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Less Horse Race than 2008

How the Media Covered the 2012 Primary Campaign

FOR FUTHER INFORMATION:

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Mitt Romney needed 15 weeks once the primary contests began to gain a secure hold over his party’s nomination for president. But he emerged as the conclusive winner in the media narrative about the race six weeks earlier, following a narrow win in his native state, according to a new report by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism that examines in detail the media’s coverage of the race.

After Romney’s tight victory in the Michigan primary on Feb. 28, news coverage about his candidacy became measurably more favorable and the portrayal of his rivals—particularly Rick Santorum—began to become more negative and to shrink in volume.

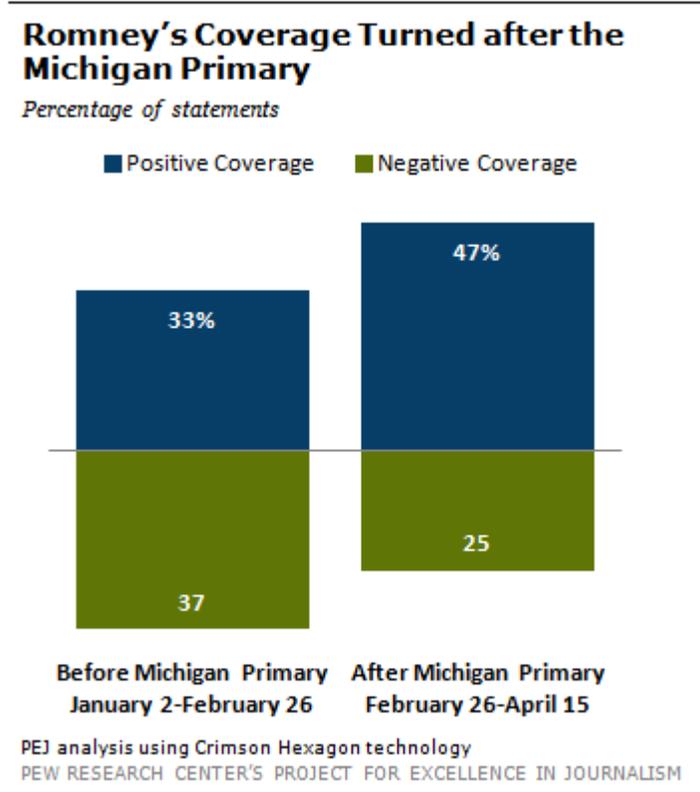
One main component of that shift in the narrative is that after Michigan, the news media began to view Romney’s nomination as essentially inevitable. Indeed, a close look at the coverage finds that references to delegate math and the concept of electoral inevitability spiked in the media the week after Michigan, rising twelve fold, for instance, on television news programs. From that point on, the amount of attention in the press to

Romney’s candidacy began to overwhelm that of his rivals, and the tone of coverage about him, which had been often mixed or negative before, became solidly positive.

A look inside the coverage also reveals that Romney endured more media “vetting” of his record and personal character than the other Republican contenders. Since November, just over 12% of the coverage in which Romney was a significant figure was devoted to those subjects. The press focused in particular on his wealth and his experience at the private equity investment firm Bain Capital.

A similar percentage of the coverage of Newt Gingrich also involved vetting his record and personal life (just under 12%), but he received only about half as much campaign coverage generally as Romney.

One quadrennial question about press coverage of campaigns is what subject matter will help voters decide among the candidates. Critics and journalists have long debated whether there is



too much focus on strategic and tactical matters in the press. Such coverage explains what is occurring in the race but people disagree over whether it illuminates how a candidate would behave if elected.

From November on, these strategic and political frames—stories focused around such concerns as momentum, strategy, horse race polls, advertising and fundraising—accounted for 64% percent of the Republican primary campaign coverage studied. That is more than five times as much as was devoted to the candidates’ personal lives (12%), 10 times as much as their public records (6%) and almost six times as much as was devoted to the candidates’ positions on policy issues (11%).

Nonetheless, these numbers represent substantially more coverage devoted to policy, personal history and public record than was the case during the 2008 presidential primary season.

These are some of the findings of a special report by PEJ that examines how the primary season was covered and what it portends about the race ahead.

The study examines the shifts and turns in the race and tracks how much attention each candidate received, the tone of that coverage and emphasis of the coverage, or what some scholars call frame.

This analysis was produced through two forms of coding of media content. One involved computer-assisted analysis of more than 11,000 news outlets. The second involved human coding of a sample of 52 key news outlets covering print, broadcast, cable, audio and online means of distribution. The computer technology from the firm Crimson Hexagon was used to examine the tone of each candidate’s coverage, how positive or negative or neutral. The human coding was used to analyze the amount of coverage each candidate received and the framing of that coverage—whether it involved strategy, issues or personal matters. The examination of the tone and volume of coverage focused on the period from January 2-April 15. The coverage of frame reaches back further, to November, to see how the race was covered for two months before the rush of primaries began.

Among the other findings of the research:

- Santorum, who emerged as Romney’s chief rival and captured some important primary victories, never enjoyed a sustained period of positive press. He had three moments over the 15 weeks examined in which his coverage was more positive than negative—following his strong showing in Iowa, following his victories in Missouri, Colorado and Minnesota and the week of his win in Louisiana. But these periods never lasted more than two weeks, largely because his primary and caucus wins were followed fairly soon by losses in subsequent contests and doubts over his organization and financing.

- Newt Gingrich had only one week during the primary season in which he enjoyed significantly more positive press coverage than negative—the week of his victory in South Carolina on Jan. 21. What’s more, no candidate also fell off the media radar screen more precipitously than Gingrich. In early March, he was a significant presence in about one-third of the campaign stories. (To be a significant figure, someone must be featured in at least 25% of the story.) Three weeks later, he registered in less than 1% of the campaign stories.¹
- Ron Paul enjoyed the most consistently positive portrayal of any candidate in the race. But that was offset by the fact that the media virtually ignored him. Paul had 11 weeks out of 15 in which the media attention paid to him was clearly more positive than negative. The next closest were Romney and Santorum, at six weeks each. But Paul received about one-eighth as much coverage as Romney and about one-quarter as much as Santorum and Gingrich. With little attention came little vetting. In all, 3% of Paul’s coverage scrutinized his personal background or public record, the lowest of any candidate in the primaries.
- An examination of President Obama’s coverage suggests the media have been treating him more as a presidential candidate than a chief executive for months. Since November, nearly two-thirds (63%) of the coverage about Obama were framed around political strategy and momentum. In contrast, 21% primarily connected the president with foreign or domestic policy issues, such as Iran or the renewed debate over health care.
- While a focus largely on political matters—topics such as horse race, strategy and fundraising—made up most of the coverage, the numbers were lower than four years earlier. Taken together, coverage of personal issues, public record and policy positions received about twice the emphasis in 2012 as it did in 2008 (28% in the 2012 race, 11% in the 2008 Republican primary race and 15% in the 2008 Democratic primary race).

Now the race takes a new turn. The focus will shift to the contrast between Romney and Obama, and, with Election Day seven months away, the pace of the narrative will also be altered by the calendar. This retrospective of how the primaries were covered reveals how the two presumptive nominees have been portrayed to this point and what the public has been told about them.

The public has been offered a mixed view of Romney, one that has emphasized his wealth, his record as a private equity executive and focused on the difficulties he has had as a campaigner in

¹ Republican presidential candidates Herman Cain, Michelle Bachmann and Rick Perry also saw significant decreases in their coverage before they exited the race. They are not included in this study because they dropped out before most of the primaries were conducted.

persuading conservative primary voters to embrace him. In the case of President Obama, the public has been exposed to a mostly negative portrayal. That, in substantial part, is a function of the fact that for many months he has been the target of multiple Republican candidates attacking his record and his competence as they sought to take his job.

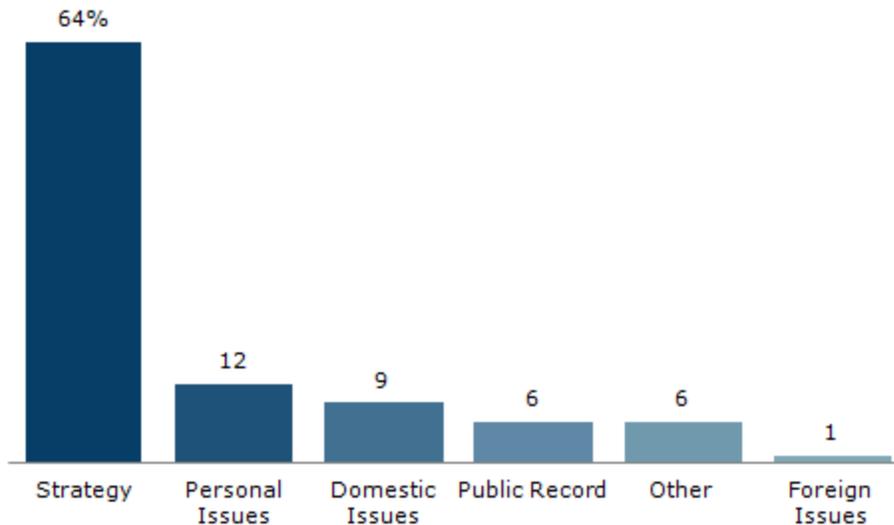
Frames of Campaign Coverage

Once the presidential primaries begin—and there is a new electoral contest nearly every week—the media often focus heavily on tactics, strategy and the numbers of the horse race. On top of that, during the primaries the policy differences between candidates are sometimes fairly minimal as rivals contend for the favor of party primary voters. In 2012, horse race and strategy dominated, but not to the degree they had in 2008.

