, but it does help make those surges explicable after the fact. This pattern also shows that the many surges in the 2012 presidential primary were hardly the result of voters chasing after that week’s “Mr. Random.” Instead they reflected the incentives of the news media to generate novel stories about the campaign and investigate candidates’ backgrounds, the incentives of the other candidates to attack anyone who became a front-runner, and the reliance of uncommitted voters on news coverage.

The Rise and Fall of Perry, Cain, and Gingrich

“Texas Gov. Perry Joining Republican Race for President.” That was the headline in the *Washington Post* on August 12, the day before Perry formally announced his entry into the race. Within two weeks, CBS News’s headline was “Rick Perry Surges to Front in Latest GOP Poll.”⁴³ But by December, his political epitaphs were everywhere:

⁴³Stephanie Condon, “Rick Perry Surges to Front in Latest GOP Poll,” CBS News/*Political Hotsheet*, August 24, 2011, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20096796-503544.html.

Random, or Romney?

To chart the media-driven boomlets of these candidates, we rely on two kinds of data. One is simply national polls from the summer and fall of 2011. The other is extensive data on news coverage gathered by the company General Sentiment. General Sentiment has developed computer programs that collect and categorize media coverage from over ten thousand print, broadcast, and cable news outlets, including national, state, and local media.¹ Their data provide not only an estimate of how often any particular topic is discussed, such as one of the presidential candidates, but also the tone or “sentiment” of that discussion. Tone refers to how negative or positive that discussion is—as judged by comparing the words in the news to a dictionary of words that are known to have largely positive or negative connotations. For example, if one were monitoring coverage of a company, news coverage that described the company as profitable would be judged as more positive than coverage describing a company as bankrupt. To do all of this via computer programs always raises the risk that the computer will misunderstand the meaning of a particular article, although advances in sentiment analysis have improved the accuracy of computer coding significantly. But computers can code far more content far more quickly than humans, making it sensible to trade off some degree of accuracy for timely and comprehensive data. To help ensure that our conclusions are on firm ground, we rely on a similar set of media data produced by the Pew Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), which also measured the candidates’ share of news coverage as well as its tone. See the appendix for further details.

¹Some further detail and references are here: <http://www.cs.sunysb.edu/~skiena/lydia/p1229-bautin.pdf>.

Random, or Romney?

Perry was “languishing in the single digits in most opinion polls” after a “series of gaffes and missteps.”⁴⁴ In the fall of 2011, a similar fate befell two other Republican candidates: Herman Cain and Newt Gingrich.⁴⁵ Each candidate’s story illustrates how, early on, actions judged to be newsworthy drove coverage, with the polls following suit. But soon the tone of that coverage shifted—aided and abetted by their opponents and even by Perry, Cain, and Gingrich themselves—and with it the fortunes of these candidates. Neither Perry nor Cain could recover. Gingrich, as we will see in the next chapter, could do so only briefly.

Rick Perry was, on paper, a strong candidate—a governor of a large state with solid conservative credentials and the ability to raise real money. In fact, he outraised all the other Republican candidates in the third quarter of 2011.⁴⁶ In July and early August 2011, he attracted episodic news attention, according to data displayed in Figure 2. The gray line on this figure includes the mentions of Perry as a percent of mentions of the eight major Republican candidates.⁴⁷ This coverage spiked temporarily when he hosted a religious revival meeting in Texas. But the real boomlet began when Perry entered the race.⁴⁸ His poll numbers followed this increase in stories. The three national polls in early August—each poll is displayed as a dot in Figure 2—put his standing at 16%, on average. In the first poll taken after his announcement, a one-day Rasmussen poll on August 15, Perry stood at 29%. Other polls in August and early September would put his standing between 24 and 33 points (with the exception

⁴⁴Naureen Khan, “Can the ‘Wizard behind the Curtain’ Save Rick Perry?” *National Journal*, December 10, 2011, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/2012-presidential-campaign/can-the-wizard-behind-the-curtain-save-rick-perry--20111210?mrefid=election2012>.

⁴⁵For the sake of brevity we do not examine the brief surges of Donald Trump and Michele Bachmann.

⁴⁶Perry raised about \$17 million. Romney raised the next highest amount, about \$14 million.

⁴⁷These were Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Huntsman, Paul, Perry, Santorum, and Romney.

⁴⁸The PEJ’s data confirm this. In the seven days before Perry’s announcement, he was featured in about 20% of stories. After his announcement, he was featured in 75% of stories.

Random, or Romney?

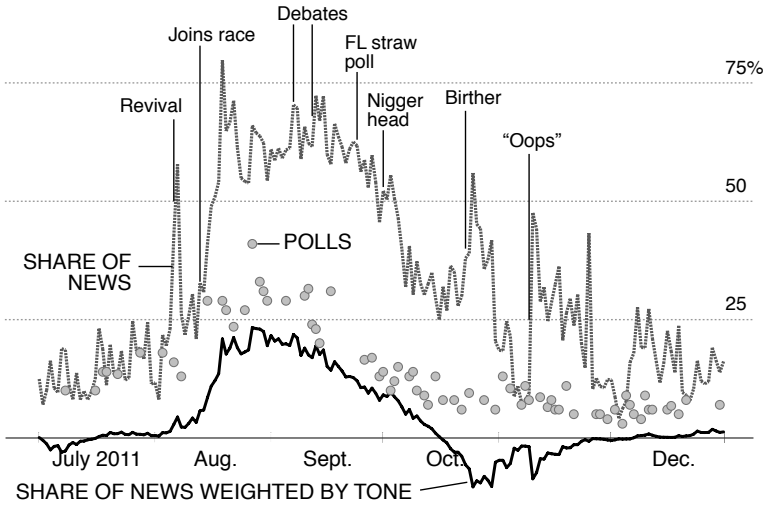


Figure 2. Trends in Rick Perry's news coverage and poll standing.

The gray line represents Perry's share of mentions of the major Republican candidates. The black line represents the share of mentions, weighted by the tone of the coverage. When the black line is above 0, the coverage is net positive; when it is below 0, the coverage is net negative. The gray dots capture Perry's standing in individual national polls among Republicans, dated to the middle of each poll's time in the field and averaging together any polls on overlapping days. The data span the period from July 1 to December 31, 2011.

of an outlying 41% figure in a Zogby Internet poll). This put him at the front of the pack.

The scrutiny began only four days after his entry into the race. Initially Perry received headlines like these from the *New York Times*:

“Money No Obstacle as Perry Joins GOP Race” (August 13, 2011)

“Shaking Up Republican Field, Perry Officially Enters Race for President” (August 14, 2011)

“A Confident Perry Lingers to Make Friends at the Fair” (August 16, 2011)

“Obama Presses His Case in Crucial Iowa, But Perry Is Close on His Heels” (August 17, 2011)

Each of these headlines suggests that Perry was running strongly in the horse race, which helps explain why the tone of his coverage was

Random, or Romney?

positive, on balance. This is what the black line in Figure 2, which weights Perry's share of coverage by the tone of that coverage, indicates. But things began to change on August 17 with this headline: "Perry Stands by Remarks on Fed Policy and Treason." While campaigning in Iowa, Perry had said this about the Federal Reserve's efforts to stimulate the economy and keep interest rates low: "Printing more money to play politics at this particular time in American history is almost treacherous—or treasonous in my opinion." Then, referring to Federal Reserve chair Ben Bernanke, Perry added, "I don't know what y'all would do to him in Iowa, but we would treat him pretty ugly down in Texas." Reporting on Perry's comments, Jeff Zeleny and Jackie Calmes wrote:

The comments came at the end of a freewheeling and unscripted day of introducing himself to voters and highlighted Mr. Perry's penchant for provocative, hard-edged campaigning of the sort that speaks to certain conservatives even as it raises hackles elsewhere. A video of the remarks quickly circulated, prompting a round of recriminations not just from Democrats but from some Republicans—a reminder of the old tensions between Mr. Perry and top advisers to former President George W. Bush.⁴⁹

The article went on to quote criticisms of Perry from Republican strategist Karl Rove and former Obama economic advisor Lawrence Summers. Reporters also began picking over Perry's November 2010 book, *Fed Up!*, particularly his comments that Social Security was a "Ponzi scheme"—"fraudulent systems designed to take in a lot of money at the front and pay out none in the end." This led Perry's spokespersons to walk back his stance, producing headlines such as "Rick Perry Tiptoes Away from Social Security Stance."⁵⁰ Despite

⁴⁹ Jeff Zeleny and Jackie Calmes, "Perry Links Federal Reserve Policies and Treason," *New York Times*, August 16, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/17/us/politics/17perry.html>.

