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The effects of traditional news, partisan talk, and political satire programs on perceptions of presidential candidate viability and electability

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how exposure to network news, partisan opinion talk, and political satire programs during the 2012 Iowa presidential caucuses affected viewers' perceptions of candidate viability (likelihood of capturing the party nomination) and electability (likelihood of winning the general election). Programs representing these genres—*ABC World News*, Fox News's *Hannity*, and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*—all framed the same candidate as the front-runner for the nomination, though each framed this candidate's general election prospects in distinctive ways. A randomized field experiment assigned respondents to view one (or none) of the three programs as they aired. Assessments of the front-runner were significantly shaped by assignment to view television coverage, hence demonstrating the potential importance of all three media genres for the presidential nomination process.

Choosing a candidate in a presidential primary or caucus represents a challenge for voters: In this context, they are unable to rely on the usual heuristics of party affiliation or ideologically distinct issue platforms. Consequently, perceptions of a candidate's *viability* (likelihood of winning the nomination) and *electability* (likelihood of winning the general election if nominated) have the potential to carry significant weight as citizens try to avoid casting a “wasted” vote (Burden & Jones, 2009). Substantial evidence shows that these perceptions have a strong impact on voter choice, particularly in early contests when information is scarce (Abramowitz, 1987, 1989; Aldrich, 1980; Bartels, 1988; Geer, 1989; Popkin, 1991; Stone & Abramowitz, 1983; Stone, Rapoport, & Abramowitz, 1992). Where voters' perceptions of viability and electability originate is significantly less well studied. They are, of course, not entirely exogenous; voters tend to perceive their favored candidate as somewhat more likely to win (Bartels, 1985). Yet many voters in early contests are unable to rate leading candidates (Geer, 1989). Furthermore, when voters are able to evaluate candidate viability and electability, they typically rely on media coverage of early contests in doing so (Bartels, 1988; Brady, 1993). Thus, media coverage of a candidate's electoral prospects early in the primary process can have dramatic “downstream” effects as momentum builds behind candidates perceived as winners (Abramowitz, 1989; Bartels, 1988).

Most of what we know about how the media affect perceptions of viability and electability, however, comes from research completed in the 1980s and 90s. Although the dynamics of the nomination process have remained largely the same since then, both the media landscape and the tools available to researchers have changed substantially. To begin with, the media environment has fragmented as sources of political information have proliferated (Morris, 2009; Prior, 2007). Voters may now choose to receive such information from a variety of outlets, including not only traditional

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news programs but also opinion-oriented political talk shows on Fox News Channel (e.g., *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Hannity*) and MSNBC (e.g., *The Rachel Maddow Show*), as well as the political satire of CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, and HBO's *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. These different types of outlets frame politics in distinctive ways and hence are likely to exert unique effects on viewers' political attitudes and behavior. Accordingly, the present study addresses a set of hypotheses and research questions about how traditional television news, partisan opinion talk, and political satire shows may each influence viewers' perceptions of presidential nomination candidates' viability and electability.

In doing so, this study moves beyond the typical methods employed by previous studies, which have relied on cross-sectional survey data or laboratory-based experiments. Instead, it uses an approach that combines the external validity of the former with the internal validity of the latter. Specifically, the study draws on data from an original field experiment in which survey respondents were randomly assigned to watch coverage of the January 2012 Iowa caucuses on *ABC World News*, Fox News Channel's *Hannity*, or *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Each framed former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney (who was reported at the time to have won a slim victory) as the front-runner in their coverage of the Iowa caucuses. At the same time, as expected given the different frames that dominate each genre, the programs presented his general election prospects in distinctive ways. The experimental results, in turn, demonstrate that respondents' perceptions of Romney differed depending on viewing assignment: Assignment to view *any* of the three programs increased perceptions of his viability, whereas the implications of viewing assignment for perceptions of electability differed somewhat depending on the program. More broadly, the findings show that media coverage of early nominating contests on not only traditional news but also partisan opinion talk and political satire programs can significantly shape perceptions of viability and electability.

Campaign frames and media genres

The concept of framing comes to us from sociology, psychology, and communication research, each of which offers its own definitions of this phenomenon. For the purposes at hand, the definition of framing offered by Entman (1993) is useful. Here, framing "is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). Conceptualized in this way, frames exist within media messages and can shape how audience members think about the topic in question.

The frame most often found in mainstream news coverage is the game—or strategy—frame. For decades, the network evening news programs (on ABC, CBS, and NBC) have tended to emphasize a "game" frame that interprets presidential campaigns in terms of candidate strategy and the horse race rather than policies and issues (Patterson, 1993). Press narratives constructed around polling data and "expectations" are common elements of game framing, as are assessments of candidate viability and electability (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2006). Research indicates that exposure to such framing of political campaigns can influence the interpretive lens through which audience members come to understand the political world (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001).

