



Misinformation and the 2010 Election

A Study of the US Electorate

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INTRODUCTION

The midterm Federal election of 2010 was the first to be conducted in the wake of the Supreme Court decision in the case of Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission. This decision struck down a provision of the McCain-Feingold election law which had prohibited corporations and unions from paying for the broadcast of election-related communications that named a candidate within 30 days of a primary or 60 days of a general election. This controversial decision freed corporations and unions to spend unlimited amounts of money on what was called “electioneering communications.” A controversial feature of this decision was that spending was to occur outside the contributions to the campaigns of candidates, and thus the campaigns were not accountable for the veracity of claims made in such communications.

The week after the election was thus a propitious time to survey the American public. Americans had been bombarded with every conceivable type of information, argument and persuasion for months, a barrage certainly unprecedented for a non-presidential election year.

A goal of the study was to determine whether Americans perceived that the information in this new environment was reliable, or whether they perceived a high level of misinformation.

In addition, another goal was to assess the quality of the information in the election environment by asking a wide range of questions on issues that were prominent in the campaign and determining whether, and to what degree, voters were misinformed on these issues.

To this end, WorldPublicOpinion.org conducted an in-depth survey of public opinion. The poll was fielded from November 6 to 15, 2010. The margin of error for the poll’s 616 self-reported voters is plus or minus 3.9%. It was conducted using the web-enabled KnowledgePanel®, a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. population. Initially, participants are chosen scientifically by a random selection of telephone numbers and residential addresses. Persons in selected households are then invited by telephone or by mail to participate in the web-enabled KnowledgePanel®. For those who agree to participate, but do not already have Internet access, Knowledge Networks provides a laptop and ISP connection. More technical information is available at <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/reviewer-info.html>.

A Note on the Question of What is “True”

A study of misinformation raises the somewhat delicate question of what is true. When dealing with topics that have been highly politicized, it is common to default to the position that all perceptions are relative and treatment of any position as more or less true is itself inherently political. We believe that such a position is at odds with what is necessary for well-functioning democracy. It is indeed very important for a healthy democratic process to be open to a wide range of positions. At the same time, it is essential that there be means and institutions for achieving consensus about key factors that ultimately affect public policy decisions.

On a regular basis government economists come to conclusions about the state of the economy. Such conclusions influence key decisions in the private sphere, as well as government decisions. Such government economists should be, and generally are, open to input from experts outside of government in the course of coming to conclusions.

In the course of this study, to identify “misinformation” among voters, we used as reference points the conclusions of key government agencies that are run by professional experts and have a strong

reputation for being immune to partisan influences. These include the Congressional Budget Office, the Department of Commerce, and the National Academy of Sciences. We also noted efforts to survey elite opinion, such as the regular survey of economists conducted by the Wall Street Journal; however, we only used this as supporting evidence for what constitutes expert opinion.

In most cases we inquired about respondents’ views of expert opinion, as well as the respondents’ own views. While one may argue that a respondent who had a belief that is at odds with expert opinion is misinformed, in designing this study we took the position that some respondents may have had correct information about prevailing expert opinion but nonetheless came to a contrary conclusion, and thus should not be regarded as ‘misinformed.’

It should also be noted that queries about expert opinion were not predicated on the idea that there is unanimity on issues. On some issues, such as climate change, there is a vocal dissenting minority among experts. Thus questions were framed in terms of whether, among experts, more had one or another view, or views were evenly divided.

The key findings of the study are:

1. Perceptions of Misleading and False Information

An overwhelming majority of voters said that they encountered misleading or false information in the last election, with a majority saying that this occurred frequently and occurred more frequently than usual.3

2. Evidence of Misinformation Among Voters

The poll found strong evidence that voters were substantially misinformed on many of the issues prominent in the election campaign, including the stimulus legislation, the healthcare reform law, TARP, the state of the economy, climate change, campaign contributions by the US Chamber of Commerce and President Obama’s birthplace. In particular, voters had perceptions about the expert opinion of economists and other scientists that were quite different from actual expert opinion.4

3. Variations in Misinformation By Voting Behavior

There were significant differences between those who voted Democratic and Republican in the level of misinformation on various issues that were prominent in the campaign and that respondents said were important in shaping their votes.16

4. Variations in Misinformation by Exposure to News Sources

Consumers of all sources of media evidenced substantial misinformation, suggesting that false or misleading information is widespread in the general information environment, just as voters say they perceive it to be. In most cases increasing exposure to news sources decreased misinformation; however, for some news sources on some issues, higher levels of exposure increased misinformation.19

FINDINGS

1. Perceptions of Misleading and False Information

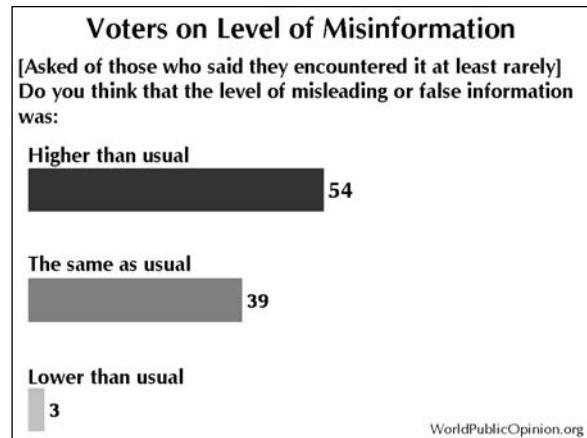
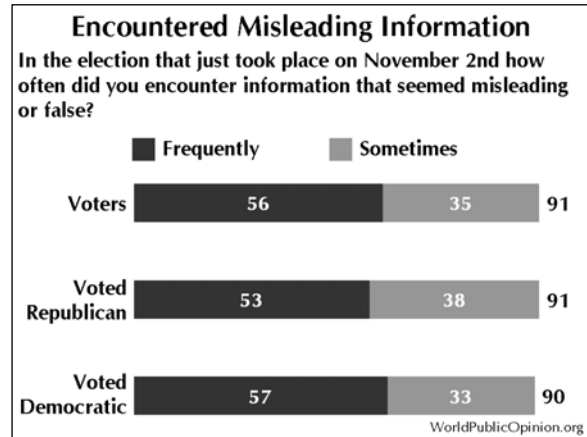
An overwhelming majority of voters said that they encountered misleading or false information in the last election, with a majority saying that this occurred frequently and occurred more frequently than usual.