⁵⁰ Brian Montopoli, "Rick Perry Tiptoes away from Social Security Stance," CBS News/*Political HotSheet*, August 22, 2011, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20095591-503544.html?tag=contentMain;contentBody.

Random, or Romney?

this scrutiny, however, news coverage of Perry was generally positive in tone in the month after his announcement.⁵¹

The real turn in Perry's news coverage came after the candidate debates on September 7 and 12. In the first debate, Perry again repeated his criticisms of Social Security, calling it a "monstrous lie," and took heat from opposing candidates for his economic record as Texas governor and for requiring young girls to be vaccinated against the human papilloma virus. In the September 12 debate, Perry was again attacked for calling Social Security a Ponzi scheme—a characterization he did not back away from. In the week after the September 12 debate, the coverage of Perry began to turn negative.⁵² Perry's poll numbers also began to slip. In the five polls conducted between August 27 and September 6, he had averaged 32%. In the four polls conducted partly or entirely in the week after the September 12 debate, Perry's averaged 25%. This was a harbinger of things to come.

On Saturday, September 24, the last day of the Florida Republican Party's "Presidential 5" conference in Orlando, 2,657 attendees cast their votes in the Republican straw poll. The poll itself had no formal significance, like most straw polls during primary season. Its results would not elect any delegates to the national convention. But as a marker of the horse race, it was irresistible. This was unfortunate for Perry. He finished second overall, with 15% of the vote, to Herman Cain, who won 37%. At that point, Cain had been largely ignored by the news media (see Figure 3) and was stalled in the single digits in most polls. Cain had held no elective office, having instead built a career as a lobbyist (as the head of the National Restaurant Association) and businessman (most notably as head of Godfather's Pizza). Few expected him to be a serious competitor for the nomination.

But his victory in this one straw poll catalyzed a round of media attention, largely at Perry's expense. "Cain Upsets Perry at Florida

⁵¹The PEJ data confirm this. In the four weeks between August 15 and September 11, roughly one-third of stories about Perry were positive, twice as many as were negative. (The rest were judged neutral in tone.)

⁵²In the PEJ data, the proportion of negative stories increased by 10 points, to 25%, although 31% were still positive.

Random, or Romney?

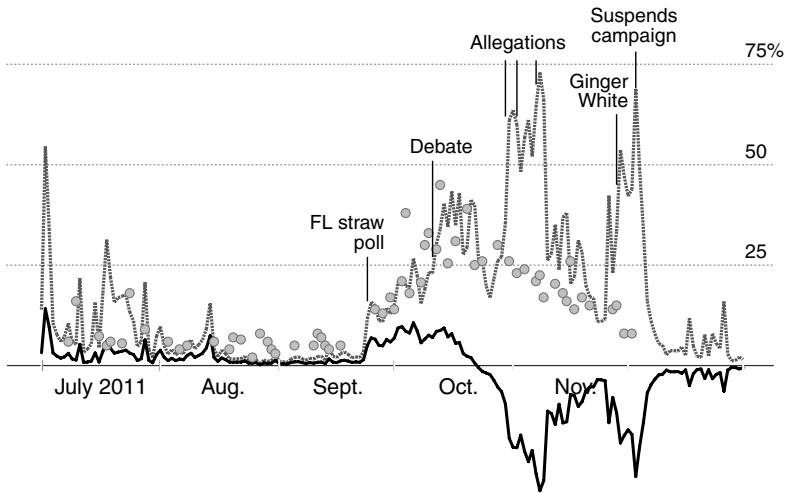


Figure 3. Trends in Herman Cain’s news coverage and poll standing.

The gray line represents Cain’s share of mentions of the major Republican candidates. The black line represents the share of mentions, weighted by the tone of the coverage. When the black line is above 0, the coverage is net positive; when it is below 0, the coverage is net negative. The gray dots capture Cain’s standing in individual national polls among Republicans, dated to the middle of each poll’s time in the field and averaging together any polls on overlapping days. The data span the period from July 1 to December 31, 2011.

Straw Poll,” declared *USA Today*.⁵³ “Cain Upsets Perry in Florida Republican Straw Poll,” declared Reuters.⁵⁴ “Herman Cain Upsets Gov. Rick Perry to Win Florida GOP Straw Poll,” declared Fox News.⁵⁵ This framing of the straw poll demonstrates how news coverage supplies an interpretation of the event. Not only did news outlets devote attention to this informal poll, they framed Cain’s win as a win *over*

⁵³ Susan Page, “Cain Upsets Perry at Florida Straw Poll,” *USA Today*, September 25, 2011, <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/onpolitics/post/2011/09/florida-straw-poll-2012-perry-romney-paul/1#.T8li2cX7R8E>.

⁵⁴ Jane Sutton and Steve Holland, “Cain Upsets Perry in Florida Republican Straw Poll,” Reuters, September 24, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/09/24/us-usa-campaign-winner-idUSTRE78N2RE20110924>.

⁵⁵ “Herman Cain Upsets Gov. Rick Perry to Win Florida GOP Straw Poll,” Fox News, September 24, 2011, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2011/09/24/perry-says-rivals-made-mistake-by-skipping-florida-test-vote/>.

Random, or Romney?

Perry, even though Cain bested the other Republican candidates, including Romney, by an even larger margin.

Within ten days Cain's share of news coverage increased sharply from essentially nothing to 20%. Meanwhile, Perry's fell. The tone of Cain's coverage was favorable on average. Meanwhile, Perry's coverage continued to become more negative.⁵⁶ In part, this was because of a new story about a hunting ranch his family owned in West Texas, which had been known by the name Niggerhead.⁵⁷ Perry's poll numbers began to slip further. In the five polls between September 24, the day of the straw poll, and October 3, he averaged 15 points. By the middle of October, many polls put him back in the single digits. Nothing Perry did would turn this around. He made news on two other occasions—once for making comments that suggested doubt as to whether Obama was born in the United States and once for declaring in a November 9 debate that he would eliminate three cabinet departments as president and then forgetting the name of the third one. His rueful comment—"oops"—was the capstone on his decline.

Meanwhile, Cain's rise continued. His share of news coverage spiked again after the October 11 candidate debate, in which he emphasized his "9-9-9" tax plan, which would have replaced the existing federal tax code with three 9% taxes (on income, business transactions, and sales). His poll numbers showed a similar pattern. In the weeks between the Florida straw poll and the October 11 debate, his share in the polls appeared to increase—averaging 21 points during this period. In the week after the debate, his polling average climbed to 31 points. In some polls at this time, he was the leading candidate overall.