From November 2011 to April 15, 2012, the coverage devoted to the strategic elements of the GOP primary fight (horse race, tactics, strategy, money and advertising) outnumbered the combined attention to all foreign and domestic policy issues by about 6:1.

Frames of 2012 Campaign Coverage

Percentage of campaign coverage



Date Range: November 1, 2011 – April 15, 2012

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

Overall, 64% of campaign coverage examined was framed around polls, advertising, fundraising, strategy and the constant question of who is winning and who is losing. There was only one month studied, November 2011, when strategy, tactics and money made up less than 60% of the coverage studied. That month they accounted for 41% and the examination of the candidates' personal histories accounted for another 39%. Of particular focus that month was Romney's

Mormon faith, Gingrich’s marital history and Santorum’s religious beliefs. By contrast, the focus on strategy, tactics and money reached its peak in March, when about three-quarters (74%) of the coverage was devoted to those subjects.

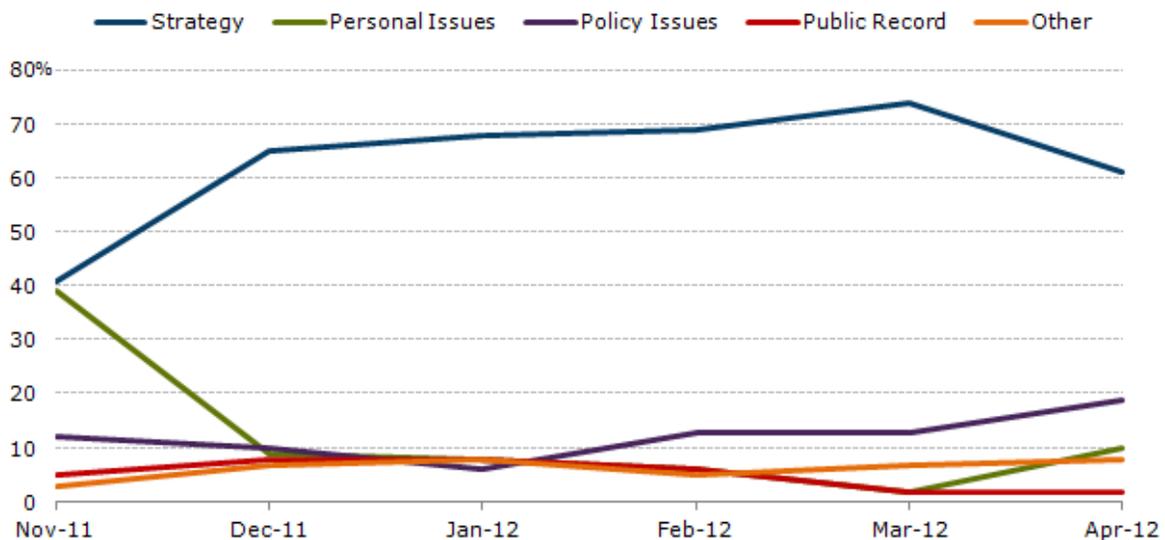
The next biggest focus of coverage was the candidates’ personal backgrounds, such as their families, religion, marriages and finances. In all, personal topics accounted for 12% of the campaign coverage from November through mid-April. That kind of candidate vetting often takes place in the earlier stages of a primary campaign when the contenders are not as well known to the public. After accounting for 39% last November, coverage of the personal history of the candidates fell off markedly in the next four months.

Another way for the media to scrutinize candidates, particularly those who are lesser known, is to examine their public record and performance in office. These topics formed only a small portion of the coverage of the primaries in 2012.

From November through mid-April, the candidates’ public records accounted for 6% of the overall campaign coverage studied.

Frames of 2012 Campaign Coverage Over Time

Percentage of campaign coverage



Date Range: November 1, 2011 – April 15, 2012

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What about what some call “the issues,” the policy positions offered by the candidates as a way to project who they are and why voters should support them? Over the last five and a half months, the candidates’ policy proposals and stands on the issues accounted for 11% of the

campaign coverage. The vast majority of these focused on domestic issues, in particular health care, unemployment and the overall economy. These domestic subjects accounted for 9% of the coverage from November through March, and coverage remained relatively steady. That number rose some, to 12%, in February and March—with some of that coverage attributable to a growing discussion of rising gas prices and the health care debate.

There was far less attention paid to foreign policy issues such as Iran’s nuclear program, negotiations with Russia, and relations with Israel, all of which accounted for just 1% of the campaign coverage. The most attention to that topic occurred back in November 2011 (4%) when the debate centered on whether President Obama’s policy was tough enough toward Iran and not friendly enough toward Israel.

One other subject area generated significant coverage during the primary season. In all, 6% of the campaign coverage was focused on the actions of voters and the identification and analysis of voting blocs, ranging from young voters to Catholic voters.

Compared with 2008, when there were open primaries in both parties, the focus on politics over policy and history is smaller. In 2008, in the Republican fight ultimately won by John McCain, 80% of the coverage in the main primary season was framed around strategy, tactics, advertising, fundraising and momentum; 4% focused on domestic issues; 5% focused on scrutiny of the candidates’ public records and personal lives.

Frames in 2012 Campaign Coverage Compared with 2008

Percentage of campaign coverage

	<u>2012</u> Republicans and Obama	<u>2008</u> Republicans	<u>2008</u> Democrats
Strategy	64%	80%	78%
Personal Issues	12	2	8
Domestic Policy	9	4	4
Public Record	6	4	2
Foreign Policy	1	2	2
Other	6	9	7

Date Range: 2012 data is from November 1, 2011-April 15, 2012. 2008 Republican date is from January 1-March 9, 2008. And the 2008 Democrat data is from January 1-May 11, 2008.

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The numbers were similar in the Democratic battle won by Obama. Fully 78% of the coverage during the key primary battles highlighted the strategy and tactics frame, 4% was about domestic policy and 10% focused on the candidate’s record and personal life.

Thus, from November 2011 through mid-April 2012, there has been considerably less strategic focus (64% vs. 80% in the 2008 GOP race), more than twice as much emphasis on domestic

policy (9% vs. 4%) and considerably more vetting of the candidates' career and personal issues (17% vs. 5% in the 2008 GOP race). While some critics who are skeptical of horse race coverage may consider the numbers higher than they might like, in 2012 more emphasis has been placed on who the candidates are and what they stand for than was the case four years earlier.

Due in large part to the fact that there were two open primary battles in 2008, the amount of overall campaign coverage from Jan. 2-April 15, 2012 is about 30% less than what it was in the same period four years earlier.

The Story by Candidate

Shortly after the primary contests began in early January, the once-crowded Republican field was winnowed to four candidates—Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich and Ron Paul. The sections below examine three components of the coverage of these contenders.

One element is the tone of campaign coverage for each candidate from Jan. 2 (one day before the Iowa caucus) until April 15 (five days after Santorum exited).

Another element of the study examines how much attention each contender received from the media, or the number of stories studied in which a candidate appeared in at least 25% of the story.

Another aspect of study is the frame of campaign coverage in which a candidate was a significant figure. (In the section above (“Frames of Campaign Coverage”), frame was analyzed for every story about the presidential campaign.) Sometimes, the numbers vary from the overall because more generic stories are not counted. Often, for instance, the tactical and strategic totals are higher by candidate.

Mitt Romney

On Tuesday Feb. 28, Mitt Romney edged out a win the Michigan primary over Rick Santorum by a 41%-38% margin. A loss in his native state would have triggered significant doubts about Romney's candidacy. The narrow victory also could have been portrayed as a frighteningly close call. In the media narrative, however, it proved to be a decisive moment in his quest for the nomination.

From that point on, what had largely been mixed or negative press coverage of Romney in 2012 took a dramatic turn for the better and stayed that way until he had a virtual lock on the nomination. Romney also began to separate from the rest of the GOP field in the amount of attention he received in the press.

A close look at the coverage reveals that after Michigan, the press began to talk in significant terms about the mathematical inevitability of Romney winning, given new rules set up by the Republican Party apportioning delegates by vote count rather than winner take all.

