

Despite kingmaking expectations, Fox News seems neutral among GOP field

By [Paul Farhi](#), Published: December 29

Even before the first Republican presidential candidates declared they were running, pundits and political operatives alike were debating the Fox News Channel's potential influence on the GOP race. As the cable news network with the strongest appeal among conservatives, Fox News seemed poised to play a kingmaking role in the 2012 primaries.

The would-be Fox effect even had a catchy name. The race for the GOP nomination, some declared, would be "[the Fox Primary](#)."

But just days before the first-in-the-nation Iowa caucus takes place, there's not much evidence to suggest that Fox News has crowned any one candidate as the eventual nominee.

There's little question that Fox is an important news and opinion source for conservative voters, despite the relatively small audiences that cable news attracts (Fox News, the ratings leader, [rarely reaches more than 2 million people at a time](#)). Among Republican voters in Iowa, [37 percent said they got most of their news from Fox](#), making it the leading TV source, a recent New York Times/CBS News poll found. By contrast, a mere 2 percent said they relied on MSNBC, which has forged a more liberal identity.

But campaign watchers are hard-pressed to detect a tilt by the network toward one candidate. Even the two candidates who have worked for Fox News as on-air contributors, Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum, don't appear to have had any special access or advantage during the campaign.

One candidate has enjoyed a disproportionate amount of airtime and number of appearances on Fox during the formative months of the campaign, [according to figures compiled by Media Matters for America](#), a liberal watchdog group and longtime Fox News antagonist.

Herman Cain appeared on Fox News 73 times between June 1 and Dec. 18, accumulating more than 11 hours of exposure. This was far more than the runner-up, Gingrich, who racked up 8 hours 15 minutes of appearances during the same period.

Yet while Cain briefly held front-runner status, his star quickly faded amid allegations of an extramarital affair and claims of sexual harassment by women who worked for him in the 1990s. He suspended his campaign earlier this month. Gingrich has been on a similar roller coaster, coming back

from near-dormancy to lead some polls before fading again.

“I have trouble seeing any sort of bias in terms of giving people coverage,” said [Tim Groseclose, a professor of political science at UCLA](#) and the author of “[Left Turn: How Liberal Media Bias Distorts the American Mind](#).” “I’d say it’s been pretty even-handed.”

Fox News representatives did not respond to requests for comment.

If the network had a preferred candidate and was trying to shape the race, Groseclose said, polls in the early primary states would be similar. Yet Mitt Romney has made a late surge in Iowa, has led for months in New Hampshire and is far behind Gingrich in South Carolina.

After holding back for months, Romney’s appearances on Fox have increased over the past month, as has his standing in Iowa. Romney’s surge may suggest something about Fox’s value as a political megaphone, but it could also say even more about other factors, such as the wave of TV ads the deep-pocketed Romney has unleashed in Iowa in recent days.

Moreover, not all airtime on Fox News is created equal; some interviewers are tougher than others. The usually unflappable Romney appeared visibly perturbed by questions about his changing positions on health care, immigration and other issues in an interview with Fox News anchor Bret Baier in late November. Baier said later on the air that Romney complained about his questions. Conversely, some note that Rep. Ron Paul (R-Tex.) has received a relatively friendly reception from Fox host Neil Cavuto, who has interviewed Paul repeatedly this year.

But while a particular candidate may come in for harsh treatment from time to time on Fox, the overall tone is never consistently hostile toward Republicans, said Ari Rabin-Havt, executive vice president of Media Matters.

The network’s strategy is to “maintain its position as the mouthpiece of the Republican party,” and a consistent animus toward any Republican might alienate some portion of the party and its viewing base, he said. “To call Fox even-handed is a bridge too far, but they certainly haven’t picked a favorite” in this campaign.

This might explain why former New Mexico governor Gary Johnson — who lags far behind the field in money, name recognition and standing in the polls — has been on Fox News about as often as Texas Gov. Rick Perry, a leading candidate. Johnson was the beneficiary of the longest interview Fox has granted a candidate during this campaign, some 40 minutes with host John Stossel in June, according to Media Matters.

“From a purely commercial standpoint, which is the overriding consideration for Fox, it all makes perfect sense,” said [Shanto Iyengar](#), a professor of political science and communications at Stanford University. “If most of your viewers are from the right, why would you want to alienate any of them? They are simply being consistent with what their audience profile data is telling them.”

Iyengar said things could change if the Republican field narrows to two candidates, as it did in 2008 in the Democratic contest between Hillary

Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama. At that point, he said, Fox is more likely to pick sides and start signalling a preference based on the candidate the network believes has the strongest chance to defeat President Obama in the fall.

But this underestimates Fox News, said Kevin Madden, Romney's press secretary in 2008 and an informal adviser to his campaign. "I think every newsroom at its core, and Fox is no exception, is driven principally to cover a great story," he said. "The up days and the down days drive coverage. I don't think they'll be any different than MSNBC or CNN or CNBC. I can't see how or why they'd go one way or another. . . . They have been consistent in giving [all of] the candidates a chance."

But Rabin-Havt sounds pretty cynical about what to expect after the primaries. "I think you'll start to see Fox broadcasting more of the usual misinformation" about the Democratic candidate, he said.