



FiveThirtyEight

Nate Silver's Political Calculus

January 16, 2012, 3:15 pm

By [NATE SILVER](#)

While most of the political world's attention has been focused on South Carolina, Mitt Romney has moved into a clear lead in a set of national polls conducted since his victory in the New Hampshire primary.

On average, Mr. Romney has 35 percent of the vote in an average of four national polls completed since New Hampshire, giving him a 19-point lead over Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum.

National Polls Since New Hampshire Primary

Pollster	Romney	Gingrich	Santorum	Paul	Perry
Gallup	37	14	14	12	5
Fox News	40	14	15	12	5
CNN	34	18	15	15	9
Poll Position	30	18	19	14	2
Average	35	16	16	13	5

Just how safe is a 19-point lead at this point in the campaign? Based on historical precedent, it is enough to all but assure that Mr. Romney will be the Republican nominee.

I went through our database of past primary polls for the 16 competitive nomination races from 1972 (when the current primary system was adopted) to 2008. For each cycle, I took a simple average of all national polls conducted in the two weeks after the New Hampshire primary was held. (The lone exception was the 1976 Democratic race, when there were no polls conducted within this window, so I expanded the range to three weeks after New Hampshire instead.)

In 13 of the 16 cases, the candidate leading in national polls after New Hampshire won his party's nomination. In another case, the 1984 Democratic race, two candidates — Walter Mondale and Gary Hart — were tied in national surveys at this point in the race, and Mr. Mondale emerged victorious. [Read more...](#)

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January 16, 2012, 12:38 pm

By [MICAHA COHEN](#)

In this edition: Iowa, New Hampshire, steak dinners and more.

Let's journey back in time, all the way back to Iowa, when Newt Gingrich was waging [an all-positive campaign](#) and Rick Perry was actually [campaigning](#).

On the day of the Iowa caucuses, The Daily Beast's Andrew Romano wrote [a post](#) comparing the campaigns of Mitt Romney and Mr. Perry. It's still worth a read. Mr. Romano, in an echo of [this FiveThirtyEight post](#), highlighted a principle difference between the two campaigns: "Mitt is focused like a laser on the economy down the homestretch, while the Texas governor is all over the map."

Also on the day of the Iowa caucuses, FiveThirtyEight projected Mr. Romney as the favorite in Iowa. Just before caucusing began, however, Nate wrote "[Why I'd Bet on Santorum \(and Against My Model\)](#)." [Read more...](#)

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January 15, 2012, 10:54 pm

By [NATE SILVER](#)

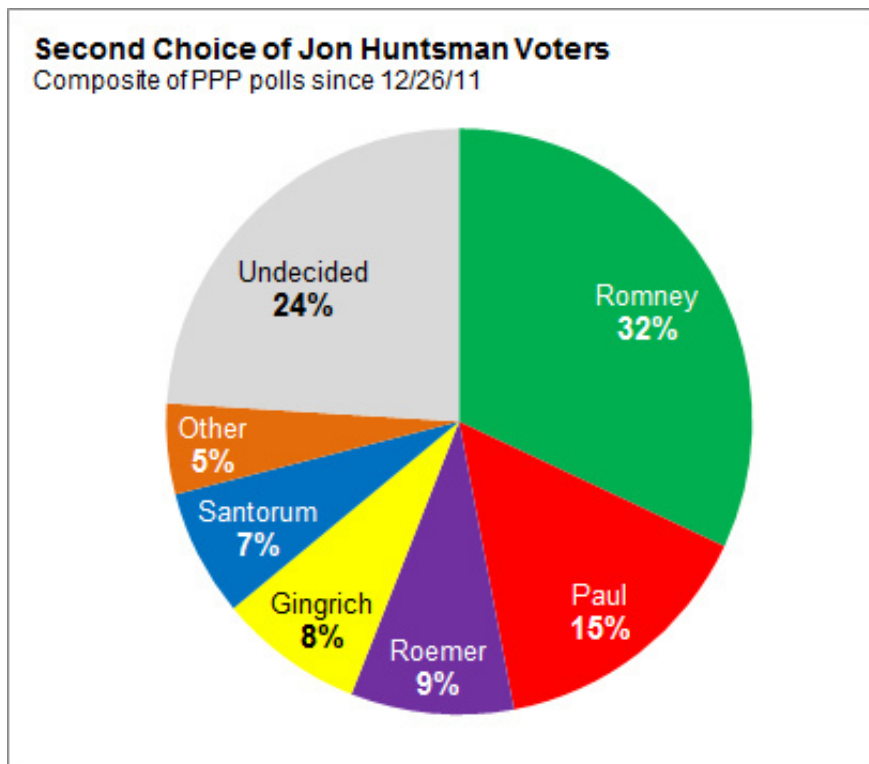
The [impending withdrawal](#) of Jon M. Huntsman Jr. from the presidential race, as reported by my colleagues Jim

Rutenberg and Jeff Zeleny, should provide a small but helpful boost to the man he plans to endorse, Mitt Romney.