Respondents were asked: “In the election that just took place on November 2nd how often did you encounter information that seemed misleading or false?” An overwhelming 91% of voters said they had encountered misleading information at least sometimes, and 56% said they had encountered it frequently. Only 8% of voters said they had encountered misleading information rarely (6%) or never (2%).

Those who said they had encountered misleading information—whether rarely, sometimes, or frequently—were then asked whether they thought “the level of misleading or false information was higher than usual, lower than usual, or the same as usual.” Among all voters, 54% thought this level was higher than usual. Only 39% of voters thought the level of misleading information the same as usual, and only 3% thought it was less.

This experience of encountering misleading information was broadly common both to those who voted Republican and those who voted Democratic. Ninety-one percent of those who voted Republican said they had encountered misleading information sometimes (38%) or frequently (53%); 90% of those who voted Democratic said they had encountered this sometimes (31%) or frequently (59%).

Voters were several points higher than the sample as a whole in reporting that they perceived misleading or false misinformation and that they perceived the level of false and misleading information as higher than usual—presumably because they were trying to be more attentive to issues in the election.



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2. Evidence of Misinformation Among Voters

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Many of the issues on which voters had significant misinformation were ones that voters said were significant in shaping their voting behavior. Respondents were asked to rate eleven different issues that were prominent in the election campaign on a 0-10 scale, with 0 meaning the issue was “not important at all” “in deciding how to vote,” and 10 meaning the issue was “extremely important.” All of the topics explored below had a mean score above 5.

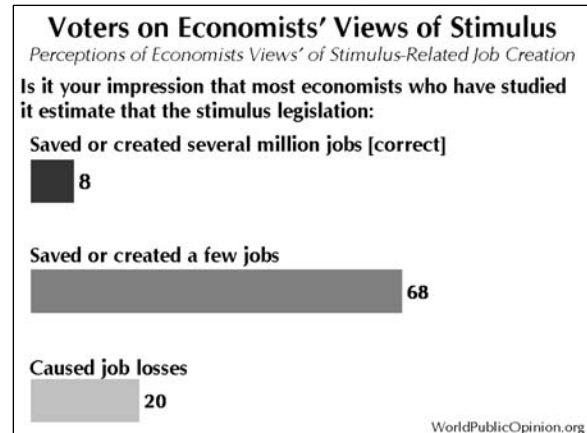
ISSUE	MEAN LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE TO THOSE WHO VOTED
The state of the economy	8.6
The unemployment rate	8.1
The healthcare reform act passed by Congress	8.0
The size of the budget deficit	7.9
The package of Congressional legislation designed to stimulate the economy, also known as the stimulus bill	7.4
The amount of federal income taxes you pay	7.0
The government bailout of banks and financial institutions, also known as TARP	7.0
The war in Afghanistan	6.7
The proposed cap and trade bill designed to address climate change	6.2
The bailout program for Chrysler and General Motors	6.1
The possibility that large amounts of foreign money were being used by the US Chamber of Commerce to influence the election	5.8

Stimulus Legislation

The Congressional Budget Office estimated that by the third quarter of 2010, the stimulus legislation had increased the number of full-time equivalent jobs by between two and five million. Other economists concurred that it had had a positive effect on the growth of the economy. However, most voters did not seem to have this information.

Respondents were asked their impression of what “most economists who have studied it estimate” about the economic impact of the stimulus. Only 8% thought that most economists estimate it has saved or created several million jobs. Eighty-eight percent thought that most economists estimated it has only saved or created a few jobs (68%) or even caused job losses (20%).

Not surprisingly, respondents’ own estimates of the effect of the stimulus legislation closely mirrored their assumptions about the estimates of economists. Among voters 11% thought that the legislation saved or created several million jobs, while 87 % thought that it has only saved or created a few jobs (61%) or even caused job losses (26%).



Those with more education were only slightly more accurate than those with less education. Notably, extreme misinformation—the belief that economists who study the question think the stimulus caused job losses--was more widespread among those with less than a high school education (23%) than those with college or more (12%). However, education made no difference in respondents’ likelihood of knowing that economists who have studied the matter estimate the stimulus saved or created several million jobs. Curiously, when people were asked what *they* thought—not what economists think—the group with the view closest to experts opinion was those with less than high school, 33% of whom said they thought the stimulus had saved or created several million jobs (college or more: 13%).¹

Effect of Stimulus Legislation

The Congressional Budget Office prepares regular estimates on the effects of the stimulus on employment. In November 2010, the CBO issued the latest in a series of reports estimating the impact of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), as the act itself requires. CBO concluded that for the third quarter of 2010, ARRA had “increased the number of full time-equivalent jobs by 2.0 to 5.2 million compared to what those amounts would have been otherwise.”²

Since 2003, the Wall Street Journal has maintained a panel of 55-60 economists which it questions regularly, in an effort to move beyond anecdotal reporting of expert opinion. The panel was frequently asked questions about the financial crisis as it unfolded. In March 2010 the panel was asked more broadly about the effect of the ARRA on growth. Seventy-five percent said it was a net positive.³

¹ Both of these analytic findings regarding education are significant at p<.000.

² See <http://cbo.gov/ftpdocs/119xx/doc11975/11-24-ARRA.pdf>

³ See <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703625304575115674057260664.html>

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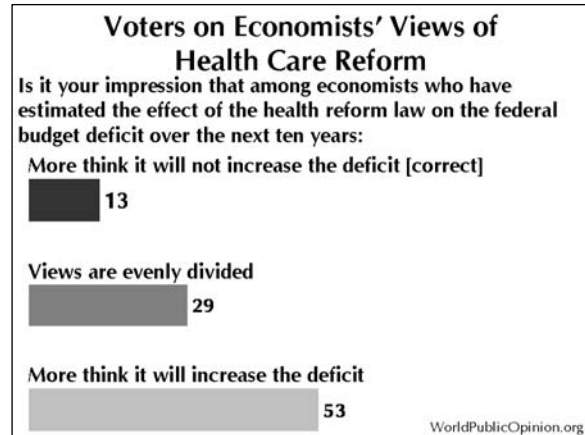
The Healthcare Reform Law and the Deficit

The CBO has concluded that the healthcare reform law (the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act) would not increase the deficit and would modestly reduce it. The perception of most voters in the election was quite different.

Respondents were asked what they thought “economists who have estimated the effect of the health reform law on the federal budget deficit over the next ten years” have concluded. Only 13% of voters thought more economists estimate health care reform will not increase the deficit. A 53% majority of voters thought that more economists estimate the legislation will increase the deficit, and another 29% thought economists are evenly divided on the question.

