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Americans Say They Don't Learn From Ads But They Believe Strained Campaign Ads Anyway, Annenberg Data Show

Americans may say they don't trust television commercials, but the University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey shows that again this year, a great many people absorb and believe what they see, no matter how dubious its relation to the truth.

From April 15 through May 2, 1,026 adults were interviewed in 18 battleground states where the Bush and Kerry campaigns have been showing commercials since March. In those states, 61 percent of the public believe Bush "favors sending American jobs overseas," 56 percent believe Kerry "voted for higher taxes 350 times," and 72 percent say 3 million jobs have been lost in Bush's presidency. The margin of sampling error was plus or minus three percentage points.

All those statements and three others that gained substantial but not majority support are not true, as FactCheck.Org, has demonstrated in great detail. FactCheck.Org, a project of the **Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania** headed by Brooks Jackson, tries to hold politicians accountable by exposing false or misleading campaign statements, and its findings are on its web site, <http://factcheck.org>.

FactCheck's findings include a critique of a Kerry campaign commercial saying "George Bush says sending jobs overseas 'makes sense' for America." But Bush never said that, nor did he sign a document saying so. What he signed was a message accompanying the annual report of his Council of Economic advisers, a report which asserted that it made sense for the United States to buy goods from other countries which produced them more cheaply than the United States could – a standard, if currently impolitic, economic thought.

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Similarly, FactCheck has scolded Bush commercials (and the President himself) for saying that Kerry “voted for higher taxes 350 times.” The list they use to support the claim includes occasions when Kerry voted to keep taxes at existing levels, or supported lower tax cuts than Republicans preferred. Right now, Kerry is calling for higher taxes only on people earning more than \$200,000 per year while promising new cuts for middle-income families. As Brooks Jackson observed, the Bush campaign could have been correct if only they had said “Kerry voted 350 times for ‘higher taxes than Republicans prefer.’”

The 3 million jobs claim is made frequently in Kerry speeches and campaign documents and in at least one campaign ad that says “Under George Bush, three million Americans have lost their jobs.” In the primary campaign, various Democrats used it. At one point last year, there were 2.7 million fewer jobs than there were when Bush took office, although the jobs deficit now is under 2 million.

But the three million figure has become such a part of conventional political wisdom that even a majority of Republicans in battleground states – 54 percent -- believe it is either definitely true or probably true. So do 81 percent of Democrats in those states, along with 78 percent of independents.

Three other dubious claims did not achieve majority acceptance in the battleground states of Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

But one came close. Forty-six percent, including a majority of independents, agreed that “John Kerry wants to raise gasoline taxes by 50 cents a gallon,” a claim of Bush ads based on one statement ten years ago that he now disavows. Forty-one percent said it was not true.

Thirty-four percent said it was definitely or probably true that Kerry “wants to raise taxes by 900 billion dollars” – a claim of Bush ads that Kerry denies. But 50 percent said that was probably or definitely not true.

Forty-three percent said it was true that “George W. Bush raided Social Security to pay for tax cuts for millionaires,” a claim made by an ad for the Media Fund, one of the groups backing the Kerry candidacy with ads in battleground states. But 45 percent said it was definitely or probably not true. The Fund asserts that the charge is justified because tax cuts reducing millionaires’ taxes caused the federal budget deficits which followed the surpluses of the last years of the Clinton Administration. Deficits are also caused by spending, on items ranging from defense to highways to education, to say nothing of the impact of a recession. They say deficits threaten the ability to pay its Social Security obligations.

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Nineteen percent of the respondents in those eighteen states said they had learned something from the commercials. But they were not much more likely to believe the strained claims of the political wars than were the self-proclaimed skeptics. Fifty-one percent of the believers said it was true that Kerry wanted to raise taxes by \$900 billion, while only 36 percent of the skeptics said so.

But the majority who claimed they had learned nothing from the ads were more likely to bad things about Bush. Sixty-three percent of the skeptics for example, believed that he favored sending American jobs overseas, compared to 52 percent of the believers. That National Annenberg Election Survey, the largest academic election poll, is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania (www.AnnenbergPublicPolicyCenter.org). It has been tracking the presidential campaign since October 7, and interviewing will continue until after Election Day. Dr. Kathleen Hall Jamieson is the director of the survey. Ken Winneg is the managing director of the survey. Adam Clymer is the political director of the survey.