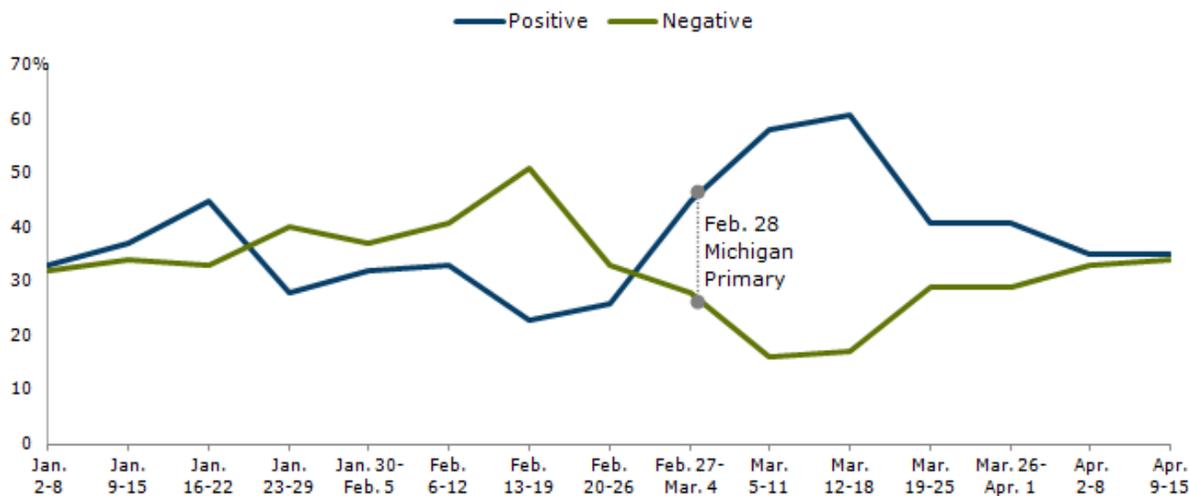
Until that point, for most of the primary and caucus season, the tone of Romney’s news coverage vacillated primarily between mixed and unflattering. He enjoyed one week of clearly positive coverage (45% positive, 33% negative) in the week following his solid, if widely expected win in New Hampshire on Jan. 10.

But that media bounce was short lived. The week of his loss on Jan. 21 to Newt Gingrich in South Carolina, negative coverage of Romney (40%) outstripped positive (28%) by 12 points.

His coverage improved some after his win in Florida on Jan. 31, but not overwhelmingly so. Romney still had to contend with the media meme that he could not “close the deal” against a weak field of opponents. And throughout February, his coverage was more consistently more negative than positive. It reached a nadir the week of Feb. 13-19 (23% positive and 51% negative) when Romney was still reeling from losses to Santorum in the Feb. 7 contests in Missouri, Colorado and Minnesota.

Romney’s Tone Over Time

Percentage of statements



Note: Coverage deemed 'neutral' is not shown. Positive, negative, and neutral coverage total 100%. PEJ analysis using Crimson Hexagon technology

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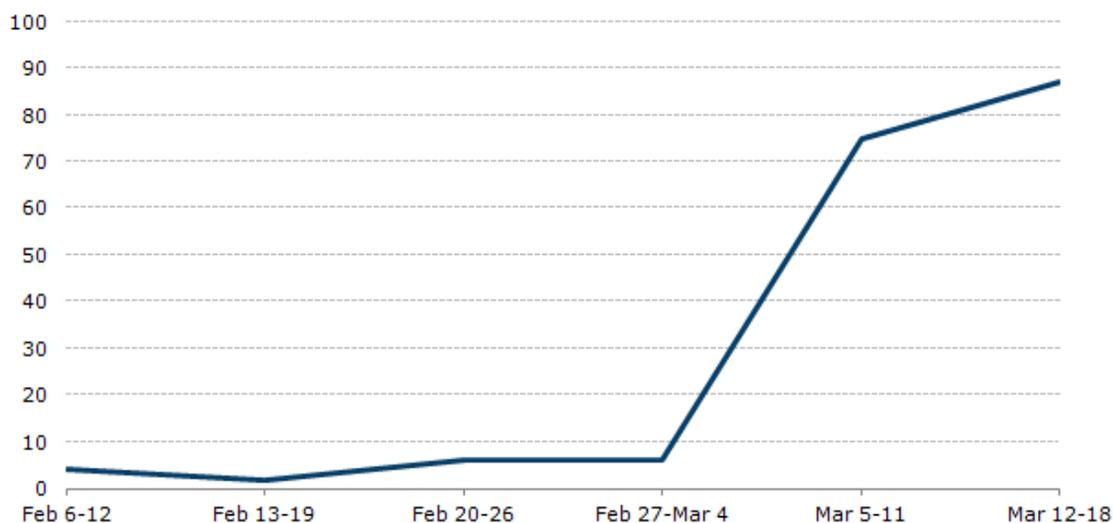
Then came Michigan, where Romney overcame a Santorum lead in the pre-election polls to pull out the win. The week of Feb. 27-March 4, Romney’s positive coverage shot up to 45% (from 26% the week before) and his negative coverage dropped to 28% (from 33%). In the next two

weeks, which included his six wins in the March 6 Super Tuesday voting, Romney enjoyed by far his best coverage of the year, with positive assertions about his campaign exceeding negative ones by more than 40 percentage points.

A keyword search of the coverage finds this sudden shift in tone about Romney coincided with a shift in the subject matter. An analysis of television news programs studied by PEJ each week reveals that the week after Michigan, references in the press to terms such as “delegate math” and “mathematical inevitability” increased twelve fold.

Discussion of Romney’s Mathematical Inevitability Spiked in mid-March

Number of mentions of delegate math on network and cable television



Note: PEJ conducted a keyword frequency search using the closed captioning of the Snapstream server. Researchers searched for variations of the term “math”, then identified only those stories that were about the GOP race and delegate counting. This data comes from 110 shows each week including daytime and evening cable, morning and evening network news, and PBS Newshour.

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The first week of April, the tone of coverage of Romney changed again to something more mixed—35% positive, 33% negative, 32% neutral. Again the storyline had changed.

In April, the press was no longer focused on Romney’s chances against GOP rivals. Instead, more of the narrative focused on criticism of Romney from the Obama campaign and Romney’s perceived chances against the sitting President.

In the media narrative, for all intents and purposes, the general election had begun.

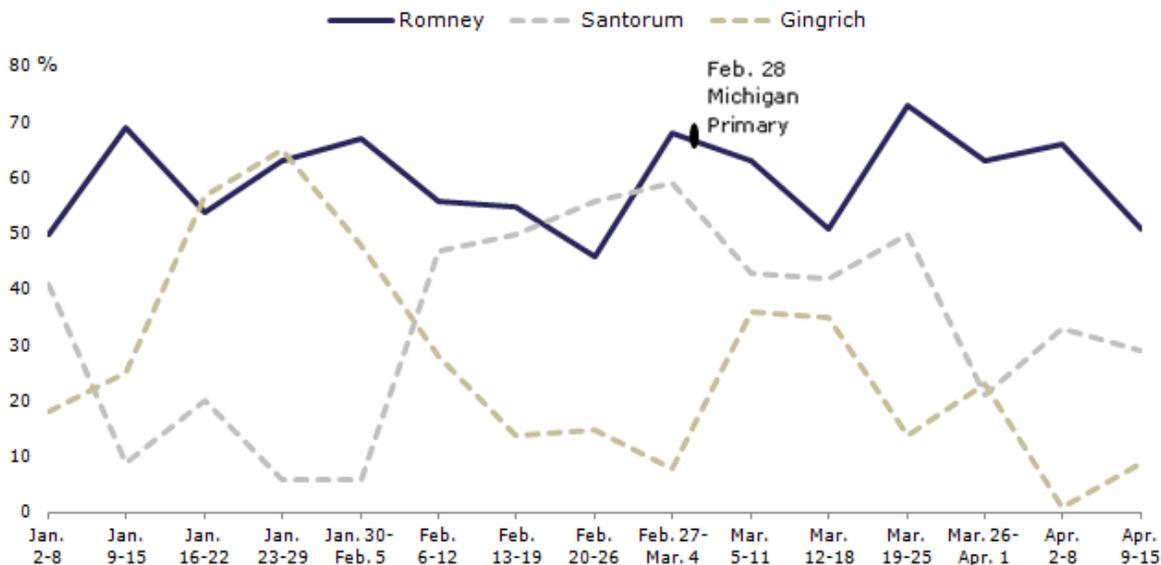
Romney’s victory in Michigan also marked something of a milestone in the competition for attention from the media. During the first eight weeks of the primary season, Romney was often closely rivaled or even bettered in amount of attention he received. PEJ monitors attention by

measuring the number of stories in which a candidate is a significant presence—meaning he is featured in at least 25% of the story.

Following Michigan, Romney remained the top GOP newsmaker week after week.

Attention to Romney Over Time

Percentage of campaign stories as significant figure



Note: To qualify at a significant figure, at least 25% of the story must be about that candidate

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This post-Michigan shift is also evident in the frame of Romney's coverage. In this case, it was a move away from his public record and his personal background to coverage that focused more heavily on the horse race.

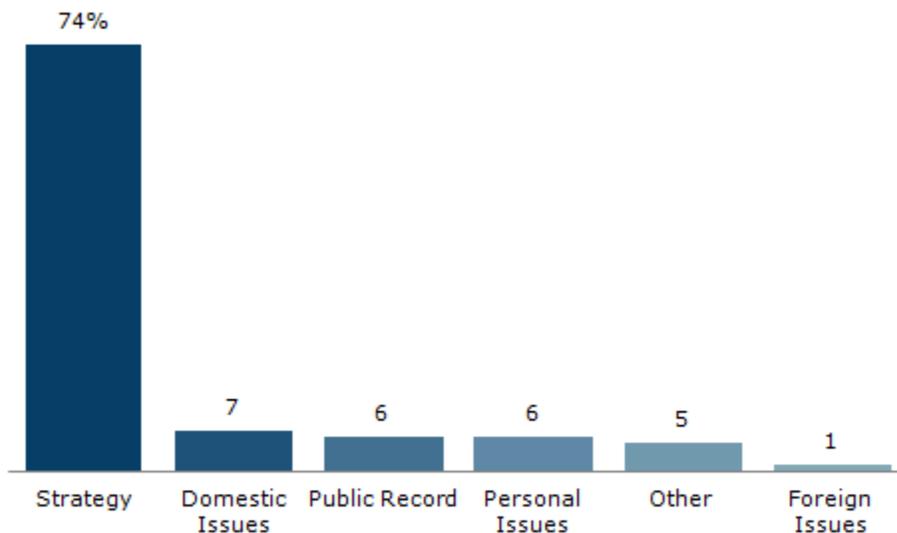
In November and December of 2011, for instance, 15% of the coverage about Romney focused on his past public record and his personal life. They ranged from discussion of his Mormon religion to criticisms that he had changed positions on key issues during his career—the so-called flip flopper issue that has dogged him.

