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## **The Master Character Narratives in Campaign 2012**

*Press Coverage of the Character of the Candidates is Highly Negative, and  
Neither Obama nor Romney Has an Edge*

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:**

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## Overview

On the eve of the conventions, the portrayal in the news media of the character and records of the two presidential contenders in 2012 has been as negative as any campaign in recent times, and neither candidate has enjoyed an advantage over the other, according to a new study of mainstream media coverage of the race for president.

More of what the public hears about candidates also now comes from the campaigns themselves and less from journalists acting as independent reporters or interpreters of who the candidates are.

An examination of the dominant or master narratives in the press about the character and record of presidential contenders finds that 72% of this coverage has been negative for Barack Obama and 71% has been negative for Mitt Romney.

The study, conducted by the Pew Research Center's Project for

Excellence in Journalism, examined the personal portrayal of the candidate in 50 major news outlets over a 10-week period.

These numbers make this as negative a campaign as PEJ has seen since it began monitoring the master narratives about candidates in press coverage in presidential campaigns in 2000. Only one campaign has been comparable—2004 when coverage was filled with the controversy over the war in Iraq, the prison scandal at Abu Ghraib and the Swift Boat documentaries. That year, 70% of the personal narrative studied about Democrat John Kerry and 75% of that about incumbent George Bush was negative, numbers similar to now.

Journalists themselves now play a smaller role in shaping these media narratives than they once did. Journalists are the source for about half as much of the statements about the candidates as was the case 12 years go. The campaigns, by contrast, have come to play an ever larger role in shaping these narratives. The candidates and their partisan allies are the source for nearly a third more of the personal narrative about the candidates than in 2000.

On the eve of the nominating conventions, the discussion of President Obama in major mainstream news outlets is dominated by two narratives assessing his economic record—that his policies have failed to help the economy and that things would be much worse without his actions. Together these two

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### Candidate Narratives Mostly Negative

*Percentage of personal assertions  
2000-2012*

	Positive	Negative
Mitt Romney	29%	71%
Barack Obama	28	72
John McCain	43	57
Barack Obama	69	31
George W. Bush	25	75
John Kerry	30	70
George W. Bush	48	52
Al Gore	20	80

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narratives make up half of all the statements about Obama's record and character—and the negative side of the argument outweighs the positive in the coverage by more than two to one.

The next biggest personal narrative about Obama in the mainstream news media is one that raises doubts about whether the president really believes in American capitalism and ideas of individualism.

On the Republican side, the No. 1 personal narrative about Romney is that his experience in private equity suggests he is a “vulture” capitalist who doesn't care about workers, followed closely by the idea that he is an elitist out of touch with average Americans. The third-biggest personal narrative in the media about Romney is that he is a gaffe-prone, awkward campaigner.

Only some of these narratives, however, seem to be sticking with voters—at least so far. While much of the press narrative has suggested Obama has the wrong approach to fixing the economy, voters are split on whether to associate that notion with Obama or Romney. They are also divided on which candidate believes in American values (though Obama's ideals are questioned more often in the press). The two personal narrative themes that appear to be breaking through to voters are Romney's elitism and his awkwardness on the stump.

These are among the conclusions of a study that examined 1,772 assertions contained in more than 800 stories from major news outlets in radio, cable, network broadcast television, newspaper front pages and the most popular news websites in the country. The study of news coverage was twinned with a survey of public attitudes about the candidates by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

In all, five of the six most prevalent master narratives in the press about Obama's character and biography were negative. And five of the six most prevalent themes about Romney were negative as well.

It is hard to know whether the findings reflect the highly polarized atmosphere of politics in 2012, changes in the ideology of the two parties, changes in the culture of the news media, or some combination of all these phenomena enabling and reinforcing one another. One conclusion, however, is unavoidable: Journalists to an increasing degree are ceding control of what the public learns in elections to partisan voices. Less of what we are hearing is coming from the press as an independent intermediary, filtering or assessing political rhetoric. And to that degree, the press is acting more as an enabler or conduit and less as an autonomous reportorial source.

Among the findings of the study:

- **Obama's economic record dwarfs all other character issues in the campaign.** Fully 36% of the master narrative themes about Obama in the press suggested that the president had failed to do enough to help the economy. That was more than twice the percentage of the counter argument—that the economy would be weaker had it not been for the administration's actions—which made up 16% of the assertions about Obama.

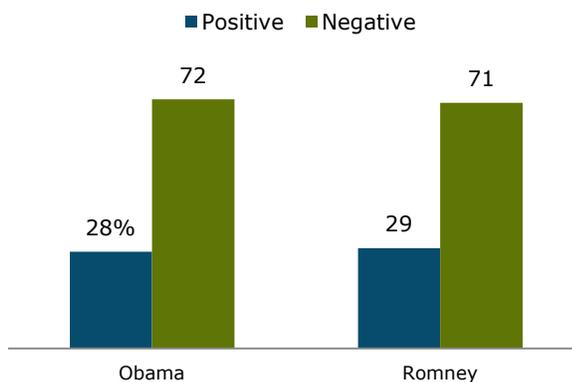
- **The media narrative about Romney is more diffuse, but includes a number of sizable negative themes—more than for Obama.** The largest—that he is a callous “vulture” capitalist—made up 14% of the assertions about Romney. The idea that he was a rich elitist was almost as large (13%). The idea that he was a weak, gaffe-prone campaigner was also substantial (11%). So was the idea that his policies would hurt the economy (10%).
- **Journalists are a shrinking source in shaping the candidate narratives, while campaigns and partisans have assumed a much larger role in defining the press discourse.** Reporters (and talk show personalities) account for about half as many of the assertions about the candidates’ character and biography as they did 12 years ago—27% versus 50% in 2000. At the same time, campaigns, their surrogates and allies now account for nearly half of these themes, 48%, up from 37% in 2000. That shift, giving partisans a bigger role in shaping the media narrative, has been gradual and may reflect in part the shrinking reportorial resources in newsrooms.
- **Campaigns have an even bigger voice in shaping the narrative online.** On the 12 most prominent news websites in the country, campaigns and surrogates are behind 58% of statements studied about the record and character of the candidates—the highest of any medium. Outside experts have the smallest presence in the coverage online, making up just 2% of statements (versus 10% generally). The top political stories online tend to be breaking news, and this orientation may account for the larger role that partisans play here in shaping the narrative. Candidates and their allies put a premium on rapid response to ensure that their messaging is available in the early accounts of any news.
- **What is not being projected in the coverage is also striking—namely the positive arguments that the candidates want to convey.** Just 3% of assertions about Obama, for instance, contain the idea that he cares about regular Americans—which PEJ has found is [a major theme in his advertising and his digital messaging](#). For Romney, in turn, there were more assertions refuting one of his central campaign themes—that he has the experience to fix the economy (10%)—than there were affirming the idea (8%).
- **Voter perceptions vary from the media narrative.** When we surveyed these personal themes with voters, the strongest impression was that 52% thought Obama was a person of good moral character—though it represented just 1% of the coverage about him and 10% of his coverage suggested the opposite. The theme about Romney that resonated most with voters was that he was prone to gaffes. Nearly half of voters, 47% associate him with that.
- **In cable television, Fox and MSNBC’s coverage of the candidates’ character themes are mirror images of each other.** Fox has offered a mixed view of Romney, but its assessments of Obama’s record and character have run negative by a ratio of six to one. The numbers are almost identical, in reverse, for MSNBC. Meanwhile, CNN has offered less about the campaign in

general, but what it has, to a greater degree than its cable rivals, resembles what audiences would find in the rest of the media.

In the four election cycles for which PEJ has conducted these studies, only two candidates have seen portrayals as negative as both Romney and Obama are seeing this year. One was Vice President Albert Gore Jr. in 2000. That year, fully 80% of the reporting of the major narrative themes about Gore portrayed negative messages about him. The largest was that he was tainted by the scandals of Bill Clinton and the second was that he was prone to lying. The other was George W. Bush in 2004, when 75% of the personal narrative studied was negative, led by the idea that he was arrogant followed by the idea that he lacked credibility.

