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DATE: July 28, 2004

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Kerry Gains On Bush in Persuadable Voters' Impressions Of Him as Caring, Experienced, Annenberg Polling Shows

As Democrats prepare to nominate John Kerry for President tonight, the persuadable voters who are still up for grabs see him as more caring, more knowledgeable, and less reckless, stubborn, or arrogant than George W. Bush, the University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey shows.

On one of those measures, a key one for Democrats, Kerry's standing is stronger relative to Bush than it was in early June. Then, 30 percent of persuadables said the term "cares about people like me" fitted Bush better and 37 percent said Kerry. Now 41 percent say Kerry and just 27 percent say Bush.

The persuadable voters – those who are either undecided or have a preference between Kerry, Bush or Ralph Nader but say there is a good chance they could change their minds – do give Bush an edge as a strong leader, as optimistic and as steady.

On the questions of which candidate is more inspiring, trustworthy, or easy to like personally, there was no statistically significant difference between them. Nor was there a difference on who has the right kind of experience to be president or shares the voters' values. But Bush's clear advantages over Kerry in early June on personal likeability and on experience has become smaller.

The current findings are based on interviews with 762 persuadable, registered voters from July 5, the day John Edwards was chosen to run for Vice President, through July 25. In all, 5,051 adults were interviewed, among whom 4,211 said they were registered.

-More-

The most important difference between the persuadable voters (about 18 percent of all registered voters, compared to 20 percent in June) and those who had firmly made up their minds came on the question of paying attention to the presidential campaign. Seventeen percent of the persuadable respondents, and 35 percent of everyone else, said they were following it very closely. Persuadable voters also were also younger, more moderate and less conservative, and had slightly lower household incomes than those who had made up their minds.

The persuadable voters were about as likely to say they approved of how Bush was handling his job as president as was the public generally and less likely to have an unfavorable general opinion of him. But on specifics from the economy to the war on terrorism to Iraq, they were more critical.

For example, 40 percent of the persuadables said they approved of how Bush was handling the war on terrorism, while 52 percent of the decided respondents did. Thirty-four percent of the persuadables said Iraq had been worth going to war over, compared to 45 percent of the decided. Twenty-two percent of the persuadables said the economy was good or excellent, compared to 32 percent of those who had made a firm choice.

As the two campaigns seek simultaneously to win over persuadable voters and energize their core supporters to ensure high turnout, neither candidate faces significant problems within his own party, although about a fifth of Republicans considered Bush more out of touch, reckless and arrogant than Kerry. Forty-seven percent of Republicans said Bush was more stubborn than Kerry, but they may not have considered that a negative.

The worst ratings Kerry got from Democrats came when 19 percent said the term “strong leader” applied better to Bush than to Kerry, 22 percent said he was more “out of touch” and 23 percent said the description “says one thing, does another” fitted Kerry better than Bush.

But that last label, a staple of Bush campaigning against Kerry, no longer provided a clear advantage for the president. Among all registered voters, 35 percent said the term fitted Bush better, while 40 percent said it described Kerry better.

Among the persuadable voters, the percentages were reversed though the differences were within the margin of sampling error, plus or minus four percentage points. Thirty-four percent of the persuadables said “says one thing, does another,” applied better to Bush and 29 percent of them it said it fitted Kerry better. In June, 30 percent of the persuadables said the term fitted Bush better, while 32 percent said Kerry.

The “shares my values” rating, which also reflects a major strain in Bush’s campaigning against Kerry, showed 35 percent of persuadables giving Kerry higher marks, and 32 percent rating Bush higher. In early June, 36 percent rated Bush higher and 36 percent gave Kerry the advantage.

-More-

But if “values” is not cutting among the persuadables, it matters to the core of each candidate’s support. Among respondents in union households, Kerry held a 50 to 35 percent edge. Among blacks, his advantage was 71 to 7 percent. But among white Protestants who described themselves as “born again” or evangelical, Bush held a 62 to 22 percent advantage.

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.

-More-

All charts reflect respondents who say they are registered to vote.

Tables

A. Respondents were asked to rate George W. Bush and John Kerry on each trait using a scale of zero to ten. The following data represents the percentage of people ranking Bush higher, Kerry higher, or both equal.