⁵⁶ Again, the PEJ data confirm this. In the week after the Florida straw poll, 35% of Cain's coverage was positive and 20% was negative. The ratio increased slightly—to 36–18—in the first full week of October. In that same week in October, 34% of Perry's coverage was negative and only 26% was positive. This was the first week that his negative coverage outweighed his positive.

⁵⁷ Stephanie McCrummen, "At Rick Perry's Texas Hunting Spot, Camp's Old Racially Charged Name Lingered," *Washington Post*, October 1, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/rick-perry-familys-hunting-camp-still-known-to-many-by-old-racially-charged-name/2011/10/01/gIQAOhY5DL_story.html.

But the scrutiny was coming. The 9-9-9 plan had already attracted criticism from the other candidates; in the October 11 debate, Romney said, “simple answers are always very helpful but oftentimes inadequate.”⁵⁸ Tax experts were even less favorable. One *Washington Post* story began, “The ‘9-9-9’ plan that has helped propel businessman Herman Cain to the front of the GOP presidential field would stick many poor and middle-class people with a hefty tax increase while cutting taxes for those at the top, tax analysts say.”⁵⁹ By the third week of October, Cain’s coverage, although still quite voluminous, had become more negative than positive. At the end of October, his poll average was about 27%, or 4 points lower than it was after the debate.

His fortunes would change dramatically at that point. On October 31, Politico broke the story of how two women had accused Herman Cain of sexual harassment and received financial settlements from the National Restaurant Association during his tenure as president from 1996 to 1999.⁶⁰ On November 3, a third woman came forward to accuse Cain of sexual harassment. On November 7, another woman, Sharon Bialek, accused Cain of actual sexual assault. Amid these allegations, news coverage of Cain spiked dramatically. At its peak almost 75% of all mentions of the Republican candidates were mentions of Cain.

These allegations brought further scrutiny of Cain’s behavior and the vague and evasive answers he and his spokespersons gave to questions about the allegations. It is not surprising that news coverage of Cain became much more negative and that his poll numbers continued to drop. In the week after Bialek came forward, Cain’s poll numbers averaged 19%. By the end of November, the “decline” phase was well under way. His share of news coverage had plummeted and his poll numbers had slipped further, to about 15%. Cain was then hit with a fourth allegation, this one from a woman named Ginger

⁵⁸ Philip Rucker and Amy Gardner, “Romney Keeps Solid Footing in GOP Race,” *Washington Post*, October 12, 2011.

⁵⁹ Michael A. Fletcher, “Experts See Surprise in Cain’s 9-9-9 Plan,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 2011.

⁶⁰ Jonathan Martin, Maggie Haberman, Anna Palmer, and Kenneth P. Vogel, “Herman Cain Accused by Two Women of Inappropriate Behavior,” *Politico*, October 31, 2011, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1011/67194.html>.

White, who claimed that she and Cain had carried on a thirteen-year affair that had ended only just before he began his presidential campaign. His news coverage spiked again, and his poll numbers fell even further. He was back to single digits in the two national polls right before he suspended his campaign on December 3.

As Cain's fortunes were waning, an unlikely candidate came to the fore: Newt Gingrich. Six months before this point, in June 2011, Gingrich's chief advisors had quit en masse, asserting that he was not interested in running a rigorous campaign—an assertion that, fairly or not, seemed to be confirmed by the fact that Gingrich had just returned from a two-week cruise in the Greek Isles. Gingrich also faced criticism within the Republican Party for his claim that Representative Paul Ryan's plan to turn Medicare into a voucher system amounted to "right-wing engineering." He later apologized.⁶¹ In July, as Figure 4 illustrates, Gingrich made news for attacking a senior member of his party—he criticized Senator Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's proposed compromise during the debt ceiling negotiations—and for his accumulated campaign debts. He then received little news coverage for the summer and most of the fall, while continuing to poll only in the single digits.

But during the month of October, Gingrich's poll numbers began to increase slowly. In the first half of October, he averaged between 7 and 8 points in national polls. In the second half of October, he averaged almost 11 points. This increase was not accompanied by any real increase in news coverage.⁶² It could have been driven by his performance in the September and October debates. Although the audiences for these debates were a fraction even of likely Republican voters, they could have been responsible for a small shift in the polls. News coverage during this time suggested that Gingrich was a consistently strong debater. For example, in an October 29 article, the *Washington Post's* Karen Tumulty wrote:

⁶¹"Gingrich Apologizes to Paul Ryan for 'Right-Wing Social Engineering' Criticism," Fox News, May 17, 2011, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2011/05/17/gingrich-apologizes-paul-ryan-right-wing-social-engineering-criticism/>.

⁶²The PEJ data confirm this. In every week in October, Gingrich was featured in no more than 4% of campaign stories.

Random, or Romney?

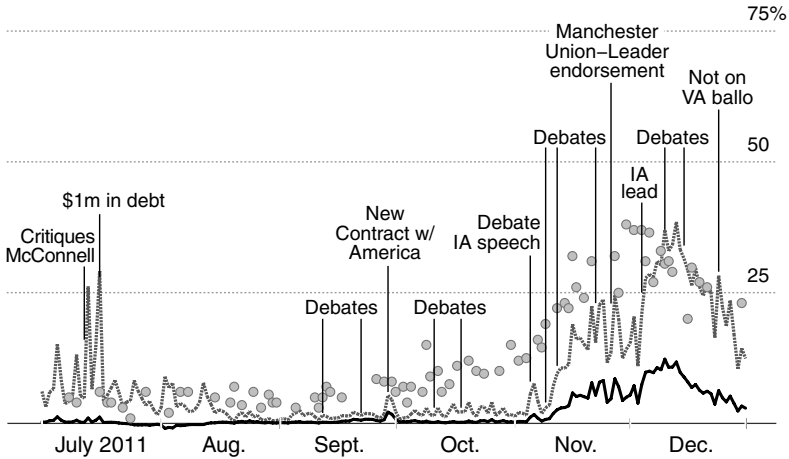


Figure 4. Trends in Newt Gingrich's news coverage and poll standing.

The gray line represents Gingrich's share of mentions of the major Republican candidates. The black line represents the share of mentions, weighted by the tone of the coverage. When the black line is above 0, the coverage is net positive; when it is below 0, the coverage is net negative. The gray dots capture Gingrich's standing in individual national polls among Republicans, dated to the middle of each poll's time in the field and averaging together any polls on overlapping days.

[T]here are signs that Republicans are giving Gingrich another look. Fundraising has picked up after his strong debate performances and amid the continued frostiness that many activist Republicans feel toward presumed front-runner Mitt Romney, the former Massachusetts governor.

The article goes on to note that Gingrich had raised \$1 million in October, which was more than he had raised in all of July, August, and September. Tumulty noted that Gingrich had seen a “modest uptick” in his poll numbers—citing a 3-point increase in *New York Times*/CBS News polls—but that does not appear to have motivated her piece.⁶³

⁶³ Karen Tumulty, “Newt Gingrich: GOP’s Consummate Survivor Is Back on His Feet,” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/newt-gingrich-gops-consummate-survivor-is-back-on-his-feet/2011/10/29/gIQA-G6rYTM_story.html.

Random, or Romney?

Gingrich's surge began to take shape in November. He received a bump in news attention after his November 5 speech at the Ronald Reagan dinner, a fund-raiser for the Iowa Republican Party. The *New York Times's* Richard Oppel Jr. said that Gingrich "appeared to help his chances" at the dinner. Gingrich was the focal point of this article, even though four other candidates spoke.⁶⁴ The article concludes by quoting an Iowa Republican who said that Gingrich "hit a home run tonight." A *Washington Post* article from that same day emphasized the friendly "debate" between Gingrich and Cain that took place after the speech.⁶⁵ Although the article noted Gingrich's somewhat higher poll numbers—citing his 12% standing in a new *Washington Post/ABC News* poll—it focused more on his performance in the debate:

On stage Saturday, Gingrich seized the opportunity to show off his mastery of policy matters. He spoke with ease about the intricacies of health policy, saying the nation's health system should be less bureaucratic and more consumer-friendly.