### Both Candidate Narratives are Negative

Percentage of personal assertions per candidate



Date Range: May 29-Aug. 5, 2012

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The negative portrayal of Obama and Romney in the press also finds some correlation in the way that the public views the candidates this year. Data from the [Pew Research Center for the People & the Press](#) and Gallup find that both of these candidates are viewed less favorably by the public—50% for Obama and 37% for Romney—than any Democratic or Republican nominees have been since 1992.

Four years ago at this point, both Obama and the Republican candidate, Senator John McCain, had favorability ratings in the low 60s. The last candidate to have a favorability rating comparable to either candidate this year was George W. Bush in 2004, at 51%, numbers similar to Obama's this year. The portrayal in the press about the candidates was also similar.

What cannot be determined is cause and effect. To what extent is the media portrayal of the candidates helping make the public view of the candidates this year more negative? Or are negative public perceptions driving the press coverage?

The study is not an analysis of media bias; rather, as it has for four campaign cycles, PEJ is examining what the public is hearing and reading from all sources in the mainstream media—from the campaigns, journalists, outside analysts and others.

PEJ began to produce this series of studies analyzing the coverage of the candidates' character and record to probe two major ideas about press coverage of presidential elections. One is that for all the reporting about tactics and strategy, campaign performance (the horse race), or even policy, in the end, character is central to how voters will choose. These studies are a way to isolate those messages about character and record and examine them in detail.

The second purpose is to test the theory that the election reporting is heavily influenced by a handful of master narratives, or what some scholars have called “meta-narratives,” about the candidates. While every campaign is an ongoing story, the theory argues that journalists’ choice of facts and incidents is influenced by certain perceived character traits or themes about the candidates. And one concern about these master narratives is that they become self-perpetuating. Facts and anecdotes that illustrate ongoing storylines become magnified, critics worry, and events that do not fit with those running storylines get overlooked.

Over the years these studies have tested the meta-narrative theory, explored how widespread certain narratives are about different candidates, how those themes have ebbed and flowed over the course of races, and examined the success of candidates in refuting negative assertions about themselves or projecting positive ones.

In 2000, for instance, we found that the idea that George Bush was unintelligent was a major theme, though it had largely disappeared in 2004, replaced by the idea that he was arrogant. The idea that Al Gore was a liar stood out as a major theme in coverage in 2000, to the point that there were moments when the press misquoted him because they thought he had begun to exaggerate again. In 2008, the idea that John McCain was not a true conservative dominated coverage about him, whereas for Obama it was that he offered the promise of a new kind of politics, a theme that is now largely absent in 2012.

To execute the studies, researchers draw up a list of character themes that they have seen in the coverage, creating an equal number of positive and negative themes. They then test a sample of stories to refine the list, add new themes and drop others, to identify which themes are indeed most common or obvious themes that campaigns are trying to project that are absent. Then a larger sample of reporting is examined to measure the presence of these themes across a broader swath of coverage.

## **The Master Narratives about Obama**

Overall, the volume of press discussion of character and record has been evenly divided between the two contenders. Over the 10 weeks studied from the end of May to early August, 50% of the assertions about the candidates were about Obama and 50% about Romney.

This stands in contrast to the last campaign in which an incumbent president faced a challenger in 2004. That year, when President George W. Bush opposed Democratic Senator John Kerry against the backdrop of the war in Iraq, 72% of the assertions during a similar period were about the president and just 28% about Kerry. Perhaps not coincidentally, our survey that year found that the public had a hard time associating character traits with Kerry at this point. That imbalance may have reflected choices by the two campaigns: Bush not engaging Kerry, and Kerry laying low while the president dealt with controversies involving the war.

This year, however, the strategic decisions have been different. Both campaigns have been highly visible, and the findings suggest that they have trained their rhetoric and messaging more on undermining their rival than on making an affirmative case for themselves.

To begin, the data show that Romney’s campaign has tried to focus the discussion on one overarching issue—the U.S. economy—and that it has been successful in casting that issue, in the press coverage of Obama, in a negative light.

Of the messages about Obama, the most prevalent theme has been that he has not done enough to fix the economy (36% of the assertions about Obama’s character and record studied). That was followed by essentially the counter-argument made by the Obama campaign—that the economy would have been worse without the actions his administration took (16% of Obama themes).

This argument, defending Obama’s record, registered as the one prominent positive character narrative about him in the coverage, and by a wide margin. No other positive theme about Obama accounted for more than 3% of the assertions about the president.

The third most prevalent narrative about Obama was more subtle, but one related to the economy, the charge that the president does not believe in American capitalism and its notions of individual success (11%). That was followed by another negative narrative, one that argued that Obama and his campaign lacked integrity. This narrative, which made up 10% of

the assertions about character and record studied, often involved the idea that his campaign engaged in negative campaign tactics or stretched the truth in its rhetoric.

One striking feature of the coverage of Obama is how focused it was around these few narratives. Together, these four themes—two about the economy, one about his belief in capitalism and one challenging his integrity—made up 73% of all the character and biographical assertions found in the coverage about Obama.

The criticism of Obama’s economic record came from a variety of sources, including many prominent Republican politicians. And the underlying theme was that the president had squandered his opportunity to fix the economy and was thus responsible for the current problems.

“President Obama has had his chance,” former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty declared in an interview on the PBS NewsHour in early June. “He hasn’t been able to get this economy ignited and recovering in any meaningful way.”

Often, GOP partisans cited economic statistics as their proof that Obama’s policies had failed. “The president has given us an abysmal economy,” Congressman Paul Ryan—who would later become Romney’s running mate—declared on Sean Hannity’s Fox News Channel show in early June. “We’ve had

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### Top Master Narratives about Obama

*Percentage of personal assertions*

Has not done enough for the economy	36%
Has protected the economy	16
Does not believe in American exceptionalism and capitalism	11
Lacks honesty and integrity	10

**Date Range:** May 29-Aug.5, 2012

**Note:** Six other narratives made up another 27%

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the most stagnant economic recovery we've had since World War Two, and government spending is the highest it's been since World War Two."

The case for Obama's policies often also came from partisans, usually Obama's allies attempting to showcase elements of the economy that had improved, which they credited to his stewardship.

"The auto industry's back," former Democratic National Committee chair Terry McAuliffe told the CBS Early Show on June 4. "President Obama and [his] team saved the auto industry."

The idea that Obama does not believe in capitalism nor understands business success was not as consistent in the narrative as the criticism of his handling of the economy. It ebbed and flowed from week to week, reaching its apex in mid and late July, shortly after the president, speaking about the role of government in fostering business success, used the phrase, "if you've got a business, you didn't build that." That was quickly seized on by Republicans as an example of Obama's disdain for individual business accomplishment.

"The night of the Olympics, what's he going to say? 'You didn't earn that gold medal?'" Republican strategist Dee Dee Benkie asked mockingly on Bill O'Reilly's Fox show.

News organizations in some cases also found small-business people who felt the president was criticizing their accomplishments with his remark. The Wall Street Journal interviewed a Colorado computer company owner who criticized Obama for "constantly attacking the people who create jobs."

## Obama the Foreign-Born Muslim

One theme that got attention in the news coverage was a debate—equally divided between affirming and refuting—about whether Obama was a Muslim and whether he was born in the United States—both claims that convey a sense of “otherness” about the president and that have lingered throughout the course of his presidency.

According to surveys from the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, doubts about Obama’s religion have actually risen slightly since the last election season. In October 2008, 55% of the public correctly identified Obama as a Christian while 43% said he was either a Muslim or they didn’t know his religion. In July 2012, the number who identified him as a Christian had fallen six points to 49% and the number that said he was either a Muslim or they didn’t know had risen five points to 48%.

There was enough discussion of this issue that it would have amounted to 7% of the themes about Obama, ranking it as the fifth largest. Yet because the discussion was so evenly split, each side of it was relatively small, and the coverage often cast this discussion as something of a side show about a rumor that had been disproven, we have separated it from the rest of the sample.