In the first two months of 2012, that vetting continued, accounting for 14% of the coverage about him, although the topics changed. On the personal side, the release of his income taxes and his substantial wealth became a significant story. On the public side, there was attention to his venture capital firm, Bain Capital, as a debate raged over whether its investments primarily benefitted the overall economy or a few wealthy businessmen.

From March 1 through April 15, the vetting of Romney's public and personal life fell to 5% of the coverage about him.

Frames of Romney Campaign Coverage

Percentage of campaign coverage



Date Range: November 2011 – April 15, 2012

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The amount of coverage of Romney's positions on policy issues see-sawed over the past five and a half months. In November and December, policy accounted for 9% of his coverage. It dropped to 6% in January and February. Policy coverage involving Romney then peaked (at 12%) from March 1 to April 15 as the health care debate, and the law Romney enacted while governor of Massachusetts, began to attract more attention.

For the full 15-week primary period, 74% of the coverage of Romney was focused on strategy, tactics, advertising and fundraising; 8% on his policy positions; 6% on his public record; and 6% on his personal background.

Rick Santorum

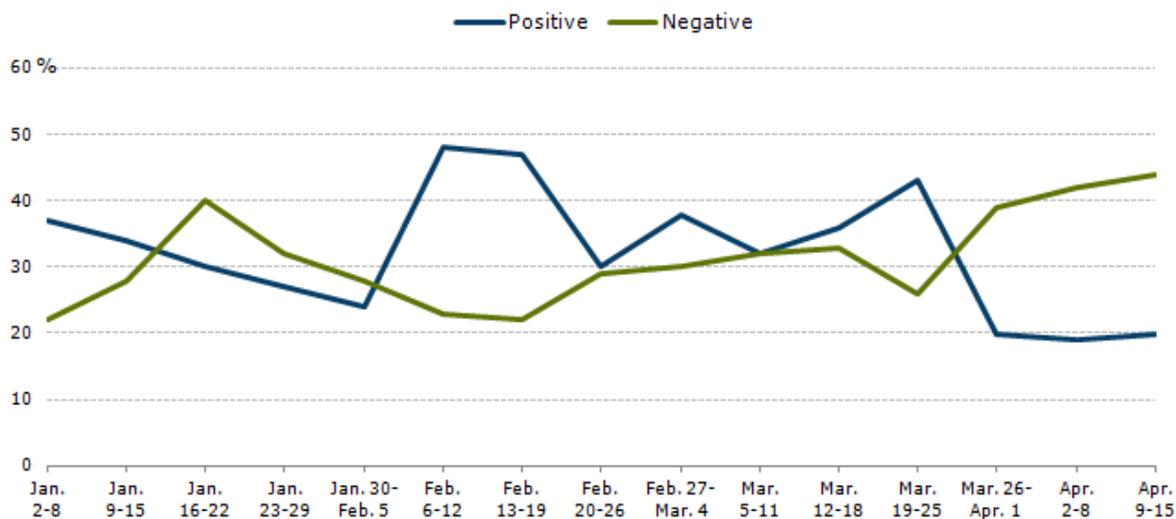
Rick Santorum, who ultimately emerged as the main challenger to Romney, also had the most roller coaster like narrative of any candidate, the tone of his coverage shifting from negative to positive and back again.

The former Pennsylvania senator was never able to sustain substantially positive coverage for more than two weeks, and often not more than one. That appears to reflect the fact that although

he won some important primary contests, Santorum was unable to string several wins together in a row.

Santorum's Tone Over Time

Percentage of statements



Note: Coverage deemed 'neutral' is not shown. Positive, negative, and neutral coverage total 100%. PEJ analysis using Crimson Hexagon technology

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And if Romney was a frontrunner who was vetted early, the opposite was true of Santorum. He appeared to need to pass a kind of viability test with the media late last year, demonstrating enough electoral strength before the press began to examine his policy positions and his past.

Santorum, indeed, was largely ignored by the press in late 2011. The last two months of the year, he generated even less attention than Ron Paul. That began to change in early January in the week of the Iowa caucus.

Santorum's Iowa victory on Jan. 3 also produced a burst of positive coverage for him. The tone of that coverage flattened out the following week, although it stayed more positive than negative, when he finished fifth in the New Hampshire primary. But during the week of his third-place finish in South Carolina on Jan. 21, the tone of Santorum's coverage dropped markedly; negative assertions outstripped positive ones by 10 points. And Santorum's narrative remained more negative than positive for the next two weeks until his victories on Feb. 7 in Minnesota, Missouri and Colorado.

Those victories marked the apex of Santorum's primary campaign narrative. The week of Feb. 6-12, positive coverage spiked to 48% and negative dropped to 23%—a 25-point positive differential. The numbers stayed in that range the following week.

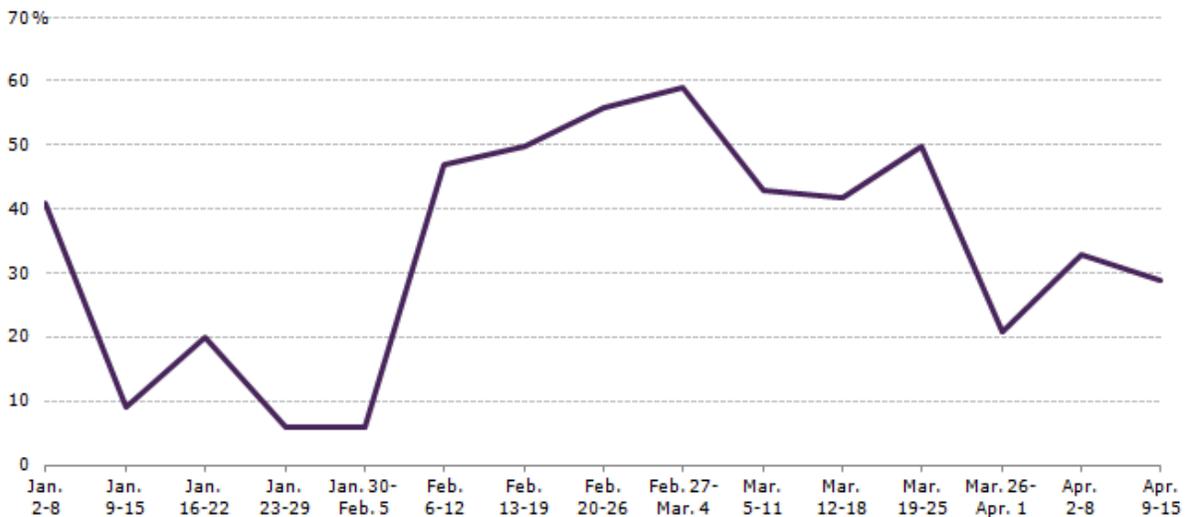
A week later, on the eve of the Arizona and Michigan primaries, the narrative became more mixed again as polls showed Santorum losing momentum in Michigan and trailing heavily in Arizona.

He would enjoy only one more substantially positive week of coverage, when he won his last contest, the March 24 Louisiana primary—43% of the assertions about his campaign were positive with 26% negative.

One week later, with Romney racking up some important endorsements and the delegate math growing more daunting, Santorum’s negative coverage outstripped positive by 19 points. Within two weeks, he had suspended his campaign.

Attention to Santorum Over Time

Percentage of campaign stories as significant figure



Note: To qualify as a significant figure, at least 25% of the story must be about that candidate

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If the tone of Santorum’s coverage yo-yoed, so did the amount of coverage he received. In three of the first five weeks of the year, he was a significant figure in less than 10% of the campaign stories studied. He did not consistently become a major newsmaker until the week of his Feb. 7 primary trifecta. In each of the seven weeks from early February to late March, he was a significant presence in between 42% and 60% of the campaign stories, although he still trailed Romney all but one week.

By the final weeks of his campaign, however, as delegate math became a theme of the coverage, Santorum began to shrink as a focus in the media. The last week of March, he was a significant presence in 21% of the stories, down from 50% the week before. A week later, his coverage grew to 33%, but that included considerable speculation that he would soon exit the race.

The focus of the coverage of Santorum is also a study in how a candidate may not actually receive much vetting for his or her ideas or record until the press decides that person could possibly win.

In November and December 2011, 92% of Santorum’s coverage was framed around tactics, strategy and horse race—even if there weren’t many stories about his campaign at that point. What little coverage Santorum received, in other words, focused largely on his status in the polls.