In recent years, the increasing fragmentation of the television environment through changes in technology (cable and Internet) and media economics (deregulation) has diminished the dominance of the traditional evening news shows and their game-framed campaign coverage. The audience for these shows has declined substantially since the early 1990s (Pew Research Center, 2012a). During the same time span, voters have increasingly turned to other media genres. In particular, alternative genres such as ideologically oriented political talk and political satire not only have grown in

viewership but also tend to frame presidential campaigns in ways distinct from the traditional news game frame.¹

The conservative-leaning Fox News Channel played a crucial role in pioneering ideologically driven, opinion-oriented political talk television by launching programs such as *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Hannity*. The liberal-leaning MSNBC followed suit with shows such as (the now-canceled) *Countdown with Keith Olbermann* and *The Rachel Maddow Show*. The viewership for these types of shows is substantial, though it varies across networks and programs. For example, average viewership in 2011 ranged from 2.08 million for *The O'Reilly Factor* to 1.67 million for *Hannity* to 983,000 for *The Rachel Maddow Show* (Pew Research Center, 2012b). Such opinion talk programs differ from traditional network television news shows in several ways, most notably in their explicitly ideological and partisan framing of politics (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Whereas network news programs' reliance on the game frame is designed to give them an aura of fairness and objectivity (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012; Kerbel, Apee, & Ross, 2000), the content of partisan talk shows is designed to reinforce the broad ideological philosophies embraced by the networks (Stroud, 2011). These frames can influence a range of political opinions and beliefs (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Stroud, 2011).

Political satire programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* also emerged as novel sources of information about presidential campaigns. Like opinion talk shows, these reach sizable audiences. In 2011, average viewership was 2.25 million for *The Daily Show* and 1.55 million for *The Colbert Report* (Comedy Central, 2011). *The Daily Show*, described by then host Jon Stewart as a "fake news show," is the seminal program in the genre. Its dominant approach to framing politics is one of mockery and derision, as it highlights flaws and foibles related to candidates' personality traits, issue positions, political fortunes, and communication efforts (Baym, 2007; Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007; Jones, 2009; Young, 2004). Research has found effects of political satire programming on a wide range of outcomes, including political beliefs and opinions (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Morris, 2009; Tsftati, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009; Young, 2004, 2006).

Despite substantial research demonstrating the effects of partisan opinion talk and political satire programs on viewers' political attitudes and opinions, scholars have yet to examine their impact on assessments of candidate viability and electability. This is a curious omission given that, as noted earlier, these assessments have been shown to strongly influence voters' choices of which candidate to support in presidential primaries. The following section draws on theories of framing across media genres to develop hypotheses and research questions about how media coverage of primary candidates might affect voters' perceptions.

Hypotheses and research questions

In early presidential nomination contests, voters respond to victories by updating their evaluations and moving toward the front-runner (e.g., Bartels, 1985). One would expect that exposure to factual information about who won the contest would increase perceptions of the winning candidate's viability, regardless of the frame used in the coverage. Momentum, after all, develops from voters learning about the front-runner's victorious status and then "getting on the bandwagon." As such, our first hypothesis is a general claim about the effect of exposure to news of early victories:

H1: Viewing coverage of a candidate winning a caucus or primary will increase perceptions of the winner's viability.

It is also likely that different media genres' frames for that victory will vary across traditional game-framed coverage, ideologically framed coverage, and satirical coverage. Although the frames that these different genres use may be predictable, their specific effects are not and depend on the

¹Although the following account focuses on specific programs as exemplars of the ideologically oriented political talk and political satire genres, it is worth noting that the two are not mutually exclusive; for example, programs such as *The O'Reilly Factor* may include satirical humor, whereas programs such as *The Daily Show* may include ideological viewpoints.

candidates and circumstances in question. For example, the consequences of game-framed coverage may depend on margin of victory relative to expectations and the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the winner compared to the remaining field. Likewise, the consequences of ideologically framed coverage may depend on the ideology of the winner compared to opponents. The potential for such subtle differences depending on circumstances prompts the following research question:

RQ1: Does the extent to which viewing caucus/primary coverage increases perceptions of the winner's viability vary across the different frames used by different media genres?

The analysis thus probes for effects associated with basic exposure to information about a candidate's victory, as well as differential effects associated with different genres' framing of that information.