Although Mr. Huntsman had relatively little support in the polls outside of New Hampshire, recent surveys suggested that the plurality of his supporters had Mr. Romney as their second choice.

The polling firm [Public Policy Polling](#) dutifully tracks second-place preferences among the voters it surveys. I compiled the results from the seven surveys that Public Policy Polling has released since Christmas: two polls each in Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina, and one poll in North Carolina. Among these seven surveys, there were roughly 550 supporters for Mr. Huntsman, a respectable sample size.

Of these voters, 32 percent listed Mr. Romney as their second choice, more than for any other candidate. Twenty-four percent of Mr. Huntsman's supporters said they were undecided if they could not pick him. Ron Paul was the second-choice of 15 percent of Mr. Huntsman's supporters, while no other Republican candidate tallied in the double digits.



Because Mr. Huntsman had relatively little support in [South Carolina](#) — between 1 and 6 percent of the vote in recent surveys — the net effect of this might be fairly negligible in the immediate term, with Mr. Romney gaining perhaps a percentage point in the state relative to more conservative candidates like Newt Gingrich.

Still, and particularly with Mr. Huntsman primed to endorse him, this removes another obstacle from Mr. Romney's path to the nomination.

One long-shot scenario by which Mr. Huntsman might have remained viable in the Republican race is if Mr. Romney had stumbled badly in South Carolina, leading Republican elites, who have [overwhelmingly favored Mr. Romney](#), to cast about for an alternative. Because Mr. Huntsman has stronger credentials than some of his Republican rivals and because he might be viewed as relatively [electable](#), he might have garnered support from some corners of the Republican establishment in the event that this occurred, despite Mr. Huntsman's occasional

deviations from conservative orthodoxy.

Now, however, the G.O.P. has no active candidates but Mr. Romney, the idiosyncratic Mr. Paul, and a set of conservatives with [poor favorability ratings](#) who might have middling appeal to independent voters. This dynamic has benefited Mr. Romney throughout the nomination race and Republican voters have one fewer alternative now.

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January 15, 2012, 5:35 pm

By [NATE SILVER](#)

On Saturday, a [survey](#) came out showing Mitt Romney with a large, 21-point lead in South Carolina. The poll is something of an outlier relative to [other recent polls of the state](#), all of which show Mr. Romney ahead, but by margins ranging from 2 to 9 points.

The poll, conducted by [Ipsos](#) for Reuters, has already attracted [more than 200 citations](#) in the mainstream media. Most of these articles, however, neglected to mention a key detail: in a break with Ipsos' typical methodology, the survey was conducted online.

Reuters did disclose this in its [write-up](#) of the poll, but it wasn't mentioned until the 17th paragraph:

The Reuters/Ipsos poll was conducted online from January 10-13 with a sample of 995 South Carolina registered voters. It included 398 Republicans and 380 Democrats.

There are a couple of other important details here as well, none of which necessarily speak favorably to the poll's potential accuracy. The poll was conducted among registered rather than likely voters, something which is almost certainly a mistake so close to a primary since turnout in primaries is normally quite low. And it contained a relatively small sample size: 398 Republicans, about half the average of other recent surveys of the state.

Now it becomes easier to understand why the poll showed such distinct results from others conducted at the same time: it used a very different, and possibly rather dubious, methodology. [Read more...](#)

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January 14, 2012, 5:51 pm

By [NATE SILVER](#)

Polling in the early stages of the nomination race can be extremely fluid, but ordinarily a candidate who is in fourth place with a week to go would have little chance of winning a state primary. This is why the [FiveThirtyEight forecast model](#) is skeptical about Rick Santorum's chances of winning South Carolina, where his numbers have slumped since his near-victory in Iowa on Jan 3.

South Carolina Primary Projections



The forecasts, however, are intended to form a benchmark based solely on top-line polling numbers and do not consider other dynamics that may be pertinent.

In the case of South Carolina, those dynamics could be favorable to Mr. Santorum after he [received the backing of a significant group of evangelical leaders](#) on Saturday. (According to exit polls, 60 percent of voters in the South Carolina Republican primary [identified themselves](#) as born again or evangelical in 2008.) Meanwhile, each of the candidates who is ahead of Mr. Santorum in the polls has vulnerabilities. [Read more...](#)

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January 14, 2012, 12:28 pm

By [NATE SILVER](#)

If Mitt Romney becomes the Republican presidential nominee, he will begin the general-election campaign with middling favorability ratings as compared with other recent standard-bearers.

The saving graces for Mr. Romney: the incumbent in the White House is not very popular, either. And Mr. Romney's favorability ratings, while mediocre, are better than those of his Republican opponents.