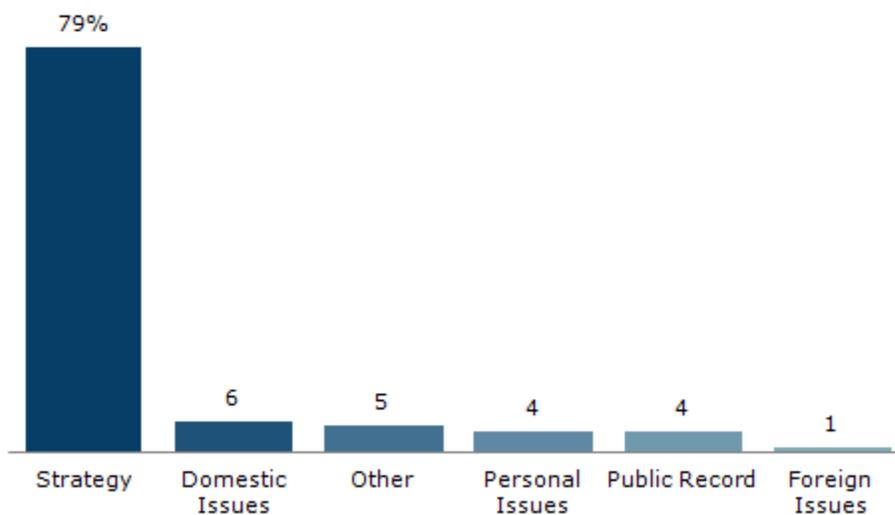
During these first two months, just 2% focused on Santorum’s policy positions and effectively no coverage in which he was a significant presence was primarily framed around his record and background.

That changed only after he won something, the Iowa caucuses.

In January and February, 11% of Santorum’s coverage focused on his record and background and 7% on his positions. In March, as his candidacy appeared less viable, the examination of his positions and record shrank again.

Frames of Santorum Campaign Coverage

Percentage of campaign coverage



Date Range: November 1, 2011 – April 15, 2012

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Overall, from November through April 15, Santorum’s personal and public life accounted for 8% of his coverage—divided evenly between attention to the personal and public. That coverage included, on the personal side, significant attention to Santorum’s deeply held religious beliefs as

a devout Catholic. When it came to his record in office, the earmarks he secured as a Pennsylvania senator were among the most frequent topics.

Another 7% of Santorum’s coverage was related to policy issues, primarily domestic ones. For all the Republican candidates, the economy and healthcare were the two main policy issues. But Santorum also generated significant attention for his views on education, abortion and topics such as pornography and contraception—positions that were in many cases closely intertwined with his religious beliefs.

And 79% of the coverage about the former Pennsylvania senator from November to April 15 focused on strategy, momentum, advertising and fundraising—numbers very much in keeping with those of the other candidates.

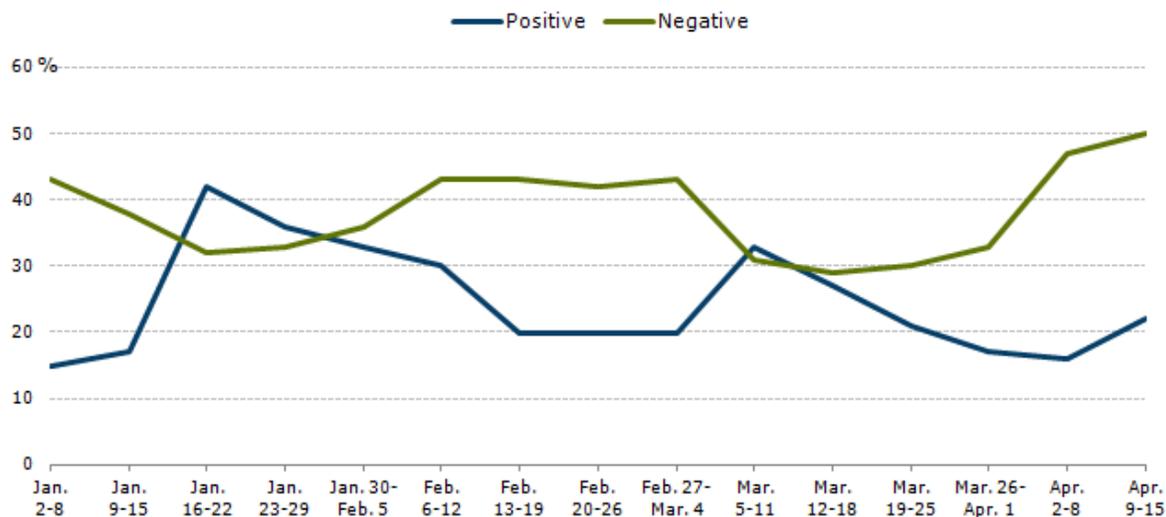
Newt Gingrich

Late in 2011 Newt Gingrich was briefly the GOP frontrunner, according to some polls. Once the primaries and caucuses actually began in January, however, Gingrich only enjoyed a single week in which positive coverage about him significantly outweighed negative, the week he won the South Carolina primary.

And the momentum lasted just about one week.

Gingrich’s Tone Over Time

Percentage of statements



Note: Coverage deemed 'neutral' is not shown. Positive, negative, and neutral coverage total 100%. PEJ analysis using Crimson Hexagon technology

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

After the media concluded that Gingrich was outdebated in Florida, and he was subsequently beaten by Romney in the primary there, his narrative sunk back into negative territory, where it largely stayed. All told, in the 15 weeks of primary contests studied in 2012, Gingrich endured 10 weeks of substantially more negative than positive coverage and four others when it was mixed between positive and negative.

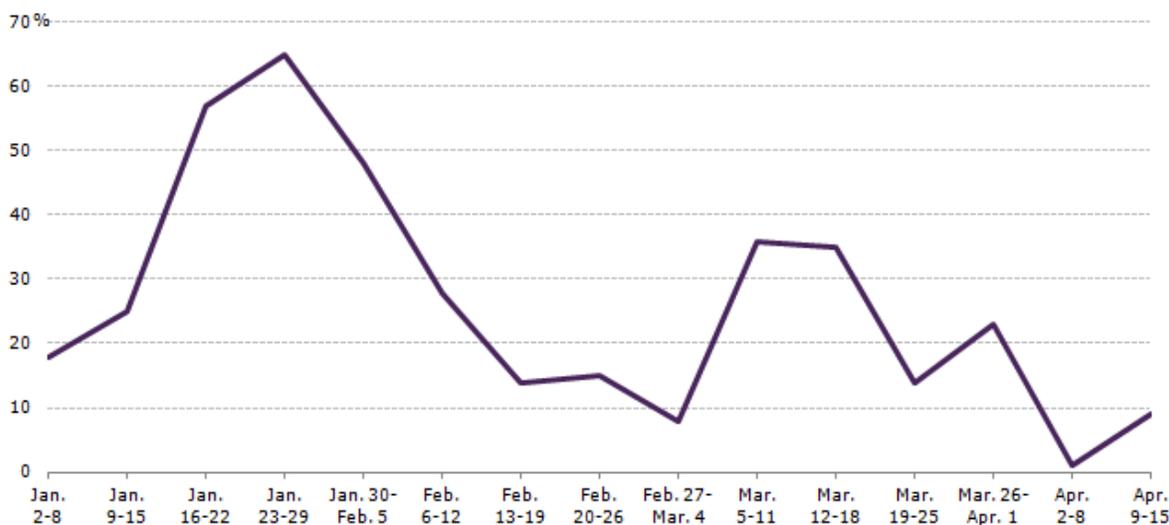
And even the mixed narrative ended some time ago. The last week when Gingrich’s coverage was divided (27% positive, 29% negative and 44% neutral) was March 12-18, shortly after his one Super Tuesday win in his home state of Georgia. For the next month, his coverage became increasingly more negative than positive—by a margin ranging from 9 points to 31 points.

And that coincided with a shrinking amount of attention to his campaign. Gingrich’s high water mark in media exposure also coincided with his win in South Carolina. In the last two weeks of January, he was the top newsmaker in the Republican field, registering as a significant presence in 57% and 65% of the campaign stories. Then it was over. From mid-February through early March, press attention dropped dramatically, and he never registered as a significant focus in more than 15% of the stories in a week.

He had two more weeks of substantial attention, but this was a mixed blessing. From March 5-18 Gingrich saw attention increase to the point that he was a significant newsmaker in more than one-third of the stories studied. Some of that was attributable to his March 6 win in Georgia, but the victory was followed within days by a spate of stories wondering if and when he would end his candidacy, given that he did not fare better in other Southern states besides his own.

Attention to Gingrich Over Time

Percentage of campaign stories as significant figure



Note: To qualify at a significant figure, at least 25% of the story must be about that candidate

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

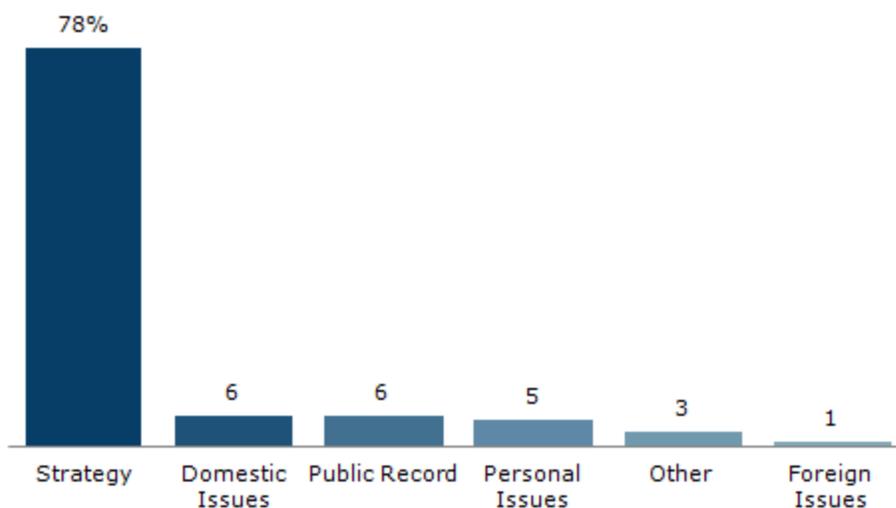
By the first week of April, Gingrich’s coverage plunged to less than 1% of campaign stories after he announced downsizing his staff but continuing to run.

