

# 12 for 2012: The Fox News Primary Begins



**Matt Lewis**

*Columnist*  
POSTED: 11/17/10

With the 2010 midterm elections in the rear view, those of us who love politics are already thinking about 2012. At a certain well-known conservative broadcasting outpost, the first unofficial beauty contest is already under way in the form of a recently launched series called "12 in 2012." Let's call it the "Fox News primary."

The Fox series includes 12 profiles of likely GOP presidential candidates, as well as a 13th segment on several dark horse candidates. The segments feature interviews with potential hopefuls, as well as Bret Baier's narration and commentary by observers such as Fox News contributor Mara Liasson and political scientist Larry Sabato. The series will culminate in an hour-long special. We're about two-thirds of the way through the series and some trends are apparent. One of them is that former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney seems to have come in for harsh treatment. Each candidate profile includes both positive and negative information. But based on the power Fox News will likely have in deciding the 2012 GOP nominee, Team Romney might wonder if this is a harbinger.



Jacquelyn Martin, AP

Conspiracy-minded skeptics might speculate that Romney's comparatively less-than-flattering portrayal is because he is one of the only top-tier candidates not on the Fox payroll (Sarah Palin, Mike Huckabee, Newt Gingrich, and former Sen. Rick Santorum are all paid Fox News contributors).

A more likely reason is that Romney was the only candidate (at least, so far) not willing to be interviewed. Fox News, of course, would hardly be the first news entity accused of favoring subjects who cooperate at the expense of those who don't -- this is a perennial charge leveled at Bob Woodward -- but it seems to have been on the producers' minds. "Romney refused to sit down with me," Baier said during the segment, the operative word perhaps being "refused." (Although Romney was not interviewed, the profile did include past clips of him with other Fox hosts, such as Sean Hannity).

Another way of looking at it is that Romney has more than the other Republican candidates to answer for, at least to conservatives' way of thinking. He has joined other Republicans in denouncing "Obamacare" (and, during the 2008 campaign, "Hillarycare"). But critics on Romney's right note Massachusetts' foray into government-mandated health insurance, calling it "Romneycare." In addition, although Romney is pro-life now, he seems to have embraced that position only when he began contemplating running as a national candidate. Fox News did not skim lightly over these issues. The segment also noted pointedly that Romney failed to endorse tea party candidates such as Sharron Angle and Christine O'Donnell.

As for some of the others, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich's "personal baggage" came up. **Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour** was praised for having balanced the budget and handled the Hurricane Katrina disaster well, but his background as a lobbyist and a Washington, D.C., "insider" was also discussed -- and not as flattering biographical material.

The series kicked off with **Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels**. Daniels was lucky enough to have pictures of him riding a Harley-Davidson included in the profile -- and it was mentioned that he turned around Indiana's financial situation (prior to his tenure, the state hadn't balanced a budget in a dozen years). But the profile also noted that he raised taxes during his first year in office, that he famously called for a "**truce**" in the culture wars, and that as budget director for President George W. Bush, he inherited a surplus and left the position with the U.S. having a deficit.

The profile on South Carolina's **Sen. Jim DeMint** was flattering, but lacked an overwhelming rationale for his candidacy, perhaps because he is unlikely to run. DeMint's primary qualification, at least according to the Fox segment, is that he endorsed a slew of tea party candidates in 2010.

If Mitt Romney's profile was the most negative, Minnesota Gov. **Tim Pawlenty's profile** was probably the most positive. That might be partly due to a great answer to criticism that he lacks the requisite charisma needed to be elected president. When Bret Baier asked him if he had enough "sizzle," Pawlenty responded, "Well, we've seen sizzle in the current president," and then went on to argue that getting things done is more important. The profile also noted that Pawlenty recently earned an **"A" grade from the libertarian Cato Institute** for keeping his state's spending under control.

There are still a few more candidates to be profiled. Tuesday night, former Alaska Gov. **Sarah Palin was featured**. Palin's life is, by now, an open book, so there were no surprises. Everyone knows Bristol Palin is on "Dancing With the Stars."

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