



Public Opinion Watch

April 21, 2004

Covering polls and related articles from the week of April 13–19, 2004.

By Ruy Teixeira

Public Opinion Watch is a project of THE CENTURY FOUNDATION. Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of THE CENTURY FOUNDATION or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

IN THIS EDITION OF PUBLIC OPINION WATCH:

- [How Well Did Bush's Ads in the Battleground States Work?](#)
- [Seniors Two-to-One Unfavorable on Medicare Prescription Drugs Bill](#)
- [College Students Catch Up to Young People in General](#)
- [New Lows in Support for Bush Policies on Iraq and the War on Terror](#)
- [Live by the Tax Issue, Die by the Tax Issue?](#)

[CLICK HERE FOR AN INDEX OF PREVIOUS PUBLIC OPINION WATCH TOPICS.](#)

How Well Did Bush's Ads in the Battleground States Work?

[Annenberg Public Policy Center poll of 1,670 adults, released April 5, 2004 \(conducted March 16–31, 2004\)](#)

[Annenberg Public Policy Center poll of 1,818 adults, released April 9, 2004 \(conducted March 21–April 7, 2004\)](#)

[Tarrance Group/Lake Sosin Perry poll of 1,000 likely voters, released April 14, 2004 \(conducted March 28–31, 2004\)](#)

Initially, most commentary suggested that Bush's ads in the battleground states were a huge success and had Kerry on the run, driving up his unfavorables and defining him negatively in voters' eyes. But now, as the GOP steps down its ad buys, the verdict is more cautious about how well the ads worked. [Ronald Brownstein's *Los Angeles Times* article](#) on the topic notes that, according to Anthony Corrado, a leading expert on campaign finance, "since March 4—just after Kerry in effect wrapped up his party's nomination—Bush has bought about as much television advertising as past presidential candidates purchased for the entire general election campaign."

The Century Foundation conducts public policy research and analyses of economic, social, and foreign policy issues, including inequality, retirement security, election reform, media studies, homeland security, and international affairs. The foundation produces books, reports, and other publications, convenes task forces, and working groups and operates eight informational Web sites. With offices in New York City and Washington, D.C., The Century Foundation is nonprofit and nonpartisan and was founded in 1919 by Edward A. Filene.

Corrado's assessment: "frankly, [the president's campaign] didn't move the [poll] numbers that much."

Recently released Annenberg Election Survey data are consistent with Corrado's judgement. Kerry's favorability rating in the March 1–15 period was 49 percent favorable/39 percent unfavorable in the "television states" (battleground states where the Bush campaign has been running ads). In the March 16–31 period, his rating in these states had changed only slightly: 48 percent favorable/40 percent unfavorable.

Other Annenberg election survey data from March 21–April 7 show that, among the general public, Bush holds statistically significant advantages over Kerry on seven out of seventeen traits, while Kerry holds such advantages on four traits. But it's interesting to note that, among "persuadable voters" (those undecided or those who said there was a good chance they might switch their candidate preference)—the presumed target of these ads—the situation was the reverse: Kerry had significant advantages on eight traits and Bush on only three. In particular, persuadable voters, in contrast with the public as a whole, thought the phrase "says one thing, does another" applied more to Bush than Kerry and also thought "changes his mind for political reasons" applied more to Bush than Kerry.

Of course, it would be nice to see data for persuadables *within* television states, but, alas, Annenberg's sample sizes couldn't begin to justify looking at such a small group of respondents.

Other relevant data come from the new "Battleground 2004" survey conducted by Tarrance Group/Lake Sosin Perry between March 28 and March 31. (Note that this is a likely voter poll, which presents problems, but at least it's a light screen—they only toss out registered voters who say they are "not very likely" to vote.)

According to an accompanying analysis memo written by Celinda Lake and her associates, while Kerry leads by a point overall, he leads by six points in the battleground states, where Bush's ad barrage was directed. (Note that, compared to the widely publicized late March figures from Gallup, this survey is more recent *and* bases its battleground state figures on about twice the number of "likely voter" respondents.)