The way the media framed Gingrich’s campaign was similar to that of other candidates. Overall, 78% of the Gingrich campaign coverage from Nov. 1-April 15 was about momentum, fundraising and advertising. That swelled to 88% in March and early April, as it became increasingly clear he would not win the race. From November through mid-April, 12% of the coverage focused on his personal life and public record.

On the personal side, the vetting of Gingrich was often very personal. His marital history, always considered a potential problem area for his campaign, exploded into headlines in late January when his second wife, Marianne, claimed he asked her for an “open marriage.”

Frames of Gingrich Campaign Coverage

Percentage of campaign coverage



Date Range: November 1, 2011 – April 15, 2012

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

Many of the stories about his public record honed in on his controversial tenure as Speaker of the House (1995 to 1999) when he was fined for ethical violations and ultimately stepped down from the post. The heaviest press focus on that public record (10%) came in November and December 2011.

Gingrich’s positions on the issues accounted for 6% of his coverage. While economic policy made up a large portion of the coverage featuring Gingrich, his stance on immigration—which he termed as “humane,” but critics labeled as amnesty—received considerable attention in

November and December. At that point, it appeared that Gingrich, rather than Santorum, would emerge as the chief rival to Romney.

Ron Paul

Two factors distinguished Ron Paul’s coverage this year: its scarcity and its positive nature.

For much of 2012, the tone of Paul’s coverage was more positive than negative. But the glaring lack of attention in the news coverage reflected a media consensus that despite a loyal following and some respectable primary showings, the libertarian-leaning candidate could not capture the Republican nomination.

Attention to Ron Paul Compared to Other Candidates

Percentage of campaign stories as significant newsmaker

Ron Paul	7%
Mitt Romney	59
Rick Santorum	31
Newt Gingrich	30

Note: To qualify at a significant figure, at least 25% of the story must be about that candidate

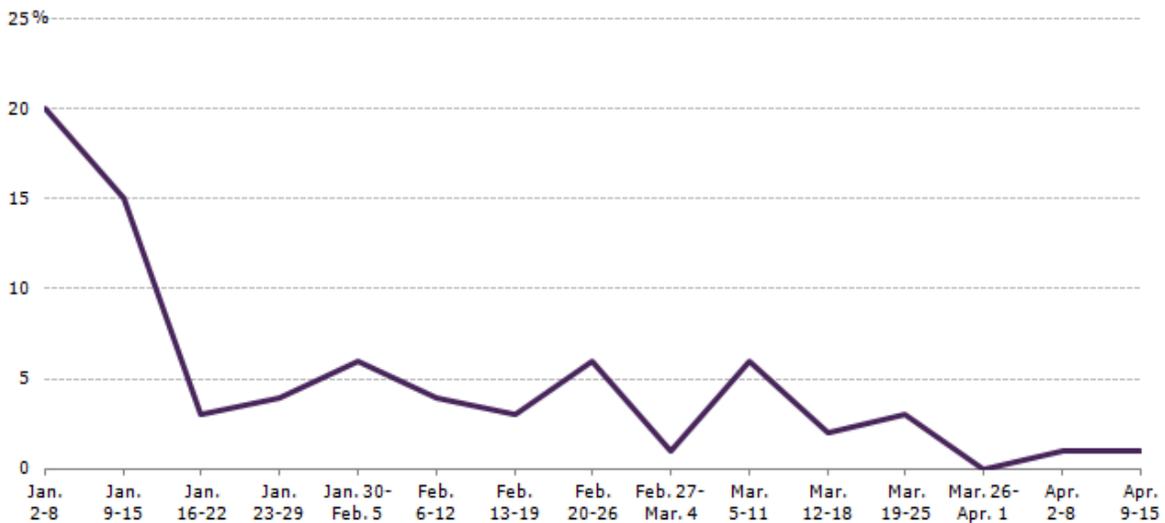
Date Range: November 1, 2011–April 15, 2012

PEW RESEARCH CENTER’S PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

From Jan. 2–April 15, Paul was a significant figure in only 7% of the campaign stories. That represented about one-eighth of Romney’s coverage and roughly one-quarter of the amount devoted to Santorum and Gingrich.

Attention to Paul Over Time

Percentage of campaign stories as significant figure



Note: To qualify at a significant figure, at least 25% of the story must be about that candidate

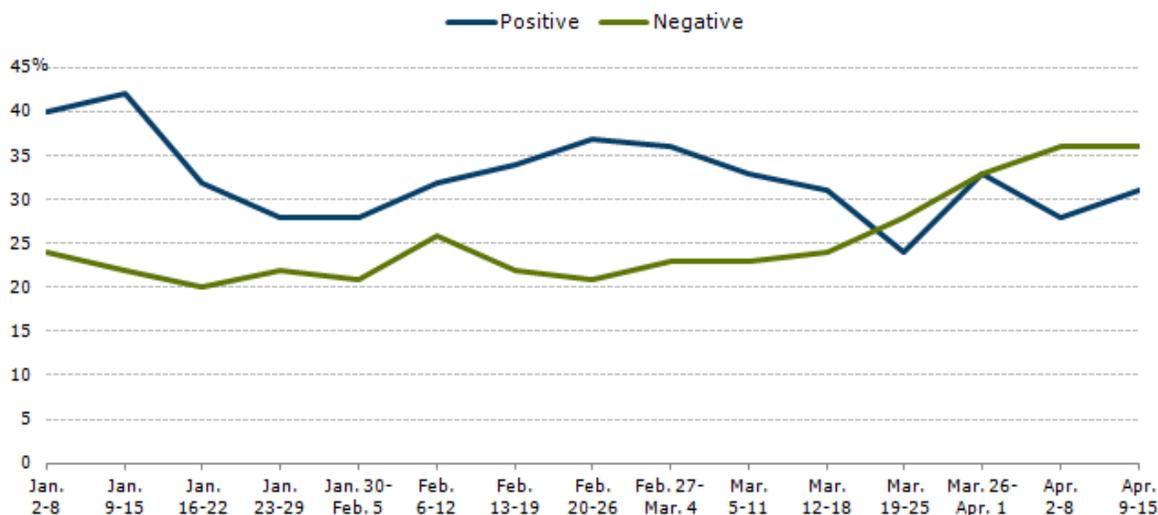
PEW RESEARCH CENTER’S PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

In only two weeks in 2012 did Paul register in more than 10% of the campaign stories. They were the first two weeks of the year—at 20% and 15%—when he had a solid third-place showing in Iowa (only 3 points behind Santorum) and a second-place finish behind Romney in New Hampshire.

From that point on, Paul was a significant newsmaker in no more than 6% of the stories in any given week. For much of this year, whatever media attention Paul did muster was positive and largely stable, with fewer fluctuations than any of his foes. In the first 11 weeks, positive coverage exceeded negative coverage by anywhere from 6 to 20 points. The best week (42% positive and 22% negative) came when he captured 23% of the vote in New Hampshire.

Paul's Tone Over Time

Percentage of conversation



Note: Coverage deemed 'neutral' is not shown. Positive, negative, and neutral coverage total 100%. PEJ analysis using Crimson Hexagon technology

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

But by late March, Paul's narrative turned negative for the first time—24% positive and 28% negative the week of March 19-25. And it never returned to positive territory as the coverage began focusing on his increasingly quixotic effort.

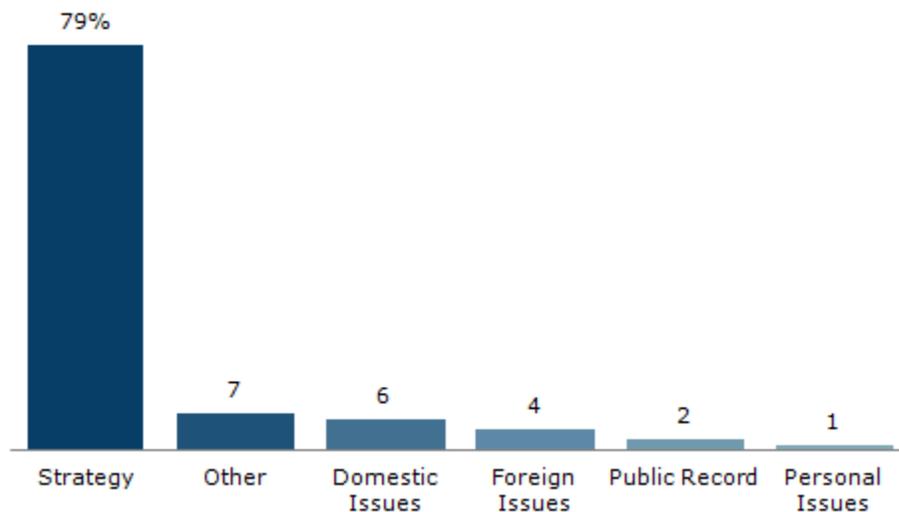
Paul, whose isolationist views distinguished him from his GOP rivals, generated a higher percentage of attention on foreign policy issues (4%) than the other candidates. That peaked, at 8%, back in November and December 2011 when foreign policy in general got the most attention in the campaign.

