



AP Poll: Bush vulnerable on jobs, Kerry weakest on national security

WASHINGTON, DC (AP) -- President Bush is vulnerable on job creation and Democratic rival John Kerry must convince voters that he can protect the country, according to an Associated Press poll.

The Associated Press Poll is conducted by Ipsos-Public Affairs. Between March 19-21, 2004, the AP/Ipsos poll interviewed a representative sample of 1,001 adults nationwide, including 784 registered voters. The margin of error is +/- 3.1 for all adults, +/- 3.5 for registered voters.

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WASHINGTON, DC (AP) -- President Bush is vulnerable on job creation and Democratic rival John Kerry must convince voters that he can protect the country, according to an Associated Press poll.

Both presidential candidates have been working hard to turn the campaign debate to their strongest subjects _ national security for the Republican incumbent and jobs for Kerry, a Massachusetts senator. Jobs are the top issue as far as voters are concerned, according to the poll, with national security trailing by about 15 percentage points.

After two weeks and tens of millions of dollars spent on negative advertising by both campaigns, little has changed in the basic landscape of a tight presidential race, the poll found. Bush was backed by 46 percent of voters, Kerry by 43 percent and independent Ralph Nader by 5 percent, according to the poll conducted for the AP by Ipsos-Public Affairs.

But that support remains fluid; fewer than 30 percent of voters say they are strong supporters of each candidate.

Margaret Topper, a 76-year-old Republican from Media, Pa., is one of those still mulling her choice. "I voted for Bush last time, but I'm not sure I will this time," she said. "The war is my problem and the debt we're incurring. But Bush stands up for what he believes and is a strong leader."

One effect of the campaign so far has been to drive down the personal popularity of both candidates, public and private polls show. Bush has been hurt by weeks of Democratic campaigning and millions of dollars' worth of advertising by various candidates throughout the

winter. More than \$17 million in advertising in recent weeks by Bush's re-election campaign have helped take the sheen off his Democratic rival.

The AP-Ipsos poll looked at the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the two closely matched candidates less than eight months before the Nov. 2 election.

Voters said they trust Bush to do a better job of protecting the country, 58 percent to 35 percent. They trust Kerry to do better at creating jobs, 53 percent to 37 percent. In campaign appearances, Kerry has emphasized job losses under the current administration, while Bush has stressed his leadership on national security.

Dwight Farrell, of Kannapolis, N.C., leans Republican but isn't happy with either candidate. "I can't think of one man who can bring us out of the turmoil we're in," said the 65-year-old former textile mill worker. "I have no faith in what George Bush is going to do. But I don't think the other one has enough sense to run the country, either."

Bush and Kerry are closely matched on some measures, like honesty, despite efforts by both to raise questions about each other's credibility. Kerry has a slight advantage on voters' perception that he cares about people like them.

Bush has a big lead over Kerry, 60 percent to 32 percent, on which candidate is the strongest leader, and almost as big a lead on which one is likely to stand up for what he believes.

People are evenly divided on which candidate has a vision for the future, highlighting the need for both to spell out thorough plans for the future rather than just criticize each other.

"I want to see which candidate slings the least mud," said Jennifer Verhoss, a 51-year-old Republican from Bradenton, Fla. "Like most of my friends, I would rather hear candidates talk about themselves and their strengths and what they have planned."

As voters wait to hear Bush and Kerry spell out their competing visions, they're taking their measure of the two candidates' personal traits.

"From my point of view, Bush has liabilities in every direction. But Kerry has got to create a perception that he will be better on national defense," said Democrat Peter Kors, a 56-year-old educator and actor from Los Angeles. "He's got to simplify his message."

Bush had a slight advantage over Democrat Al Gore on the question of strong leadership in a June 2000 AP poll, but not a double-digit lead like he has over Kerry. Bush has that advantage after more than 30 months leading the U.S. response to terrorist attacks.

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