The poll also shows Kerry ahead by seven points among independents and by twenty-two points among moderates.

In terms of specific issues, the poll indicates that, where Kerry is strong, he is generally farther ahead of Bush in the battleground states than among voters as a whole. For example, Kerry is ahead by twenty-five points in the battleground states on protecting the middle class, compared to nineteen points among all voters. Other examples include: improving the health care system (+24/+19); strengthening social security (+23/+19); prescription drugs (+20/+15); creating jobs (+19/+17); the economy (+12/+8); holding down federal spending (+11/+4); keeping American prosperous (+9/+6); and sharing your values (+7/+3).

It's also worth noting that Democrats lead Republicans in this poll by six points in the generic congressional contest. That lead widens to ten points among battleground state voters, seventeen points among independents, and thirty-three points among moderates.

These data suggest that, while the race between Bush and Kerry has clearly tightened since early March, the specific influence of the Bush campaign's ads in the battleground states may well have been exaggerated.

Seniors Two-to-One Unfavorable on Medicare Prescription Drugs Law

[Kaiser Family Foundation poll of 1,201 adults, released April 14, 2004 \(conducted April 1–5, 2004\)](#)

Kaiser Family Foundation's latest Health Poll Report Survey shows seniors two-to-one (47 percent to 24 percent) unfavorable on the Medicare prescription drugs law. The public as a whole is also unfavorable, by 39 percent to 28 percent.

In addition, the poll shows that seniors overwhelmingly want two important changes to the Medicare legislation: (1) change the law to allow Americans to buy prescription drugs from Canada (65 percent to 24 percent); and (2) change the law to allow the federal government to use its buying power to negotiate with drug companies for lower prices (62 percent to 19 percent).

These are some strong numbers. And they back up the thrust of a Sunday story in the *New York Times* on how [the reaction to the new law seems more likely to hurt than help Republicans and Bush in two key states: New Mexico and Arizona](#). It would be quite ironic if the GOP's seemingly savvy strategy of passing an expensive new entitlement for seniors wound up costing them New Mexico and their must-win state of Arizona because of negative reaction from these very same voters.

The best-laid plans. . . .

College Students Catch Up to Young People in General

[Schneders/Della Volpe/Schulman poll of 1,205 college undergraduates for Harvard Institute of Politics, released April 15, 2004 \(conducted March 12–23, 2004\)](#)

Harvard University's Institute of Politics (IOP) has released another in their series of polls of (four year) college undergraduates. Prior to this poll, college students—at least those at four-year colleges—appeared to deviate from the preferences of young voters (eighteen to twenty-nine years old) in general. For example, in the October, 2003, IOP survey, college students gave Bush an approval rating of 61 percent and said that they preferred him over a Democratic opponent by five points. But polls of all young voters at the time generally gave a generic Democratic opponent a healthy lead over Bush.

In contrast, today college students give Bush only a 47 percent approval rating and say that they prefer Kerry over Bush by ten points. That's basically the same as [Kerry's lead among all young voters](#)

[at the present time.](#)

Moreover, among those who say they are registered to vote *and* say they definitely will be voting, Kerry has a commanding twenty-three-point lead.

In more good news for Democrats, college students give Democrats an eight-point lead over Republicans in party identification, reversing a Republican advantage in October, 2003. It's also the largest lead Democrats have had on party identification since IOP started taking their surveys in fall of 2000.

There is more interesting data in the poll on college students' views of specific issues. You can [read the entire poll here.](#)

New Lows in Support for Bush Policies on Iraq and the War on Terror

[Ipsos poll of 1,001 adults for Associated Press, released April 13, 2004 \(conducted April 5–7, 2004\)](#)

[Annenberg Public Policy Center poll of 1,267 adults, released April 16, 2004 \(conducted April 1–14, 2004\)](#)

Kerry may or may not be ahead in the race at the current time. Head-to-head registered voter polls, [which I've argued are the most important polls to look at](#), have tended to show Kerry ahead for the last few weeks, though the most recently released polls now indicate a slight Bush lead.