Due in part to coverage of his foreign policy stances, the percentage of combined coverage devoted to his overseas and domestic policies (9%) was also the highest in the Republican field.

Conversely, the vetting of Paul’s personal and public life was minimal. Only 3% of the coverage about him focused on those subjects—far less than Romney (12%), Gingrich (12%) and Santorum (8%). To some degree, that reflected the media consensus that Paul could not win and thus, no extensive look at his history and biography was warranted.

Frames of Paul Campaign Coverage

Percentage of campaign coverage



Date Range: November 1, 2011 – April 15, 2012

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

One area in which Paul was similar to his rivals was in the percentage of coverage devoted to the strategic aspects of his campaign. From November to April 15, that accounted for 79% of the coverage about him, reaching its highest level (91%) in March and April.

Barack Obama

Of all the presidential candidates studied in this report, only one figure did not have a single week in 2012 when positive coverage exceeded negative coverage—the incumbent, Democrat Barack Obama.

While a sitting president may have access to the “bully pulpit,” that does not mean he has control of the media narrative, particularly during the other party’s primary season.

In Obama’s case, his negative coverage was driven by several factors. One was the consistent criticism leveled at him by each of the Republican contenders during primary season. The other involved news coverage of issues—ranging from the tenuous economic recovery to the continuing challenges to his health care legislation—with which he was inextricably linked. An examination of the themes in Obama’s coverage also reveals that the coverage placed him firmly

in campaign mode. His coverage that focused on the strategic frame exceeded that relating to policy issues by 3:1.

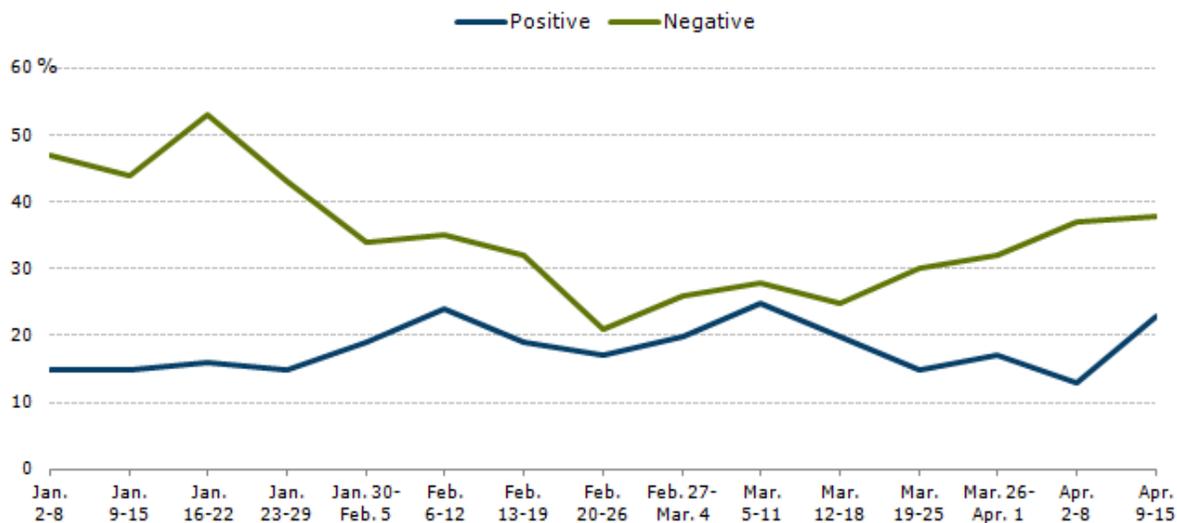
Although Obama’s coverage in 2012 was consistently on the negative side, there were marked variations in the past few months.

In January, the differential between the president’s positive and negative coverage was dramatic. In the four weeks, the percentage of negative assertions outnumbered positive ones by between 28 and 37 points.

That tone, however, began to moderate in the first three weeks of February, when negative coverage exceeded positive by between 11 and 15 points.

Obama’s Tone Over Time

Percentage of statements



Note: Coverage deemed 'neutral' is not shown. Positive, negative, and neutral coverage total 100%. PEJ analysis using Crimson Hexagon technology

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

Then, starting the week of Feb. 20, Obama saw a month in which the differential dropped even further—down to mid and low single digits—essentially giving him a mixed narrative. One thing that helped Obama’s narrative in that period was the media’s increasing focus on an eventual Romney-Obama matchup, and some polling data that seemed favorable to the incumbent.

But there was one more change in the tone of coverage. Beginning in late March, the gap between negative and positive coverage jumped back to 15 percentage points, culminating in the week of April 2-8, when positive assertions fell to 13% and negative rose to 37%—marking his

worst week since January. The tone of his narrative rebounded somewhat the following week, narrowing the gap between his negative and positive coverage back to 15 points.

Several factors drove Obama’s negative coverage in recent weeks. One of them was the continued rise in gas prices, which triggered criticism of the administration’s energy policy. Another was the uncertainty surrounding the health care legislation as the Supreme Court held hearings on the law in late March.

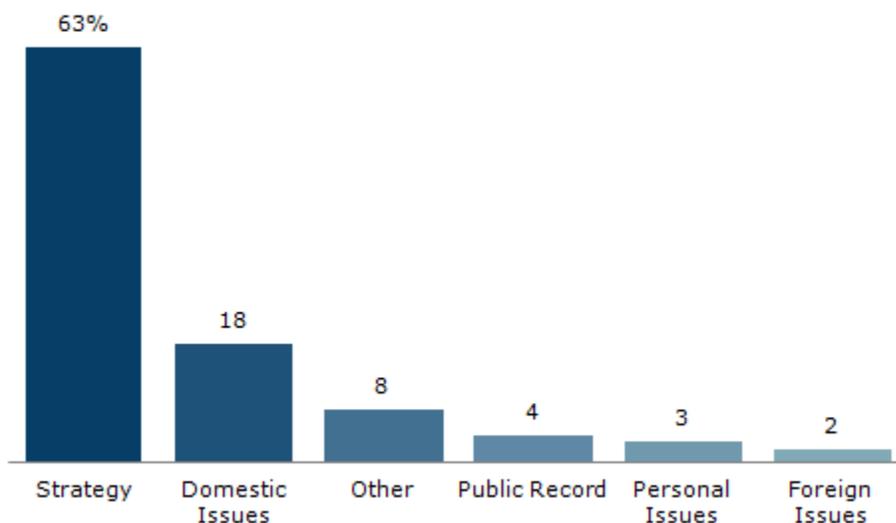
Still another element was the accidental open mic comment when Obama was overheard telling Russian President Dmitry Medvedev that he would have “more flexibility” in dealing with the Russian-U.S. relations “after my election.” That comment quickly became part of the campaign narrative with Romney characterizing it as “alarming” and “troubling.”

Other than tone, what distinguished Obama’s coverage most from his rivals’ was considerably more focus on the issues—not surprising given that he is the sitting president. Domestic and foreign policy matters accounted for 21% of his coverage compared with 8% for Romney, 7% for Santorum, 6% for Gingrich and 9% for Paul.

A large majority of the president’s issues coverage (18%) focused on domestic policy, with that coverage spiking in recent months. In January and February, 18% of Obama’s coverage was about domestic issues—most notably rising gas prices and unemployment.

Frames of Obama Campaign Coverage

Percentage of campaign coverage as significant newsmaker



Date Range: November 1, 2011 – April 15, 2012

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

From March 1-April 15, that number rose to 22% with the focus on subjects such as the Keystone oil pipeline, the contraception issue and Obama's year-old health care bill—his biggest domestic policy initiative—which is being challenged at the Supreme Court.

Top Line:

Less Horse Race than 2008:

How the Media Covered the 2012 Primary Campaign

Frames of 2012 Campaign Coverage

Percentage of campaign coverage in mainstream press

Frames	Nov 2011	Dec 2011	Jan 2012	Feb 2012	Mar 2012	April 1-15 2012	Nov 2011– April 15, 2012
Advertising/Fundraising	10.0%	13.2%	12.7%	18.5%	15.9%	16.3%	14.1%
Strategy/Momentum	30.9	51.8	55.4	50.6	57.9	44.5	50.2
Personal Issues	39.1	8.7	8.2	6.1	2.5	9.9	11.5
Domestic Issues	8.0	8.2	5.0	12.2	11.7	19.0	9.3
Foreign Issues	3.8	1.3	0.7	0.5	1.4	0	1.3
Public Record	5.0	8.3	8.3	6.0	2.1	1.6	5.9
Other	3.3	7.4	7.5	5.1	7.4	7.8	6.4

Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism

Frames in Campaign Coverage Compared to 2008

Percentage of campaign coverage in mainstream press

Frames	2012 Republicans and Obama	2008 Republicans	2008 Democrats
Advertising/Fundraising	10.0%	13.2%	12.7%
Strategy/Momentum	30.9	51.8	55.4
Personal Issues	39.1	8.7	8.2
Domestic Issues	8.0	8.2	5.0
Foreign Issues	3.8	1.3	0.7
Public Record	5.0	8.3	8.3
Other	3.3	7.4	7.5

Date Range: 2012 data is from November 1, 2011-April 15, 2012. 2008 Republican date is from January 1-March 9, 2008. And the 2008 Democrat data is from January 1-May 11, 2008.

