

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
August 1, 2000

CONTACT: Lorie Slass 202-879-6701
Kathleen Hall Jamieson 215-898-7041

Americans Still Unfamiliar With Most of Bush and Gore's Policy Positions and Feel Ill-Equipped to Make Choice Between Them

Annenberg Researchers Found News Exposure is Doing Little to Help Improve Knowledge

(Philadelphia, PA) Fifty-five percent of Americans feel they don't yet know enough about the candidates in the Presidential election to make an informed choice, and most don't know where George W. Bush and Al Gore stand on major policy issues according to new research from the Annenberg 2000 survey released today by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

The new study found less than half of those surveyed knew Bush or Gore's position on nine major public policy issues. Among the findings:

- More than half of those surveyed could not correctly identify Bush's position on school vouchers, soft money, HMO lawsuits, health insurance for children, and gun licenses.
- More than half could not correctly identify Al Gore's position on the death penalty, allowing gays to serve in the military, social security and the stock market, school vouchers, soft money, and HMO lawsuits.

A large majority of respondents, however, could correctly identify the candidates' positions on a few key issues:

- Over three in four (78 percent) knew Bush's position on the death penalty.
- Seventy-percent knew Gore's position on health insurance for every child.
- Seventy-two percent knew Gore's position on licenses for handguns.

According to the Annenberg research it does not appear that attention to news media, particularly the networks, is boosting the electorate's knowledge of the candidates much. There is little difference among high, medium and low consumers of television news on knowledge of the candidates' positions. There were improvements in knowledge among regular newspaper and talk radio users.

"The conventions provide the public with important information about similarities and differences between candidates on key issues," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Pennsylvania and Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center. "If the conventions are successful, we expect to see knowledge levels rise as a result."

-- MORE --

In addition to a lack of knowledge on policy positions, the study also found that the majority of those surveyed did not know key biographical information about each candidate. Less than half of all respondents knew which candidate:

- supported legislation permitting concealed handguns;
- spoke at Bob Jones University;
- owned a major league baseball team;
- is the son of a former Senator; and,
- considers himself a born-again Christian.

For some, the internet is a helpful source of campaign information. But according to the Annenberg research, people who use the internet for campaign information are actively seeking campaign information through a variety of media. The study found that political web-surfers are:

- more likely to be men;
- have a median income of \$57,500;
- watch local news less than other respondents but concentrate more heavily than non-net user respondents on those media that focus more on politics: cable news, talk radio and newspapers.

“For a relatively elite audience, the internet is functioning not as a substitute for political information from other media, but as a supplement,” added Jamieson.

To date, interviews have been conducted with over 48,000 randomly selected U.S. residents. The survey uses a rolling cross-sectional design, interviewing daily throughout since November. The results reported here are based on interviews completed December 14, 1999 through July 24, 2000.

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 is available on the Annenberg Public Policy Center website, appcpenn.org.

###

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.