Either way, the really significant political development in the recent period is the undercutting of support for Bush's war in Iraq and for his handling of the war on terror. Here are some findings from recent polls that show just how seriously his standing in this area—once his ticket to sure reelection—has eroded.

The latest Annenberg Election Survey includes this question: "Has the war in Iraq reduced the risk of terrorism against the United States or increased the risk of terrorism against the United States?" Very straightforward. By about two-to-one (57 percent to 29 percent), the public says that the Iraq war has *increased* the risk of terrorism against the United States. Wow.

The poll also asks another very straightforward question: "All in all, do you think the situation in Iraq was worth going to war over, or not?" Note that there's no specific mention in this question of the war's costs—casualties, money, and so on—which has tended to produce negative responses for quite a while (for example, [the CBS News question](#)). But, even with no mention of costs, this question still returns a negative response: 51 percent to 43 percent saying that the Iraq situation wasn't worth going to war about. That could represent some kind of a turning point in public evaluations of the Iraq war.

Another noteworthy recent finding comes from a recent Ipsos-AP poll. In that poll, Bush's approval rating on "handling the war on terrorism" clocks in at just 51 percent.

These new lows suggest just how difficult it may be for Bush to run—and win—as a “war president,” as he likes to describe himself. And for further indications on this score, check out [this excellent Los Angeles Times article](#) on how reactions to the deteriorating Iraq situation may sink his chances to carry Minnesota, very high on the Bush campaign’s list of blue states that they hope to pick off in November.

Live by the Tax Issue, Die by the Tax Issue?

[Ipsos poll of 1,001 adults for Associated Press, released April 13, 2004 \(conducted March 19–21, 2004\)](#)

[International Communications Research poll of 1,007 adults for *Money* magazine, released April 15, 2004 \(conducted April 5–9, 2004\)](#)

The political theory of cutting taxes is that people will feel their taxes have gone down and feel generally better off. Therefore, if you cut taxes, people will vote for you.

The devil may be in the details on that one. In a just-released Ipsos-AP poll, 49 percent say that their overall tax burden—federal, state and local—has gone *up* in the past three years. That’s almost four times the number (13 percent) who say their tax burden has gone down over that time period.

And here’s an even more devastating datum: in a new ICR-*Money* magazine poll, 60 percent say that they personally did *not* benefit from the 2003 tax cut, compared to just 34 percent who say that they did.

Much of this has to do with the trivial nature of the tax benefits doled out to the middle class, compared to those doled out to the affluent. For the average voter, these benefits were no doubt easy to miss. But I wonder if some of the jaundiced reaction at this point isn’t attributable to finding out, as tax day approached, that you owed Uncle Sam substantially more than you thought you did. That happened to me and a number of other people I know and it reflects the way the withholding schedules were changed last year, in association with the tax cuts, to pump more money into people’s pockets. That worked in the short run but now it means many people have to write some serious checks that they weren’t planning on and they’re probably not happy about it.

The ICR-*Money* survey also shows that the public ranks reducing the federal deficit as more important than the 2003 tax cut by 50 percent to 42 percent. Still more impressive, the public would prefer a job creation program to the 2003 tax cut by a stunning 76 percent to 21 percent. That includes 89 percent of Democrats, 83 percent of independents, and even 54 percent of Republicans who say that they would prefer a job creation program to the tax cut.

Ruy Teixeira is a Senior Fellow at The Century Foundation and a Fellow at The Center for American Progress.

Public Opinion Watch covers newly released polls, as well as key newspaper and magazine articles that make use of polling data. If you've ever wondered what to make of the blizzard of survey data covered in the newspapers--and whether the newspapers themselves know what they're talking about--you'll want to check out this feature on a regular basis. Each edition will combine noteworthy findings and trends from the latest polling data with analysis of the misinterpretations and misrepresentations to which polling data are so often subject.

This and other publications can be found at The Century Foundation Web site: www.tcf.org.