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Bush Makes Slight Gains on Some Measures But Suffers Among Persuadable Voters, Annenberg Data Show

George W. Bush made slight gains from the Republican National Convention on two important comparisons with John Kerry among the general public. But his standing among persuadable voters may be worse now than it was in August, the University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey shows.

Polling conducted from Friday, September 3, the night after the convention, through Sunday, September 12 showed that 54 percent of all registered voters thought he would do a better job of fighting the war on terrorism than would Kerry, while 36 percent preferred Kerry. In polling from August 9 through 29, the night before the convention began, 50 percent said Bush would do better and 39 percent said Kerry.

Bush also went from a 49 to 42 percent advantage when asked who would be a better commander-in-chief of the military to a 52 to 39 percent edge.

Other important measures showed no significant change. In the latest polling, 52 percent of the public approved of his handling of his job as president. In August, 53 percent approved. Forty-six percent disapproved on both occasions. The margin of sampling error for the latest data was plus or minus two percentage points. For the August results it was plus or minus one point.

But among persuadable voters – respondents who said they were undecided among Bush, John Kerry or Ralph Nader for president or who said they had a preference but there was a "good chance" they would change their minds – Bush approval dropped from 56 percent in August to 44 percent in September, while disapproval increased from 39 to 49 percent. The persuadable voters showed no statistically significant changes for Bush on either the commander-in-chief or war on terrorism questions.

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Bush increased his advantage, compared to pre-convention polling of all respondents, on the public view of how several traits described him and Kerry. Before the convention, 49 percent said he was steadier than Kerry, while 33 percent said Kerry was steadier. After the Republican convention, the advantage widened to 51 to 32 percent.

He also improved on likeability and experience, and he reversed a Kerry advantage on the question of who was more "out of touch" with respondents. Before the convention, 41 percent said Bush and 38 percent said Kerry. Afterwards, 44 percent said Kerry and 38 percent said Bush.

There were indications in the data that Bush had received a short-term “bounce” from the convention, but on some measures it was dissipating last week. For example, approval of his handling of the presidency was in the mid-fifties when the latest polling began, but then declined.

Another Bush decline may have been more directly tied to news events. From September 3 through 6, the first four days of interviewing, 52 percent of respondents said they believed he had fulfilled his obligation to the Texas Air National Guard. But in the six days of polling that began September 7, when CBS News reported on documents it said showed his commanding officer believed he had shirked his duties, just 46 percent said they felt Bush had met his obligation. Belief among Republicans dropped from 82 to 75 percent; among independents the decline was from 47 to 40 percent. Only 23 percent of Democrats believed Bush in each period.

Among all 2,385 registered voters, Kerry’s standing slipped slightly, compared to the weeks before the Republican convention. In August, after the Democatic convention, 45 percent had a favorable opinion of him while 36 percent had an unfavorable opinion. In the September polling, 43 percent were favorable and 41 percent unfavorable.

But among the persuadables, who make up about 16 percent of all registered voters, opinion of Kerry actually improved. In August, 36 percent of persuadables had a favorable opinion and 26 percent an unfavorable one. In the latest polling, 43 percent were favorable and 25 percent unfavorable.

When the same question was asked about Bush, the changes were not statistically significant. In August, 50 percent had a favorable view and 40 percent an unfavorable view. In the September polling, 52 percent were favorable and 38 percent unfavorable.

There was no statistically significant change in the rating of Bush’s handling of the war on terrorism, a central theme of the Republican convention. He maintained a strong, 55 percent approve, 41 percent disapprove rating in the Sept. 3-12 polling. In the August 9-29 polling, 53 percent had approved and 44 percent disapproved.

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But there was an increase in the percentage who agreed with his view that the war in Iraq had reduced the risk of terrorism. In the entire sample, that went from 29 percent to 36 percent, although 53 percent still disagreed, down from 59 percent in August.

Among all respondents, there was no real change on the economy. Bush's own rating for handling the economy was basically unchanged among all respondents. In the latest polling, 46 percent approved and 52 percent disapproved. In August, 45 percent approved and 51 percent disapproved.

