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Annenberg Survey: Most Americans Still Unfamiliar with the Presidential Candidates

As the talking heads, columnists, and political reporters begin to presuppose the biographical data and issue positions of the presidential contenders, an Annenberg Public Policy Center survey raises a caution. Biography matters; the public is still learning some of those details the elites take for granted. The broad outlines of policy matter; it is important to continue to report them even as the debate becomes more specific. Americans will need to learn a lot more about the candidates for president before they can make informed choices among them.

About the researchers

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About the survey

The Annenberg 2000 Survey will be the largest survey of the American electorate ever conducted. By the end of 2000, over 100,000 interviews will have been conducted on Americans' political knowledge, media use, and opinions about candidates and issues. Reports will be released regularly.

To date interviews have been conducted with 4153 randomly selected U.S. residents. Under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA), the survey uses a rolling cross-sectional design, continuously interviewing throughout the campaign season. The results reported here are based on interviews completed October 25 through December 13 with a random sample of 4153 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in telephone households in the continental US.

For the subsamples employed here, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls. To attempt to correct for some of these errors, the data are weighted in analysis to align the sample's demographics with current U.S. Census population parameters.

For more information

Please direct questions to Michael Hagen or Paul Waldman at (215) 898-7041. More information on the Annenberg Public Policy Center and its studies can be found at <http://www.appcpenn.org>.

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Many Americans feel they cannot evaluate the candidates

At this stage of the presidential campaign, most Americans do not even recognize the names of many of the contenders. Many people who do recognize a candidate's name do not feel they know enough to express a favorable or unfavorable opinion about him.

The Annenberg 2000 Survey has been asking U.S. residents for their opinions of the presidential candidates, explicitly inviting people to indicate the ones about whom they do not know enough to rate or do not feel either favorable or unfavorable. Three quarters of all Americans have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of George W. Bush. But less than half are willing to express an opinion about Steve Forbes or John McCain, less than one third are willing to express one about Orrin Hatch, and less than one sixth are ready to express positive or negative sentiments about Alan Keyes or Gary Bauer. Familiarity with Vice President Gore equals that with Governor Bush, but less than half feel they know enough about Bill Bradley to venture an opinion about him.

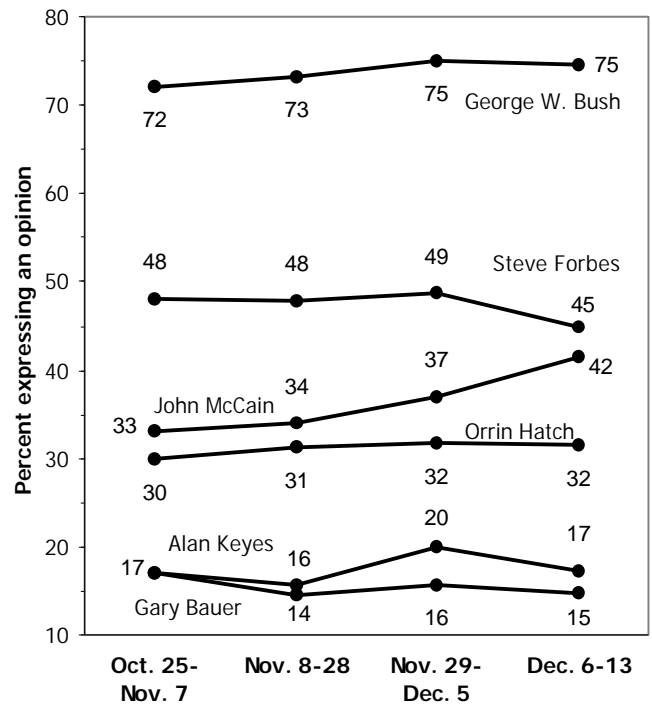
Familiarity with the candidates has increased little since the town hall meetings and debates began seven weeks ago. Only familiarity with Senator McCain has grown since late October—by 9 percentage points. But McCain and the other candidates unknown to a majority of the public when the campaign began remain so.

Americans do not yet have clear images of the candidates

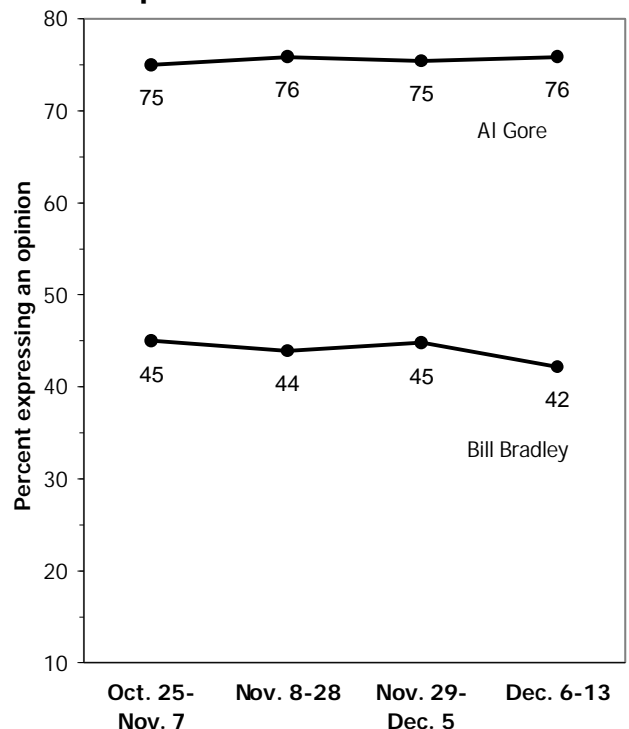
Before the pundits declare the election over and pronounce the supposed front-runners the inevitable nominees of their parties, it is important to note that no single impression of any presidential candidate is widely held by the public. Asked what word or phrase first comes to mind upon hearing the names of the presidential candidates, no more than 15 percent reported the same response to any candidate.