Another major election project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center is FactCheck.org.a project that tries to hold politicians accountable by exposing false or misleading campaign statements. It is available online at www.FactCheck.Org.

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Questions

A. I'm going to read you some things people have said about John Kerry or George W. Bush. For each one, please tell me whether you think that it is definitely true, probably true, probably not true, or definitely not true?

All Respondents

	Everyone	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Persuadables
John Kerry wants to raise taxes by \$900 billion dollars.					
Definitely True	5%	9%	2%	7%	3%
Probably True	28%	36%	23%	28%	31%
Probably Not True	36%	31%	45%	35%	32%
Definitely Not True	12%	7%	16%	14%	13%
George W. Bush favors sending American jobs overseas.					
Definitely True	19%	9%	27%	19%	17%
Probably True	34%	27%	38%	36%	38%
Probably Not True	27%	36%	22%	27%	27%
Definitely Not True	10%	19%	3%	10%	5%
John Kerry voted for higher taxes 350 times.					
Definitely True	10%	16%	5%	8%	8%
Probably True	42%	44%	39%	45%	36%
Probably Not True	25%	18%	33%	25%	28%
Definitely Not True	5%	3%	8%	4%	4%
Three million American jobs have been lost while George W. Bush was president.					
Definitely True	27%	10%	40%	27%	31%
Probably True	43%	41%	43%	44%	47%
Probably Not True	18%	30%	9%	18%	11%
Definitely Not True	4%	8%	2%	3%	1%
John Kerry wants to raise gasoline taxes by 50 cents a gallon.					
Definitely True	9%	12%	5%	10%	7%
Probably True	32%	39%	24%	35%	31%
Probably Not True	32%	26%	38%	32%	32%
Definitely Not True	12%	7%	17%	9%	6%
George W. Bush raided Social Security to pay for tax cuts for millionaires?					
Definitely True	10%	2%	18%	8%	5%
Probably True	30%	16%	39%	34%	31%
Probably Not True	35%	44%	26%	35%	38%
Definitely Not True	13%	26%	4%	10%	8%

Those with no opinion are not shown.

“Persuadables” are respondents undecided about the presidential election and those who have a preference but say there is a “good chance” they could switch.

Battleground States

	Everyone in Battleground States	Republican	Democrat	Independent
John Kerry wants to raise taxes by \$900 billion dollars.				
Definitely True	6%	10%	3%	6%
Probably True	28%	36%	23%	25%
Probably Not True	37%	34%	44%	36%
Definitely Not True	12%	6%	17%	16%
George W. Bush favors sending American jobs overseas.				
Definitely True	23%	6%	33%	26%
Probably True	38%	34%	36%	41%
Probably Not True	24%	33%	20%	23%
Definitely Not True	6%	17%	2%	3%
John Kerry voted for higher taxes 350 times.				
Definitely True	10%	16%	8%	5%
Probably True	45%	50%	42%	44%
Probably Not True	23%	14%	27%	31%
Definitely Not True	6%	3%	10%	5%
Three million American jobs have been lost while George W. Bush was president.				
Definitely True	31%	12%	44%	37%
Probably True	41%	42%	37%	41%
Probably Not True	17%	32%	11%	13%
Definitely Not True	3%	6%	2%	1%
John Kerry wants to raise gasoline taxes by 50 cents a gallon.				
Definitely True	9%	12%	5%	11%
Probably True	37%	44%	28%	40%
Probably Not True	31%	25%	40%	29%
Definitely Not True	11%	4%	17%	9%
George W. Bush raided Social Security to pay for tax cuts for millionaires?				
Definitely True	10%	2%	16%	11%
Probably True	33%	23%	42%	33%
Probably Not True	33%	40%	27%	34%
Definitely Not True	12%	25%	4%	8%

"Battleground States" are the 18 states the campaigns consider closely contested, where they show television commercials. The states are: Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