Nor was there any change in how the economy is perceived. In September, as in August, 27 percent said the national economy was excellent or good, while 73 percent said it was only fair or poor.

But among persuadable voters, the percent saying it was excellent or good declined from 19 percent to 13 percent. And the percentage disapproving of Bush's handling of the economy increased from 54 to 63 percent.

The National Annenberg Election Survey is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania (www.AnnenbergPublicPolicyCenter.org). 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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Tables

A. Favorability

		9/3 – 9/12		8/9 - 8/29	
		Persuadables	Total	Persuadables	Total
Bush					
	Favorable	43%	52%	47%	50%
	Unfavorable	33%	38%	30%	40%
Kerry					
	Favorable	43%	43%	36%	45%
	Unfavorable	25%	41%	26%	36%
Cheney					
	Favorable	25%	42%	32%	40%
	Unfavorable	39%	39%	34%	39%
Edwards					
	Favorable	34%	38%	36%	43%
	Unfavorable	19%	30%	15%	26%

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B. Issues

	9/3-9/12/04		8/9 – 8/29/04	
	Persuadables	Total	Persuadables	Total
Do you feel things in this country are generally going in the right direction, or do you think things are seriously off on the wrong track?				
Right Direction	37%	42%	33%	39%
Wrong Track	52%	51%	48%	52%
Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president?				
Approve	44%	52%	56%	53%
Disapprove	49%	46%	39%	46%
Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling the nation's economy?				
Approve	32%	46%	39%	45%
Disapprove	63%	52%	54%	51%
How would you rate economic conditions in this country today?				
Excellent or good	13%	27%	19%	27%
Fair or poor	86%	73%	80%	73%
How would you rate your own personal economic situation today?				
Excellent or good	35%	48%	39%	48%
Fair or poor	65%	52%	60%	52%
Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling the war on terrorism?				
Approve	50%	55%	53%	53%
Disapprove	41%	41%	42%	44%
Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is currently handling the situation in Iraq?				
Approve	34%	47%	42%	45%
Disapprove	59%	49%	55%	52%
All in all, do you think the situation in Iraq was worth going to war over, or not?				
Yes, worth it	48%	48%	40%	44%
No, not worth it	48%	49%	50%	51%
Has the war in Iraq reduced the risk of terrorism or increased the risk of terrorism?				
Reduced the risk	24%	36%	21%	29%
Increased the risk	62%	53%	62%	59%
Do you think the U.S. should keep military troops in Iraq until a stable government is established there, or do you think the U.S. should bring its troops home as soon as possible?				
Keep troops in Iraq	47%	57%	49%	55%
Bring troops home	48%	38%	47%	41%

	9/3-9/12/04		8/9 – 8/29/04	
	Persuadables	**Total**	**Persuadables**	**Total**
Do you think George W. Bush has a clear plan for bringing the situation in Iraq to a successful conclusion, or don't you think so?				
Has a clear plan	17%	36%	30%	36%
Doesn't have a clear plan	73%	57%	59%	58%
Do you think John Kerry has a clear plan for bringing the situation in Iraq to a successful conclusion, or don't you think so?				
Has a clear plan	15%	26%	17%	29%
Doesn't have a clear plan	56%	59%	55%	56%
Who do you trust more to handle the responsibilities of commander in chief of the military: George W. Bush or John Kerry?				
George W. Bush	42%	52%	45%	49%
John Kerry	29%	39%	26%	42%
Both	1%	1%	3%	1%
Neither	8%	3%	7%	3%
Who do you trust to do a better job handling the U.S. war on terrorism: George W. Bush or John Kerry?				
George W. Bush	47%	54%	49%	50%
John Kerry	23%	36%	22%	39%
Both	2%	1%	2%	1%
Neither	9%	3%	7%	3%