Nonetheless, it is there in the discourse. The persistence of the notion that Obama is a Muslim was evident in a late July New York Times interview with a woman in West Virginia coal country. “Obama is scary,” she said. “He’s a Muslim.”

The “birther” debate—about whether Obama was born in the U.S.—flared up as an issue early in the campaign when Donald Trump—then contemplating a run for the presidency—hammered away at the issue. And both views were evident in a July 18 AP story reporting that “Investigators for an Arizona sheriff’s volunteer posse had declared that President Barack Obama’s birth certificate is definitely fraudulent.” That same story went on to cite a statement from an official in the Hawaii attorney general’s office, calling those allegations “untrue” and “misinformed” and emphasizing that “President Obama was born in Honolulu and his birth certificate is valid.”

## The Master Narratives about Mitt Romney

If coverage of Obama focused largely on his handling of the economy, the media narrative about Romney was more varied. Romney’s biography generated more press attention than any other subject. The largest of component of this (14% of Romney biographical assertions studied) raised doubts about Romney’s career at the Bain Capital private investment firm. And the data show that much of this negative narrative came from citing the Obama campaign and its ads.

That was followed by a more personal narrative (13%) that Romney was a wealthy elitist, some of which came from the Obama camp, but which also came from journalists and outside experts.

However, these two themes were closely followed by the narrative that Romney was an awkward campaigner (11%).

The next two biggest narratives about Romney involved basically two sides of an argument about whether his economic ideas would help or hurt the economy. Arguments affirming that Romney knew how to fix the economy, or had good ideas for doing so, made up 8% of the personal coverage about him studied over these 10 weeks. The counter-argument, that Romney's ideas would hurt the economy, was actually slightly larger (10%). In short, if Romney's economic theories were one of the key arguments he wanted to project in the press to win the White House, he has struggled to do so. It is a wash in the coverage whether his economic theories are good or bad, though that he has fared better than Obama in this regard.

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## Top Master Narratives about Romney

*Percentage of personal assertions*

Unfeeling capitalist	14%
Rich/elitist	13
Lacks charisma/makes gaffes	11
Does not know how to improve economy	10
Knows how to improve economy	8
Policies are vague	8
Campaign well organized	6
Flip-flopper	6

**Date Range:** May 29-Aug.5, 2012

**Note:** Four other narratives made up another 24%

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The arguments over Romney's economic policies, in turn, were closely followed by a related but slightly different theme in the coverage about Romney, that his policies, most notably his economic ones, were too vague (8% of the Romney themes studied). This emerged as a distinct theme in the coverage and may partially explain the appeal for Romney of selecting Paul Ryan, the author of the House budget plan, as a running mate.

These top six narratives about Romney were also followed by two more themes that were almost as large—that Romney ran a well-organized campaign (6%) and that he was a flip-flopper (6%).

This variety of narratives about Romney is part of what stands out in the coverage about him. While just four themes filled 73% of the press discussion about Obama, it took eight different narratives to amount to a similar percentage for Romney.

The idea that Romney was a hard-hearted capitalist and that Bain Capital was more about destroying jobs and making money for investors than building up the general economy was a persistent one over these 10 weeks. That theme ranked as either the No. 1 or No. 2 narrative about Romney in seven of the 10 weeks studied.

In the coverage, journalists often noted that this was coming from the Obama camp. In mid-July, CBS News political director John Dickerson put it bluntly. Obama “wants to make Bain a four-letter word.”

And some of this theme came directly from the president. In late-June remarks in Florida, Obama said that the Romney campaign “argue[s] that if you help corporations and wealthy investors maximize their profits by whatever means necessary, whether it be layoffs or outsourcing, union busting or whatever means available, that will automatically translate in jobs and prosperity to benefit everybody,” he said.

The related idea that Romney was an elitist also showed up consistently over the 10 weeks. Often these were sparked by stories about his personal wealth, whether they related to his expensive homes or the show horse owned by his wife.

Shortly after The New York Times published a June 6 story featuring neighbors grumbling about Romney’s California beach house, late night comedian Jimmy Fallon joked that the candidate’s Secret Service team “is bothering the people who live by his beach house. Romney had a lot of questions about the complaint, such as ‘Which beach house?’”

The theme that the GOP nominee lacks charisma or is prone to gaffes gained particular force the week of July 23-29, when he stumbled during an overseas tour, first by raising security concerns about the London Olympics and then by stepping onto the third rail of Mideast politics—the Israeli/Palestinian standoff.

Romney “is perhaps the only politician who could start a trip that was supposed to be a charm offensive by being utterly devoid of charm and mildly offensive,” liberal host Rachel Maddow quipped, quoting the London Telegraph newspaper.

## **What Was Missing from the Candidates’ Narratives**

In the heat of the campaign season, what is not conveyed in the media about a candidate can be as important as what is. In the period from late May to early August, several themes that have been associated with Obama and Romney failed to gain traction in the news.

Many polls, for instance, have found that the Democrat seems to be more personally likeable than his Republican rival. But only 2% of the personal narrative about Obama has projected his likeability or talent for connecting with people, and an equal percentage has refuted that perception.

Some of the negative themes Republicans have tried to project have also not gotten much traction in the media. One of these is that idea that Obama is a divider rather than a uniter. Florida Senator Marco Rubio, for instance, asserted back in May that Obama is the most “divisive figure in modern American history.” But that line of attack accounted for only 3% of all of the assertions about character and record studied about Obama. The Obama camp also appeared to have spent little effort refuting it (one tenth of 1% of the coverage).

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## Narratives That Did Not Receive Significant Coverage

*Percentage of personal assertions*

### **Obama**

Has lost his magic	4%
Is divisive	3
Is out of touch	3
Cares about regular folk	3
Is good on national security	3
Is likeable	2

### **Romney**

Is a good family man	2
Is a true conservative	1

**Date Range:** May 29-Aug.5, 2012

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One other subject that has not surfaced significantly in the press is national security. Traditionally, Republicans have made the case that Democrats are too soft on this subject. The Obama campaign, at least in an initial advertisement, argued that this was a strength for Obama, that he managed to withdraw from a controversial war in Iraq, killed Osama bin Laden and is accelerating a withdrawal from an unpopular war in Afghanistan. Overall, 3% of the assertions about Obama's character and record affirmed his national security skills, and 3% refuted that idea.

Several possible narratives about Romney also showed up only modestly in press coverage.

Although Romney is the first Mormon to advance this close to the presidency, the idea that his religion would be a major topic of coverage has simply not been borne out. Only a handful of the more than 1,700 statements about Romney's character and biography studied over these 10 weeks, just three, centered on the question of whether his religion would be a problem in the election. That subject thus did not even make the list of the top 10 narratives about the candidate.

During the Republican primaries the question of whether Romney was a true political conservative or a moderate was a significant aspect of the campaign. In the general election race, that theme has all but vanished: in all, 1% of the assertions about Romney have projected that he is a true conservative, and an equal percentage has contended he is not.

Romney has not made social or cultural wedge issues a central element of his campaign. And the idea that Romney--with his large family, deeply held religious beliefs, and espousal of conservative positions on social issues--is a moral man with good values accounted for only 2% of the themes about him. The rebuttal to that narrative, suggesting that he lacked integrity or honesty, was twice as prevalent, at 4%.

One interesting feature of these discussions about the integrity of the candidates, however small, is that they tend to be grounded in criticism of how each candidate is conducting his campaign. In other words, the discussion of integrity in the campaign so far has been something of a looking glass argument, in which each side attacks the other and complains that the other side is engaging in negative campaigning as the evidence.

## A More Negative Campaign

Taken together, this amounts to a highly negative narrative about both candidates in this campaign. The master narratives about Obama were 72% negative. The master narratives about Romney were 71% negative. Only once before has PEJ seen a race that was depicted as negatively, the [2004 contest](#) between Bush and Kerry. That year 75% of the personal narrative studied about Bush was negative and 70% for Kerry, numbers quite similar to this year. [Only in 2000](#) did we find a narrative about a single candidate substantially more negative than this year, Vice President Gore, whose personal narrative was 80% negative.