Asked about their own views, three quarters of voters (75%) departed sharply from the CBO, saying that they thought the healthcare reform law would increase the deficit over the next ten years. Only 23% said it would reduce the deficit.

There were no significant effects for differences in education on either question about healthcare reform.



The Healthcare Reform Law's Effect on the Deficit

In March 2010 CBO released an estimate of how the then-pending health care legislation would affect the deficit if passed. CBO calculated that the net effect through 2019 would be to reduce the deficit by \$124 billion (this figure excludes the education provisions that were also part of the legislation). Beyond 2019, the CBO estimated that the Affordable Care Act would reduce the deficit by roughly 0.5% of GDP.⁴

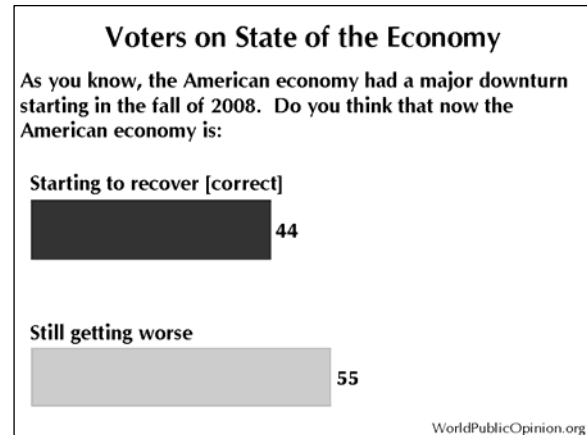
Regarding Medicare's contribution to the overall budget deficit, the 2010 annual report of the Boards of Trustees of the Medicare trust funds stated that “The financial status of the HI (Hospital Insurance) trust fund is substantially improved by the lower expenditures and additional tax revenues instituted by the Affordable Care Act. These changes are estimated to postpone the exhaustion of HI trust fund assets from 2017 under the prior law to 2029 under current law and to 2028 under the alternative scenario” (a model that made harsher assumptions). The trustees assessed that overall, “The Affordable Care Act improves the financial outlook for Medicare substantially,” although “the effects of some of the new law's provisions on Medicare are not known at this time.”

⁴ Summary in the Congressional Budget Office Director's Blog, “Cost Estimate for Pending Health Care Legislation,” <http://cboblog.cbo.gov/?p=546>

State of the Economy

The Bureau of Economic Analysis at the Department of Commerce says that the US economy began to recover from recession in the third quarter of 2009 and has continued to grow since then. However, only 44% of voters thought the economy is starting to recover, while a 55% majority thought the economy is still getting worse.

Views varied sharply by income group. Among those in income categories below \$100,000, 51-61% thought the economy is still getting worse (starting to recover, 36-45%). Among those with incomes above \$100,000, 57% thought the economy is starting to recover. But even in this upper-income group, 43% thought the economy is still getting worse.



The effects for differences in education on views of the economy were not quite strong enough to be significant. However, it is curious that those with less than a high school education were the only group in which a slight majority thought the economy was starting to recover (51% to 46%).

Status of the Economy

The US Bureau of Economic Analysis concluded in September 2010 that the recession had ended in June 2009. “In determining that a trough occurred in June 2009, the [Business Cycle Dating] Committee did not conclude that economic conditions since that month have been favorable or that the economy has returned to operating at normal capacity,” the bureau said. “Rather, the committee determined only that the recession ended and a recovery began in that month.”⁵

At the time the poll was conducted, the US Bureau of Economic Analysis had recently made its first estimate of growth in 2010’s third quarter and put it at 2.0%. On November 23 (shortly after the poll), the Bureau revised its estimate to 2.5%. The Bureau also reported that overall personal income increased 0.5% in October. Private wage and salary disbursements increased \$33 billion in October, compared with an increase of \$8 billion in September

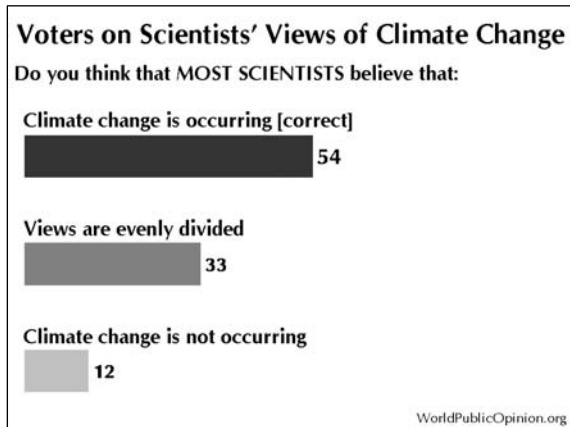
⁵ Quoted in the New York Times article “The Recession Has Officially Ended,” Sept. 20, 2010, <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/20/the-recession-has-officially-ended/>

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Climate Change

The National Academy of Sciences has concluded unambiguously that climate change is occurring. However, a substantial 45% of voters thought that most scientists think climate change is not occurring (12%) or scientists are evenly divided (33%). Fifty-four percent recognized that most scientists think that climate change is occurring.

Interestingly, in the US public overall (including non-voters), views were bit more accurate. Fifty-nine percent recognized that most scientists think climate change is occurring, while 39% thought that either most scientists believe climate change is not occurring (10%), or that expert opinion is divided on the subject (29%); a 59% majority were correct that most scientists think climate change is occurring.



Over the last decade, correct public perception about the bulk of scientific opinion has risen and fallen without stabilizing. Gallup has regularly asked:

Just your impression, which one of the following statements do you think is most accurate—most scientists believe that global warming is occurring, most scientists believe that global warming is not occurring, or most scientists are unsure about whether global warming is occurring or not?

In 2001 61% said most scientists believe global warming is occurring. This was slightly higher in 2006 and 2008 (both 65%), but then turned sharply lower in 2010 to a bare majority of 52%. In ABC/Washington Post's trend question, which asks whether "most scientists agree with one another about whether or not global warming is happening"--or "is there a lot of disagreement"--has regularly found only a minority thinking there is scientific consensus: 35% in 2006, 39-40% in 2007 and 2008, and 31-36% in 2009. This may be in part because the public's experience of "a lot of disagreement" among scientists can be based on the amount of publicity given to debate, relative to the amount of publicity given to majority consensus and the conclusions of collective scientific bodies.

