

# March 5, 2012

## Anzalone Liszt Research

### National Polling Summary

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Friends,

Below you will find the weekly Anzalone Liszt Research National Polling Summary, which provides a pollster's take on data and trends that affect political campaigns.

This week, we turn our attention to rising gas prices and how they might impact the 2012 campaign.

Following our analysis are additional news items and data we thought you'd enjoy.

John Anzalone and Jeff Liszt

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#### **STORY THIS WEEK: The Rising Costs of Owning Two Cadillacs**

The GOP presidential candidates have seized on the rising cost of gasoline as a new line of attack against President Obama. Gas prices in the U.S. have risen [11%](#) since mid-December, hitting a [national average](#) of \$3.72 per gallon. Prices shot up 16 cents last week in the Midwest, where Rick Santorum was telling audiences that [higher gas prices](#) were part of Obama's radical plan to save the environment. On the West Coast - where prices had jumped 22 cents in a week - Newt Gingrich was [promising](#) \$2.50-a-gallon gasoline, while dismissing President Obama as a man who "believes in small cars".

Underpinning this rhetoric is the idea that expensive gas can cost a President his job. But what kind of relationship exists between gas prices and Presidential elections? Does pain at the pump really lead to points in the polls?

#### **The Bank Shot Effect**

There is no simple, predictive relationship between higher gas prices and Presidential election results. The New York *Times*' Nate Silver [makes the case](#) that the price of gas, by itself, "falls short of being statistically significant, and gas prices only explain a small percentage of the performance of the incumbent party." Rising gas prices may be symptomatic of broader economic illness, but they provide no additional explanatory power in elections once factors like GDP, inflation and unemployment are taken into account.

Instead, gas prices impact elections indirectly, as part of what Jim Tankersley of *National Journal* calls "[a bank shot approach to the economy](#)". Rising gas prices can hit variables like GDP, unemployment rate, and job creation, which in turn can endanger a sitting President's chances at re-election. (Those variables were featured in [another piece](#) by Silver that takes a look at what economic indicators best predict Presidential elections.)

Polling offers a view into this economic chain reaction. When gas prices spiked last summer, 58% of Americans in a CNN/ORC [poll](#) admitted to having "cut back significantly on household spending because of higher gas prices." Economists at Deutsche Bank recently [calculated](#) that every \$10 spike in crude oil prices translates into a \$25 billion dip in consumer spending and a 0.2% drag on real GDP growth.

Gas prices also shape elections by distorting voters' perception of the economy. Ezra Klein of the *Washington Post* looked at recent research to [report](#) that, because people purchase gas so often, "high gas prices can trick consumers into thinking that inflation is higher, and thus the economy is worse than it really is."

The perception surrounding gas prices - why they're high, how much they'll hurt, and who's to blame - can shape an election year narrative. Recent public polling suggests that President Obama's approval rating has so far been shielded against damage from rising gas prices by the recent flurry of positive economic news. But that may not last for long.

### **Is your tank half full or half empty?**

A new AP-GfK [poll](#) indicates that 71% of Americans consider gas prices "extremely/very important" - up 6 points since December - with 39% rating the issue as "extremely important". That is the highest score since the summer of 2011, at the peak of last year's price spike. The intensity of concern surrounding gas prices is now comparable to fears about unemployment (40% extremely important), the federal deficit (39%), and terrorism (40%). In fact, the percentage of people who rated gas prices "extremely important" increased by 9 points since December, the biggest jump on any issue in the survey.

Views of President Obama's handling of gas prices did not worsen over the past month, but there is significant room for improvement, as currently just 39% approve of his handling on the issue while 58% disapprove, nearly identical to his rating in December (39% - 57%). The President's stagnant numbers on this measure are almost certainly due to rising gas prices, as his approval rating on other economic issues increased during that time - including unemployment (45% to 49%), taxes (46% to 50%), and the overall economy (39% to 48%) - not to mention a 5 point rise in his overall job approval rating.

In spite of the rising gas prices, the public's views of the direction of the country are improving. In December, 26% believed "things in this country are heading in the right direction", versus

70% on the wrong track. That figure has gained positive momentum, sitting at 39% right direction - 57% wrong track for February.

A Feb. 21 Quinnipiac [poll](#) underscores the recent rise in optimism. Since October, there has been a 24-point leap in the percentage of voters who feel the economy is getting better (35% versus 11%). But this poll indicates that Obama still has work to do in convincing voters that he is the reason behind the recent improvement - the President's job approval has only increased by 1 point since the fall, and his re-election numbers are unmoved.



Broad metrics support the public polling: the [consumer confidence index](#) (CCI) rose to 70.8 on Tuesday, up from 61.5 in January. The last time consumer confidence reached the 70+ range was a year ago - February 2011 - before rising gas prices (see chart) extinguished hopes for a recovery. Experts worry that the same cycle might repeat itself this year.

Although an improving labor market and rising stock prices have reassured consumers about America's economic health, one Wall Street economist cautions that the recovery "will be put to the test in coming weeks due to the spike in gasoline prices."

### The Blame Game

When it comes to who voters blame, polls suggest the public places much more of the blame on oil companies than President Obama. In 2011, gas prices peaked in mid-May (which follows the historical [trend](#)), and two polls conducted then reveal how voters apportion blame as prices climb. A George Washington University/Politico [poll](#) showed that 38% of likely voters blamed

oil and gas companies for the spike in gas prices, followed by oil exporting nations (22%), with the Obama administration placing a distant third (12%). Oil companies seem to be the scapegoat of habit. Polls from [May 2011](#), [May 2008](#) and [May 2006](#) all show a majority of respondents placing "a great deal" of blame for exorbitant gas prices on oil companies - 61%, 60% and 63%, respectively. Just a quarter of respondents in the 2011 poll blamed the Obama administration, only slightly more than the 21% of people who felt Obama deserved no blame whatsoever.