That same year, we found that 48% of the assertions studied by about George Bush were negative (vs. 52% positive).

Bush's portrayal became much more negative four years later (jumping to 75%) when he ran as a sitting president. That year his opponent John Kerry's was virtually the same, (70% negative), though during the pre-convention period studied (a similar period to this year) what stood out as much was how little of the campaign coverage focused on Kerry's record and character. It amounted to only a little more than a quarter (28%) of all the personal narratives studied about the two candidates, and the polling that year showed that voters had only indistinct impressions of the Democratic nominee.

[In 2008](#), when we conducted this study during the primaries, the portrayal of all the major candidates was more positive than it is today. For Obama, 31% of his character narrative was negative while 69% was positive. For Hillary Clinton, his primary opponent, the numbers were similar—33% negative to 67% positive. The character narratives about John McCain, conducted before he had fully wrapped up the nomination, were notably different—57% negative versus 43% positive. However, almost all of that negative narrative about McCain—just under 90% of it—was about a single theme, that he was insufficiently conservative to animate the Republican base.

If the master narratives about the two candidates in 2012 have been predominantly negative so far, it has also been unrelenting so. In no single week during those two-and-one-half months did either Obama or Romney enjoy a period in which the narrative about their character and record was more positive than not. Nor did it ever come close. Negative themes outnumbered positive in the press every week for both men.

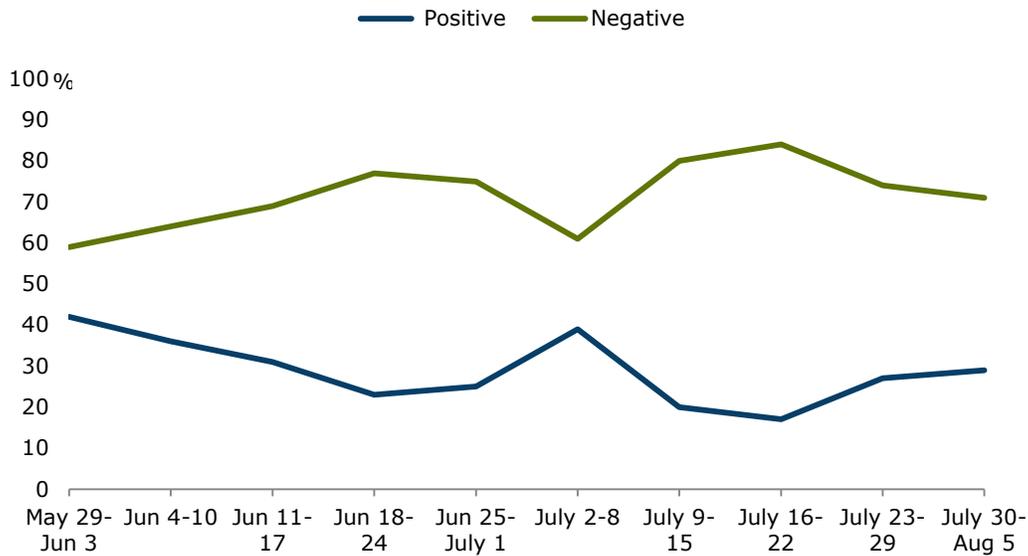
The static nature of the narrative reflects a fundamental reality of the race in recent months. There has been no signature event that might cause the media to re-evaluate the storyline or perception of either candidate. In lieu of that, both campaigns have been engaged in a fairly static debate, one waged largely

through the candidates, their surrogates and other allies repeating talking point themes over several months.

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### Narrative Has Been Consistently Negative for Obama ...

Percentage of positive and negative coverage from May 29-Aug. 5

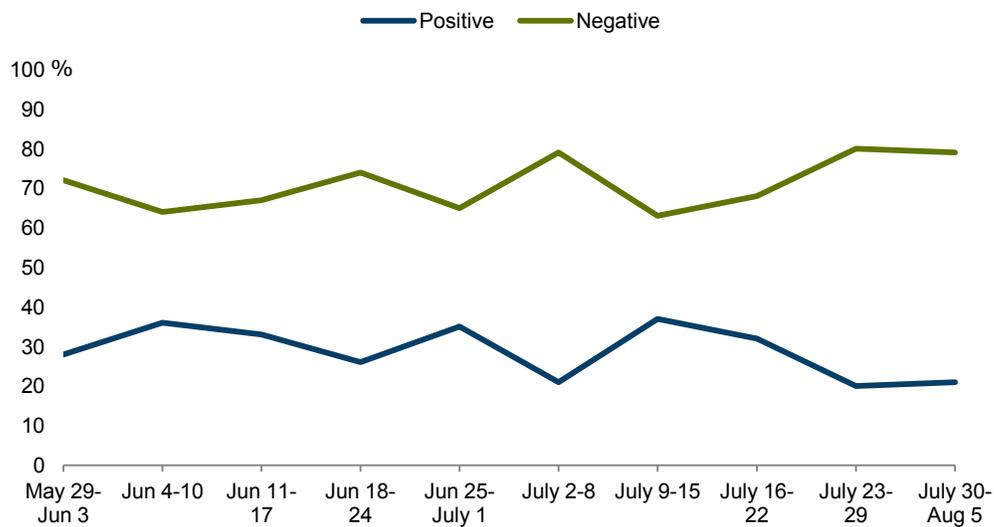


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### ... And for Romney

Percentage of positive and negative coverage from May 29-Aug. 5



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## Sources of the Assertions

One question in trying to understand how campaign coverage is shaped involves identifying who is driving the master narratives about the candidates—who are the sources for these themes.

What we find this year is that campaigns, their surrogates and partisan allies are becoming a larger source of the messaging in the press about the candidates while journalists are becoming a smaller part of where these narratives come from. This shrinking has been gradual over the years, but it is unmistakable.

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### Sources for Candidate Narratives in 2012

*Percentage of personal assertions*

<b>Partisans</b>	48%
Candidates	18
Campaign Surrogates	13
Other Political Figures	12
Ads	4
Super PACs	1
<b>Media</b>	27
Journalists	19
Talk Show Hosts	8
<b>Experts</b>	10
<b>Polls</b>	6
<b>Voters</b>	5
<b>Other</b>	4

**Date Range:** May 29-Aug.5, 2012

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In all, just under half of the narratives about Obama and Romney—48%—came from partisan sources this year. That includes the candidates themselves, their campaign surrogates, political allies, super PACs and political ads. Journalists were the source of 19% of these assertions and another set of media voices, talk show hosts on TV and radio, were the source of 8%. Outside experts accounted for 10%, polls 6% and voters 5%.

This marks a sharp rise in the influence of partisan voices, spin doctors and surrogates in shaping what the public is told about the biography and the character of the candidates.

The numbers for journalists are down by almost half and the numbers for partisans are up substantially from what we found in 2000, the first year we began to analyze character narratives in the media.

## How Sources for Narratives Changed from 2000 - 2012

*Percentage of personal assertions*

	2012	2008	2004	2000
Media	27%	35%	39%	50%
Politicians	48	46	39	37
Polls	6	4	1	2
Experts	10	6	10	5
Voters	5	6	3	3
Other	4	3	8	3

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That year, fully 50% of the character narratives came from media voices, journalists and talk show hosts, though there were fewer such programs then. Campaigns and surrogates accounted for 37%.

In 2004, the last time an incumbent president ran against a challenger, the campaigns and their allies were the source for 39% of the assertions about character and record in the coverage, as were journalists and hosts, also at 39%. Four years ago, in 2008, partisans had begun to have a bigger role, accounting for 46% of the assertions, but journalists also played a bigger role than now (28% vs. 19% today), while talk show hosts were about the same (7% vs. 9%).

While the sample of media has evolved over the years—there was no web component studied in 2000, and cable news shows come and go—by and large the samples are fairly consistent and reflect the media of their time. If anything, the samples of 2000 and 2004 might have involved more opportunities for campaign surrogates because they included Sunday interview programs.