Status of Scientific Consensus on Climate Change

In 2005 the United States' National Academies of Science joined the national science academies of Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, and the United Kingdom in making a joint statement about all aspects of the climate change issue. As to the reality of climate change, the academies stated: "Carbon dioxide levels have increased from 280 ppm in 1750 to over 375 ppm today – higher than any previous levels that can be reliably measured (i.e. in the last 420,000 years). Increasing greenhouse gases are causing temperatures to rise; the Earth's surface warmed by approximately 0.6 centigrade degrees over the twentieth century."⁶

The US Congress in 2008 requested The National Academy of Sciences to research climate change. The NAS's information base, in turn, rests in great part on climate change research that was mandated by the Global Change Research Act of 1990 and has been conducted by various government departments and agencies.

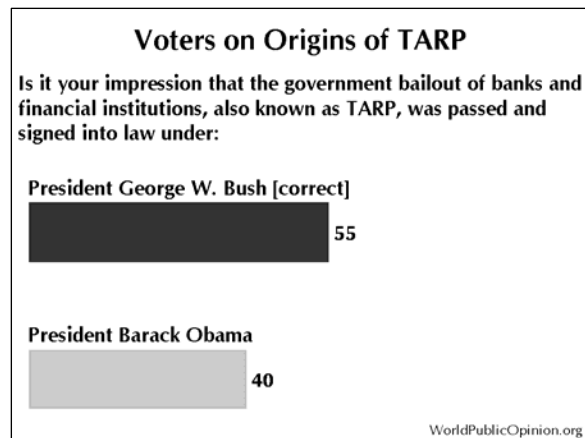
In April 2010 the Proceedings of the NAS published a study of expert opinion, "Expert credibility in climate change," which found—after surveying the publications of 1,372 climate researchers—that "97% of self-identified actively publishing climate scientists agree with the tenets of ACC [anthropogenic climate change]."⁷

In May 2010 the NAS released its most recent report, which stated: "Climate change is occurring, is caused largely by human activities, and poses significant risks for—and in many cases is already affecting—a broad range of human and natural systems. This conclusion is based on a substantial array of scientific evidence, including recent work, and is consistent with the conclusions of recent assessments by the U.S. Global Change Research Program, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Fourth Assessment Report, and other assessments of the state of knowledge on climate change."⁸

TARP

Large numbers of voters had misinformation about which President initiated the Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP). Asked which President had started the program, 40% believed incorrectly that TARP was started under President Obama, not under President George W. Bush. Fifty-five percent were correct that the program began under Bush.

Respondents were also asked their perceptions of what economic experts thought at the time the troubled assets program (TARP) was debated and initiated. Among voters there was no majority view on this question. The most common answer—by a slim margin—was that at the time, more economists thought it was necessary (45%). However, a majority (52%) had another view: 20% believed more economists thought TARP was not necessary, and 32% thought economists were divided.



⁶ National Academy of Sciences website: "Joint science academies' statement: Global response to climate change," July 6, 2005, <http://www.nationalacademies.org/onpi/06072005.pdf>

⁷ William R. Anderegg, James W. Prall, Jacob Harold, Stephen H. Schneider, "Expert credibility in climate change," <http://www.nationalacademies.org/onpi/06072005.pdf>

⁸ http://books.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=12782&page=2

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Some data on economists' views does exist, though it can only be indicative. The Wall Street Journal panel of 55-60 economists was asked in October 2008 "What effect will the government's purchase of distressed assets have on the financial crisis?" Sixty-five percent said that it would have a stabilizing effect, though most said that some problems will also persist. A minority of 35% was more dismissive, saying that it would "have a small stabilizing effect" (33%) or that it would have no stabilizing effect (2%). One month later the panel was asked whether TARP was "succeeding in helping the markets," and 63% said that it was.

Those with a college education or more were more likely to think that more economists thought TARP was necessary (52%, compared to 44% for the full sample); respondents at other educational levels responded similarly to the full sample.

TARP was passed in Congress with considerable bipartisan support. Majorities of Democrats in both houses favored it. Republicans were divided overall: a large majority of Republicans favored it in the Senate, and while House Republicans leaned negative, this was by a narrow margin. A majority of voters were correct about Democratic support for TARP, but views were mixed on how the Republicans voted.

Respondents were asked: "When Congress voted on the bailout for banks and financial institutions in 2008, please select how you think the Democrats and Republicans voted: [each] mostly favored it, mostly opposed it, or were divided." Sixty percent of voters were aware that Democrats had mostly favored TARP (opposed it, 9%; were divided, 26%). Regarding Republican congressional support, 31% thought correctly that Republicans were divided; 31% thought they mostly favored it; and 33% thought they mostly opposed it.

TARP's Origins

The Troubled Assets Relief Program was initially proposed by President Bush's Treasury Secretary Henry M. Paulson Jr. on September 19, 2008. The Program was proposed to bail out banks and financial institutions involved in the subprime mortgage crisis, which was bringing on a crisis of confidence manifested in severe stock exchange drops in the United States and worldwide. A slightly altered version won the support first of the Senate, on Oct. 1, and of the House, on Oct. 3. President Bush quickly signed the bill, called the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act.

The Senate passed the bill 74-25 (with one abstention) on October 1st, 2008. Majorities of both Democrats and Republicans voted in favor: Democrats (39 yeas, 9 nays, 1 abstention), Republicans (34 yeas, 16 nays).⁹

The House passed the bill with Senate amendments with a vote of 263 in favor and 171 opposed on October 3, 2008. A large majority of Democrats voted in favor (172 yeas, 63 nays), while Republicans leaned negative despite a large number in favor (91 yeas, 108 nays).¹⁰

Shortly afterward, Secretary Paulson decided to use the \$250 billion in the first round of funds allocated by Congress not to buy toxic assets, but to inject cash directly into banks by purchasing shares.

⁹http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=110&session=2&vote=00213

¹⁰<http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2008/roll681.xml>

The Government Bailout of General Motors and Chrysler

The bailout program for the US car manufacturers General Motors and Chrysler occurred under both President Bush—who initiated it in December 2009, when the major shock of the financial crisis was impacting the US economy—and President Obama, who continued and structured the program. However, a majority of voters had a different perception.

Respondents were asked: “Is it your impression that the bailout program for Chrysler and General Motors occurred under President George W. Bush, President Barack Obama, or both presidents?” Fifty-three percent believed the GM-Chrysler bailout occurred under President Obama only. Another 16% thought it occurred under President Bush only. Just 28% were correct that the GM-Chrysler bailout occurred under both presidents.

When respondents were probed as to whether they thought the Treasury was supposed to receive at least part of the funds back or not, most were correct. Asked, “Is it your impression that in the bailout for Chrysler and General Motors, the money was given for them to keep, or that if they get back on their feet the government will get some or all of its money back?” a very large majority (85%) understood correctly that the money was not given to them. Only 14% were mistaken.