	Persuadables	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Total
Optimistic					
Bush higher	35%	72%	17%	41%	42%
Kerry higher	28%	10%	58%	34%	34%
Equal	23%	11%	18%	17%	16%
Cares about people like me					
Bush higher	27%	75%	9%	35%	38%
Kerry higher	41%	11%	76%	46%	45%
Equal	16%	8%	8%	9%	9%
Inspiring					
Bush higher	34%	80%	12%	37%	42%
Kerry higher	33%	10%	73%	44%	43%
Equal	18%	5%	11%	12%	10%
Strong leader					
Bush higher	42%	82%	19%	41%	46%
Kerry higher	28%	8%	65%	41%	39%
Equal	16%	4%	10%	10%	8%
Trustworthy					
Bush higher	35%	77%	11%	38%	41%
Kerry higher	31%	9%	72%	45%	43%
Equal	16%	6%	8%	10%	8%
Shares my values					
Bush higher	32%	79%	12%	36%	41%
Kerry higher	35%	9%	73%	47%	43%
Equal	17%	6%	9%	8%	8%
Knowledgeable					
Bush higher	28%	71%	12%	29%	36%
Kerry higher	42%	14%	74%	53%	47%
Equal	17%	10%	9%	13%	11%

	Persuadables	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Total
Reckless					
Bush higher	39%	20%	62%	49%	44%
Kerry higher	22%	53%	15%	25%	30%
Equal	17%	15%	14%	14%	15%
Steady					
Bush higher	40%	77%	18%	42%	44%
Kerry higher	23%	6%	60%	34%	34%
Equal	21%	8%	15%	14%	13%
Says one thing, does another					
Bush higher	34%	16%	50%	36%	35%
Kerry higher	29%	62%	23%	40%	40%
Equal	15%	11%	14%	12%	13%
Has the right kind of experience to be president					
Bush higher	39%	80%	15%	38%	43%
Kerry higher	32%	9%	69%	44%	41%
Equal	16%	5%	9%	9%	8%
Easy to like as a person					
Bush higher	34%	76%	14%	40%	42%
Kerry higher	30%	9%	67%	38%	38%
Equal	19%	7%	11%	13%	11%
Out of touch with people like me					
Bush higher	39%	20%	59%	43%	41%
Kerry higher	23%	56%	22%	32%	36%
Equal	22%	15%	12%	17%	14%
Stubborn					
Bush higher	48%	47%	58%	56%	53%
Kerry higher	14%	22%	16%	15%	17%
Equal	14%	17%	13%	14%	15%
Arrogant					
Bush higher	43%	22%	66%	48%	46%
Kerry higher	26%	59%	15%	29%	33%
Equal	15%	12%	12%	13%	13%

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B. Favorability

	Persuadables	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Total
Bush					
Favorable	45%	87%	17%	42%	48%
Unfavorable	30%	8%	70%	45%	41%
Kerry					
Favorable	34%	13%	74%	41%	43%
Unfavorable	20%	65%	9%	31%	34%
Cheney					
Favorable	30%	72%	14%	29%	37%
Unfavorable	33%	11%	65%	46%	41%
Edwards					
Favorable	33%	16%	62%	38%	38%
Unfavorable	13%	47%	8%	20%	25%

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C. Issues

	Persuadables	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Total
Do you feel things in this country are generally going in the right direction or do you feel things are seriously off on the wrong track?					
Right direction	31%	67%	15%	34%	37%
Wrong track	55%	26%	77%	58%	55%
Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president?					
Approve	50%	87%	20%	45%	50%
Disapprove	44%	12%	78%	53%	48%
Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling the nation's economy?					
Approve	40%	84%	14%	38%	45%
Disapprove	54%	13%	82%	58%	52%
How would you rate economic conditions in this country today?					
Excellent or good	22%	57%	13%	24%	30%
Fair or poor	78%	43%	86%	75%	69%
How would you rate your own personal economic situation today?					
Excellent or good	41%	65%	36%	47%	48%
Fair or poor	59%	35%	63%	52%	52%
Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling the war on terrorism?					
Approve	40%	83%	24%	44%	50%
Disapprove	54%	14%	75%	52%	47%
Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is currently handling the situation in Iraq?					
Approve	36%	77%	15%	37%	42%
Disapprove	59%	19%	82%	60%	55%
All in all, do you think the situation in Iraq was worth going to war over, or not?					
Worth it	34%	75%	19%	37%	43%
Not worth it	60%	20%	79%	58%	53%
Has the war in Iraq reduced the risk of terrorism or increased the risk of terrorism?					
Reduced the risk	20%	48%	12%	24%	28%
Increased the risk	67%	37%	81%	65%	61%
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	45%	72%	38%	55%	54%
Bring troops home	50%	25%	59%	42%	43%

	Persuadables	Republican	Democrat	Independent	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	23%	64%	14%	29%	36%
Doesn't have a clear plan	69%	28%	84%	66%	59%
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%	7%	41%	27%	25%
Doesn't have a clear plan	54%	81%	37%	58%	57%

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 interviews conducted from July 5 through 25, 2004. In that period, 5,051 adults were interviewed, of whom 4,211 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. For smaller subgroups, the margin of sampling error would be higher. For "persuadable" voters, for example, it would be plus or minus four percentage points.

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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