The shrinking role of journalists in shaping the master character narratives of the candidates more likely reflects diminishing reportorial resources in newsrooms and more reliance, on television in particular, of live interview formats in which partisans are invited to deliver campaign messages. In 2000, cable programs also were more likely to involve panel debates in the style of *Crossfire*, the old CNN program. Today, more programs involve one guest at a time.

If the groups are broken down into components, journalists are still the largest single one, at 19%. But they are followed closely by the candidates themselves (18%), and then campaign surrogates (people officially representing the two campaigns) at 13%.

Interestingly, 41% of the time that these surrogates appeared they were anonymous or on background, meaning a formal staffer was allowed to talk about a candidate without being named. That ratio is higher from what we have found in the past. In 2004, for instance, 33% of the assertions from were unnamed.

Inside these numbers, there is a good deal of variation depending on the theme.

## Sources for “Obama Weakened the Economy”

Percentage of narrative by source, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012

Campaign and surrogates	57%
Talk show hosts	11
Journalists/authors	10
Experts	8
Polls	8
Voters	5
Other/don't know	1
Other media	0

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The largest narrative in the race so far, that Obama has not done enough to fix the economy, has come largely from the Romney camp. Fully 57% of this charge originated with Romney, his campaign, his ads or GOP allies. Another 11% came from talk show hosts. And 10% came from journalists.

## Sources for “Obama Is Dishonest”

Percentage of narrative by source, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012

Campaign and surrogates	55%
Journalists/authors	14
Experts	13
Talk show hosts	11
Other/don't know	5
Voters	2
Polls	0
Other media	0

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The same was basically true for the No. 4 narrative about Obama, that he lacked honesty and integrity. Fully 55% of that narrative originated with the Romney campaign and its surrogates, including Romney’s advertising—which was cited in 13% of those assertions. Another 25% came from journalists and talk hosts.

When it came to the biggest positive narrative about Obama--the counter theme that he has protected the economy from a worse fate—the reverse was true. In this case, Obama’s own campaign, ads and allies were the source for 54% of those assertions in the press (Another 2% came from Republican sources). The second-largest source, at 15%, was outside experts who commented in the media.

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### Sources for “Obama Is Good for Economy”

*Percentage of narrative by source, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012*

Campaign and surrogates	56%
Experts	15
Journalists/authors	11
Talk show hosts	9
Polls	5
Voters	3
Other media	1
Other/don't know	0

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The sourcing for one of the more subtle negative narratives about Obama was different. The idea that Obama doesn't believe in capitalism and its notions of success was driven in substantial measure by media voices. Here, the journalists and talk show hosts accounted for 40% of that narrative, only modestly less than the 46% that came from the Romney campaign and its allies.

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### Sources for “Obama Is Not a Capitalist”

*Percentage of narrative by source, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012*

Campaign and surrogates	46%
Journalists and authors	26
Talk show hosts	14
Experts	5
Voters	4
Other/don't know	2
Polls	1
Other media	1

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Some journalists seized on remarks by the president himself, such as his June 8 comment that “the private sector is doing fine.”

“President Obama’s assertion that the private sector is doing fine was no gaffe,” asserted Fox News analyst Brit Hume, on June 11. Rather it reflects “his clear belief in the primacy of the public sector over the private.”

Obama later acknowledged that the economy “is not doing fine.”

When it came to the top two narratives about Romney, the related themes that he is a vulture capitalist and a wealthy elitist, the sources differed markedly. The Obama campaign and its allies were the primary source on the theme of vulture capitalism, accounting for more fully 76% of the assertions in the media driving this narrative. (Another 1% came from Republican sources.) Journalists, talk show

hosts and outside experts, interestingly, combined to add another 10%, a number some might consider low given that this theme involved examining Romney’s record.

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### Sources for “Romney Is a Vulture Capitalist”

*Percentage of narrative by source, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012*

Campaign and surrogates	77%
Journalists/authors	5
Polls	4
Experts	4
Other media	3
Voters	2
Other/don’t know	2
Talk show hosts	2

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The sources for the charge that Romney was an elitist were much more diverse. Less than half of those assertions (47%) came from the Obama campaign and his partisans; one-third (33%) originated with journalists, talks hosts and outside experts. (Another 1% came from Republican sources.)

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### Sources for “Romney Is Elitist”

*Percentage of narrative by source, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012*

Campaign and surrogates	48%
Experts	14
Journalists/authors	10
Talk show hosts	9
Polls	6
Voters	5
Other media	5
Other/don’t know	3

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Much of the idea that Romney is an awkward, gaffe-prone campaigner stemmed from his closely watched trip overseas in late July. Journalists accounted for 40% of that narrative, and talk show hosts another 7%. Another 21% of that narrative came from one media outlet directly citing another press source, in this case, the overseas journalists who were covering Romney’s trip.

Only 3% of that narrative came from the Obama campaign and its allies—a sign perhaps of the axiom in politics that when your opponent is in trouble get out of the way. (Another 2% came from Republican sources.)

When Romney professed doubts about security at the London Olympics, the British press seized on the stumble and the American media in turn quoted them at length. Romney’s comments about the lack of

preparedness in London “set off a firestorm with the British press,” ABC correspondent David Muir reported July 26. “On television here, it’s the lead story.”

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### Sources for “Romney Is Gaffe-Prone”

*Percentage of narrative by source, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012*

Journalists/authors	40%
Other media	21
Polls	11
Talk show hosts	7
Other/don’t know	7
Experts	6
Campaign and surrogates	5
Voters	2

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The debate over Romney’s ability to fix the economy, meanwhile, was waged between the campaigns using the press as a conduit. More than 60% of the narrative making the affirmative case for the Romney’s economic acumen came from the Romney campaign and its allies. Almost two-thirds of assertions arguing that Romney’s ideas would hurt the economy (63%) came directly from the Obama camp.

In both cases, independent outside sources play a role, but a much smaller one. Public opinion polls were a significant source of assertions for Romney’s positive economic narrative (12%).

Experts, on the other hand, were a sizable source for the idea that Romney’s policies would hurt the economy (14%).

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### Sources for “Romney’s Ideas Are Not Good for the Economy”

*Percentage of narrative by source, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012*

Campaign and surrogates	63%
Experts	14
Journalists/authors	8
Voters	7
Talk show hosts	5
Polls	3
Other media	1
Other/don’t know	0

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## Sources for “Romney’s Ideas Are Good for the Economy”

*Percentage of narrative by source, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012*

Campaign and surrogates	61%
Polls	12
Experts	8
Journalists/authors	7
Voters	7
Talk show hosts	4
Other media	1
Other/don’t know	0

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### What Americans Perceive About the Candidates’ Personal Narratives

The second phase of this analysis was to survey Americans to see how public perceptions of the candidates correlated to their portrayal in the news media.

The attitudes of voters vary considerably this year with the portrayal of the candidates in the press. Overall, for instance, while the press coverage of record and biography is equally negative for the two candidates, in the view of voters, Obama fares more favorably when asked which characteristics people would associate with each contender.

In the press, the biggest narrative was that Obama had not done enough or had the wrong approach to fixing the economy. That narrative was more than twice as prevalent in the coverage as was the counter-argument—that his economic approach was helpful. And there was twice as much narrative suggesting that Obama’s ideas were the wrong approach for the economy as there was that Romney’s approach was the wrong one.

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## How Voters View the Candidates

Percentage of registered voters surveyed

	Obama	Romney	Both	Neither	DK
Good moral character	38%	26%	14%	17%	5%
Out of touch elitist	25	35	6	26	9
Believes in American values	36	31	12	17	4
Wrong approach to fixing the economy	37	33	6	18	6
Often makes mistakes when he speaks	18	33	14	25	9
Best experience to be a good leaders	40	31	2	20	7

**Date Range:** August 16-19, 2012

**Note:** N=807. Percentage of voters who thought each phrase better described Barack Obama or Mitt Romney, neither or both.

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Yet voters surveyed in mid August (August 16-19) were more evenly split on this question. In all, 43% associated Obama with the idea of having the wrong economic approach (37% tie this specifically to Obama and another 6% associate it with both candidates). At the same time, 39% associated this with Romney (33% and 6%). The difference between the two candidates was within the margin of error.

