

Public Opinion Watch

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Covering polls and related articles from the week of March 8–14, 2004.

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IN THIS EDITION OF PUBLIC OPINION WATCH:

- [Economic Anxiety and Bush](#)
- [Off to the \(NBC News/Wall Street Journal\) Races](#)
- [Have Voters Been Brainwashed by the Democratic Nominating Contest, or Do They Just Not Like Bush So Much Any More?](#)
- [The Red, the Blue, and the Purple](#)

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

Economic Anxiety and Bush

[NBC News/ Wall Street Journal poll of 1,018 adults, released March 11, 2004 \(conducted March 6–8, 2004\)](#)

The University of Michigan's preliminary March reading of consumer sentiment shows consumer confidence dropping again, just as it did in February. All the more reason to pay heed to the findings of the latest NBC News/ *Wall Street Journal* poll that indicates economic anxiety is likely to play a large role in the November election, and all to Bush's detriment.

The poll has Bush's approval rating on the economy at 45 percent approval/51 percent disapproval, down from 49 percent/45 percent in January. In addition, the poll now shows more respondents saying that the economy has gotten worse in the past year (35 percent) than saying it has gotten better (33 percent). That's a substantial shift from January, when 43 percent said that the economy had gotten better and only 23 percent said it had gotten worse.

And economic issues, such as jobs and economic growth, will be most important, according to

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respondents, in deciding their November vote (36 percent), followed by domestic issues such as health and education (27 percent), and followed only then by national defense issues, such as Iraq and the war on terror (18 percent). That's 63 percent saying they're going to vote on the basis of Bush's two weakest areas.

Ah, but do they hold Bush responsible for the state of the economy? After all, his favorite mantra these days is that continuing economic problems are just the lingering effects of September 11 and the situation he inherited from the Clinton administration. This poll indicates that those pesky voters indeed may hold him responsible, despite his efforts to wiggle out of it: 30 percent say that his policies are mainly responsible for the state of the economy and another 50 percent say they are partially responsible.

But the really bad news for Bush has to do with the kinds of economic problems that people are upset about and their attitude toward his tax cuts. The poll presented people with six controversial aspects of the U.S. economy; the three people said were most important to their evaluation of the economy were the number of jobs moving overseas, jobs for lower-paid workers that lack health and retirement benefits, and the budget deficit—all areas of very serious weakness for Bush. Moreover, when asked to express their feelings about these economic elements by selecting a statement, with four choices ranging from very cheerful to very gloomy, only 4 percent selected the cheerful option (“these elements don't represent a problem today and in the future and America has the same economic security it always has had”), compared to 47 percent who selected the gloomy option (“these elements are a major problem today and in the future and America no longer has the economic security it had in the past”).

As for the tax cuts, 59 percent still say that they either have hurt the economy (23 percent) or had no real effect (36 percent). And, by 55 percent to 39 percent, people say that the tax cuts are too large and should be repealed for those with over \$200,000 in income (Kerry's position), rather than that the tax cuts are the right size and should all be kept and made permanent (Bush's position).

Off to the (NBC News/Wall Street Journal) Races

[NBC News/ Wall Street Journal poll of 1,018 adults, released March 11, 2004 \(conducted March 6–8, 2004\)](#)

[American Research Group \(ARG\) poll of 770 registered voters, released March 12, 2004 \(conducted March 9–11, 2004\)](#)

The new NBC News/ *Wall Street Journal* poll has a relatively strong horse race showing for Bush (two points ahead of Kerry), compared to other recent public polls, which has occasioned some comment. [Influential blogger Josh Marshall](#), for example, noted this and wondered whether the result was “an outlier or a trend” or perhaps was due to the NBC News question being asked of all adults, instead of registered or likely voters.

The all adults hypothesis doesn't seem to fit. The most recent Gallup and ABC News polls (see below) do provide figures for all adults, in addition to registered/likely voters: in the Gallup poll, Kerry is ahead of Bush by five points among all adults, and in the ABC News poll, Kerry is ahead of Bush by eleven points among all adults.

So we can safely reject the all adults hypothesis. What about time frame? Is the NBC News poll much more recent, so perhaps they're catching a shift in the public mood? Seems doubtful. The NBC News poll was conducted March 6–8, the Gallup poll March 5–7, and the ABC News poll March 4–7. That seems too close to account for the difference, unless you believe March 8 was a very special day indeed. So, to answer Marshall's question, it seems more outlier than trend.