In contrast to its implications for viability, the "signal" of an early victory is typically less clear for the candidate's chances of winning the general election. Here, the impact of genre-characteristic framing should loom larger than the effect of simply learning about the candidate's win. Given that the framing generally used by conservative-oriented talk shows aims to reinforce positive perceptions of conservatives and Republicans, one can hypothesize that exposure to these shows will result in more positive evaluations of Republican candidates' electability:

H2a: Viewing conservative-oriented political talk show coverage of caucuses/primaries will lead to increased perceptions of Republican candidates' electability, relative to viewing other (or no) coverage.

In contrast, the framing of political satire shows is typically aimed at mocking candidates in general and conservative candidates in particular (Morris, 2009). As such, exposure to these shows should have the opposite effect of exposure to conservative opinion shows:

H2b: Viewing satirical news show coverage of caucuses/primaries will lead to decreased perceptions of Republican candidates' electability, relative to viewing other (or no) coverage.

Of course, these hypotheses about the effects of different media genres' framing of early nomination contests rely on the assumption that the shows do, in fact, frame such contests in distinctive ways. Thus, the next section provides evidence about how three shows in particular, one from each of the discussed media genres, framed the 2012 Iowa Republican caucuses.

Framing the 2012 Iowa Republican caucuses

The literature just described suggests that game frames should have dominated network news coverage of the Iowa caucuses, whereas ideological frames should have dominated partisan cable coverage and derisive frames should have dominated political satire. The coverage on *ABC World News* (selected as an exemplar of traditional broadcast evening news), Fox News Channel's *Hannity* (typical of the partisan opinion talk genre²), and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (typical of the political satire genre) during the three days encompassed by the experimental study at hand reflected the frames that previous studies demonstrate dominate each genre.

There was one obvious similarity in how the programs covered the Iowa caucus results: All three presented Romney as the winner and framed him as the front-runner for the nomination. After the study was completed, the Iowa GOP announced that Santorum had in fact won the caucuses by 34 votes. Members of the public, however, had no way of knowing this at the time. Thus, the result reported by the media—rather than the ultimate caucus result—is the one that should have mattered in terms of shaping immediate perceptions.

²The study focuses on *Hannity* rather than the even more popular *The O'Reilly Factor* given that Bill O'Reilly, unlike Sean Hannity, does not self-label as conservative.

At the same time, there were subtle differences in how each program framed the meaning of Romney's "victory" in terms of its implications for the general election. These differences reflect broader underlying distinctions in the nature of campaign information formats across the three aforementioned programming genres.

ABC World News

Following the standard expectations-driven story templates that dominate traditional campaign news reporting, *ABC World News* focused on the surprisingly strong showing by Rick Santorum in the Iowa caucuses and the narrowness of Romney's victory despite his heavy spending in the state. *ABC World News*' Diane Sawyer described how Santorum had "shocked the political world" and positioned himself as Romney's chief rival for the nomination. In covering Romney, the program presented him as a winner but also highlighted the challenges still facing his campaign for the nomination. The evening after the caucuses, correspondent David Muir summarized the state of the race:

Mitt Romney huddled up front with his wife Ann after winning what he called a squeaker in Iowa. One of his chief strategists telling us, eight is enough, to declare victory. . . . And tonight, Romney faces a brand new playing field. It's now Rick Santorum's turn in the role as the Romney alternative. ("Your voice your vote," 2012b)

The story then mentioned 2008 Republican presidential nominee John McCain's endorsement of Romney, quoting him as saying that "the bottom line [is that] Romney won." In the following segment, commentator George Stephanopolous reiterated this message: "The big picture is that Mitt Romney is much closer to the nomination today than he was yesterday, than he was 24 hours ago" ("Your voice your vote," 2012a). Put simply, *ABC World News* focused on strategy and expectations, framing Romney as having won a "photo finish" and building momentum toward the nomination.

Hannity

Fox News Channel's *Hannity* touched on some of the same themes, including both Santorum's "astonishing finish" and Romney's victory by the "slimmest of margins." The discussion, however, emphasized the strength of Romney's position in both the primary and general elections. Host Sean Hannity called him the "front-runner" for the nomination, and guest Karl Rove noted that "a few weeks ago, nobody was really predicting that he was going to win Iowa." Both predicted that he would win the upcoming New Hampshire primary. Two other guests went further, saying that Romney would be the nominee.

This show also provided Romney and John McCain a platform to explicitly frame the Iowa outcome in their own words through a joint appearance as guests on the January 4 broadcast. McCain took the opportunity to highlight both Romney's viability and his electability:

I believe he is the one who can defeat Barack Obama and be president of the United States. . . . I think there is very little doubt that he is picking up traction amongst all sectors of the Republican Party. ("Interview," 2012)

Romney himself reinforced the case for his chances in the general election, arguing that he had "the kind of background that will post up well against Barack Obama."