Another theme present in the press coverage was that Obama did not believe in American ideas of capitalism and individualism. In the survey, slightly more people associate Obama with *believing* in American values than Romney, though the difference here again is within the margin of error. In all, 48% of voters said Obama believes in American values (36% specifically tie to this Obama and another 12% to both men), while 43% associate this idea with Romney (31% for Romney specifically and 12% for both).

Whether the candidates believe in American values was related to another theme in the coverage, that Romney was an elitist out of touch with regular Americans. Here the coverage and the attitudes of voters did correlate. In all, 41% associated Romney with being an elitist (35% associate just Romney, and 6% both candidates). A smaller percentage, 31%, associate Obama with elitism (25% and 6%).

Voters and the media coverage also match up more on another theme in the press, that Romney was an awkward campaigner prone to gaffes. Nearly half of voters surveyed, 47%, associate that trait with Romney (33% with Romney specifically and 14% for both), compared with 32% for Obama (18% and 14%).

Finally voters are more likely to associate good morals and good leadership experience with Obama than with Romney, even though the Romney campaign has tried to establish these themes as foundations of his candidacy. Neither theme showed up as strong narratives about Romney in the press. And among voters, Obama fares better on these themes on the eve of the conventions than Romney. In all, 52% of voters associate strong morals with compared with 40% for Romney, and 42% of voters associate strong leadership experience with Obama compared with 33% for Romney.

In short, on six different themes present in the coverage of candidates, the two men are basically split on two, and Obama fares slightly better on the other four, a perception that is more positive for the president among voters than it is in the press.

## The Master Narratives by Media Sector

The way the candidates' character and biography are portrayed was largely consistent across different media sectors, but there were some striking exceptions—and those came from cable news and radio talk.

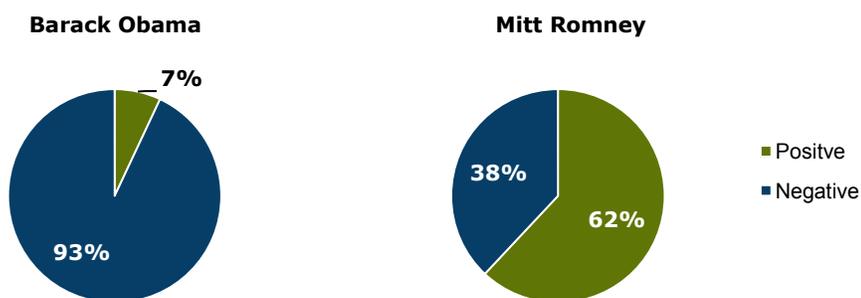
To a great extent, moreover, these ideological media are playing offense rather than defense—that is, spending considerably more time attacking the candidate they oppose than extolling the virtues of the one they like.

In a look across conservative talk radio and cable talk programs, 7% of the character assertions about Obama were positive, compared with 93% that were negative over these 10 weeks. This universe includes the Fox News programs Hannity and The O'Reilly Factor, along with the talk radio shows of Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. The discussion on these programs about Romney, by contrast, was more muted, 62% positive and 38% negative.

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### Conservative Talk Show Portrayals of Candidate Narratives

*Percentage of positive and negative coverage on conservative talk shows, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012*



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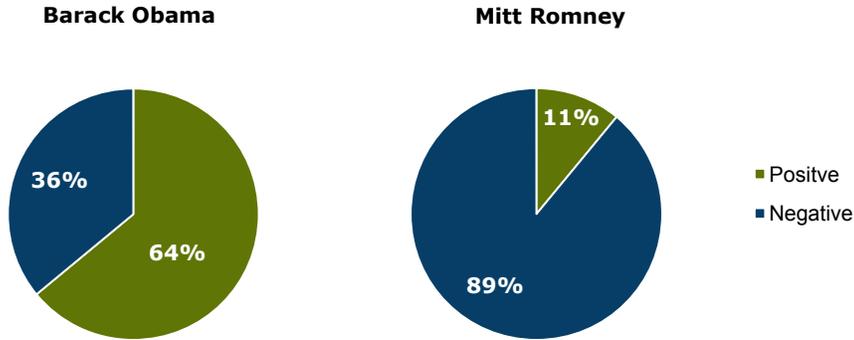
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Virtually the same pattern is true if one looks at the universe of liberal radio and cable talk show programs. The liberal shows studied included The Rachel Maddow Show and The Ed Show on MSNBC, along with Ed Schultz's radio program. Here, during the 10 weeks studied, 11% of the Romney character narrative was positive while 89% was negative. And the numbers for Obama mirror what we found in conservative talk about Romney. Here, 64% of the liberals' assertions about Obama's character and biography were positive and 36% negative.

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## Liberal Talk Show Portrayals of Candidate Narratives

Percentage of positive and negative coverage on liberal talk shows, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012



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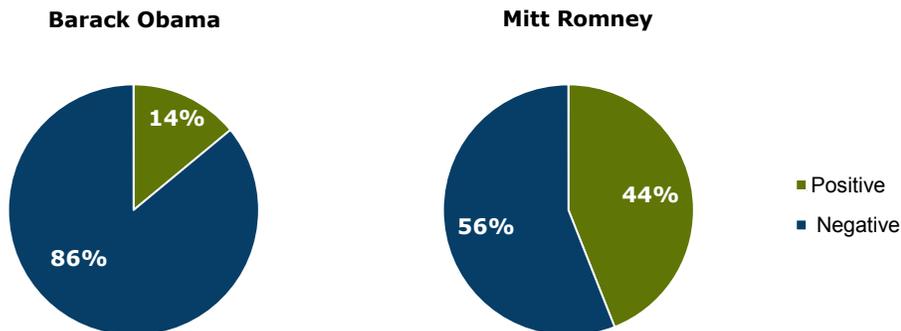
A similar pattern can be found in looking just at the discourse on MSNBC and on Fox News.

On the Fox programs studied, 14% of the master narrative about Obama was positive for the 10 weeks studied, while 86% was negative. And most of this—70% of all the Obama discussion on Fox—consisted of three themes: that he had not done enough for the economy (39%), he did not believe in capitalism (18%) and he is not honest or a person of integrity (13%).

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## Fox News Portrayals of Candidate Narratives

Percentage of positive and negative coverage on Fox News Channel, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012



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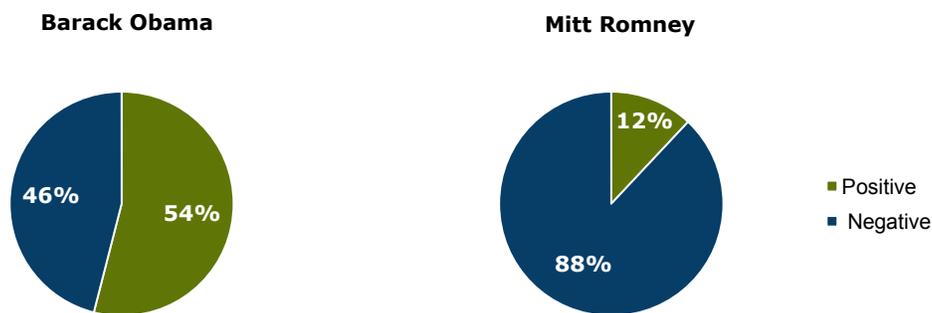
The Fox narrative about Romney was not flattering either—44% positive and 56% negative.

On MSNBC, the numbers were almost identical in reverse. Here 12% of the narrative about Romney’s character and biography was positive while 88% was negative. The discussion, as in the media generally, was more varied. The top four MSNBC themes about Romney—accounting for 54% of his narrative—were that he does not know how to fix the economy (15%), his policies are vague (14%), he is a rich elitist (13%) and he is an awkward campaigner who has made significant gaffes (12%).

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### MSNBC Portrayals of Candidate Narratives

*Percentage of positive and negative coverage on MSNBC, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012*



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Meanwhile, the MSNBC narrative about Obama was mixed at 54% positive and 46% negative.