While Republicans continue to attack Obama over rising gas prices, they may find that their stalwart support of tax breaks for Big Oil may be even harder to defend than usual. As recently as May 2011, [77%](#) of Americans believed that oil companies were making "too much profit".

One way Republicans will look to direct blame towards Obama is by linking specific administration policies to the recent rise in prices, such as the decision on the Keystone XL pipeline. Speaker John Boehner is the [latest](#) to urge President Obama to approve the controversial project, echoing the Republican presidential candidates' aggressive rhetoric from the campaign trail.

Although the retail price of oil represents just one piece of a broader economic puzzle, its psychological impact on consumer confidence and its direct effect on consumers' wallets give gas prices an outsized prominence relative to other economic factors. And while rising gas prices could be a drag on the economy and President Obama's approval rating, they could also cast an increasingly harsh light on the GOP's coziness with Big Oil, suggesting that this is an issue that could cut both ways in the months ahead.

## **OTHER NEWS FROM THE POLLING AND POLITICAL WORLD**

**GOP NOMINATION UPDATE:** While Mitt Romney certainly helped his chances last Tuesday, the race for the GOP nomination will be thrown into a tumult again if he comes up short against Santorum tomorrow in Ohio. The latest [polls](#) show Ohio as a toss-up, though the momentum appears to be with Romney, as he has closed a double-digit gap over the past week.

The [Atlantic](#) highlights thirteen economic charts from the Treasury Department that make the case for President Obama's re-election.

Our [dependence on foreign oil](#) is declining.

Contrary to what the Republican Presidential candidates suggest, a new poll finds that Obama leads the GOP field among [Israeli Jews](#).

A new [Pew poll](#) finds that 60% of Americans believe colleges have a positive effect on the country, but that conservative Republicans and tea party supporters express doubts.

NBC releases its [Voter Confidence Index](#).

President Obama [talks sports](#) with ESPN's Bill Simmons.

Who said it? [Mitt Romney or Mr. Burns?](#)

Missed a past newsletter? They can be found on our website, [here](#).

## PUBLIC POLLING

### PRESIDENT OBAMA'S JOB RATING

<b>Polling Firm</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Approve</b>	<b>Disapprove</b>
<i>Rasmussen</i>	March 1-3	Likely Voters	46%	53%
<i>Gallup</i>	Feb. 29-March 2	Adults	48%	46%

### PRESIDENTIAL HEAD TO HEAD

<b>Polling Firm</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Obama</b>	<b>Romney</b>
<i>Rasmussen</i>	March 1-3	Likely Voters	47%	43%
<i>GWU/Politico</i>	Feb. 19-22	Likely Voters	53%	43%
<b>Polling Firm</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Obama</b>	<b>Santorum</b>
<i>Rasmussen</i>	March 1-3	Likely Voters	47%	43%
<i>GWU/Politico</i>	Feb. 19-22	Likely Voters	53%	42

### PARTY SELF ID

<b>Polling Firm</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Dem</b>	<b>Rep</b>	<b>Ind/Other</b>
<i>Pollster.com</i> <i>Trend</i>	March 5	Adults	30.7%	25.5%	41.3%

### GOP NATIONWIDE PRIMARY

Polling Firm	Date	Sample
<i>NBC News/WSJ</i>	Feb. 29-March 3	Registered Voters
Romney	38%	
Santorum	32%	
Gingrich	13%	
Paul	13%	

### GENERIC HOUSE BALLOT

Polling Firm	Date	Sample	Dem	Rep
<i>Rasmussen</i>	Feb. 20-26	Likely Voters	39%	43%
<i>GWU/Politico</i>	Feb. 19-22	Likely Voters	46%	45%

### OBAMA POPULAR VOTE SHARE

Polling Firm	Date	Polly Vote	Polls	Iowa Electronic Markets	Econometric Models	Index Models
<i>PollyVote</i>	Feb. 28	51.3%	50.7%	50.6%	49.8%	54.2%

### DIRECTION OF THE COUNTRY

Polling Firm	Date	Sample	Right Direction	Wrong Track
<i>Rasmussen</i>	Feb. 20-26	Adults	32%	61%
<i>AP-GFK</i>	Feb. 16-20	Adults	39%	57%

**SUPER TUESDAY PRIMARIES**

	<b>Size</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Romney</b>	<b>Santorum</b>	<b>Gingrich</b>	<b>Paul</b>
<b>Ohio</b>						
<i>Rasmussen</i>	750	March 4	31%	32%	13%	13%
<i>Ohio Poll</i>	542	Feb 16-26	26%	37%	16%	11%
<i>Quinnipiac</i>	847	Feb 23-26	29%	36%	17%	11%
<b>Georgia</b>						
<i>InsiderAdvantage</i>	751	March 4	21%	18%	47%	6%
<i>PPP</i>	728	March 3-4	24%	19%	47%	8%
<b>Tennessee</b>						
<i>WeAskAmerica</i>	1023	March 4	30%	29%	29%	12%
<i>Rasmussen</i>	750	March 3	30%	34%	18%	8%
<b>Oklahoma</b>						
<i>Rasmussen</i>	750	Feb. 21	18%	43%	22%	7%
<i>Sooner Poll</i>	300	Feb 8-16	23%	39%	18%	8%
<b>Massachusetts</b>						
<i>Suffolk/7News</i>	172	Feb 11-15	64%	16%	6%	7%
<b>Virginia</b>						
<i>NBC News/Marist</i>	529	Feb. 29- March 2	69%	--	--	19%