Voters on Origins of GM and Chrysler Bailouts

Is it your impression that the bailout program for Chrysler and General Motors occurred under:

Both presidents [correct]

28

President George W. Bush

16

President Barack Obama

53

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Origins and Structure of the GM-Chrysler Bailout

The report of the Congressional Oversight Panel of TARP gives the following account of the origins of the GM-Chrysler bailout under President Bush:

“The financial crisis weakened American automakers even further, constricting credit and reducing demand, turning their long-term slump into an acute crisis. By early December, Chrysler and General Motors (GM) could no longer secure the credit they needed to conduct their day-to-day operations. Unless they could raise billions of dollars in new financing, they faced collapse... The Bush Administration then announced that it would consider making TARP funds available to the automotive industry – a reversal of its previous stance that automakers were ineligible to receive TARP assistance – and on December 19 announced that Chrysler and GM would both receive TARP funds.”¹¹

The initial allocation under the Bush administration was \$17.4 billion. Later under the Obama administration an additional \$63 billion was made available. The government required both companies to go through orderly bankruptcies as a condition of continued assistance. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the Treasury “agreed to exchange the debt positions it held in the original companies for a blend of debt, equity, and preferred shares” in the post-bankruptcy companies. As of November 2010, the companies had repurchased roughly \$11 billion in debt. After the election, General Motors made an initial public offering in which the Treasury sold some of its shares, generating \$12 billion.¹²

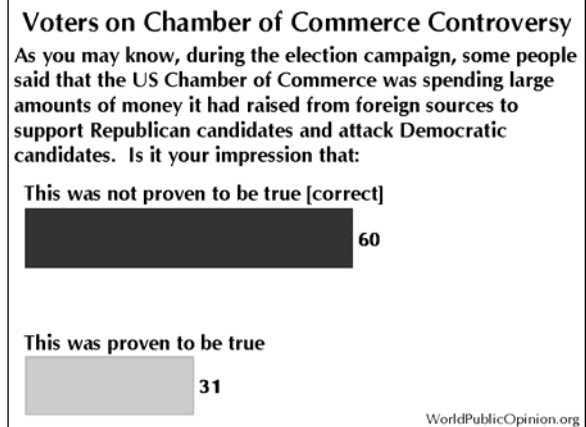
¹¹ Congressional Oversight Panel, Sept. 9, 2009, <http://cop.senate.gov/documents/cop-090909-report.pdf>

¹² Congressional Budget Office, “Report on the Troubled Asset Relief Program, November 2010,” <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/119xx/doc11980/11-29-TARP.pdf>

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U.S. Chamber of Commerce

In October an article on the website ThinkProgress.org launched the claim that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce was using large amounts of money raised from foreign sources to support Republican candidates. Most voters—60%—were aware that this charge about the Chamber of Commerce was not proven to be true. However, a substantial 31% did believe the claim that “the US Chamber of Commerce was spending large amounts of money it had raised from foreign sources to support Republican candidates and attack Democratic candidates” was proven to be true.



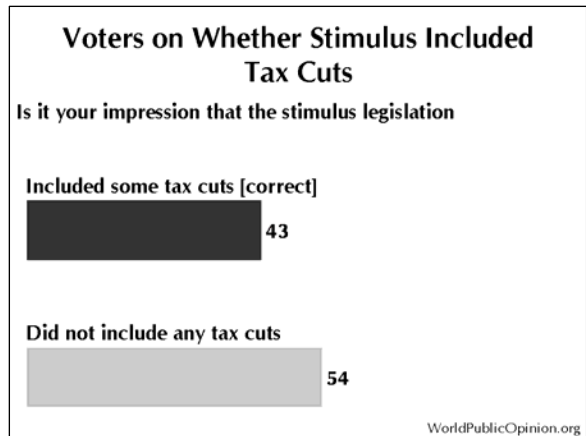
This particular piece of misinformation has a strong relationship to respondents’ educational levels. Those with less than high school were the only group where a majority (56%) believed the claim against the US Chamber of Commerce had been proven. Groups with a high school education or more were all similar to the full sample.

Claims Regarding the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Funds Raised Abroad

The site FactCheck.org--on which major news organizations frequently depend for investigation of questionable campaign assertions—stated on October 11, 2010 that “no evidence has been produced” that would support the claim that foreign money was used for political ads.¹³ Also on October 11, the site PolitiFact (which won a Pulitzer Prize in 2009) stated that “no one has offered any evidence that the Chamber of Commerce is not complying with that law” (which bars the use of of foreign funds in US campaigns), and cited an attorney for the Campaign Legal Center: "The law of the land right now is that if an organization like the Chamber of Commerce is using generally accepted accounting principles to show that you are not using foreign money to finance regulated activities, then you're in the clear."¹⁴

Income Taxes

Although the stimulus legislation included about \$288 billion in tax cuts,¹⁵ this was not the understanding of a majority of voters. Instead, a modest majority of 54% of voters believed there were no tax cuts in the stimulus legislation, while 43% knew it did include tax cuts.



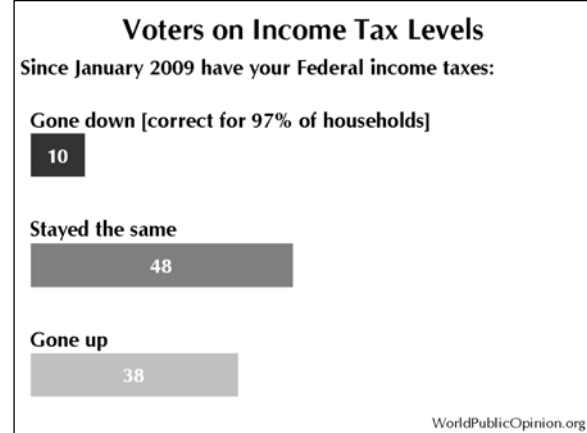
¹³ Factcheck.org, Oct. 11, 2010. See <http://www.factcheck.org/2010/10/foreign-money-really/>

¹⁴ PolitiFact, Oct. 11, 2010, <http://politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2010/oct/11/barack-obama/president-barack-obama-says-foreign-money-coming-u/>.

¹⁵ Politifact.com, Feb. 10, 2010, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2010/feb/10/jon-stewart/stewart-claims-stimulus-bill-one-third-tax-cuts/>

As part of the stimulus package, federal taxes were reduced for almost all American households. In order to quickly support consumer spending and thereby assist the economy, the reductions were delivered by lowering withholding from regular paychecks, which made the tax cut less noticeable.