Like *ABC World News*, *Hannity* framed Romney's Iowa win as a boost to his viability. In keeping with the ideological framing that one would expect from a partisan opinion talk show, it went further in framing Romney as a candidate well positioned to beat Barack Obama in the fall.

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart

For his part, *The Daily Show*'s Jon Stewart presented Romney's nomination as inevitable while painting him as a disappointing choice for Republican voters. In his opening segment on the evening of the Iowa caucuses, Stewart "predicted" the future, saying,

The Republican presidential race and the conservative voters' desperate effort to explore every other possible option (living or otherwise) before ultimately and unhappily voting for Mitt Romney is a rite of passage for Republican voters known as "Romspringa." (*The Daily Show*, 2012)

Unlike *ABC World News* and *Hannity*, Stewart dismissed the "Santorum surge" altogether, highlighting instead the sad inevitability of a Romney nomination. Using a Whitman's Chocolate Sampler box (reabeled a "White Man's" sampler) as the basis for his analogy, he described Santorum as just another exciting bonbon that voters would not like in the end:

You're gonna end up with plain chocolate. You're gonna. You just are. ... So that's it. You end up with Romney, the *least* bad chocolate. And by the way, when you do ultimately end up with Romney, don't try and pretend this is the chocolate you wanted the whole time. You're gonna be miserable ... [be]cause even Romney's good ideas reek of John Kerry-esque out of touch-ed-ness. ... So, that's your guy. Eat up. (*The Daily Show*, 2012)

Following Romney's slim victory, Stewart again painted the former Massachusetts governor as undesirable, flawed, and out of touch. Thus, Stewart framed Romney as a highly viable candidate for the nomination but a weak candidate for the general election.

In sum, the different shows adopted largely similar frames in their discussions of Romney's viability but distinctive frames around his chances in the general election. All three shows agreed that Romney was "much closer to the nomination" (*ABC World News*), the "front-runner" (*Hannity*), and the candidate Republicans would "ultimately end up with" (*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*). In contrast, the shows varied in how they discussed his electability. Whereas Stewart mocked Romney as a flawed general election candidate whom voters would dislike, *Hannity* allowed both McCain and Romney to paint the former governor as a strong nominee who could beat Obama. Meanwhile, *ABC World News* devoted relatively little attention to Romney's chances in the fall, focusing on his ability to win the nomination.

Methods

Previous efforts to assess the effects of media coverage on candidate perceptions have typically relied on one of two methods. The first examines relationships between media exposure variables and opinion variables in survey data. This method allows for externally valid inferences but is weaker at disentangling cause and effect given the reciprocal causality between media exposure and opinions. The second method uses laboratory experiments that randomly assign participants to watch (or not watch) media coverage and then ask their opinions. This allows for internally valid inferences but is potentially limited in generalizability by the nature of the participants (particularly if they are college students; see Sears, 1986) and the artificiality of the laboratory setting.

With these limitations in mind, the present study draws on a third method: field experimentation. In a field experiment, the researcher(s) randomly assign participants to conditions in a naturalistic setting. Thus, the method addresses both a key weakness of laboratory experimentation (external validity) and a key weakness of cross-sectional survey data analysis (internal validity; Albertson & Lawrence, 2009; Vavreck, 2007). Given that field experimentation offers a powerful tool for drawing ecologically valid inferences about media effects, it is unfortunate that the use of the method remains relatively rare in research regarding media effects on public opinion (for notable exceptions, see Albertson & Lawrence, 2009; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, pp. 104–107; Gerber, Karlan, & Bergan, 2009; Mullainathan, Washington, & Azari, 2010).

The data for the present study came from a field experiment conducted to coincide with the January 3, 2012, Republican Iowa caucuses. The participants were drawn from a preexisting panel of 1,060 research participants, who had been recruited through a previous telephone survey. Although probability sampling was used to select potential panelists, those who accepted the invitation to join the panel were older on average than the general public (see Footnote 5 for more details). Given that the audience for *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is disproportionately young, the age composition of the sample (and the panel from which it was drawn) raises external validity concerns. At the same

time, it is worth noting the primary electorate—like this study's sample—tends to be older on average than the general public. The selection of participants from a single state raises another set of concerns, but also reflects the state-by-state nature of the actual presidential nomination process. It bears mentioning that the sample used here compares favorably to the sorts of student samples often used in experimental communication research.