Three of the four candidates whose names were tested elicited remarkably similar patterns of response. The most common words or phrases about Bradley, Bush, and McCain refer to a prominent feature of the candidate's personal biography—Bradley's athletic background, Bush's family background, and McCain's military background. The next most common category of response in each case is the candidate's office. But many more people mention Gore's office than anything else, and the next most common responses involve President Clinton, describe Gore as boring or stiff, or connect the vice president with environmental

Familiarity with Republican presidential candidates



Familiarity with Democratic presidential candidates



issues (the only issue mentioned at all frequently for any candidate). For most Americans, Gore's personal biography comes to mind much less readily than do the others'.

Knowledge of candidates and of facts on which policy is built is not increasing

During the past seven weeks, few Americans appear to have learned the facts behind the policies being debated. Few are conversant with fundamental figures describing economic and social conditions. Accurate knowledge about one feature of economic life familiar to a majority, the minimum wage, has actually declined in recent weeks; the information the public acquired as a result of the recent congressional debate seems to have led many to believe that the minimum wage had increased already. No other indicator of the level of public knowledge about national conditions has changed much in either direction.

Knowledge of the candidates' biographies and policy positions likewise has not increased and in some cases has decreased slightly. Part of the reason may be that interest in the campaign has diminished slightly: the percentage of Americans who say they have been very interested in the campaign so far fell from 21 in late October to 18 in early December. Nothing in the presidential campaign thus far has attracted much of the public's attention. For that reason if for no other, the campaign to date has done little to educate the potential electorate.

Factual knowledge	Percent answering correctly			
	10/25-11/7	11/8-11/28	11/29-12/5	12/6-12/13
<i>Correct answers in bold.</i>				
Is the minimum wage per hour ...\$4.50, \$5.15 , \$6.35, or \$7.10?	71	75	68	64
What federal tax rate do most people pay...15%, 28% , 32%, or 39.6%?	40	46	45	38
How many Americans do not have health insurance...about 1 in 50, 1 in 20, 1 in 10, or more than 1 in 10 ?	39	38	34	35
Is the US trade deficit in the first half of 1999 higher , lower, or the same as last year?	34	38	38	34
How many pregnancies end in abortion each year in the U.S....fewer than 10%, between 10% and 25% , or more than 25%?	32	34	31	33
How many legal immigrants come to the US each year...fewer than 200,000, 400,000, 600,000 , or more than a million?	20	24	17	17
Over the first eight months of 1999, what was the inflation rate...1.6%, 2%, 2.6% , or 3.2%?	17	14	15	17
Do you think that tax breaks for ethanol, a corn-based fuel additive, cost ... \$100 million, \$275 million, \$425 million, or \$600 million a year ?	12	11	10	11

Biographical knowledge

Percent answering correctly

Correct answers in parentheses.

	<u>10/25-11/7</u>	<u>11/8-11/28</u>	<u>11/29-12/5</u>	<u>12/6-12/13</u>
Democrats: Now I have a few questions about just the Democratic candidates for president, Bill Bradley and Al Gore. To the best of your knowledge, who ...				
was a professional basketball player (Bradley)	41	44	46	42
Is the son of a former U.S. Senator (Gore)	30	35	34	32
voted for the Reagan tax cuts in 1981 (Bradley)	21	16	16	19
was a U.S. Senator (both)	15	17	14	15
served in the military during the Vietnam War (both)	4	6	7	6
Republicans: Now I would like to ask you about the Republican candidates. To the best of your knowledge, which of the following is the current job of ...				
George W. Bush (state governor)		71	69	68
Steve Forbes (businessman)		58	55	53
Orrin Hatch (U.S. Senator)		35	35	33
John McCain (U.S. Senator)		34	36	36
Gary Bauer (former head of private political organization)		6	7	7
Alan Keyes (talk show host)		6	6	6

Policy knowledge

Percent answering correctly

Correct answers in parentheses.

	<u>10/25-11/7</u>	<u>11/8-11/28</u>	<u>11/29-12/5</u>	<u>12/6-12/13</u>
Democrats: Now I have a few questions about just the Democratic candidates for president, Bill Bradley and Al Gore. To the best of your knowledge, who favors ...				
the U.S. signing the treaty banning underground testing of nuclear weapons (both)	24	24	25	22
allowing a woman to choose to have an abortion (both)	24	29	30	23
giving tax credits or vouchers to people who send their children to private schools (neither)	18	20	19	17
tax-free savings accounts to pay for a college education (Gore)	15	12	14	14
public financing of Congressional campaigns (Bradley)	7	5	5	6
Republicans: Six Republicans are running for president. They are To the best of your knowledge, who ...				
supported the treaty to ban nuclear tests (none)		17	14	15
supports school vouchers to help parents send their children to private schools (all)		13	10	9
would make an anti-abortion constitutional amendment a top priority (Bauer)		3	5	7
favors instant checks at gun shows and pawn shops and opposes a waiting period to purchase guns (McCain)		2	4	6
opposes tax breaks for ethanol, a corn-based fuel additive (McCain)		2	3	2
would only nominate Supreme Court justices who oppose abortion rights (Bauer, Forbes, Keyes)		0	0	0