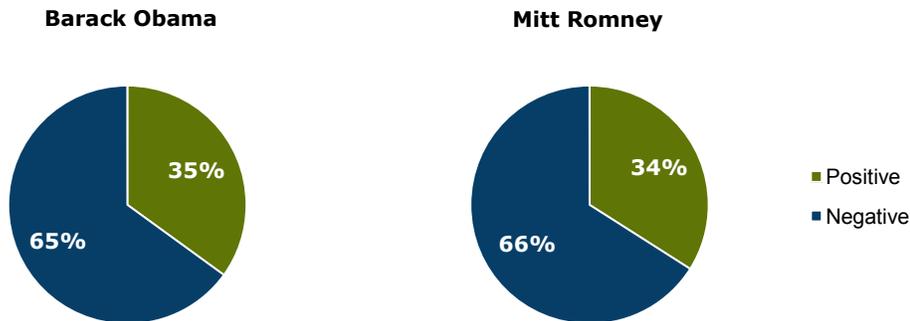
One other feature of this more partisan media universe is that hosts focus far more on the candidate they want to criticize than they do on the candidate their audience might be more likely to support. Among conservative radio and cable talk hosts, 84% of the discussion focused on Obama, versus just 16% on Romney. The numbers were similar on Fox alone (75% vs. 25%). The same general trend was found in liberal talk, but to a lesser degree. Among liberal talkers, 66% of the discussion of candidate record and biography focused on Romney, versus 34% on Obama. The numbers on MSNBC were nearly identical 65% to 35%.

Elsewhere in the press studied, and the treatment of the two candidates was fairly similar. In newspaper coverage, for instance, about two-thirds of the narrative for each candidate was negative (65% for Obama and 66% for Romney) with the remaining one-third positive.

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## Newspaper Portrayals of Candidate Narratives

Percentage of positive and negative coverage in newspapers, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012



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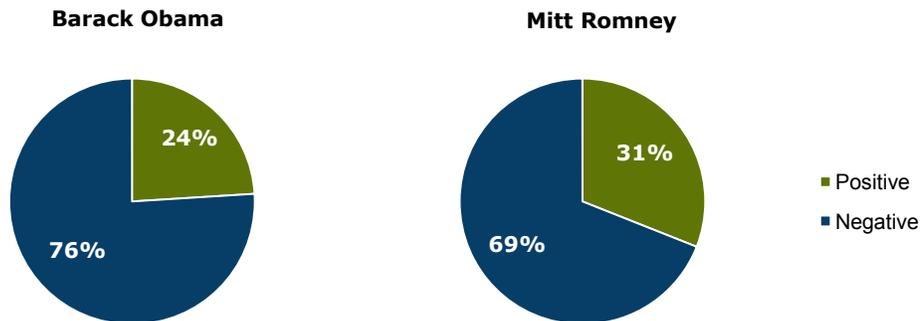
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On news websites, there was a similar pattern. About one-quarter (24%) of the character narrative about Obama was positive while 76% was negative. For Romney, 31% was positive and 69% negative.

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## Online Portrayals of Candidate Narratives

Percentage of positive and negative coverage on online news sites, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012



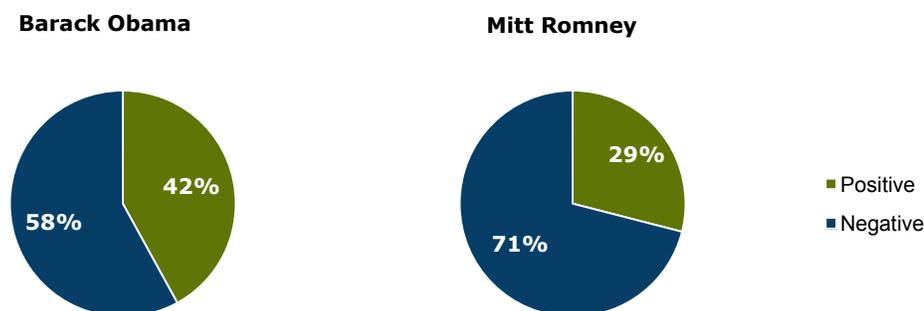
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On morning and evening network news broadcasts, Obama's and Romney's narratives were also considerably more negative than positive, but the president fared better. For Obama, 42% of the character narrative about him was positive compared with 58% negative. In the case of Romney, 29% of the narrative was positive compared with a higher percentage—71%—that was negative.

## Network News Portrayals of Candidate Narratives

Percentage of positive and negative coverage on network news, May 29-Aug. 5, 2012



**Note:** PBS not included  
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Finally, the third cable news channel, CNN, stands out among its cable rivals for looking more like the rest of the media than either Fox or MSNBC. To begin with, it offered far fewer personal narratives about the candidates than its rivals—fewer than half of what aired on either MSNBC or the Fox News Channel. And the numbers resembled what one would have found online and in print. On CNN, the master narratives about Obama’s character and record were 29% positive and 71% negative. For Romney, they were 38% positive and 62% negative.

One interesting difference among the various platforms also relates to sourcing. Different media turn for their sourcing to different places.

Campaigns have a larger voice online. Here 58% of the personal narrative about the candidates came from the campaigns and their allies versus 48% in the media overall. Conversely, experts played a much smaller role in the top content on news websites, just 2% versus 10% generally.

### Sources for the Candidate Narratives by Medium

Percentage of personal assertions

	Cable TV	Newspapers	Online	Broadcasting
Journalists	19%	21%	23%	18%
Talk show hosts	11	1	0	1
Campaign	48	40	58	51
Experts	15	6	2	7
Voters	1	14	6	3
Polls	3	15	6	13

**Date Range:** May 29-Aug.5, 2012

**Note:** Percentages do not add up to 100 because not all categories are included

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This orientation toward campaign sources online is significant, given the audience shift to digital platforms. What is it about online content that makes it different from what the public would encounter in print, for instance, or on network evening newscasts?

The study found that the top stories online are often breaking news accounts of what has occurred in the last few hours. The higher presence of campaign sources, and the lower presence of experts, may reflect this breaking news orientation. Candidates and their allies can drive this fast-paced news narrative with campaign statements and coordinated talking points that flood into newsrooms electronically. Finding outside sources to interpret the accuracy of these claims, or to put them in context, may take more time and go into analytical pieces that are less frequent and may not be the lead story.

Campaigns, by contrast, had the smallest role as a source for the personal narratives about the candidates in newspapers, at 40%. Voters and polls had a larger role than elsewhere at 14% for voters versus 5% generally, and 15% for polls versus 6% generally. These print pieces tend to be longer than what appears online or on television. They often also include material that fleshes out the day's events, and thus the pieces try to be more analytical than the breaking news accounts that appear earlier. Journalists themselves do not play a significantly larger a role in print. In all 21% of print statements about the candidates came from journalists compared with 19% generally and 23% online. The smaller role that campaigns play in shaping the candidate narratives in print, in other words, is made up for by other sources reporters have sought out.

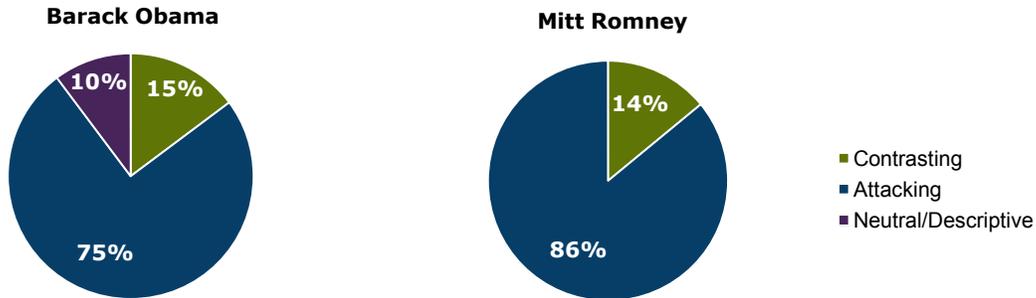
The negative quality of the coverage in the press also stands in some contrast to the kinds of messages that campaigns share on their own websites and in social media, according to earlier PEJ research. In those venues, the majority of the messaging from Romney and Obama were about their own candidacies (55% for Obama and 52% for Romney). In all, only 14% of Obama's direct messaging talked about Romney. Romney's messaging was more focused on Obama (34%). To see this earlier report on candidate direct messaging, [click here](#).