The first phase of the field experiment, the *precaucus survey*, was a telephone survey of panelists conducted from December 22, 2011, to January 2, 2012. Of the panelists, 506 (or 47.7%) completed this survey, which included a series of questions about the Republican candidates. At the end of the survey, participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups. Each group received a different set of instructions. Participants in the control condition were simply told that they would be called back to answer more questions in a few days. In contrast, participants in the three treatment conditions received the following instructions:

We are studying what people think about different news shows and will be calling you back to capture your opinions. To help us, we need you to watch [ABC World News/Hannity/The Daily Show with Jon Stewart] three nights next week, Tuesday January 3rd through Thursday January 5th.³

Participants in each treatment condition were then given details about when and where they could watch the show to which they were assigned. They received one Interactive Voice Response call on January 2, 2012 (the day before the Iowa caucuses) and another on January 4, 2012, to remind them of their viewing instructions. Participants for whom an e-mail address was available received a reminder with a link to a site where they could view their group's coverage.

A series of randomization checks confirmed that there were no significant differences in means (at the $p < .1$ level) between participants in the control group and those asked to watch one of the television shows in terms of education level, interest in politics, ideology, trust in media, perceptions of bias in the media, regular cable news use, or regular broadcast news use.

The *postcaucus survey* took place from January 6 to January 10, 2012.⁴ A total of 306 participants (60.4% of those who completed the *precaucus survey* and 28.9% of the full panel) completed the *postcaucus survey*.⁵ Of these, 66 were assigned to view *ABC World News*, 88 to view *Hannity*, 62 to view *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and 90 to the control. Both the *precaucus* and *postcaucus* surveys included measures of perceptions regarding Mitt Romney's viability and electability. The former was measured by a question asking how well the phrase "has a strong chance of winning the Republican nomination for president" described Romney. The latter was measured by a question asking how well the phrase "has a strong chance of defeating Barack Obama in the general election" described Romney. Response options for both items included 3 (*very well*), 2 (*somewhat well*), 1 (*not very well*), and 0 (*not at all*).

In "encouragement designs" such as this one—where participants are encouraged to take part in the treatment but the researcher does not have full control over whether they were, in fact, treated—noncompliance can be an important issue. The analyses described next use measures capturing the random assignment to groups as the key independent variables, as the participants actually treated are a nonrandom subset of the original treatment group (see Gerber & Green, 2012, Chapter 5). As discussed further in the

³Given that *Hannity*, unlike *ABC World News* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, runs for a full hour rather than half an hour, participants in the *Hannity* condition were instructed to watch only the first half hour of each night's broadcast (accordingly, the analysis of the show's framing of the Iowa caucuses only considers the first half hour of its coverage from each night). Given that Fox News Channel preempted *Hannity* on January 3 for special coverage of the Iowa caucuses, these participants were also instructed to watch the half hour of the network's special coverage that aired at the beginning of *Hannity*'s regular time slot. The caucus results were not known at the time of this broadcast; thus, it is unlikely that the special coverage contributed to the results reported here.

⁴All surveys on January 10 were completed before 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time.

⁵Of these, 48.7% were men and 51.3% were women. In terms of race, 92.5% self-identified as White, 4.6% self-identified as Black or African American, and the remainder self-identified as another race or did not answer. The sample was skewed toward older participants: 5.0% were 40 years of age or younger, 7.5% were between 41 and 50, 23.2% were between 51 and 60, and 59.3% were 61 or older. Participants also tended to be well educated: 11.5% had a high school education or less, 25.9% had attended college but did not complete a degree, another 26.2% had completed a 4-year degree, and the remaining 36.2% had attended graduate school. In regard to partisanship, 39.9% identified as Democrats, 22.2% as Republicans, and 37.9% as independents or other.

supplemental materials, compliance rates were nonetheless high and did not differ significantly across conditions.⁶

A related methodological issue is attrition. Of the 506 respondents who completed the precaucus survey, 306 completed the postcaucus survey. If attrition were systematically related to potential values of the dependent variable, then the remaining participants assigned to the treatment and control groups would no longer be random samples of the original pool of participants. As shown in the supplemental materials, tests for relationships between attrition and participants' background attributes or experimental assignment revealed no evidence that respondents dropped out of the study differentially as a function of the program they were encouraged to watch.