After the November 9 candidate debate, Gingrich received more and increasingly favorable news coverage.⁶⁶ This appeared to catalyze his poll numbers. A CBS News poll conducted during and after the November 9 debate put his standing at 15%, which led the *New York Times's* Trip Gabriel to write that Gingrich was "running near the front of a fractured pack," a fact that Gabriel also credited to his debate performance, although, given the audiences for the debates, it was more likely due to the news coverage complimenting his debate

⁶⁴ Richard Oppel Jr., "Gingrich Tailors Message at Iowa GOP Dinner," *New York Times/The Caucus*, November 5, 2011, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/05/gingrich-tailors-message-and-unites-with-opponents-in-iowa/>.

⁶⁵ Philip Rucker, "For Gingrich and Cain, It's a Friendship and a Contest," *Washington Post*, November 5, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/for-gingrich-and-cain-its-a-friendship-and-a-contest/2011/11/05/gIQAvtBqM_story.html.

⁶⁶ In the PEJ data, Gingrich's news coverage increased to 15% of stories from November 7 to 13 and then to 37% and 44% in the subsequent two weeks. The shift in tone was also evident: only 19% of Gingrich stories were positive in the first week of November (versus 25% that were negative). This ratio was 26–25 in the second week of November, however.

Random, or Romney?

performances.⁶⁷ The rest of November followed the now familiar pattern, as Gingrich's share of the news and poll standing increased in tandem.

Even as Gingrich's ascent continued, there were the predictable rumblings. In mid-November the *Post's* Tumulty wrote, "But whether he will become an actual threat to Romney, or just another fleeting phenom, will depend largely on two things: Gingrich's ability to keep in check the impulses that have been his undoing in the past, and how well he deals with the criticism and scrutiny that go with being a real contender."⁶⁸ Tumulty went on to quote the unfavorable view of a "Republican former House colleague" ("The worst in Newt comes out when he is doing well"), to note Gingrich's self-described "controversial" proposals, and to describe his "political baggage," such as his three marriages. Both Gingrich's rivals and news reporters began to dwell on the consulting fees he received from Freddie Mac, the government housing agency that Gingrich himself had criticized for its alleged role in the housing bubble and subsequent financial crisis. In the November 22 debate, Gingrich's endorsement of a path for citizenship for some illegal immigrants led reporters to note that this "could put him at odds with some conservatives in his party."⁶⁹

But the real turning point seemed to come in December when Romney began to attack Gingrich in earnest, mostly on the issues that had been discussed in the previous weeks. Tracking a series of *New York Times* and *Washington Post* headlines captures the shift in tone that augured Gingrich's decline.⁷⁰ Initially those stories

⁶⁷ Trip Gabriel, "As Foes Flounder, Gingrich Gets Bump in Poll," *New York Times/The Caucus*, November 11, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/12/us/politics/newt-gingrich-gets-bump-in-poll-as-foes-flounder.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁶⁸ Karen Tumulty, "Newt Gingrich, on the Rise, Says, 'Hopefully, I'm Going to Be More Disciplined,'" *Washington Post*, November 16, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/newt-gingrich-on-the-rise-says-hopefully-im-going-to-be-more-disciplined/2011/11/16/gIQAeSVkSN_story.html.

⁶⁹ Dan Balz and Amy Gardner, "GOP Candidates Show Sharp Differences on National Security and Terrorism," *Washington Post*, November 22, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/gop-candidates-debate-security-vs-rights-in-dc-debate/2011/11/22/gIQANbsemN_story.html.

⁷⁰ John Harwood, "In Gingrich, Romney Now Sees a Grave Threat," *New York Times/The Caucus*, December 5, 2011, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/05/in-gingrich-romney-now-sees-a-grave-threat/>; Jeff Zeleny and Marjorie Connelly, "In

Random, or Romney?

portrayed Gingrich as the front-runner and Romney as back on his heels.

December 5: “In Gingrich, Romney Team Sees Threat”

December 6: “In Iowa, Gingrich Is Gaining Favor, New Poll Shows”

Then as the attacks from both Democrats and Romney increased:

December 7: “New Romney Ad Turns Up Heat on Gingrich”

December 8: “Romney Supporters Slam Gingrich’s Leadership Skills, Vanity”

December 12: “Mitt Romney Steps Up Attacks on Newt Gingrich”

Some of these attacks on Gingrich came from Republican Party leaders, including former Missouri senator James Talent, former New Hampshire governor John Sununu, and former House member Christopher Shays. Talent said that Gingrich “was not a reliable and trustworthy leader.” Sununu said that Gingrich “is more concerned about Newt Gingrich than he is about conservative principle.” Shays said, “Newt is an entrepreneur more than he’s a manager.” Their comments provided a somewhat uncommon glimpse into the conversations ongoing during the invisible primary. They also pointed to an important weakness for Gingrich—one that would be evident in coming months: there was real and sincere opposition to his candidacy within the party, and some leaders were willing to go on the record and criticize him in order to prevent his becoming the party’s nominee.

As Gingrich came under fire, news stories began to suggest that he was in trouble and that perhaps his campaign was not up to the

Iowa, Gingrich Is Gaining Favor, New Poll Shows,” *New York Times*, December 6, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/07/us/politics/gingrich-leads-gop-rivals-in-iowa-poll-finds.html?_r=4; Michael D. Shear, “New Romney Ad Turns Up Heat on Gingrich,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/08/us/politics/new-romney-ad-turns-up-heat-on-gingrich.html>; David A. Farenthold and Philip Rucker, “Romney Supporters Slam Gingrich’s Leadership Skills, Vanity,” *Washington Post*, December 8, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/romney-supporters-ex-colleagues-attack-gingrichs-leadership-vanity/2011/12/08/gIQAfS4YgO_story.html; Amy Gardner, Karen Tumulty, and Philip Rucker, “Mitt Romney Steps Up Attacks on Newt Gingrich,” *Washington Post*, December 12, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/mitt-romney-steps-up-attacks-on-newt-gingrich/2011/12/12/gIQADWi-hqO_story.html.

Random, or Romney?

task of responding. On December 17 the *Washington Post*'s Dan Balz referred to Gingrich's "time of testing" and the "twin problems" that he confronted: "answering his rivals' attacks, which are raining down on the former House speaker," and "how to rapidly build a campaign infrastructure large and sturdy enough to sustain a viable presidential candidacy."⁷¹ This latter point suggests how, despite increases in fund-raising, news attention, and poll standing, Gingrich could still be judged as lacking by other measures of the horse race—in this case, the sophistication of his campaign operation.⁷² The consequence of these attacks and news coverage of them was evident in Gingrich's poll standing in December. For example, the Gallup polls showed his rapid decline: from 37% in the first week of December to 31% in the second week to 26% in the third week to 23% in the final week. He only faded further into the New Year as the Iowa caucus approached—although, unlike any of the candidates who had surged earlier in 2011, Gingrich was not quite finished yet.

Anybody but Romney?

By the end of the fall, Republican voters were more enthusiastic about the field than they were six months earlier but less enthusiastic than in past election years. In a November 2011 Pew Research Center poll, almost half of Republican respondents said that the Republican candidates were, as a group, "excellent" or "good."⁷³ This was low by historical standards: 56% of Republicans had said that of the GOP field in November 2007, and 67% of Democrats had similarly favorable feelings toward the Democratic field at that time. The

⁷¹ Dan Balz, "Gingrich's Time of Testing Arrives," *Washington Post*, December 17, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/gingrichs-time-of-testing-arrives/2011/12/17/gIQAVpZkoO_story.html.

