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## American public has much to learn about presidential candidates' issue positions, National Annenberg Election Survey shows

Many Americans are unable to identify where the major party candidates' stand on various issues ranging from health care to abortion to free trade, according to recent data collected by the University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey. Only a little over a quarter (28 percent) of adults were able to identify Senator John McCain as the presidential candidate more likely to support free trade agreements like NAFTA.

Over one-third (37 percent) of adults mistakenly believe that Senator Barack Obama is the candidate who proposes providing individuals 2,500 dollars or families 5,000 dollars to help them buy their own health insurance. That is in fact Senator McCain's position. Only 20 percent of respondents, however, attributed that health insurance plan to McCain.

Only 8 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 43 percent of respondents incorrectly identify Obama as the sole candidate who favors that position.

On the issue of abortion, 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.

On the issue of reducing pollution, only 9 percent of adults knew that both candidates favor reducing pollution through a process called cap and trade.

"As data from the 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Surveys confirm," noted Kate Kenski, a senior analyst for the National Annenberg Election Survey and an assistant professor of communication at the University of Arizona, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, "voters of all educational levels learn from watching debates."\*

"Our research in 2000 also suggested that debates can have a significant effect on voters' attitudes," added Jamieson.\*\*

There were three 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, and eliminating the Bush tax cuts for people above a certain income level.

Over three-fourths (78 percent) knew that Obama was the candidate who opposed the war in Iraq. Three-fifths (61 percent) of adults were able to identify Obama as the candidate who is proposing a health care reform that mandates that children have health insurance. A comparable percentage (63 percent) was able to identify Obama as the candidate who would eliminate the Bush tax cuts for people above a certain income level.

Study participants had some difficulty answering basic questions about the political system (see Table 2). 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 (36 percent) of respondents knew that it takes two-thirds of the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto. Over half (56 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 in the United States. The margin of sampling error was plus or minus 1.4 percentage points for the sample overall.

\* See Kenski, K., & Jamieson, K. H. (2006). Issue knowledge and perceptions of agreement in the 2004 presidential general election. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 36(2), 243-259; Waldman, P., & Jamieson, K. H. (2003). Rhetorical convergence and issue knowledge in the 2000 presidential election. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 33(1), 145-163. For additional information about debates, see also Jamieson, K. H., & Birdsell, D. S. (1990). *Presidential debates: The challenge of creating an informed electorate*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

\*\* See Johnson, R., Hagen, H. G., & Jamieson, K. H. (2004). *The 2000 Presidential Election and the Foundations of Party Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## Appendix

Table 1. Candidate issue knowledge (n=4,683)

<b>Which candidate is more likely to support free trade agreements like NAFTA?</b>	
<i>John McCain</i>	27.9%
Barack Obama	21.7%
(VOL) Both	13.1%
(VOL) Neither	11.6%
(VOL) Don't know	24.8%
(VOL) Refused	0.8%
<b>Which candidate or candidates running for president would provide individuals twenty-five hundred dollars or families five thousand dollars to help them buy their own health insurance?</b>	
<i>John McCain</i>	19.6%
Barack Obama	37.1%
Both	2.9%
Neither	12.9%
(VOL) Don't Know	27.2%
(VOL) Refused	0.3%
<b>Which candidate or candidates running for president favors overturning Roe versus Wade, the Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion?</b>	
<i>John McCain</i>	42.1%
Barack Obama	15.5%
Both	2.3%
Neither	19.5%
(VOL) Don't Know	20.2%
(VOL) Refused	0.4%
<b>Which candidate or candidates running for president favors closing the base at which alleged enemy fighters are held at Guantanamo Bay?</b>	
John McCain	9.8%
Barack Obama	43.4%
<i>Both</i>	8.3%
Neither	9.1%
(VOL) Don't Know	29.1%
(VOL) Refused	0.3%
<b>Which candidate or candidates favor reducing pollution through a process called cap and trade?</b>	
John McCain	12.0%
Barack Obama	26.7%
<i>Both</i>	9.3%
Neither	8.2%
(VOL) Don't Know	43.4%
(VOL) Refused	0.4%
<b>Which candidate or candidates running for president opposed the war in Iraq?</b>	
John McCain	3.6%
<i>Barack Obama</i>	77.9%
Both	5.8%
Neither	6.9%
(VOL) Don't Know	5.5%
(VOL) Refused	0.3%

<b>Which candidate or candidates running for president is proposing a health care reform plan that mandates that children have health insurance?</b>	
John McCain	7.3%
<i>Barack Obama</i>	<i>61.4%</i>
Both	13.3%
Neither	3.8%
(VOL) Don't Know	13.9%
(VOL) Refused	0.3%
<b>Which candidate or candidates running for president would eliminate the Bush tax cuts for people above a certain income level?</b>	
John McCain	12.8%
<i>Barack Obama</i>	<i>62.8%</i>
Both	4.2%
Neither	6.6%
(VOL) Don't Know	13.3%
(VOL) Refused	0.4%

Table 2. General knowledge about the political system (n=4,683)

<b>Who has the final responsibility to determine if a law is constitutional or not? Is it the president, the Congress, or the Supreme Court?</b>	
President	10.3%
Congress	16.9%
<i>Supreme Court</i>	<i>65.6%</i>
(VOL) Don't Know	6.8%
(VOL) Refused	0.3%
<b>How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto?</b>	
<i>Two-thirds</i>	<i>36.0%</i>
Other response	25.8%
(VOL) Don't Know	37.8%
(VOL) Refused	0.4%
<b>Do you happen to know which party has the most members in the United States House of Representatives?</b>	
<i>Democratic Party</i>	<i>55.7%</i>
Republican Party	17.7%
(VOL) Don't Know	26.3%
(VOL) Refused	0.2%
<b>To the best of your knowledge, do you happen to know how Supreme Court justices are chosen? Are they,</b>	
nominated by a non-partisan Congressional committee	2.5%
elected by the American people	5.3%
<i>nominated by the President and then confirmed by the Senate</i>	<i>68.4%</i>
appointed if they receive a two-thirds majority vote of the Justices already on the court	8.4%
(VOL) Don't Know	15.1%
(VOL) Refused	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 field period ran from September 5 and September 22, 2008. The total number of respondents interviewed during this period was 4,683.

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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