Actually, there were some other interesting horse race results in this poll that are at least as worthy of attention, if not more so. The poll had two tickets matched up against Bush–Cheney. The first, Kerry–Edwards, runs dead even with Bush–Cheney. The second, Kerry–Gephardt, runs six points behind Bush–Cheney. Interesting.

The poll also asked people whether they preferred that the Democrats or the Republicans control Congress after the next election. By four points, they said they preferred that the Democrats wind up in control of Congress. That may not sound like much, but in this poll, that question has not returned a pro-Democratic margin since December 1999.

The new ARG poll provides further confirmation that the NBC News result is probably more an outlier than a trend. That poll, conducted March 9–11, has Kerry over Bush by 7 points (50–43) among registered voters, including an impressive 9 point lead among all-important independent voters. It's also worth noting that, with Nader thrown in, Kerry's lead is still 6 points (48–42), with Nader only drawing 2 percent.

The ARG poll also registers Bush's approval rating at a mere 45 percent, which I believe is the lowest ever in this poll.

Have Voters Been Brainwashed by the Democratic Nominating Contest, or Do They Just Not Like Bush So Much Any More?

[Gallup poll of 1,005 adults for CNN/USA Today, released March 8, 2004 \(conducted March 5–7, 2004\)](#)

[TNS Intersearch poll of 1,202 adults for ABC News/Washington Post, released March 8, 2004 \(conducted March 4–7, 2004\)](#)

Public Opinion Watch reports. You decide.

Here are the most interesting results from the latest Gallup/CNN/USA Today and ABC News/Washington Post polls.

1. In the ABC News poll, Kerry is leading Bush by nine points (53 percent/44 percent) among registered voters. With Nader thrown in, he still leads by four points, with Nader drawing 3 percent. In the Gallup poll, Kerry leads by eight points (52 percent/44 percent) among likely voters. He also has more “hard” support (those who say they are certain to vote for him) than Bush (45 percent/38 percent). With Nader thrown in, Kerry still leads by Bush by six points (50 percent/44 percent), with Nader at just 2 percent.

Note that these two polls measure Nader support at 2 percent to 3 percent, [while the much-publicized Ipsos/AP poll](#) had his support at 6 percent. I suspect the Gallup/ABC News figures are better measures of his current support.

2. Bush’s overall approval rating in the ABC News poll is 50 percent, with 48 percent disapproval (his highest ever). His rating in the Gallup poll is 49 percent, with 48 percent disapproval (tied for his highest ever).

3. Bush’s approval ratings in the ABC News poll are only above 50 percent in two areas: the U.S. campaign against terrorism (63 percent) and protecting Americans constitutional rights and freedoms (61 percent). Significantly, his rating on the economy has now dipped below 40 percent (39 percent approval/59 percent disapproval). His other poor to very poor ratings are, in descending order: education (50 percent approval/45 percent disapproval); taxes (50 percent/47 percent); the situation in Iraq (46 percent/53 percent); the issue of same-sex marriage (44 percent/52 percent!); creating jobs (43 percent/54 percent); prescription drug benefits for the elderly (41 percent/49 percent); Social Security (38 percent/55 percent); the cost, availability and coverage of health insurance (32 percent/62 percent); and the federal budget deficit (30 percent/65 percent).

4. In the ABC News poll, Kerry is now five points ahead of Bush (49 percent/44 percent) on who would do a better job coping with the main problems the nation faces over the next few years. He also now has caught up with and surpassed Bush on who would do a better job handling the situation in Iraq (48 percent/47 percent). And he has widened his lead over Bush on dealing with the economy to twelve points (53 percent/41 percent).

5. Also in the ABC News poll, here are voters’ choices for the single most important issue in deciding their vote for president: economy/jobs (36 percent); terrorism (17 percent); Iraq (10 percent); education (8 percent); Medicare/prescription drugs (7 percent); and health care (6 percent). And here are Kerry’s leads over Bush on dealing with these issues: the economy (+12); terrorism (-21); Iraq (+1); education (+12); Medicare/prescription drugs (no data available but a reasonable guess is that Kerry would have a substantial lead); and health care (+20).

