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Rush Limbaugh Succeeded in Defining John McCain's Credentials, New National Annenberg Election Survey Finds

After Rush Limbaugh began strongly attacking Arizona Sen. John McCain's conservative credentials, people who listened to the talk show host were more likely than the non-listening population -- including those who describe themselves as conservatives -- to believe that Sen. McCain was a moderate.

The findings, released today, are based on an across-time analysis of 639 Limbaugh listeners and 8,077 non-listeners surveyed by the National Annenberg Election Survey. (For a description of the survey, see Appendix).

Consistent with Limbaugh's message during the period from the New Hampshire primary to Super Tuesday, his listenership increasingly came to share the view that former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee was less conservative and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney more so than Limbaugh listeners previously had thought.

The conservative talk show host, whose audience is estimated to exceed 13.5 million people, opposed Sen. McCain's 2000 presidential bid and escalated his attacks on the Republican contender in the days before and immediately after McCain's victory in the New Hampshire primary on January 8.

"The influence of conservative talk radio in general and Rush Limbaugh in particular has been called into question by political commentators of both the left and right," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania and co-director of the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES).

"Sen. McCain's victories do not mean that Rush Limbaugh lacks influence. Listening to his show increased his listeners' awareness of McCain's non-conservative positions, reduced his listeners' sense of the Senator's trustworthiness and altered his listeners' ideological placement of the person who is now the presumptive Republican nominee,"

said Jamieson. “We find all three effects in the NAES data. The shift in his listeners’ assessments of Governors Huckabee and Romney is also consistent with Limbaugh’s assessments.”

“It is reasonable to surmise that Rush Limbaugh played at least some role in signaling conservative voters that Sen. McCain did not share their views. Limbaugh’s listeners are more likely than conservatives not in his audience to know that Senator McCain was the Republican endorsed by *The New York Times* (a frequent object of the host’s attack on the ‘liberal media’) and that he had opposed some of the Bush tax cuts.” [Controlling for gender, race, education party identification and ideology, Limbaugh listeners were 3.94 times more likely than non-listeners to know that *The New York Times* endorsed Sen. McCain and 3.75 times more likely than non-listeners to know that Sen. McCain had opposed some of President Bush’s tax cuts.]

“Those who consider themselves very conservative have been voting for candidates other than McCain,” said Jamieson. “Rush Limbaugh probably played a role in that sorting process.”

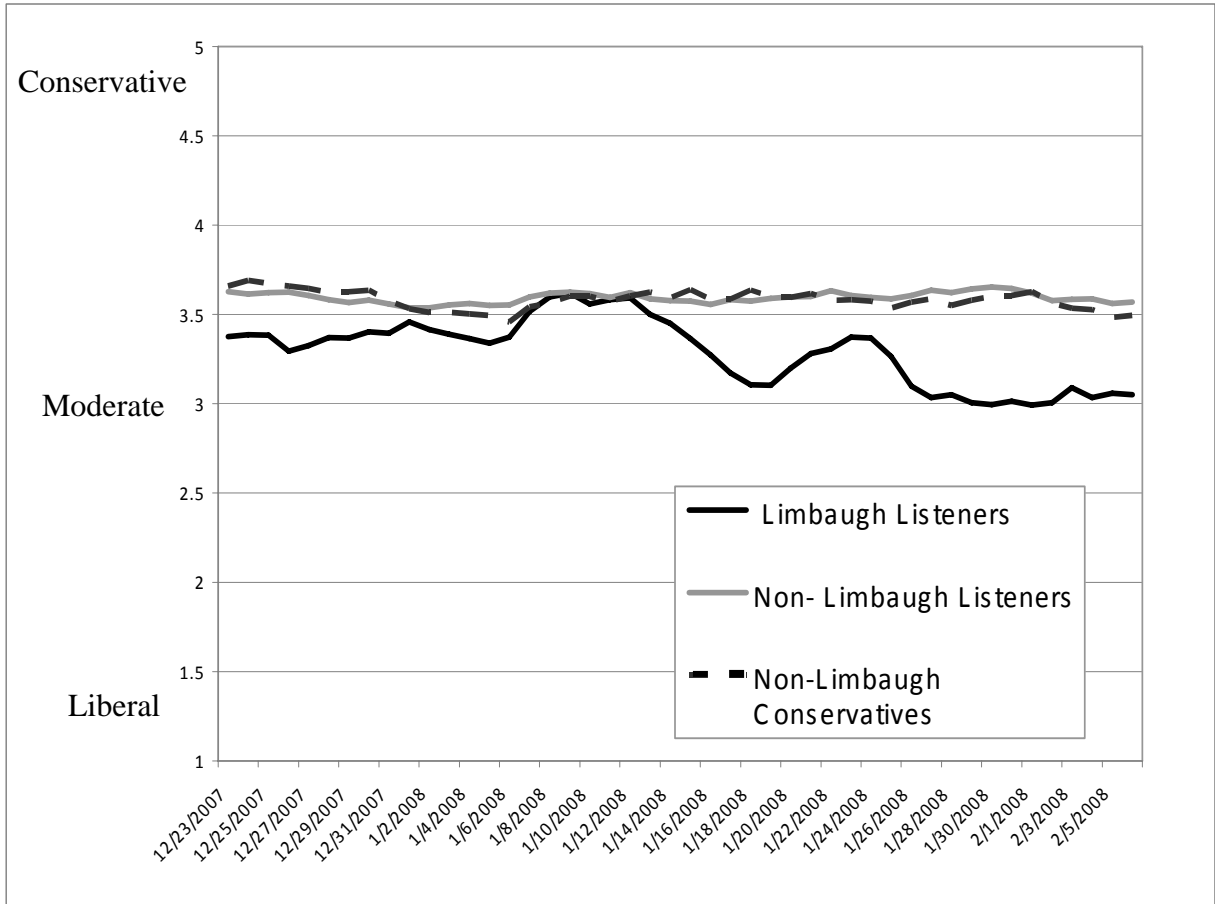
Jamieson is co-author with Annenberg School for Communication professor Joseph Cappella of a forthcoming book titled *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (Oxford University Press). One chapter of that book examines survey-based evidence of Limbaugh’s effects in past Republican primary campaigns.