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C. Traits

	9/3-9/12/04		8/9 – 8/29/04	
	Persuadables	Total	Persuadables	Total
Optimistic				
Bush higher	42%	45%	38%	43%
Kerry higher	32%	36%	28%	36%
Equal	19%	14%	24%	16%
Cares about people like me				
Bush higher	28%	44%	30%	41%
Kerry higher	45%	43%	40%	44%
Equal	20%	8%	20%	9%
Inspiring				
Bush higher	39%	47%	36%	44%
Kerry higher	39%	42%	35%	44%
Equal	20%	8%	20%	8%
Strong leader				
Bush higher	51%	51%	45%	48%
Kerry higher	25%	36%	27%	39%
Equal	20%	9%	18%	9%
Trustworthy				
Bush higher	38%	47%	38%	44%
Kerry higher	32%	41%	33%	41%
Equal	21%	8%	19%	9%
Shares my values				
Bush higher	33%	47%	36%	44%
Kerry higher	41%	43%	37%	43%
Equal	19%	7%	16%	8%
Knowledgeable				
Bush higher	35%	40%	31%	38%
Kerry higher	41%	44%	37%	44%
Equal	20%	12%	22%	13%
Reckless				
Bush higher	42%	42%	41%	44%
Kerry higher	24%	36%	20%	32%
Equal	23%	15%	23%	15%
Steady				
Bush higher	50%	51%	44%	49%
Kerry higher	26%	32%	25%	33%
Equal	17%	11%	18%	11%

	9/3-9/12/04		8/9-8/29/04	
	Persuadables	Total	Persuadables	Total
Says one thing, does another				
Bush higher	26%	32%	29%	34%
Kerry higher	42%	49%	39%	44%
Equal	19%	12%	15%	13%
Has the right kind of experience to be president				
Bush higher	47%	49%	45%	46%
Kerry higher	33%	39%	25%	40%
Equal	12%	7%	20%	9%
Easy to like as a person				
Bush higher	42%	48%	40%	44%
Kerry higher	30%	37%	26%	37%
Equal	20%	10%	21%	10%
Out of touch with people like me				
Bush higher	48%	38%	35%	41%
Kerry higher	31%	44%	29%	38%
Equal	13%	14%	24%	15%
Stubborn				
Bush higher	61%	55%	47%	52%
Kerry higher	13%	18%	16%	20%
Equal	12%	16%	20%	17%
Arrogant				
Bush higher	45%	43%	39%	43%
Kerry higher	25%	38%	28%	37%
Equal	21%	13%	21%	14%
Effective, gets things done				
Bush higher	50%	50%	46%	47%
Kerry higher	21%	32%	22%	35%
Equal	13%	9%	16%	9%

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Survey Methodology

The National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) is a survey conducted each presidential election by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

The 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey is based on telephone interviews which began October 7, 2003 and will continue past Election Day.

The sample of telephone exchanges called was randomly selected by a computer from a complete list of thousands of active residential exchanges across the country. Within each exchange, random digits were added to form a complete telephone number, thus permitting access to both listed and unlisted numbers. Within each household, one adult was designated by a random procedure to be the respondent for the survey. The interviewing is conducted by Schulman, Ronca, Bucuvalas, Inc.

The results have been weighted to take account of household size and number of telephone lines into the residence and to adjust for variation in the sample relating to geographic region, sex, race, age and education.

This report deals with two interviewing periods. From September 3 through September 12, 2,797 adults were interviewed, of whom 2,385 said they were registered voters. In theory, in 19 out of 20 cases, results for all registered voters will differ by no more than two percentage points, up or down, from what would have been obtained by interviewing all American adults. From August 9 through August 29, 6,058 adults were interviewed. In that period, 5,146 said they were registered voters; for them the margin of sampling error would be plus or minus one percentage point.

For smaller subgroups, the margin of sampling error would be higher. For "persuadable" voters, for example, it would be plus or minus five percentage points in the September 3-12 period, and plus or minus three percentage points in the August 9-29 period.

Moreover, some questions were not asked of all respondents, which would lead to higher potential error. In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey of public opinion may introduce other sources of error into the poll. Variations in the wording and order of questions, for example, may lead to somewhat different results.

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