When asked what change, if any, had occurred to their income taxes since January 2009, only 10% of voters were aware that their taxes had gone down. A substantially larger number—38%-- even believed that their federal income taxes have gone up during the Obama administration. Another 48% thought their taxes had stayed the same.



Interestingly, those with incomes below \$25,000 were the only income group in which a plurality (50% to 40%) believed correctly that the stimulus legislation included some tax cuts. Majorities of all other income groups were mistaken.

Income Tax Changes During the Obama Administration

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, enacted in February 2009, was designed so that \$288 billion of the full \$787 billion would take the form of tax cuts: \$237 billion toward individuals and \$51 billion for businesses. Among the largest items for individuals was a payroll tax credit (\$116 billion) for those earning less than \$75,000. Businesses were allowed to use current losses to offset profits made during the last five years (instead of two), making many eligible for tax refunds (\$15 billion).

Thus approximately one-third of the economic stimulus initiated in 2009 came in the form of tax reductions.¹⁶ The Tax Policy Center estimates that the Obama tax cuts saved 97% of U.S. households an average of \$1,179 in 2009 (the program continued in 2010).¹⁷

Tax cuts were delivered by lowering tax withheld from paychecks over time. The Obama administration's Making Work Pay credit and its expansion of the earned income credit were both built into the tax tables. Making Work Pay was administered by reducing withholding, and the earned income credit at the time tax returns were filed on April 15. The administration also extended the patch on the alternative minimum tax.

¹⁶ Howard Gleckman, "Why Nobody Noticed Obama's Tax Cuts," Tax Policy Center website, http://taxvox.taxpolicycenter.org/blog/_archives/2010/10/21/4661223.html

¹⁷ See also "Obama's Tax Cuts Deserve More Attention," *Kansas City Star*, Oct. 29, 2010, at <http://www.kansascity.com/2010/10/29/2370419/obamas-tax-cuts-deserve-attention.html#ixzz16ER6CBtQ>

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Troop Levels in Afghanistan

Although President Obama has more than doubled the number of troops in Afghanistan, four in ten voters had a different perception.

Respondents were asked, “What is your impression of what the Obama administration has done in regard to the number of US troops in Afghanistan—increased them, decreased them, or kept them the same?” Forty-three percent mistakenly believed that the Obama administration had either kept troop levels the same (20%) or actually decreased them (23%). A 55% majority was aware that the Obama administration increased the number of US troops in Afghanistan.



There were major differences by educational level in respondents’ understanding on troop levels in Afghanistan. Among those with less than a high school education, 21% knew that the Obama administration increased troops. Among those with college or more, 68% were aware of this.

Troop Levels in Afghanistan

The Obama administration has increased US troop levels in Afghanistan in two stages. In 2008 there were about 33,000 US troops in Afghanistan; as of November there were 90,000.

Obama’s Birth in the United States

From approximately spring 2008 onward, the misinformation that Barack Obama was not born in the United States has circulated widely. Respondents were asked the following:

As you may know, some people have suggested that President Obama was not born in the United States. Do you think that Obama was not born in the US, Obama was born in the US, or it is not clear whether Obama was born in the US or not?”



Forty-two percent of voters believed either that Obama was not born in the US (15%) or that it is unclear whether he was or not (27%). Fifty-six percent knew it is clear that Obama was born in the United States.

Obama's Birth

The claim that Obama was not born within the United States was proven to be false in 2008. Researchers for the site Factcheck.org examined the physical birth certificate authenticated by the state of Hawaii and provided an exhaustive account of it, together with five photographs from various angles. Factcheck's article also reproduces the birth announcement that Barack Obama's parents posted in the Sunday edition of the *Honolulu Advertiser* on August 13, 1961.¹⁸

¹⁸ For FactCheck.org's article with photographs, see http://www.factcheck.org/elections-2008/born_in_the_usa.html

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3. Variations in Misinformation By Voting Behavior

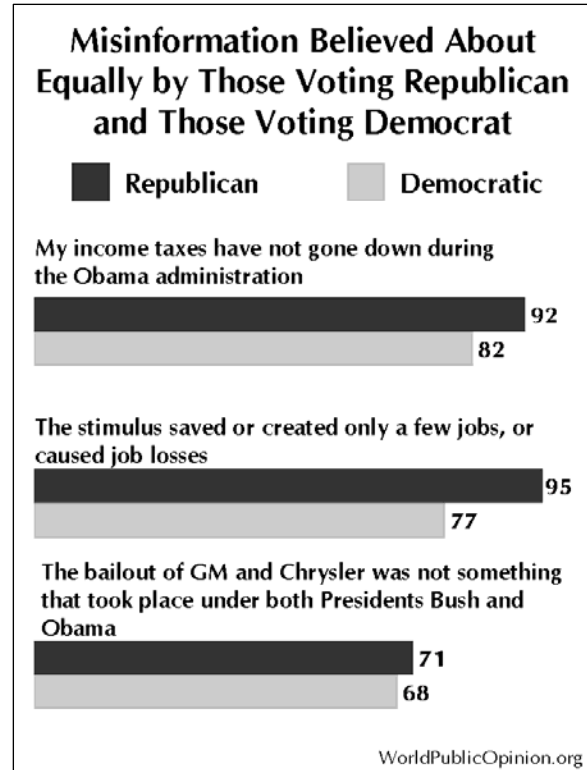
There were significant differences between those who voted Democratic those who voted Republican in the level of misinformation on various issues that were prominent in the campaign, and that respondents said were important in shaping their votes.