Before the New Hampshire primary about half of Limbaugh’s listeners said Sen. McCain was a conservative. That number dropped almost 12 percentage points [11.8%] after McCain won in New Hampshire. After January 8, the number of Limbaugh listeners who said McCain was a liberal jumped nine percentage points [9.1%].

During this period, the political perceptions of Sen. McCain among non-Limbaugh listeners remained stable.

Figure 1 plots the average ratings of Sen. McCain’s ideological views among Limbaugh listeners and non-listeners across time. Immediately after the New Hampshire primary, Limbaugh listeners begin to shift away from their view that Sen. McCain is a conservative. These results hold after controlling for gender, race, education, party identification and respondents’ own ideology.

Figure 1. Seven-Day Rolling Average Ratings of John McCain’s ideological views on a 5-point scale where “Very Conservative” = 5 and “Very Liberal” = 1.



Listening to Rush Limbaugh produced a significant and similar – although not as strong – effect on respondents’ perceptions of former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee as a conservative. Controlling for gender, race, education, party identification and respondents’ own ideology, those in Limbaugh’s audience considered Gov. Huckabee less conservative in the weeks after the New Hampshire primary than those in the audience had during the weeks before. Before the New Hampshire primary there was no significant relationship between Limbaugh listening and perceptions of Gov. Huckabee’s ideology.

Even before the New Hampshire primary, former Michigan Gov. Mitt Romney’s conservative credentials were acknowledged by respondents who listened to Limbaugh. That relationship strengthened after the New Hampshire vote. This change, too, is significant.

In the period after the New Hampshire primary, Rush Limbaugh listeners were also more likely than non-Limbaugh listeners to view Sen. McCain as less trustworthy.

The analysis for this release was conducted by Annenberg senior researcher Bruce Hardy.

Note: Table 5 in this release has been updated from its original version, dated February 8.

Appendix:

The National Annenberg Election Survey is the largest academic election survey being conducted in the 2008 campaign. It ultimately will include approximately 100,000 interviews and reflect the views of citizens as the campaign evolves. About half of the survey consists of rolling cross-section interviews conducted by telephone. The remainder are being conducted over the internet with five waves of web panel interviews gathered from 20,000 participants. The first web wave began in October 2007; the final interviews will be completed following the general election, November 4, 2008. The data reported here are drawn from the rolling cross sectional phone survey.

National Annenberg Election Surveys also were conducted in 2000 and 2004.

The 2008 survey, as with past NAES polls, will examine a wide range of political attitudes about candidates, issues and the traits Americans want in a president. It will also place a particular emphasis on the effects of media exposure through campaign commercials and news from radio, television, newspapers and the internet. Additionally, the survey measures the effects of other kinds of political communication, from conversations at home and on the job to various efforts by campaigns to influence potential voters.