6. In the ABC News poll, 41 percent say that they want to keep moving in the direction Bush has been taking the country, compared to 57 percent who want to elect a president to take the country in a different direction.

7. Kerry beats Bush on every characteristic ABC News tested except “is a strong leader.” On “tolerant of different points of view,” he beats Bush 73 percent applies/17 percent doesn’t apply to 47 applies/51 doesn’t apply. On “honest and trustworthy,” he beats Bush 59 percent/30 percent to 54 percent/45 percent; on “understands the problems of people like you,” he beats Bush 58 percent/34 percent to 41 percent/57 percent; and on “stands up to special interests” he beats Bush 54 percent/30 percent to 51 percent/44 percent.

And even on “strong leader,” Kerry is virtually tied with Bush, 61 percent/29 percent to 63 percent/36 percent.

8. In the ABC News poll, just 26 percent say that Bush cares more about protecting the interests of ordinary working people, compared to 67 percent who say that he cares more about protecting the interests of large business corporations. That’s his worst rating ever, including during the summer of corporate scandals in 2002. In contrast, by 60 percent/23 percent, the public says that Kerry cares more about the protecting the interests of ordinary people.

9. In the Gallup poll, by 66 percent/30 percent, people say that it is inappropriate for political candidates to run campaign ads using images depicting the September 11 terrorist attacks. When asked specifically about Bush’s use of such ads, people still say by 54 percent/42 percent that it is inappropriate.

10. In the Gallup poll, 40 percent of likely voters now say that they usually, almost always, or always vote Democratic, compared to 36 percent who say that they typically vote Republican. Two months ago, Republicans had the advantage on this question, 44 percent/37 percent.

The Red, the Blue, and the Purple

David W. Moore, “[Kerry Maintains Small Lead, Bush Approval at 49 Percent](#),” Gallup Organization, March 9, 2004

The Gallup report above provides further analysis of their latest poll. In the report, they break down states into red (Bush won by 5 percent or more), blue (Gore won by 5 percent or more), and purple (the margin of victory for Gore or Bush was less than 5 percent; this includes of course almost all the swing states the current campaigns are likely to focus on). In blue states, Kerry is ahead of Bush 55 percent to 42 percent among likely voters. Not unexpected. *But in purple, swing states, he is ahead of Bush by even more, 55 percent to 39 percent.*

Also worth noting in light of the attention being paid to Nader’s candidacy: with Nader in the mix, the analogous figures are 55 percent to 42 percent in blue states and 52 percent to 39 percent in purple states.

These are intriguing figures. I got curious about how Kerry’s current performance compared to the actual vote in 2000, using the red, blue, and purple categories defined by Gallup. Here’s what I found.

In 2000, Gore lost the Gallup red states by 57 percent to 41 percent, carried the Gallup blue states by 55 percent to 40 percent, and the purple states (Florida, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Wisconsin) were a dead heat, at 48 percent to 48 percent. Today, the Gallup data (using likely voters and throwing in Nader to make the comparison more exact) show Kerry also losing in the red states, though by less (51 percent to 45 percent), running about the same in the blue states as Gore did in 2000 (55 percent to 42 percent), and

doing much better than Gore did in the purple states (52 percent to 39 percent).

What this means is that Kerry's overall lead in the Gallup poll is in no way traceable to running up the vote in the blue states; he's simply holding the Gore lead in those states. Instead, Kerry's lead over Bush is driven by exactly what the Kerry campaign would want: strongly improved performance, relative to Gore, in swing states and whittling down Bush's lead in the red states.

In light of this analysis, it's interesting to look at [a Barron's analysis by John Zogby](#) of state-by-state polling (both his own and others) that shows Kerry holding 85 percent of the blue state (defined here in the traditional way as states Gore carried, no matter how small the margin) electoral votes plus New Hampshire, Bush holding only 63 percent of the red state electoral votes, and 136 electoral votes "in play." The electoral votes in play, in Zogby's analysis, are distributed over twelve states (Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, Tennessee, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin), eight of which were carried by Bush in 2000 and only four by Gore, meaning that the Republicans have much more turf to defend than the Democrats.

That turf may be very difficult to defend if the Gallup purple state calculations are any indication of how voters in this very similar group of "in play" swing states are leaning. It's a long way to November, I'll grant you, but the Kerry campaign has got to be happy with how this election campaign is starting out.

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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.

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