⁷² The PEJ data show that news coverage in December was trending negative. During the week of November 28–December 4, 28% of stories about Gingrich were negative and 28% were positive. During the week of December 12–18, the stories were 35% negative and 25% positive.

⁷³ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "GOP Voters Still Unenthused about Presidential Field," January 9, 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/01/09/gop-voters-still-unenthused-about-presidential-field/?src=prc-twitter>.

Random, or Romney?

front-running candidates also elicited less enthusiasm than did their 2008 counterparts. Relatively few Republicans said they would vote “enthusiastically” for Romney, Santorum, or Gingrich in November 2012 if one of them were the nominee.⁷⁴ More said that would be voting “mainly against Obama” or would not vote at all. This decline in enthusiasm is especially evident compared to 2010. In that election, more Republicans than Democrats said they were more enthusiastic about voting compared to previous elections—a reversal of the pattern in 2006 and 2008. But by late 2011, the parties were much closer to parity.⁷⁵ Although voters’ stated enthusiasm six months before an election may not predict whether they ultimately decide to vote, the trends in partisan differences demonstrate how much harder it was for Republicans to get behind a Republican presidential candidate than simply to oppose the Democratic president.

The still unsettled nature of the race was, in the minds of many, a repudiation of Mitt Romney. Early on, quite a few political analysts considered him the front-runner. In April 2010, for example, Mark Halperin said that Romney was “now the front-runner for 2012 and presumably will hold on to that status for the foreseeable future.”⁷⁶ But throughout the fall Romney was almost always in second place behind whichever candidate was the flavor of the month. On the eve of the Iowa caucus, Romney’s poll numbers were in the mid-to high 20s, essentially tied with the fading Gingrich. Romney, who had achieved so much in other aspects of his life, seemed doomed to fail again as a presidential candidate.

In a long piece in the *New York Magazine*, Frank Rich summed up the conventional explanation for Romney’s failure to consolidate

⁷⁴This is from a March 8–11 Gallup poll (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/153272/Romney-Santorum-Stir-Less-Enthusiasm-McCain.aspx>). In total, 35% said this of Romney, 34% said this of Santorum, and 28% said this of Gingrich.

⁷⁵Frank Newport, “Republicans Less Enthusiastic about Voting in 2012,” Gallup, December 8, 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/151403/Republicans-Less-Enthusiastic-Voting-2012.aspx>; Tom Jensen, “Dems Winning on Enthusiasm,” Public Policy Polling, April 3, 2012, <http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2012/04/dems-winning-on-enthusiasm.html>.

⁷⁶Mark Halperin, “Rove and Romney on the Republican Party after Bush,” *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, April 22, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/25/books/review/Halperin-t.html?_r=1.

Random, or Romney?

support. He is worth quoting at length. Rich began by articulating the “standard analysis of the race,” in which Romney’s “unyielding 25 percent average in the polls” will ultimately be sufficient for him to prove “Beltway handicappers” correct:

Eventually primary voters will exhaust all conceivable alternatives. . . . Then they will come home to the 25 percent leader of the pack, because that’s what well-mannered Republicans always do.

But then Rich rejoined:

But this narrative is built on a patently illogical assumption: that a 25 percent minority is the trunk wagging the Republican elephant. What makes anyone seriously assume that the 75 percent will accommodate itself to that etiolated 25 percent rather than force the reverse? That lopsided majority of the GOP is so angry at the status quo that it has been driven to embrace, however fleetingly, some of the most manifestly unqualified, not to mention flakiest, presidential contenders in American history. The 75 percent is determined to take a walk on the wild side. This is less about rejecting Mitt—who’s just too bland a figure to inspire much extreme emotion con or pro—than it is about fervently wanting something else.⁷⁷

This enraged 75% was, to Rich, the “Molotov Party.” Thinking of the Republican primary in this way, however, failed to appreciate Romney’s strength at this point. Moreover, although it was certainly true that the majority of Republicans were “angry at the status quo,” if by status quo one means “Barack Obama,” Republican voters’ attitudes about their party’s presidential candidates were not those of a restive Molotov majority, fervently wanting anybody but Romney.

Part of the reason that Romney was not the consistent front-runner during the fall had to do with how the media covered him. The pattern of discovery, scrutiny, and decline did not apply, as

⁷⁷ Frank Rich, “The Molotov Party,” *New York Magazine*, December 26, 2011, <http://nymag.com/news/frank-rich/gop-2012-1/>.

Random, or Romney?

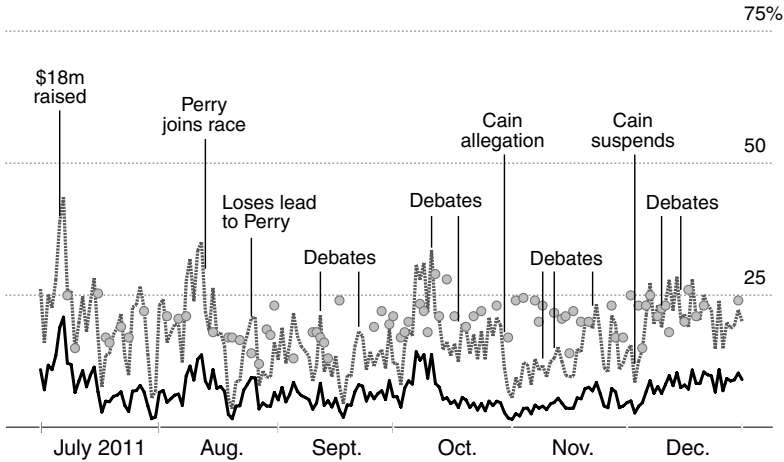


Figure 5. Trends in Mitt Romney's news coverage and poll standing.

The gray line represents Romney's share of mentions of the major Republican candidates. The black line represents the share of mentions, weighted by the tone of the coverage. When the black line is above 0, the coverage is net positive; when it is below 0, the coverage is net negative. The gray dots capture Romney's standing in individual national polls among Republicans, dated to the middle of each poll's time in the field and averaging together any polls on overlapping days.

Figure 5 shows. Having run in 2008, Romney was much more of a known quantity. There was, in short, less to “discover” about him. In fact, some of the biggest shifts in Romney's share of news coverage did not have anything to do with what he did or said. These shifts came about largely because of trends in coverage of Perry and Cain. As Perry's share of news coverage increased after he joined the race, Romney's decreased. Romney's also decreased when Cain was accused of sexual harassment but then increased when he dropped out of the race. In short, news coverage of Romney was far more constant: he never dominated the news but he never disappeared. His poll numbers followed a similar pattern, fluctuating relatively little during these six months, especially compared to the larger ups and downs for Cain, Perry, and Gingrich.

But much like the proverbial tortoise racing against the hare, Romney emerged from the fall as the clear leader according to

Random, or Romney?

