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American public still has much to learn about presidential candidates' issue positions as campaign end draws near, Annenberg Survey shows

Many Americans are unable to identify where the major party candidates stand on various issues ranging from abortion to free trade to closing the base at which alleged enemy fighters are held at Guantanamo Bay, according to recent data collected by the University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES). Only 30 percent of adults were able to identify Senator John McCain as the presidential candidate more likely to support free trade agreements, like NAFTA. Statistically comparable low levels of understanding of the candidate positions on free trade were detected by the NAES in September (see Table 1).

On the issue of abortion in September, around two-fifths (42 percent) of respondents knew that McCain is the candidate who favors overturning *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion. This percentage increased slightly to 47 percent in October.

In October, only 9 percent of survey respondents knew that *both* McCain and Obama favor closing the base at which alleged enemy fighters are held at Guantanamo Bay. Over 44 percent of respondents incorrectly identified Obama as the sole candidate who favored that position. Comparable levels of mistakes on the Guantanamo Bay question were found in the September data.

"It does not appear that much learning about the candidates' issue positions has taken place during the general election campaign," noted Kate Kenski, a senior analyst for the National Annenberg Election Survey and an assistant professor of communication at the University of Arizona. "From September to October, we detected a few increases in learning on topics such as mandatory health insurance for children and elimination of the Bush tax cuts for people above a certain income level, but those increases in learning were small."

There were seven candidate issue position questions in which over half of adults were able to identify correctly the major party presidential candidates' issue positions: opposing the Iraq War, mandating that children have health insurance, eliminating the Bush tax cuts for people above a certain income level, providing a \$5,000 tax credit to help uninsured families buy health insurance, being the first to call for a surge of troops in Iraq, providing tax cuts to the middle

class, and proposing taxation of health benefits an employee receives from an employer (see Tables 1 and 2).

Study participants had some difficulty answering basic questions about the political system (see Table 3). About two-thirds (66 percent) knew that the Supreme Court was the institution who has the final responsibility of determining whether or not a law is constitutional. A little over one-third (32 percent) of respondents knew that it takes two-thirds of the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto. About three out of five (60 percent) of adults knew that the Democrats have more members in the U.S. House than do the Republicans.

Data for this study were collected between September 5, 2008 and September 22, 2008 from 4,683 adults and between October 19, 2008 and October 23, 2008 from 1,286 adults in the United States. The margin of sampling error was plus or minus 1.4 percentage points for the sample overall in September and was plus or minus 2.7 percentage points for the sample overall in October.

Appendix

Table 1. Candidate issue knowledge from 9/5 to 9/22 (n=4,683) and 10/19 to 10/23 (n=1,286)

Which candidate is more likely to support free trade agreements like NAFTA?		
	9/5 to 9/22	10/19 to 10/23
<i>John McCain</i>	27.9%	30.0%
Barack Obama	21.7%	21.8%
Both	13.1%	14.8%
Neither	11.6%	12.9%
(VOL) Don't know	24.8%	19.4%
(VOL) Refused	0.8%	1.2%
Which candidate or candidates running for president favors overturning Roe versus Wade, the Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion?		
	9/5 to 9/22	10/19 to 10/23
<i>John McCain</i>	42.1%	46.8%
Barack Obama	15.5%	17.5%
Both	2.3%	1.1%
Neither	19.5%	17.1%
(VOL) Don't Know	20.2%	17.2%
(VOL) Refused	0.4%	0.2%
Which candidate or candidates running for president favors closing the base at which alleged enemy fighters are held at Guantanamo Bay?		
	9/5 to 9/22	10/19 to 10/23
John McCain	9.8%	8.5%
Barack Obama	43.4%	44.3%
<i>Both</i>	8.3%	9.0%
Neither	9.1%	9.0%
(VOL) Don't Know	29.1%	29.0%
(VOL) Refused	0.3%	0.3%
Which candidate or candidates running for president opposed the war in Iraq?		
	9/5 to 9/22	10/19 to 10/23
John McCain	3.6%	3.7%
<i>Barack Obama</i>	77.9%	79.7%
Both	5.8%	3.8%
Neither	6.9%	7.3%
(VOL) Don't Know	5.5%	5.4%
(VOL) Refused	0.3%	0.2%
Which candidate or candidates running for president is proposing a health care reform plan that mandates that children have health insurance?		
	9/5 to 9/22	10/19 to 10/23
John McCain	7.3%	7.0%
<i>Barack Obama</i>	61.4%	65.9%
Both	13.3%	12.0%
Neither	3.8%	3.0%
(VOL) Don't Know	13.9%	11.8%
(VOL) Refused	0.3%	0.3%

