

Political gambles

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

January 10, 2012

[Paul Waldman is right](#) that the media would do us all a service by focusing more on who *wins* elections than on the expectations game, which is itself largely a media creation. He ends with a pithy comparison that makes his point but also brings to mind some of the larger issues he doesn't get into here:

People often complain that political reporting too much resembles sports reporting, with the obsession over who's up and who's down, who's winning and losing. But at least sports reporting is concerned with actual facts. If the Packers beat the Giants next week by only two points, no headlines are going to read, "Packers Fall Short of Expectations." A win is a win.

True. Of course, along with the production demands of campaign journalism (which Waldman details), political (and sports!) journalists--especially those with some space for opinion in their writing--have some additional incentives: at one level they're like gamblers, playing with not straight-up cash but the currency of their own credibility. Pushing the conventional wisdom in an electoral horse race is like taking a safe bet at, well, an actual horse race. Going with a long-shot narrative is a higher-risk, higher-yield thing to do.

If you figure voters to be the actors here--i.e., they're the players in the sports analogy, not just the fans--then it follows that the game is somewhat fixed: the media doesn't just pick winners and see if it's right; it heavily influences the outcome, however unintentionally. The media creates the idea of expectations and then reports on its own idea; in the meantime this barrage of information affects voters. Players on the field respond to the ongoing narrative by switching jerseys or taking a fall or running off to a third team they always liked better, anyway.

And when people bet on football games, they don't usually simply pick a winner. They bet on the point spread--that is, the wager is based on the expectations for both teams. The NFL and the NCAA oppose sports betting because of its potential

corrupting influence. Meanwhile, the corrupting influence of the media circus around the presidential primaries continues unabated.

While there's a lot not to like about gambling, one thing I can't stand about sports betting in particular is the way it can make people cheer not for a team but for a specific combination of statistical outcomes that is meaningful only to them. (It's the same reason I have no use for fantasy sports.) Election-season political engagement thrives on its participants picking a team, keeping it clean and playing to win. Political journalists are among the most engaged people in the country, but their work both imposes on them the fiction of being above picking sides and provides a whole set of incentives very different from everyone else's. The result is a slough of provocative but content-light coverage that, taken as a whole, can swing an election.

If only there were a way to simply reduce presidential-campaign coverage--drastically. Along with letting the voters decide for themselves, this might [take the presidency itself down a few notches](#) in the minds of Americans. But that sounds about as likely as getting people to stop obsessing over football.