When respondents were asked to rate each of the issues explored in this study in terms of their importance in deciding how they would vote, they gave all the issues a mean rating above 5—both those who voted Republican and those who voted Democratic.¹⁹

ISSUE	Voted Republican	Voted Democratic
The state of the economy	8.9	8.3
The unemployment rate	8.3	8.0
The healthcare reform act passed by Congress	8.7	7.6
The size of the budget deficit	8.9	6.8
The package of Congressional legislation designed to stimulate the economy, also known as the stimulus bill	8.0	7.0
The amount of federal income taxes you pay	7.8	6.4
The government bailout of banks and financial institutions, also known as TARP	7.8	6.3
The war in Afghanistan	6.6	6.9
The proposed cap and trade bill designed to address climate change	6.7	5.9
The bailout program for Chrysler and General Motors	7.0	5.3
The possibility that large amounts of foreign money were being used by the US Chamber of Commerce to influence the election	5.4	6.2

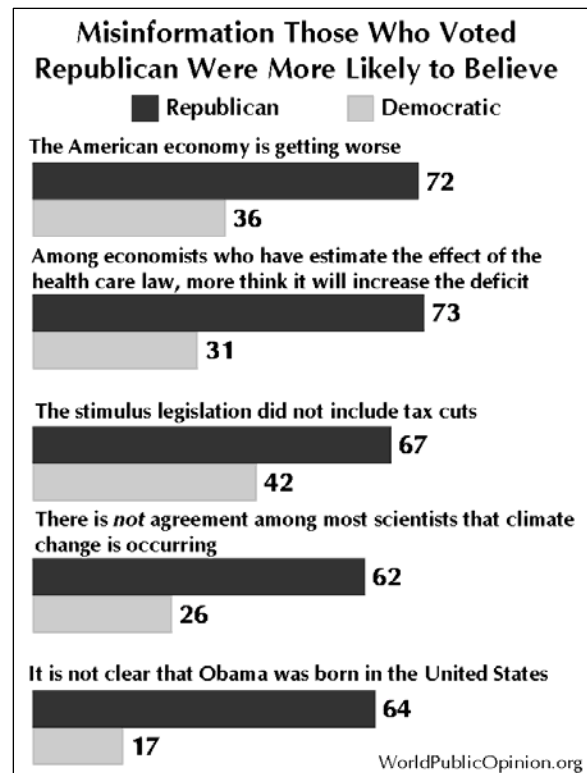
¹⁹ Respondents were identified as voting Republican or Democratic as follows. Those who said they voted in the “in the recent election held on November 2” were asked whether they voted for the Republican or Democratic candidate, or someone else, for the House of Representatives, and then, “if there was a US Senate election in your state,” which party’s candidate they voted for (the option “no Senate election in my state” was provided). The small subgroup who voted for different parties between House and Senate races, or who voted for someone from some other party in both cases, were removed from the analysis.

First, there were issues for which majorities of both voter groups had misinformation, though there were variations in the size of the majority. These included the belief that the stimulus only created a few jobs or resulted in job losses (voted Democratic 77%, voted Republican 95%), that the respondent's taxes had not gone down (voted Democratic 82%, voted Republican 92%), and that the bailout of GM and Chrysler did not occur under both Presidents Bush and Obama (voted Democratic 68%, voted Republican 71%).



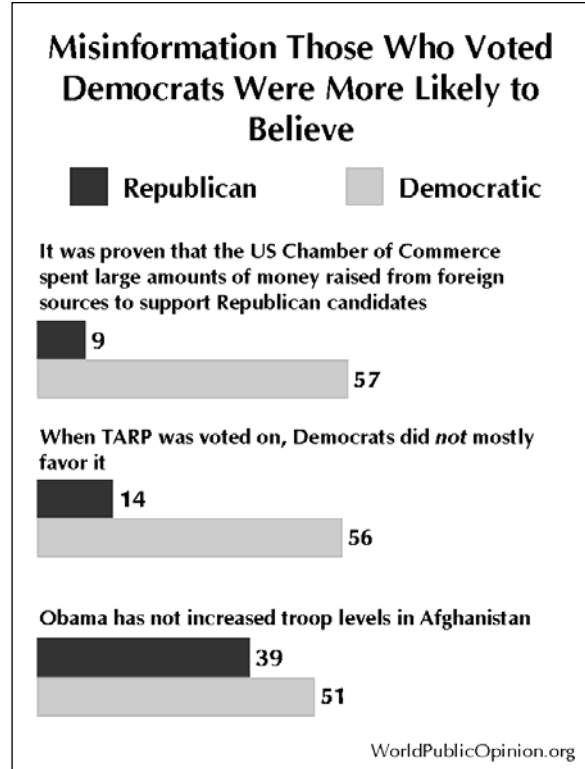
There were also some issues on which majorities of those who voted Republican evidenced misinformation, while this was the case for fewer than half of those who voted Democratic.

These were: the belief that the American economy is still getting worse (voted Republican 72%, voted Democratic 36%); that economists have concluded that the health care law will increase the deficit (73% to 31%); that the stimulus legislation did not include any tax cuts (67% to 42%), that most scientists do not agree that climate change is occurring (62% to 26%), and that it is not clear that Obama was born in the US (64% to 17%).



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On other issues most Democrats evidenced misinformation, while this was the case with less than half of Republicans. These were: the belief that it was proven to be true that the US Chamber of Commerce was spending large amounts of foreign money to support Republican candidates (voted Democratic 57%, voted Republican 9%); that Obama has not increased the level of troops in Afghanistan (51% to 39%), and that Democrats in Congress did not mostly vote in favor of TARP (56% to 14%).



4. Variations in Misinformation by Exposure to News Sources

Consumers of all sources of media evidenced substantial misinformation, suggesting that false or misleading information is widespread in the general information environment, just as voters say they perceive it to be. In most cases increasing exposure to news sources decreased misinformation; however, for some news sources on some issues, higher levels of exposure increased misinformation.

All respondents were asked the same questions about a range of news sources—for each source, whether they got news from it almost every day, about two to three times a week, about once a week, rarely or never. The news sources asked about were:

- newspapers and news magazines (in print and online)
- network TV news broadcasts
- public broadcasting (NPR or PBS)
- Fox News
- MSNBC
- CNN

Looking at the frequency of misinformation among the consumers of various news sources, one striking feature is that substantial levels of misinformation were present in the daily consumers of all news sources. Even the daily consumers of news sources with the lowest levels of misinformation still included substantial numbers with misinformation.

For each topic, the news source with the *lowest* level of misinformation among its daily consumers was as follows:

- most economists who have studied it estimate that the stimulus legislation saved or created only a few jobs or caused job losses: MSNBC, 65% misinformed
- among economists who have estimated the effect of the health reform law, more think it will increase the deficit: Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS), 38%
- the bank bailout legislation (TARP) was passed and signed into law under Pres. Obama: MSNBC, 38%
- the US economy is getting worse: Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS), 34%
- the stimulus legislation did not include any tax cuts: MSNBC, 34%
- the bailout of GM and Chrysler occurred under President Obama only: MSNBC, 32%
- since January 2009 the respondent's federal income taxes have actually gone up: MSNBC, 27%
- it is unclear whether Obama was born in the US—or, Obama was not born in the US: Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS), 24%
- when TARP came up for a vote, Democrats were opposed or divided: Fox News, 21%
- when TARP came up for a vote, most Republicans opposed it: CNN, 28%
- it was proven that the US Chamber of Commerce was spending foreign money to back Republicans: Fox News, 23%
- most scientists think climate change is not occurring or views are divided evenly: MSNBC and public broadcasting (NPR or PBS), both 20%

This suggests that misinformation cannot simply be attributed to news sources, but are part of the larger information environment that includes statements by candidates, political ads and so on.