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Attention to Political Candidates by Week

Percentage of campaign coverage as significant figure in mainstream press

Week	Gingrich	Santorum	Romney	Paul
Jan 2-8	18.3%	41.2%	50.4%	19.8
Jan 9-15	25.1	8.5	69.4	14.9
Jan 16-22	57.4	20.2	53.5	3.4
Jan 23-29	64.6	6.3	63.2	4.3
Jan 30-Feb 5	48.1	6.4	66.7	5.5
Feb 6 - 12	27.5	46.6	56.4	4.4
Feb 13-19	13.6	50.0	55.3	3.0
Feb 20-26	15.4	56.3	45.7	6.1
Feb 27-Mar 4	8.3	59.2	67.9	0.9
Mar 5-11	36.4	43.2	63.2	6.0
Mar 12-18	34.8	41.8	51.1	2.2
March 19-25	14.1	50.3	72.5	3.4
March 26-Apr 1	23.0	20.7	63.2	0.0
Apr 2-8	0.5	33.3	65.6	1.1
Apr 9-15, 2012	8.6	29.4	50.8	1.1
Totals Jan 2-Apr 8	29.55	31.54	59.3	6.8

Note: To qualify at a significant figure, at least 25% of the story must be about that candidate

Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism

Frames of Romney Campaign Coverage

Percentage of campaign coverage as significant figure in mainstream press

Frames	Nov-Dec 2011	Jan-Feb 2012	March- April 15 2012	Nov – Apr 15
Advertising/Fundraising	12.1%	9.7%	9.8%	10.2%
Strategy/Momentum	60.3	62.5	66.8	64.2
Personal Issues	6.6	7.0	3.8	6.2
Domestic Issues	6.1	5.6	11.0	7.1
Foreign Issues	2.6	0.1	0.8%	0.7
Public Record	8.4	7.2	1.7%	5.9
Other	2.2	4.9	5.2%	4.52

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Romney's Tone Over Time

Percentage of statements in mainstream press

Week	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Jan 2-8	33%	35%	32%
Jan 9-15	37	29	34
Jan 16-22	45	22	33
Jan 23-29	28	33	40
Jan 30-Feb 5	32	31	37
Feb 6-12	33	26	41
Feb 13-19	23	26	51
Feb 20-26	26	41	33
Feb 27-Mar 4	45	28	28
Mar 5-11	58	26	16
Mar 12-18	61	22	17
Mar 19-25	41	30	29
Mar 26-Apr 1	41	30	29
Apr 2-8	35	32	33
Apr 9-15	35	31	34
Jan 2 -Apr 15	39	29	32
Jan 2-Feb 26	33	30	37
Feb 27-Apr 15	47	28	25

Note: Coverage deemed 'neutral' is not shown. Positive, negative, and neutral coverage total 100%.
PEJ analysis using Crimson Hexagon technology

Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism

Frames of Santorum Campaign Coverage

Percentage of campaign coverage as significant figure in mainstream press

Frames	Nov-Dec 2011	Jan-Feb 2012	March- April 15 2012	Nov – Apr 15
Advertising/Fundraising	6.1%	7.4%	7.3%	7.3%
Strategy/Momentum	85.6	66.4	78.4	72.0
Personal Issues	0.0	5.3	2.9	4.3
Domestic Issues	0.0	6.9	6.2	6.3
Foreign Issues	2.4	0.4	0.3	0.5
Public Record	0.0	5.8	0.5	3.7
Other	5.5	5.3	2.9	4.7

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Santorum's Tone Over Time

Percentage of statements in mainstream press

Week	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Jan 2-8	37%	41%	22%
Jan 9-15	34	38	28
Jan 16-22	30	30	40
Jan 23-29	27	41	32
Jan 30-Feb 5	24	48	28
Feb 6-12	48	29	23
Feb 13-19	47	31	22
Feb 20-26	30	40	29
Feb 27-Mar 4	38	32	30
Mar 5-11	32	35	32
Mar 12-18	36	30	33
Mar 19-25	43	30	26
Mar 26-Apr 1	20	41	39
Apr 2-8	19	40	42
Apr 9-15	20	36	44
Jan 2 -Apr 15	35	35	31

Note: Coverage deemed 'neutral' is not shown. Positive, negative, and neutral coverage total 100%.
PEJ analysis using Crimson Hexagon technology

Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism

Frames of Gingrich Campaign Coverage

Percentage of campaign coverage as significant figure in mainstream press

Frames	Nov-Dec 2011	Jan-Feb 2012	March- April 15 2012	Nov – Apr 15
Advertising/Fundraising	10.8%	13.2%	3.5%	11.1%
Strategy/Momentum	57.2	66.2	84.2	66.7
Personal Issues	4.7	6.6	0.0	5.4
Domestic Issues	8.3	3.6	5.4	5.7
Foreign Issues	1.3	0.1	0.6	0.6
Public Record	9.7	5.4	0.8	6.2
Other	3.1	3.2	4.5	3.2

Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism

Gingrich's Tone Over Time

Percentage of statements in mainstream press

Week	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Jan 2-8	15%	42%	43%
Jan 9-15	17	44	38
Jan 16-22	42	26	32
Jan 23-29	36	31	33
Jan 30-Feb 5	33	32	36
Feb 6-12	30	27	43
Feb 13-19	20	36	43
Feb 20-26	20	39	42
Feb 27-Mar 4	20	36	43
Mar 5-11	33	36	31
Mar 12-18	27	44	29
Mar 19-25	21	48	30
Mar 26-Apr 1	17	50	33
Apr 2-8	16	37	47
Apr 9-15	22	28	50
Jan 2 -Apr 15	28	36	37

Note: Coverage deemed 'neutral' is not shown. Positive, negative, and neutral coverage total 100%.
PEJ analysis using Crimson Hexagon technology

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Frames of Paul Campaign Coverage

Percentage of campaign coverage as significant figure in mainstream press

Frames	Nov-Dec 2011	Jan-Feb 2012	March- April 15 2012	Nov – Apr 15
Advertising/Fundraising	6.7%	2.9%	25.0%	4.7%
Strategy/Momentum	62.6	77.5	65.8	73.9
Personal Issues	0.0	1.3	0.2	0.9
Domestic Issues	7.3	4.4	8.0	5.7
Foreign Issues	7.7	1.3	0.0	3.6
Public Record	5.4	0.8	0.0	1.8
Other	4.9	9.2	0.0	7.1

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Paul's Tone Over Time

Percentage of statements in mainstream press

Week	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Jan 2-8	40%	36%	24%
Jan 9-15	42	36	22
Jan 16-22	32	48	20
Jan 23-29	28	50	22
Jan 30-Feb 5	28	51	21
Feb 6-12	32	43	26
Feb 13-19	34	44	22
Feb 20-26	37	42	21
Feb 27-Mar 4	36	42	23
Mar 5-11	33	44	23
Mar 12-18	31	45	24
Mar 19-25	24	48	28
Mar 26-Apr 1	33	34	33
Apr 2-8	28	36	36
Apr 9-15	31	33	36
Jan 2 -Apr 15	34	42	24

Note: Coverage deemed 'neutral' is not shown. Positive, negative, and neutral coverage total 100%. PEJ analysis using Crimson Hexagon technology

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Frames of Obama Campaign Coverage

Percentage of campaign coverage as significant figure in mainstream press

Frames	Nov-Dec 2011	Jan-Feb 2012	March- April 15 2012	Nov – Apr 15
Advertising/Fundraising	14.7%	18.6%	17.2%	16.4%
Strategy/Momentum	50	43.6	44.9	46.6
Personal Issues	10.6	5.6	2.1	3.1
Domestic Issues	12.5	18.1	21.6	18.1
Foreign Issues	3.4	2.2	2.1	2.6
Public Record	5.0	4.6	2.9	4.2
Other	13.0	5.9	9.9	7.9

Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism

Obama's Tone Over Time

Percentage of statements in mainstream press

Week	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Jan 2-8	15%	38%	47%
Jan 9-15	15	41	44
Jan 16-22	16	32	53
Jan 23-29	15	42	43
Jan 30-Feb 5	19	48	34
Feb 6-12	24	41	35
Feb 13-19	19	49	32
Feb 20-26	17	63	21
Feb 27-Mar 4	20	54	26
Mar 5-11	25	48	28
Mar 12-18	20	55	25
Mar 19-25	15	55	30
Mar 26-Apr 1	17	50	32
Apr 2-8	13	50	37
Apr 9-15	23	39	38
Jan 2 -Apr 15	18	48	34

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“Math” Mentions by Week on TV News

Number of mentions of delegate math on network and cable television

Feb 6-12	4
Feb 13-19	2
Feb 20 - 26	6
Feb 27 - March 4	6
March 5-11	75
March 12-18	87
March 19-25	30
March 26 – April 1	15
April 2-8	13

Note: PEJ conducted a keyword frequency search using the closed captioning of the Snapstream server. Researchers searched for variations of the term “math”, then identified only those stories that were about the GOP race and delegate counting. This data comes from 110 shows each week including daytime and evening cable, morning and evening network news, and PBS Newshour.

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