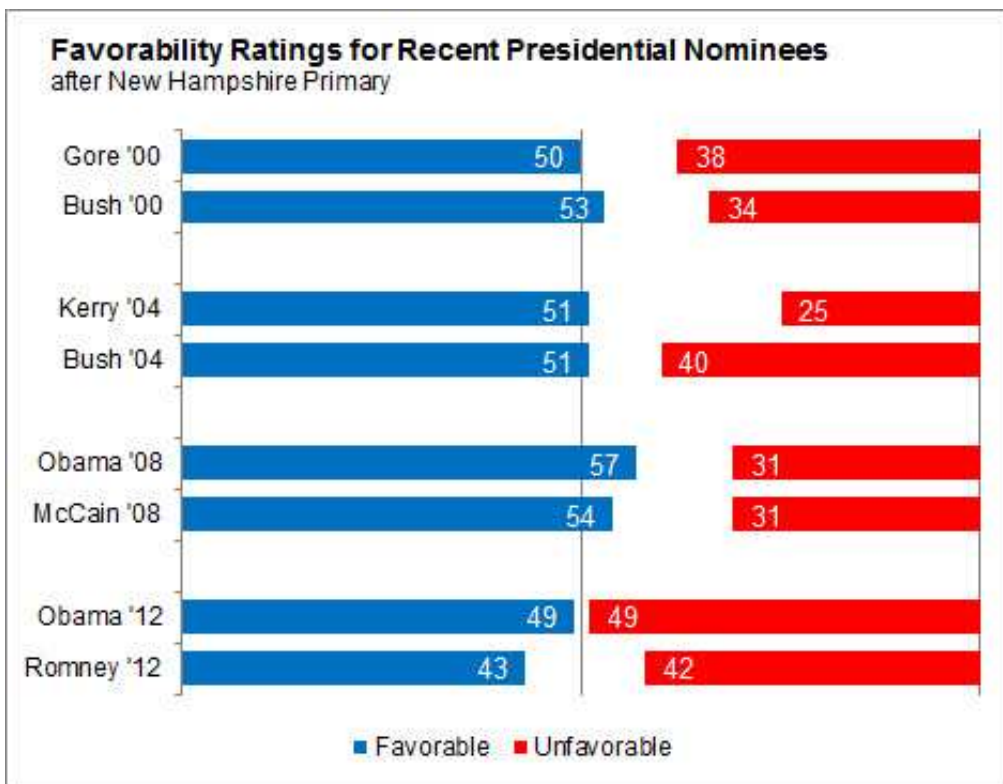
A CNN [poll](#) released Friday found that 43 percent of Americans have a favorable view of Mr. Romney and 42 percent an unfavorable view. Both ratings are higher than in most other recent polls as Mr. Romney has become a more familiar figure to Americans and as they have come to take firmer opinions of him. However, the pattern of Mr. Romney's favorability rating roughly equaling his unfavorability rating [is typical for him](#).

Mr. Obama's ratings in the poll were 49 percent favorable and 49 percent unfavorable. These numbers are also common for him. In most surveys, Mr. Obama's favorability ratings are slightly stronger than his approval ratings — Americans take a somewhat more sympathetic view of Mr. Obama personally than of his policies. But they are still no better than evenly divided.

In contrast to Mr. Romney and Mr. Obama, other recent nominees had clearly net-positive favorability ratings at this stage of the campaign.

In 2008, for instance, Mr. Obama's favorability rating averaged 57 percent and his unfavorability rating 31 percent, according to an average of surveys in the [PollingReport.com database](#) in the month after the New Hampshire primary. The ratings for Mr. Obama's Republican opponent, John McCain, were similar, averaging 54 percent favorable and 31 percent unfavorable.

George W. Bush, in 2000, and John Kerry, in 2004, also had positive ratings at this stage of the campaign. Mr. Bush's unfavorables had climbed by the time he ran for re-election in 2004, and Al Gore's were not terrific in 2000, but they were still in positive territory over all, unlike what we now see for Mr. Obama and Mr. Romney.



In a perfect world, of course, Republicans might prefer to nominate someone of whom the American public had a clearly positive view. But it is not apparent just who that might be. Some of Mr. Romney's opponents have highly negative favorability ratings. Newt Gingrich, for instance, had a favorability rating of 28 percent against an unfavorability rating of 56 percent in the CNN poll, while views of Rick Perry were 27 percent favorable and 51 percent unfavorable. [Read more...](#)

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January 12, 2012, 11:24 pm

By [NATE SILVER](#)

There's a theory making the rounds that [attacks from Mitt Romney's fellow Republicans](#) on his tenure at Bain Capital could actually help him in the end.

The theory goes like this: Mr. Romney, if he becomes the nominee, is very likely to be attacked on these grounds