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Americans Learned Much About Candidate Positions After First Two Debates Those “Not Much Interested in Politics” Have Begun Focusing On Campaign

More Americans were able to correctly identify the presidential candidates’ positions on a host of issues after the first two debates than they were prior to the debates, according to a new study released today by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

Research conducted the week following the October 3 and 5 debates found that more voters knew after the debates than before the debates that Al Gore opposed and George Bush supported a plan to allow workers to invest some of their Social Security payroll tax in the stock market. In addition, the number of Americans who could correctly identify the candidates’ position on school vouchers and abortion and which candidate favored the biggest tax cut and who favored using some of the Medicare surplus to cut taxes also increased after the debates.

“Debates should not be judged by who won or who lost, but did Americans learn where candidates stand on the issues. These debates can help voters cast an informed vote and forecast governance,” said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center and Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication. “Learning is the goal in debates and it is happening.”

Even prior to the debates, Americans had begun to focus on the campaigns, with interest in the political campaigns jumping 7 points between September 25 and October 8. More Americans are discussing the campaigns with family and friends. The largest growth in political conversations took place among those who only follow politics ‘now and then’. This group saw a fifteen percent jump in those who report having had a political conversation with family or friends in the past week, reaching 64% by the end of the first week of October.

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. Margin of error for a weekly average is +/- 3.5%. The full report can be found on www.appcpenn.org.

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The Annenberg Public Policy Center was established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg in 1994 to create a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania that would examine the role of communications in public policy issues at the local, state and federal levels. The Center has four ongoing research foci: Information and Society; Media and the Developing Mind; Media and the Dialogue of Democracy; Health Communications. The Annenberg Public Policy Center supports research and sponsors lectures and conferences in these areas.