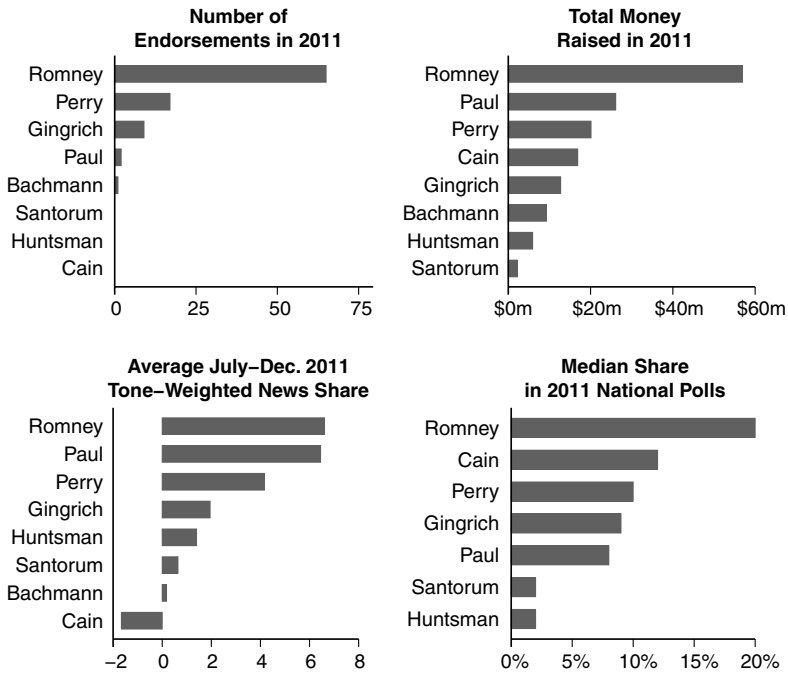


Figure 6. Republican candidate endorsements, fund-raising, news coverage, and polling in 2011.

key fundamentals of presidential primaries: endorsements, fund-raising, media attention, and polls. We summarize all of those data in Figure 6. Although, as we have noted, relatively few Republican Party leaders endorsed any candidate, Romney won the vast majority of those endorsements. In fact, he garnered more endorsements from sitting governors, senators, and House members than he did before the Iowa caucus in 2008, when both John McCain and Rudy Giuliani earned nearly as many endorsements as he did. It is important that none of the other candidates could accumulate many, if any, endorsements. Perry, Cain, and Gingrich benefited from media attention but ultimately could not win significant support among party leaders. Their support was, in some sense, not only temporary but superficial. To the extent that pre-Iowa endorsements tell us who the nominee is likely to be—and typically they do—Romney was that candidate.

Random, or Romney?

Romney also raised more money during 2011 than any other candidate and had far more cash on hand at the end of the year—almost \$20 million, or about \$16 million more than his nearest competitor (Paul). He had consistently received more positive media coverage than any other candidates, besting Paul only slightly but certainly besting Perry, Cain, and Gingrich, despite their boomlets. And although he had not consistently led in the polls, especially in the fall of 2011, his polling median was larger than that of any other candidate. Moreover, at the end of 2011, he was once again in the lead. In the last national poll of the year, fielded December 31 through January 2 by YouGov, 30% of Republican primary voters supported Romney, giving him a 13-point lead over his nearest opponent (Gingrich).

This leads to one of the ironies of this invisible primary period. Because Romney was relatively well-known, he never received the spikes in coverage that Perry, Cain, and Gingrich did. Because of that, he never “surged” in the polls and never experienced the reinforcing cycle of positive news coverage and gains in the polls. This made him appear to be a weak candidate, unloved by many in the party. But this also concealed the underlying structure of the race, which tilted in his favor. Even if Romney was never the heavy favorite, he was the clear front-runner.

The notion of a Molotov Party wanting “anybody but Romney” also seemed to suggest a party cleaved by ideology, with the moderate minority supporting Romney and the conservative majority opposing him. But that was not how the Republican Party looked at the end of 2011. In December, views of Romney were actually quite favorable, according to YouGov polls of likely Republican primary voters (see Figure 7). He was actually better liked than all of the other candidates. And overall views of most of the candidates were favorable on balance, suggesting that however unenthusiastic Republicans were about “the field,” a majority of them liked most of the candidates in that field.

Moreover, none of the cleavages in this Molotov Party was all that evident, at least when it came to views of Romney. As we show in Figure 8, Romney was viewed positively by likely Republican primary voters regardless of whether they were conservatives or moderates, pro-life or pro-choice, relatively wealthy or not, Tea Party members

Random, or Romney?

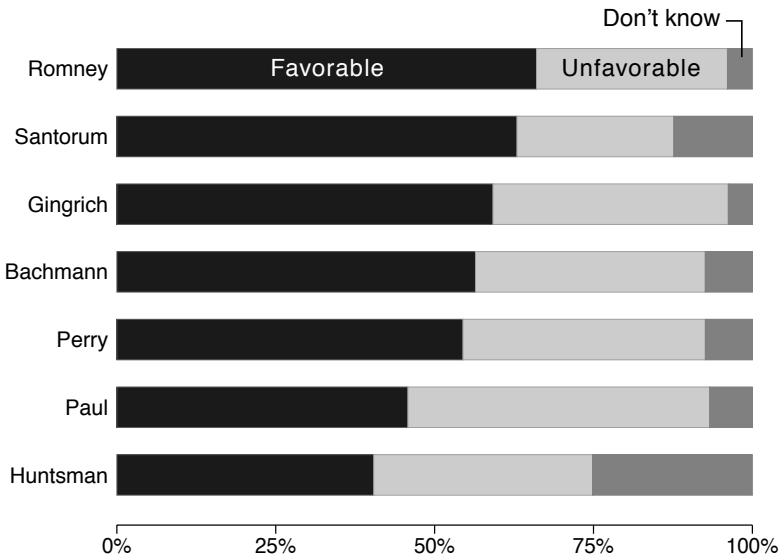


Figure 7. Views of GOP presidential candidates by likely Republican primary voters (December 2011).

Data are from a YouGov survey conducted in mid-December 2011. N = 6,532.

or not. In fact, Romney was viewed *more favorably* among the very constituencies that were supposed to want anyone but him. For example, about 73% of conservative Republican primary voters had a favorable view of him, compared to 61% of liberals and moderates. Even if some in the party were not enthusiastic about Romney, they were not, as Rich was careful to note, rejecting him.

Why would moderate and conservative Republican voters have such similar views of a candidate allegedly anathema to conservatism? One reason is that they did not see Romney as all that liberal. In a YouGov poll conducted right before the Iowa caucus, Republican primary voters were asked to place themselves and several of the Republican candidates on a liberal-conservative scale. On average, respondents placed both themselves and all of the candidates on the conservative side of the spectrum (see Figure 9).⁷⁸ Although

⁷⁸ Of course, respondents' placements of the candidates may not be "accurate" as judged by close observers of politics. Respondents may also tend to assume that candidates they favor share their ideological views, a process known as "projection" in the political science literature. However, neither of these undercuts our basic point:

Random, or Romney?

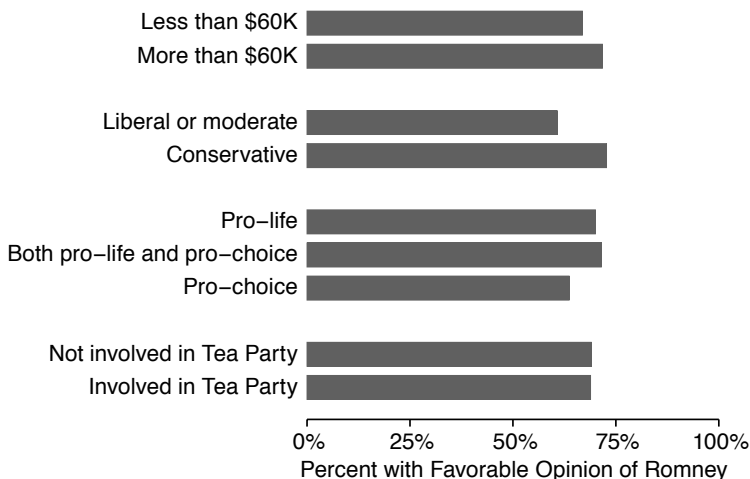


Figure 8. Views of Romney by different groups of likely Republican primary voters (December 2011).