Results

Table 1 reports posttest perceptions of Romney's viability and electability, by experimental condition. Table 2, in turn, presents the results of lagged dependent variable regression models that included participants' perceptions of Romney's viability/electability prior to the Iowa caucuses, measured in the pretest survey, along with dichotomous variables for assignment to each of the experimental treatments (see Finkel, 1995, for a discussion of the use of lagged dependent variable models vs. change score models).⁷ Whether looking at the basic posttest distributions and means or the regression coefficients that control for prior perceptions of Romney, the results paint a consistent picture.⁸

Results suggest that viewing almost *any* kind of coverage of a reported winner increases the audience's perceptions of that candidate's viability in the general election (see the upper portion of Table 1 and the first column of Table 2). Consistent with expectations, participants asked to watch *Hannity* or *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* were significantly more likely than control participants to perceive Romney as viable (mean scores of 2.59 and 2.68, respectively, compared to 2.37 for the control group; $p < .05$ for each). Those asked to watch *ABC World News* were also marginally more likely to perceive Romney as viable (mean score of 2.56, $p = .08$ for difference from control group). These conclusions are reaffirmed by the regression models in Table 2. Controlling for prior perceptions of Romney, being assigned to view *Hannity* or *The Daily Show* significantly increased respondents' perceptions of Romney's ability to win the nomination (the coefficients were .18 [.09] and .23 [.10], respectively). Those asked to watch *ABC World News* were somewhat more likely to perceive him as viable, though this effect fell short of statistical significance, with a coefficient of .13 (.10).

The lagged dependent variables were used to calculate first differences between the control group and those asked to watch *ABC World News*, between the control group and those asked to watch *Hannity*, and between the control group and those asked to watch *The Daily Show*, setting pretest perceptions of Romney to their sample mean. Those asked to watch *The Daily Show* perceived Romney to be substantially more likely to win the Republican nomination than those not asked to watch any coverage (the difference is .23 [.07, .39] on the 0–3 scale). Similarly, those asked to watch *Hannity* showed an increase in perceived viability of .17 [.03, .33]. Although being assigned to watch *ABC World News* had a similar estimated effect (.12 [–.04, .28]), the confidence intervals that overlap zero do not allow one to place significant weight on this estimate.

⁶Of the participants asked to watch *ABC World News*, 64 (97.0%) reported watching the show; of these, four reported watching 1 night, 21 reported watching 2 nights, and 39 reported watching 3 or more nights. Of the participants asked to watch *Hannity*, 74 (85.1%) reported watching the show; of these, five reported watching 1 night, 22 reported watching 2 nights, and 47 reported watching all 3 nights. Of the participants asked to watch *The Daily Show*, 54 (87.0%) reported watching the show; of these, four reported watching 1 night, nine reported watching 2 nights, and 41 reported watching all 3 nights. There were no statistically significant differences across the groups in the mean number of nights of coverage participants said they watched.

⁷Supplementary models included interaction terms between prior perceptions of Romney and the experimental condition. There was no evidence that the effects of news coverage were conditional on participants' preexisting beliefs about Romney.

⁸One potential concern is that participants in different experimental conditions varied in their media consumption and political engagement. We conducted supplementary analyses demonstrating that the inclusion of additional pretest controls (measures of broadcast news use, cable news use, newspaper use, Internet news use, and political interest) does not substantively alter the results reported here. See the supplemental materials, Table A3, for this analysis. The supplemental materials include models that do not include the lagged dependent variable, to check that the modeling assumptions were not affecting the results (Table A4). The substantive results from these models align with those reported in the main body of the article.

Table 1. Distributions for perceptions of Mitt Romney's viability and electability, by condition.

	Likelihood of Romney Winning Nomination						<i>M</i>
	0	1	2	3	DK	Total	
Control	3	6	36	45	0	90	2.37
(%)	(3.3)	(6.7)	(40.0)	(50.0)	(0.0)	(100)	
Assigned to <i>ABC</i>	0	4	21	41	0	66	2.56 [†]
(%)	(0.0)	(6.1)	(31.8)	(62.1)	(0.0)	(100)	
Assigned to <i>Hannity</i>	0	3	30	55	0	88	2.59*
(%)	(0.0)	(3.4)	(34.1)	(62.5)	(0.0)	(100)	
Assigned to <i>TDS</i>	1	1	15	45	0	62	2.68**
(%)	(1.6)	(1.6)	(24.2)	(72.6)	(0.0)	(100)	
Likelihood of Romney Winning General Election							
Control	15	22	33	20	0	90	1.64
(%)	(16.7)	(24.4)	(36.7)	(22.2)	(0.0)	(100)	
Assigned to <i>ABC</i>	2	7	35	21	1	66	2.15**
(%)	(3.0)	(10.6)	(53.0)	(31.8)	(1.5)	(100)	
Assigned to <i>Hannity</i>	9	13	39	27	0	88	1.95*
(%)	(10.2)	(14.8)	(44.3)	(30.7)	(0.0)	(100)	
Assigned to <i>TDS</i>	7	13	34	8	0	62	1.69
(%)	(11.3)	(21.0)	(54.8)	(12.9)	(0.0)	(100)	

Note. Significance tests are based on comparisons to means in the control condition.