Which candidate or candidates running for president would eliminate the Bush tax cuts for people above a certain income level?		
	9/5 to 9/22	10/19 to 10/23
John McCain	12.8%	13.7%
<i>Barack Obama</i>	<i>62.8%</i>	<i>70.7%</i>
Both	4.2%	3.4%
Neither	6.6%	3.9%
(VOL) Don't Know	13.3%	8.1%
(VOL) Refused	0.4%	0.3%

Table 2. Candidate issue knowledge from 10/19 to 10/23 (n=1,286)

Which candidate or candidates running for president would provide uninsured individuals with a twenty-five hundred dollar credit or uninsured families with a five thousand dollar credit to help them buy their own health insurance?	
<i>John McCain</i>	56.3%
Barack Obama	22.8%
Both	2.9%
Neither	5.3%
(VOL) Don't know	12.4%
(VOL) Refused	0.3%
Which candidate or candidates running for president was the first to call for an increase in the number of troops as a way to make Iraq more stable, known as the surge?	
<i>John McCain</i>	78.3%
Barack Obama	3.1%
Both	1.6%
Neither	6.4%
(VOL) Don't know	10.4%
(VOL) Refused	0.2%
Which candidate or candidates running for president would provide more tax cuts to the middle class?	
John McCain	17.6%
<i>Barack Obama</i>	63.3%
Both	5.4%
Neither	7.3%
(VOL) Don't know	6.0%
(VOL) Refused	0.4%
Which candidate or candidates running for president supports federal funding for embryonic stem cell research?	
John McCain	12.4%
Barack Obama	51.7%
<i>Both</i>	8.4%
Neither	5.7%
(VOL) Don't know	21.6%
(VOL) Refused	0.2%
Which candidate or candidates proposes taxing the health benefits an employee receives from an employer?	
<i>John McCain</i>	53.9%
Barack Obama	19.4%
Both	3.2%
Neither	6.2%
(VOL) Don't know	17.1%
(VOL) Refused	0.3%

Table 3. General knowledge about the political system from 9/5 to 9/22 (n=4,683) and 10/19 to 10/23 (n=1,286)

Who has the final responsibility to determine if a law is constitutional or not? Is it the president, the Congress, or the Supreme Court?		
	9/5 to 9/22	10/19 to 10/23
President	10.3%	8.8%
Congress	16.9%	18.1%
<i>Supreme Court</i>	<i>65.6%</i>	<i>66.4%</i>
(VOL) Don't Know	6.8%	6.6%
(VOL) Refused	0.3%	0.1%
How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto?		
	9/5 to 9/22	10/19 to 10/23
<i>Two-thirds</i>	<i>36.0%</i>	<i>31.9%</i>
Other response	25.8%	30.5%
(VOL) Don't Know	37.8%	37.5%
(VOL) Refused	0.4%	0.1%
Do you happen to know which party has the most members in the United States House of Representatives?		
	9/5 to 9/22	10/19 to 10/23
<i>Democratic Party</i>	<i>55.7%</i>	<i>59.6%</i>
Republican Party	17.7%	15.0%
(VOL) Don't Know	26.3%	25.3%
(VOL) Refused	0.2%	0.1%
To the best of your knowledge, do you happen to know how Supreme Court justices are chosen? Are they,		
	9/5 to 9/22	10/19 to 10/23
nominated by a non-partisan Congressional committee	2.5%	3.4%
elected by the American people	5.3%	3.9%
<i>nominated by the President and then confirmed by the Senate</i>	<i>68.4%</i>	<i>70.9%</i>
appointed if they receive a two-thirds majority vote of the Justices already on the court	8.4%	8.6%
(VOL) Don't Know	15.1%	12.9%
(VOL) Refused	0.2%	0.2%

The analysis for this release was conducted by Kate Kenski, Ph.D., a senior analyst for the National Annenberg Election Survey and an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Arizona.

About the Survey

The National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) is a survey conducted each presidential election by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. It is the largest academic election survey being conducted during the 2008 campaign. It ultimately will include approximately 57,000 rolling cross-section telephone interviews (one interview per respondent) and almost 100,000 web interviews (including up to five interviews with the same person) as the campaign evolves. The first web wave began in October 2007; the final interviews will be completed following the general election, November 4, 2008.

National Annenberg Election Surveys also were conducted in 2000 and 2004.

The 2008 survey, as with past NAES polls, will examine a wide range of political attitudes about candidates, issues, and the traits Americans want in a president. It will also place a particular emphasis on the effects of media exposure through campaign commercials and news from radio, television, newspapers and the internet. Additionally, the survey measures the effects of other kinds of political communication, from conversations at home and on the job to various efforts by campaigns to influence potential voters.

Methodology

Data for this analysis come from the NAES rolling cross-sectional telephone survey. The first field period used in the analysis ran from September 5 to September 22, 2008. The total number of respondents interviewed during this period was 4,683. The second field period used in the analysis ran from October 19 to October 23, 2008. The total number of respondents interviewed during this period was 1,286.

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. The sample sizes reported in the tables, however, are the unweighted number of cases.

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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