Data are from a YouGov survey conducted in mid-December 2011.

Romney was placed slightly to the left over the average Republican primary voter, the difference is minimal. Romney was only slightly further away from this average voter than was Gingrich and actually closer than was Bachmann or Santorum. This does not mean that all Republican voters were ideologically closer to Romney than anyone else. On average, Huntsman was perceived by moderate Republican voters as closer to them than was Romney. And conservative Republican voters considered Gingrich, Paul, Santorum, and Bachmann to be closer to them than Romney. But despite Romney's record as Massachusetts governor and despite vocal opposition from some conservative opinion leaders, Republican voters did not see Romney as a closet liberal. He was shaping up as a candidate who could prove acceptable to range of factions within the party.

One last finding suggests the Molotov Party was not nearly so restive as bomb-thrower analogies would suggest. If conservatives and moderate Republicans were really warring camps—and if the

regardless of how they came to this assessment, on average Republican voters did not see Romney as an ideological outlier.

Random, or Romney?

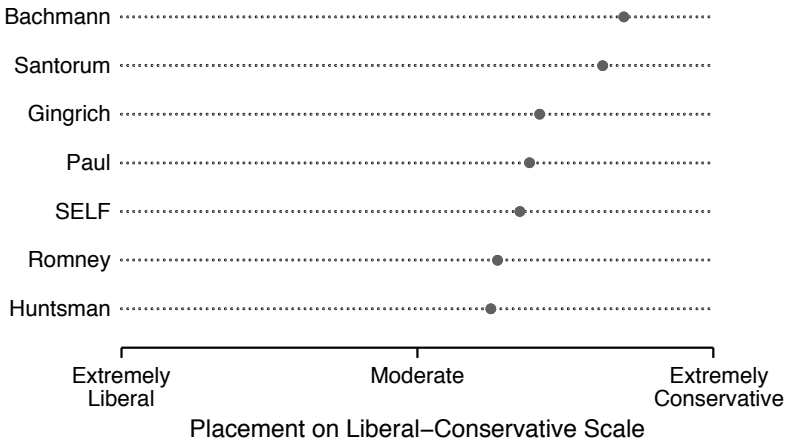


Figure 9. Ideological placements of GOP presidential candidates and self by likely Republican primary voters (late December 2011).

Data are from a YouGov survey conducted December 31, 2011–January 2, 2012. N = 281.

volatility in the fall were the result of conservatives seeking “anybody but Romney”—you might expect that by December 2011 supporters of the various candidates would be ideologically divided. To see if this was true, we created measures of social and economic conservatism, drawing on attitudes toward various salient issues, including taxation of the wealthy, health care, abortion, and gay rights.⁷⁹ Drawing on a large December 2011 YouGov survey, we mapped the location of the average supporter of each of the Republican candidates (see Figure 10). All of these respondents identified as likely Republican primary voters. For comparison, we also mapped the average Democrat, Republican, and independent, as well as those who supported Obama in a head-to-head race with Romney.

In fact Republican primary voters, regardless of whom they supported, were ideologically similar. The only exception to this was supporters of Huntsman, who were too small a group to be consequential anyway. To be sure, the supporters of the candidates

⁷⁹These measures weight each issue equally, but the results are very similar if we allow the weights to vary via a factor analysis.

Random, or Romney?

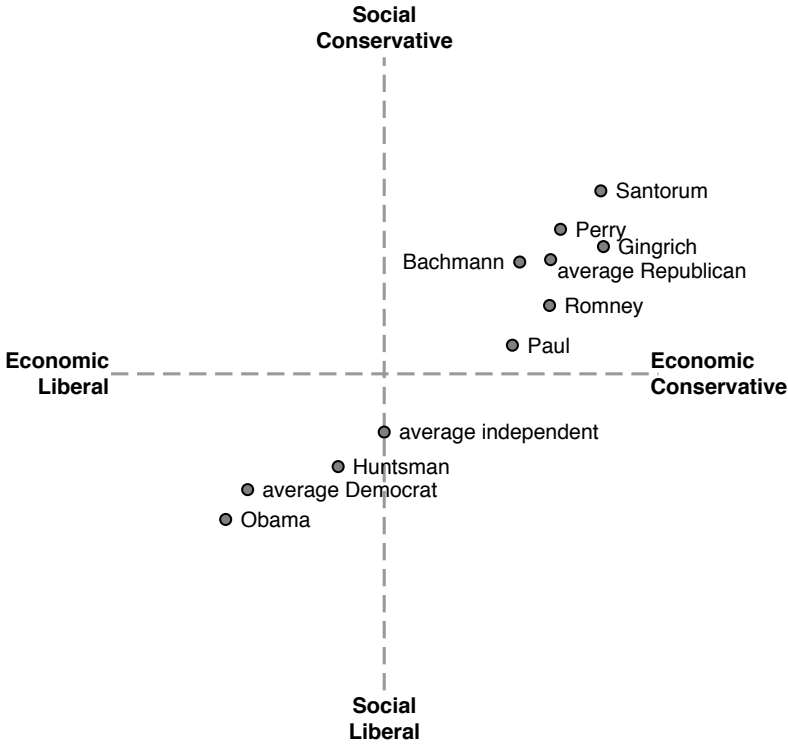


Figure 10. Ideological location of supporters of each Republican candidate and Obama.

The graph maps the ideological location of the average supporter of each Republican candidate. All of these supporters also identified themselves as likely Republican primary voters. The graph also maps the ideological location of the average Republican, Democrat, and independent, as well as those who supported Obama in a two-way race against Romney. The economic scale includes attitudes toward government-provided universal health care, increasing taxes for the wealthy, and government regulation of business. The social scale includes two measures of attitudes toward abortion as well as attitudes toward gay marriage. Source: December YouGov poll. The number of respondents in the poll is 23,998. The number of likely Republican primary voters is 7,674.

were not identical. Supporters of Bachmann, Gingrich, Perry, or Santorum were more socially conservative than Romney supporters. Those who supported Gingrich, Perry, or Santorum were more economically conservative. But these differences are not large. For

Random, or Romney?

example, if we imagine social conservatism as a 100-point scale ranging from liberal to conservative, Santorum supporters were 16 points more socially conservative than Romney supporters. Similarly, Gingrich supporters were only 9 points more conservative than Romney supporters on economic issues. Contrast that to the gaps between Obama and Romney supporters: 36 points on social issues and 48 points on economic issues.

Why were supporters of the various Republican candidates so ideologically similar? Possibly because Republican voters were not choosing on ideological grounds. For example, Bachmann was arguably much more conservative on social issues than were her supporters, who may not have known or cared. If voters did not have ideology foremost in mind, this would undercut the frequent characterization of a Republican Party cleaved by ideology—with restive factions of moderates and conservatives, evangelicals and Chamber of Commerce types, “well-mannered” Republicans and “Molotov” Republicans who would struggle to agree on a nominee. The lack of meaningful ideological rifts also suggests that lengthy discussions of which candidate would appeal to which faction were beside the point: there was not that much daylight among the factions.

The various candidates’ supporters may have looked similar because the candidates were, too. Conservative writer Ramesh Ponnuru could almost have been summarizing our results when he wrote this on December 2, 2011, on the Web site of the *National Review*.

The Republican party now features a remarkable degree of programmatic consensus. The entire field wants to cut corporate tax rates, convert Medicaid into block grants, and (the asterisk candidacy of Gary Johnson aside) protect unborn human life. Even Jon Huntsman, the candidate positioned farthest left in the field, favors these policies. None of them enjoyed such uniform support in previous primaries, and some of them had none.