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Furthermore, those who had greater exposure to news sources were generally better informed. In the great majority of cases, those with higher levels of exposure to news sources had lower levels of misinformation.

There were however a number of cases where greater exposure to a news source increased misinformation on a specific issue.

Those who watched Fox News almost daily were significantly more likely than those who never watched it to believe that:

- most economists estimate the stimulus caused job losses (12 points more likely)
- most economists have estimated the health care law will worsen the deficit (31 points)
- the economy is getting worse (26 points)
- most scientists do not agree that climate change is occurring (30 points)
- the stimulus legislation did not include any tax cuts (14 points)
- their own income taxes have gone up (14 points)
- the auto bailout only occurred under Obama (13 points)
- when TARP came up for a vote most Republicans opposed it (12 points)
- and that it is not clear that Obama was born in the United States (31 points)

These effects increased incrementally with increasing levels of exposure and all were statistically significant. The effect was also not simply a function of partisan bias, as people who voted Democratic and watched Fox News were also more likely to have such misinformation than those who did not watch it--though by a lesser margin than those who voted Republican.

There were cases with some other news sources as well.

- Daily consumers of MSNBC and public broadcasting (NPR and PBS) were higher (34 points and 25 points respectively) in believing that it was proven that the US Chamber of Commerce was spending money raised from foreign sources to support Republican candidates.
- Daily watchers of network TV news broadcasts were 12 points higher in believing that TARP was signed into law by President Obama, and 11 points higher in believing that most Republicans oppose TARP.

All of these effects were statistically significant.

Most economists who have studied it estimate that the stimulus legislation saved or created a few jobs or caused job losses

	Never	Rarely	About once a week	About 2-3 times a week	Almost every day
Fox News	83	89	88	88	91
CNN	90	85	90	85	84
MSNBC	89	87	92	87	64
Network TV news broadcasts	92	86	83	82	90
Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS)	85	88	87	89	87
Newspapers and news magazines (in print or online)	86	88	93	82	86

Among economists who have estimated the effect of the health reform law on the federal budget deficit over the next ten years, more think it will increase the deficit

	Never	Rarely	About once a week	About 2-3 times a week	Almost every day
Fox News	41	38	50	56	72
CNN	50	51	50	48	46
MSNBC	50	49	49	53	45
Network TV news broadcasts	56	47	44	53	49
Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS)	55	51	38	44	40
Newspapers and news magazines (in print or online)	44	47	49	52	55

Presently, the US economy is getting worse

	Never	Rarely	About once a week	About 2-3 times a week	Almost every day
Fox News	46	49	61	60	72
CNN	58	57	49	49	58
MSNBC	58	55	52	54	50
Network TV news broadcasts	64	51	60	63	50
Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS)	62	54	50	52	34
Newspapers and news magazines (in print or online)	59	54	57	52	56

Most scientists think climate change is not occurring + views are divided evenly

	Never	Rarely	About once a week	About 2-3 times a week	Almost every day
Fox News	30	37	45	36	60
CNN	51	40	39	25	25
MSNBC	49	34	35	35	20
Network TV news broadcasts	59	37	41	36	35
Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS)	49	41	36	21	13
Newspapers and news magazines (in print or online)	48	43	41	24	40

Since January 2009, the respondent's federal income taxes have actually gone up

	Never	Rarely	About once a week	About 2-3 times a week	Almost every day
Fox News	33	31	39	47	49
CNN	38	38	41	49	26
MSNBC	39	42	39	36	27
Network TV news broadcasts	31	34	46	45	38
Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS)	35	44	38	41	36
Newspapers and news magazines (in print or online)	38	40	50	31	34

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The stimulus legislation did not include any tax cuts

	Never	Rarely	About once a week	About 2-3 times a week	Almost every day
Fox News	49	45	52	52	63
CNN	56	50	53	49	44
MSNBC	55	47	56	50	34
Network TV news broadcasts	53	53	57	47	52
Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS)	56	53	56	33	33
Newspapers and news magazines (in print or online)	59	54	47	50	47

The bailout of GM and Chrysler occurred under Pres. Obama only (not Bush as well)

	Never	Rarely	About once a week	About 2-3 times a week	Almost every day
Fox News	43	46	45	57	56
CNN	51	54	42	38	48
MSNBC	51	53	44	43	32
Network TV news broadcasts	55	44	39	46	55
Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS)	53	47	47	40	41
Newspapers and news magazines (in print or online)	51	50	45	49	47

When TARP came up for a vote, most Republicans opposed it

	Never	Rarely	About once a week	About 2-3 times a week	Almost every day
Fox News	26	36	33	27	38
CNN	36	30	31	28	30
MSNBC	33	31	38	28	29
Network TV news broadcasts	30	24	31	29	41
Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS)	33	30	36	27	27
Newspapers and news magazines (in print or online)	31	28	39	31	31

It is unclear whether Obama was born in the US—or, Obama was not born in the US

	Never	Rarely	About once a week	About 2-3 times a week	Almost every day
Fox News	32	36	55	50	63
CNN	52	39	48	33	41
MSNBC	48	38	49	42	39
Network TV news broadcasts	56	39	46	43	43
Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS)	51	46	41	26	22
Newspapers and news magazines (in print or online)	55	38	49	36	45

**It was proven that the US Chamber of Commerce was spending foreign money to back
Republicans**

	Never	Rarely	About once a week	About 2-3 times a week	Almost every day
Fox News	42	27	41	35	23
CNN	26	38	37	34	42
MSNBC	26	40	38	25	60
Network TV news broadcasts	26	30	49	36	31
Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS)	30	30	45	33	55
Newspapers and news magazines (in print or online)	32	40	39	35	25

The bank bailout legislation (TARP) was passed and signed into law under Pres. Obama

	Never	Rarely	About once a week	About 2-3 times a week	Almost every day
Fox News	45	45	47	35	47
CNN	43	40	54	52	38
MSNBC	45	43	49	44	38
Network TV news broadcasts	39	41	43	39	51
Public broadcasting (NPR or PBS)	41	47	52	25	48
Newspapers and news magazines (in print or online)	44	43	47	41	44

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