Table 1. Rating of John McCain’s ideology by Limbaugh Listeners vs. Non-Listeners before and after the NH Primary

Rating of McCain’s Views (%)	Rush Limbaugh Listeners		Non-Listeners	
	Before NH Primary (12-17-07 to 1-07-08) <i>N=205</i>	After NH Primary (1-09-08 to 2-06-08) <i>N = 434</i>	Before NH Primary (12-17-07 to 1-07-08) <i>N=2721</i>	After NH Primary (1-09-08 to 2-06-08) <i>N = 5356</i>
Conservative	50.7	38.9	59.3	58.9
Moderate	33.2	35.9	27.5	27.4
Liberal	16.1	25.2	13.2	13.7

Table 2. Regression analysis predicting respondents' perception of John McCain ideological views on a 5-point scale where "Very Conservative" = 5 and "Very Liberal" = 1

	Before NH Primary (12-17-07 to 1-07-08) Standardized Beta	After NH Primary 1-09-08 to 2-06-08) Standardized Beta
Gender (Female)	-.053***	.000
Race (Black)	-.058***	.002
Education	.137***	.102**
Republican	-.012*	.029*
Ideology (Conservative High)	.000	-.069**
Rush Limbaugh Listeners	-.049*	-.113**
R^2 (%)	2.7	3.0
** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$;		

Table 3. Regression analysis predicting respondents' perception of Mike Huckabee ideological views on a 5-point scale where "Very Conservative" = 5 and "Very Liberal" = 1

	Before NH Primary (12-17-07 to 1-07-08) Standardized Beta	After NH Primary 1-09-08 to 2-06-08) Standardized Beta
Gender (Female)	.037	.053**
Race (Black)	-.098**	-.056**
Education	.229**	.250**
Republican	-.029	.033*
Ideology (Conservative High)	-.044	-.075**
Rush Limbaugh Listeners	-.006	-.068**
R^2 (%)	7.1	8.4
** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$;		

Table 4. Regression analysis predicting respondents' perception of Mitt Romney ideological views on a 5-point scale where "Very Conservative" = 5 and "Very Liberal" = 1

	Before NH Primary (12-17-07 to 1-07-08) Standardized Beta	After NH Primary 1-09-08 to 2-06-08) Standardized Beta
Gender (Female)	.031	.026
Race (Black)	-.067**	-.057**
Education	.196**	.208**
Republican	-.106**	-.009
Ideology (Conservative High)	-.053*	-.112**
Rush Limbaugh Listeners	.070**	.081**
R^2 (%)	6.5	7.0
** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$;		

Table 5. Regression analysis predicting respondents' perception of John McCain as "trustworthy" on a 10-point scale where "Not at all" = 0 and "extremely" = 10

	Before NH Primary (12-17-07 to 1-07-08) Standardized Beta	After NH Primary 1-09-08 to 2-06-08) Standardized Beta
Gender (Female)	-.016	-.021
Race (Black)	.018	-.064**
Education	.133**	.110**
Republican	.114**	.140**
Ideology (Conservative High)	.064*	.019
Rush Limbaugh Listeners	-.034	-.107**
R^2 (%)	3.8	4.6
** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$;		

Table 6. Logistic Regression Predicting Correct Answer to “Which Republican candidate or candidates running for president opposed some of the Bush tax cuts?”

	B	S.E.	Exp(B)
Gender (Female)	-0.318	0.063	0.728**
Race (Black)	-0.071	0.124	0.931
Education	0.083	0.013	1.087**
Republican	0.086	0.077	1.089
Ideology (Conservative coded High)	0.001	0.031	1.001
Rush Limbaugh Listeners	1.322	0.121	3.751**
<i>Nagelkerke R² (%) 6.5; ** p < .01; * p < .05;</i>			

Table 7. Logistic Regression Predicting Correct Answer to “Do you happen to know who The New York Times endorsed for the Republican nomination for president?”

	B	S.E.	Exp(B)
Gender (Female)	-0.131	0.109	0.877
Race (Black)	-0.158	0.352	0.854
Education	0.176	0.024	1.192**
Republican	0.067	0.119	1.069
Ideology (Conservative coded High)	0.104	0.059	1.110**
Rush Limbaugh	1.322	.121	3.942**
<i>Nagelkerke R² (%) 11.2; ** p < .01; * p < .05;</i>			

Question Wording

Rush Limbaugh Listeners Defined

In the past week, from which talk radio host or radio program did you get most of your information about the 2008 presidential campaign? [Anyone who responded by saying Rush Limbaugh was considered a Limbaugh listener for purposes of this analysis.]

Candidate Ideology

Which of the following best describes the views of [John McCain, Mike Huckabee, Mitt Romney] – “Very Conservative,” “Somewhat Conservative,” “Moderate,” “Somewhat Liberal” or “Very Liberal.”

McCain - Trustworthy

I am going to read you some phrases. For each one, please tell me how well that phrase applies to the following candidates [John McCain]. Please use a scale from 0 to 10, where “zero” means it does not apply at all and 10 means it applies extremely well. Of course you can use any number in between... “trustworthy”