When the candidates differ, it is typically on issues that are unlikely to matter during the next presidency. Representative Bachmann may, unlike some of the others, wish to abolish

Random, or Romney?

the EPA, but no conceivable Congress within the next eight years will grant her wish.

The narrowness of the candidates' differences on pertinent issues militates in favor of picking the one who can best implement the sensible agenda they largely share.⁸⁰

Ponnuru's view was not shared by every Republican, but the title of his article, "Romney's the One," was a much more accurate description of the race in December 2011 than was "Anybody but Romney." Many signs did suggest that Romney would be "the one." He was ahead of his rivals, and sometimes far ahead, on the most important metrics of the horse race. He was well-liked overall and, contrary to much conventional wisdom, perceived as moderately conservative—certainly well within the party's "programmatic consensus." But the first serious tests of the race were yet to come.

⁸⁰ Ramesh Ponnuru, "Romney's the One," *National Review Online*, December 2, 2011, <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/284700/romney-s-one-ramesh-ponnuru#>.

Appendix

Media Data

We rely on extensive media data collected by General Sentiment and the PEJ. The General Sentiment data are discussed in the text. Here we describe the PEJ data in more detail.⁸¹ After sampling stories from a range of print, broadcast, and cable news sources, the PEJ determines whether each of the presidential candidates is the focus of at least 25% of the story. They then calculate the share of the week's stories in which each candidate is featured at that level (where a week is defined as Monday through Sunday). PEJ also calculates the tone of news stories, albeit in a different fashion than they calculate news share and in a different fashion than does General Sentiment. PEJ staff members coded a set of news stories as positive, negative, or neutral toward the various candidates. Stories that were unambiguous in tone were then used to “train” a computer algorithm employed by the company Crimson Hexagon.⁸² Like General Sentiment, Crimson Hexagon examines a large number of news sites (more than 11,500 in total) and then, drawing on its training by PEJ staff members, places content from these news organizations in the categories positive, negative, or neutral. This methodology is different than General Sentiment's, which relies not on human coders to help the algorithm identify tone but on dictionaries of words with positive or negative connotations. Unlike General Sentiment, the PEJ methodology does not generate an overall “score” but percentages in each category of positive, negative, and neutral. We use both sources of information in an attempt to triangulate on the tone of news coverage.

Statistical Analyses

In the text we argue that salient events drive news attention to candidates. When this happens for the first time for any candidate—what

⁸¹ Further information is here: http://www.journalism.org/commentary_back-grounder/About+Campaign+2012+in+the+Media+.

⁸² See Daniel Hopkins and Gary King, “A Method of Automated Nonparametric Content Analysis for Social Science,” *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 1 (2010): 229–47.

Random, or Romney?

we call “discovery”—the data suggest that news attention creates a subsequent increase in poll numbers. At that point, news attention and poll numbers may begin to reinforce each other, meaning that increasing news coverage helps drive poll numbers but increasing poll numbers help drive news coverage. We can attempt to get some purchase on the relationship between news coverage and polls using a technique called vector auto-regression (VAR). VAR is a way of modeling two factors that could simultaneously cause each other—that is, where you cannot assume that Factor #1 causes Factor #2 but not the other way around. A VAR model stipulates that each factor is caused by previous values of that factor as well as previous values of the other factor. In other words, a candidate’s poll standing on Wednesday might be due to his standing on Monday and Tuesday, as well as news coverage on Monday and Tuesday.

To estimate these models, we followed these steps. First, we generated a measure of the candidate’s national poll standing that helps separate movement in the polls from sampling fluctuation and provides us a daily measure, even though the national polls were episodic (as Figures 2–5 show). We first “smoothed” the polls using a technique called local regression or lowess, which helps “even out” the bumps and wiggles that may simply arise because of sampling fluctuation. Given the rapidity with which the candidates’ poll numbers sometimes changed, we made the smoothed measure relatively sensitive to changes in poll numbers.⁸³ For days that did not have polling data, we simply interpolated poll numbers in a linear fashion. If polls showed a candidate at 15% on Monday and 18% on Thursday, we assumed that the candidate’s standing was 16% on Tuesday and 17% on Thursday. If anything, this method of smoothing likely underestimates the extent to which polls respond to news coverage of salient events. Even a relatively sensitive smoother may struggle to capture the abrupt changes that characterize polling during this primary and thus suggest erroneously that polls were moving even before the event and subsequent news coverage took place. Nevertheless, this is the best we can do without creating a measure that simply

⁸³ In technical terms, we chose a low bandwidth for the lowess smoother (equal to 0.1).

assumes that the polls could not move until after the event—which would essentially mean creating a measure designed to confirm our theory.

Second, to capture news coverage, we relied on the measure of news share that is weighted by tone, as presented in Figures 2–5. We chose this measure because the figures suggest that poll numbers may respond not only to the volume of coverage but also to its tone.

Third, setting up the VAR models means choosing the appropriate number of previous values. In other words, because the model assumes that a candidate's poll standing and news coverage depend on his earlier poll standing and news coverage, we must answer the question “how much earlier?” To do so, we examine various numbers of previous values and choose the model that best fits the available data.⁸⁴ Typically this means including values from the previous two, three, or four days.

Having estimated these models, we then examine a statistic—the chi-squared statistic—that suggests whether each factor appears to be causing the other. This statistic is generated from a test created by the statistician Clive Granger and is sometimes called a test of “Granger causality.” Essentially what it tells us is how useful each factor is in predicting the other. If the chi-squared value is statistically significant, this does not necessarily imply strict causality, which we could not ascertain without randomized experiments. But it does suggest how polls and news coverage are or are not related.

In Table 1 we present the chi-squared statistics for Perry, Cain, Gingrich, and Romney from July to December 2011. For Cain, the model includes the days through December 3, when he suspended his campaign.

For Perry, the results suggest a reinforcing cycle. More (and more favorable) news coverage is associated with higher poll numbers and vice versa. Although Perry's poll numbers did not initially increase until after the news coverage did, after that it does appear that each helped sustain the other. For Cain, however, news coverage is associated with poll numbers but not the reverse. This may be because the

⁸⁴ We examined the fit statistics provided by the “varsoc” command in the statistical software package Stata.

Random, or Romney?

trends in Cain's coverage were driven less by success in the polls and more by discrete events—the Florida straw poll, the debates, and the allegations of sexual misconduct.

For Gingrich, the opposite is true: his rising poll numbers appear to shape news coverage, but news coverage did not shape polls. This is consistent with what we found earlier, where there was a modest increase in his poll numbers in October even though news coverage had not increased. Moreover, his slow gain in the polls was noticed and cited by reporters. Later coverage in November also cited poll numbers, which could mean that the poll numbers themselves helped motivate the coverage, even though the coverage cited other factors besides poll numbers as reasons for the renewed attention to Gingrich.

Finally, for Romney an entirely different dynamic holds. As we argued, news coverage of Romney and his poll numbers did not exhibit the same pattern as that of the other candidates. There was no apparent cycle of discovery, scrutiny, and decline but instead relative stability.

Table 1. Granger Causality Tests of News Coverage and National Polls, July–December 2011

	Polls → News	News → Polls
Perry	27.3* (2)	10.8* (2)
Cain	6.0 (4)	12.8* (4)
Gingrich	21.3* (3)	5.7 (3)
Romney	3.6 (4)	2.7 (4)

Note: Cell entries are chi-squared statistics from Granger causality tests. Degrees of freedom are in parentheses. Number of observations for Perry, Gingrich, and Romney is 184; for Cain, it is 156.

* $p < .05$