A new analysis of this data by PEJ shows that when the candidates did talk about each other on these digital platforms, however, it tended to be a pure attack that only criticized the opponent and offered nothing comparative about their own ideas or candidacy. For Romney, fully 86% of his messaging about Obama was an attack rather than comparative. For Obama, 75% of this communication was pure attack rather than comparative.

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## When Talking About Each Other, Both Candidates Attack

Percentage of all digital posts studied, across platforms



**Date Range:** June 4-17, 2012

**Note:** These percentages represent the number of posts, where Obama and Romney referred to their opponent

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The portrayal in the mainstream press has tended to focus on this aspect of the campaign dialogue—the campaigns talking about one another. The more affirmative narrative about the candidates, in other words, could be found in their direct messaging rather than in the portrayal of the candidates in traditional media.

## About This Study

A number of people at the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism worked on PEJ's "The Master Character Narratives in Campaign 2012." Director Tom Rosenstiel and Associate Director Mark Jurkowitz wrote the report. Senior Researcher Paul Hitlin supervised the content analysis component. Researchers Steve Adams, Heather Brown, Emily Guskin and Sovini Tan coded and analyzed the content data. Monica Anderson created the charts. Jesse Holcomb copy edited the report. Dana Page handles the communications for the project.

## Methodology

The report issued by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, "The Master Character Narratives in Campaign 2012," uses content analysis data derived from human coding.

## Sample Design

The content was based on media coverage originally captured as part of [PEJ's weekly News Coverage Index](#) (NCI) from May 29-August 5, 2012.

Each week, the NCI examines the coverage from 52 outlets in five media sectors, including newspapers, online news, network TV, cable TV, and radio. Following a system of rotation, between 25 and 28 outlets each weekday are studied as well as 3 newspapers each Sunday.

For this particular study of campaign coverage, ABC and CBS radio headlines were excluded. Therefore, the 50 media outlets examined for this campaign study were as follows:

### Newspapers (Eleven in all)

#### Coded two out of these four every weekday; one on Sunday

*The New York Times*

*Los Angeles Times*

*USA Today*

*The Wall Street Journal*

#### Coded two out of these four every weekday; one on Sunday

*The Washington Post*

*The Denver Post*

*Houston Chronicle*

*Orlando Sentinel*

#### Coded one out of these three every weekday and Sunday

*Traverse City Record-Eagle (MI)*

*The Daily Herald (WA)*

*The Eagle-Tribune (MA)*

**Web sites (Coded six of twelve each weekday)**

Yahoo News  
MSNBC.com  
CNN.com  
NYTimes.com  
Google News  
FoxNews.com

ABCNews.com  
USAToday.com  
WashingtonPost.com  
LATimes.com  
HuffingtonPost.com  
Wall Street Journal Online

**Network TV (Seven in all, Mon-Fri)**

Morning shows – coded one or two every weekday

ABC – Good Morning America  
CBS – Early Show  
NBC – Today

Evening news – coded two of three every weekday

ABC – World News Tonight  
CBS – CBS Evening News  
NBC – NBC Nightly News

Coded two consecutive days, then skip one

PBS – NewsHour

**Cable TV (Fifteen in all, Mon-Fri)**

Daytime (2:00 to 2:30 pm) coded two out of three every weekday

CNN  
Fox News  
MSNBC

Nighttime CNN – coded one or two out of the four every day

Situation Room (5 pm)  
Situation Room (6 pm)  
Erin Burnett OutFront  
Anderson Cooper 360

Nighttime Fox News – coded two out of the four every day

Special Report w/ Bret Baier

Fox Report w/ Shepard Smith  
O'Reilly Factor  
Hannity

Nighttime MSNBC – coded one or two out of the four every day

PoliticsNation  
Hardball (7 pm)  
The Rachel Maddow Show  
The Ed Show

**Radio (Seven in all, Mon-Fri)**

NPR – Coded one of the two every weekday

Morning Edition  
All Things Considered

Talk Radio

Rotate between:

Rush Limbaugh  
Sean Hannity

Coded every other day  
Ed Schultz

From that content, the study included all campaign-related stories:

- On the front page of newspapers
- In the entirety of commercial network evening newscasts
- The first 30 minutes of network morning news and all cable programs, along with the PBS evening news
- The first 30 minutes of the talk radio programs
- A 30 minute segment of NPR's broadcasts or PBS' NewsHour (rotated between the first and second half of the programs)
- The top 5 stories on each website at the time of capture

Click here for the full [methodology](#) regarding the News Coverage Index and the justification for the choices of outlets studied.

**Sample Selection**

To arrive at the sample for this particular study of campaign coverage, we began by pulling all the stories from May 29-August 5, 2012, that were either coded as campaign stories, meaning that 50% or more of the story was devoted to discussion of the ongoing presidential campaign, or included President Obama or Governor Romney in at least 25% of the story.

For all stories, further sampling was conducted by selecting every other relevant story by outlet. This was done by listing the stories from each show in chronological order and randomly selecting the first story. We then selected every-other story within each outlet to arrive at the final sample.

This process resulted in a sample of 827 stories.

### **Coding Design**

A coding protocol was designed for this project based on previous studies by PEJ.

For each of the two major party presidential candidates (Barack Obama, Mitt Romney), researchers examined campaign coverage to identify the ten most common themes about the character and record of each candidate. Five of the themes for each candidate were positive and five negative. (For Obama, two themes about his economic policy were eventually merged.) Researchers then identified each assertion within every story reflecting any of these themes in the sample.

### *Unit of Analysis*

The unit of analysis for this study was the assertion (reflecting one of the major narrative themes). Any time a coder came across an assertion within one of the stories in the sample, he or she noted the assertion and coded the variables listed below for each one. Many stories contained multiple assertions about a candidate; many other stories did not have any assertions about character and record relevant for this study.

### *Variables*

The variables included in this study were the following: theme/message, affirming the narrative thread or rebuttal, and variable source of statement.

**Theme/message** are the overarching themes that the press, candidates, and operatives focus on and are usually centered on a candidate's character. As noted above, the master themes about each of the two candidates were identified and tested prior to coding. This variable measures which of the themes the statement addressed.

**Affirming the narrative thread or rebuttal** captures whether the assertion being coded is affirming the narrative thread or refuting it.

**Source of statement** designates the person who is making the statement. This is not necessarily the author of the piece, but the person who expresses the particular statement. For example, if a newspaper story quotes an unnamed voter as asserting that, "Senator Obama cares about regular people," that means the source of the statement is the voter and not the journalist writing the piece.

### **Coding Team & Process**

The team responsible for performing the content analysis on this particular study was made up of four experienced coders and a senior researcher.

Testing of all variables used to determine campaign stories has shown levels of agreement of agreement of 80% or higher. For specific information about those tests, see the [methodology on intercoder testing](#).

During coder training for this particular study, intercoder reliability tests were conducted for all the campaign-specific variables. There were two different intercoder tests conducted to assure reliability.

The first test was to assure that coders could identify the assertions within campaign stories. Each coder was given the same group of stories and asked to identify where threads appeared in those stories. The agreement between all the coders on this task was 80%.

The second test consisted of each coder being given a list of assertions and asked to code each of the campaign specific variables for those threads.

From that test, the specific levels of agreement for the variables in this study were as follows:

Thread/statement: 87%

Affirming narrative thread or rebuttal: 96%

Source of statement: 80%

### **Additional Analysis**

The results of PEJ's coding were twinned with a companion survey of public attitudes about the candidates by the [Pew Research Center for the People & the Press](#). The survey of registered voters was conducted on August 16-19, 2012. Together, the two studies allowed us to explore how much these press messages were shaping public opinion of the candidates.