ABC = *ABC World News*, *TDS* = *The Daily Show*.

[†]*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01.

Table 2. Perceptions of Mitt Romney's viability and electability, by condition.

	Likelihood of Romney Winning Nomination	Likelihood of Romney Winning General Election
Pretest perception	.26 (.06)***	.61 (.04)***
Assigned to watch <i>ABC</i>	.13 (.10)	.19 (.12)
Assigned to watch <i>Hannity</i>	.18 (.09) [†]	.17 (.11) [†]
Assigned to watch <i>TDS</i>	.23 (.10)*	-.10 (.12)
Constant	1.79 (.12)	.69 (.10)
<i>R</i> ²	.12	.43
<i>N</i>	306	303

Note. Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses. Significance levels are based on one-tailed tests.

ABC = *ABC World News*, *TDS* = *The Daily Show*.

[†]*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ****p* < .001.

The first difference in perceptions of Romney's viability between the control group and all other participants is .18 [.04, .31], indicating that those assigned to watch *ABC World News*, *Hannity*, or *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* were more likely to see Romney as likely to win the nomination. Watching any of the three shows increased perceptions of Romney's viability, consistent with theoretical expectations. After all, all three shows covered Romney as the winner, thereby providing a strong informational cue to voters about his later electoral chances. In addition, all three programs used Romney's reported "victory" to then emphasize his strong viability coming out of the caucuses.

These results do *not*, however, provide evidence that the effects of the three treatments on perceptions of Romney's viability differed from one another. Although *ABC World News* may have been more cautious than *Hannity* or *The Daily Show* in anointing Romney the front-runner, assignment to the *ABC World News* condition did not have a different impact on viewers than assignment to either of the other shows. The mean posttest perceptions shown in Table 1 do not reveal significant differences between treatment conditions; neither do the coefficients in Table 2. The relatively small sample size and subtle differences in coverage here preclude the conclusion that differences in coverage between *ABC World News* and the other shows had no effects; instead, all one can say is that there were no observable differences across the treatments uncovered in these data.

Now, consider the results for perceptions of Romney's chances of winning the general election (electability). Here, the three shows provided strikingly different frames. Whereas *ABC World News* paid relatively little attention to Romney's general election chances, *Hannity* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* offered diametrically opposed assessments. *Hannity* emphasized Romney's strengths against President Obama; in contrast, Stewart mocked his weaknesses. In keeping with this, those assigned to view *Hannity* were significantly more likely than those not asked to watch any coverage to perceive Romney as electable (a mean of 1.96 compared to 1.64 in Table 1; $p < .05$). Controlling for prior perceptions in Table 2, the coefficient is .17 (.11). Mean perceptions of electability were also greater among those assigned to watch *ABC World News* (2.15) than among control participants ($p < .01$), but this effect fell short of statistical significance after controlling for pretest perceptions. Views of electability did not differ between the control group and those assigned to view *The Daily Show*.

A series of first differences in perceptions of Romney's electability assess differences across the media program assignments. Consistent with *Hannity*'s message that Romney would be a strong general election candidate, participants assigned to view it were more likely to perceive him as electable compared to those not assigned to watch any coverage (a .17 [.01, .34] increase on the 0–3 scale). Assignment to watch *Hannity* had no measurable effect, however, relative to assignment to watch *ABC World News*, which said less about Romney's electability (–.01 [–.20, .17]). This counterintuitive finding—that assignment to watch *ABC World News* had about the same effect as assignment to watch *Hannity* on perceptions of Romney's electability—suggests limits on the power of media framing to shape voter attitudes.

The estimates for those assigned to watch *The Daily Show* tell a somewhat different story. Compared to respondents assigned to the control group, those assigned to watch to Stewart's skewering of Romney's failings were not significantly less likely to perceive him as electable (–.10 [–.29, .08]). Compared to those who were asked to watch *ABC World News*, however, being assigned to watch *The Daily Show* had a significantly negative impact: Those in *The Daily Show* condition perceived Romney as –.29 points [–.50, –.07] less electable than those in the *ABC World News* condition. A similar difference emerges between respondents assigned to *The Daily Show* and *Hannity* conditions. Compared to those asked to watch *Hannity*, those asked to watch *The Daily Show* were substantially less likely to view Romney as electable in a general election context (–.27 [–.45, –.09]).

Discussion

The results presented here demonstrate that media coverage of early nomination contests carries significant consequences for viewers' perceptions of candidate viability and electability. Respondents who were assigned to watch political information from all three genres saw Romney as more viable. These effects emerged despite the fact that Romney's margin of victory was both negligible and, ultimately, spurious—thereby providing a unique and dramatic illustration of how media constructions of political reality matter in the nomination process. Furthermore, the findings for partisan opinion talk and political satire programs suggest that these media genres can produce effects on perceptions of viability that are comparable to the effects of traditional news.

There is no evidence that the three shows influenced perceptions of viability in different ways. Nor is this surprising, given the minimal differences in how the various genres framed Romney's nomination prospects. However, differences did emerge across viewing assignment in perceptions of electability. Those assigned to watch the conservative coverage on *Hannity*, which suggested that Romney could beat Obama, viewed Romney as more electable than those assigned to the control condition or to view *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*'s mocking caricatures of Romney.⁹ In addition, those assigned to view *The Daily Show* viewed him as more electable than those assigned to view

⁹Given previous research (e.g., Druckman, 2001; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010) suggesting that media effects can depend on a range of audience member characteristics, future research could consider in more depth whether (and, if so, how) such characteristics moderate the effects observed. This could be particularly useful given that one would expect the regular audiences for the programs examined here to differ from one another in a variety of ways (unlike the homogenous audiences created through random assignment for the present study).

coverage on *ABC World News*, which said relatively little about Romney's general election chances. On the other hand, no such differences emerged between those assigned to view *Hannity* and those assigned to view *ABC World News*, or between those assigned to view *The Daily Show* and those in the control condition. Taken together, these results suggest that the distinctive frames used by different media genres can carry consequences for public perceptions but also that differences across genres in framing may need to be considerable to matter.

As with any study of media effects, there are potential threats to the internal and external validity of the findings presented here. In terms of the former, the use of a real-world setting may afford the researcher less control over conditions than a laboratory setting would provide. Likewise, it may be more difficult to obtain a representative sample for a field experiment than for a cross-sectional survey. Even with these limitations, however, field experimentation offers a powerful tool for drawing ecologically valid inferences about media effects. The present study's participants are not strictly representative of the broader population, as they are better educated and older on average. The sample used here is, nonetheless, a closer approximation to the broader public than the college student samples often used in experimental research. In regard to internal validity, the randomized assignment to view different television programs allows for greater confidence in causally interpreting the results. The use of field experimentation introduces uncertainty regarding whether participants actually watched the coverage to which they were assigned; if anything, however, this should tend to *attenuate* the key findings, given that exposure to the treatment shows would have been lower among non-compliant participants.¹⁰ The random assignment also means that any consumption of other media by respondents is orthogonal to the treatment condition: Unlike in observational studies, the level of general media consumption outside of the assigned programs is unrelated to the treatment (as participants in the treatment conditions were given no instructions about what else to watch or not watch). Thus, we can interpret the results as causal effects of assignment to the treatment programs and not the results of respondents consuming other media.

The findings of this study are important for two reasons. First, they demonstrate the value of new methodological approaches to studying media effects in general and the effects of partisan opinion talk and political satire programs in particular. The field experimental approach used here allows for more valid causal inferences than survey-based research (because participants are randomly assigned to watch different media) and for more generalizable inferences than lab-based experiments (because participants watch actual TV shows as they air, in their own homes; Albertson & Lawrence 2009).

Second, given that previous studies have demonstrated the substantial influence of both viability and electability perceptions in shaping primary election vote choice, these results can help us understand the factors predicting who wins presidential nominations (Abramowitz, 1989; Bartels, 1988). After party leaders relinquished control of the nomination processes following 1968, the role of clarifying and organizing elections fell to the media, an institution driven by different norms and values than the parties (Patterson, 1993). The results here suggest that media coverage of candidates can significantly shape voter perceptions, even in the fragmented media environment that has emerged since the late 1980s. Although citizens can now select from a growing array of media genres, media coverage may still play a crucial role in shaping how they interpret—and, ultimately, respond to—the critical early contests in the presidential nomination process.

¹⁰Another possibility is that assignment to conditions may have caused participants to consume other forms of media, which in turn caused changes in perceptions. The design of the field experiment allows one to draw strong causal inferences only about the effects of assignment to conditions, not about the effects of viewing any particular programming. Ultimately, it cannot prove that viewing the program contents (as opposed to viewing some other programming as a result of being assigned to view one show) caused the effects observed. Given that the results are consistent with the content of the specific programs viewers were assigned to watch, however, it seems plausible that viewing the content of these shows (rather than viewing any secondary programming prompted by assignment to conditions) explains the effects observed.

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