

## **Bush and Cocaine Use: The Public Ho-Hums it**

Vast majorities of Americans say it wouldn't affect their vote if George W. Bush did use cocaine – or even if he just won't say. And most would be content never to know.

Fifty-three percent in an ABC News poll say Bush should not answer the question; 41 percent say he should. Nearly eight in 10, moreover, say it wouldn't effect their vote if he refused to answer; and even more say it wouldn't matter to them if he used the drug.

Bush thus looks to be clearing this hurdle comfortably. Just nine percent would be “much less likely” to support him if he doesn't answer, and six percent “much less likely” if he did take the drug. These tend to be people who don't support him anyway.

RESPONSIBILITY – Still, there is at least some potential hazard in Bush's admission of a “young and irresponsible” phase in his life. It would cost him a few points in support if those “much less likely” voters did turn away from him – not much given his current big lead, but potentially significant in a tight race.

Moreover, an irresponsible phase is not necessarily in the common experience: Nearly nine in 10 Americans over age 30 say they personally were “mature and responsible” in their late 20s, not young and irresponsible. And cocaine use, of course, is outside the practice of the vast majority. Eight percent in this poll say they've used cocaine, about the same as in ABC News polls in the mid-80s.

REACTION - The public's ho-hum reaction isn't surprising; bad behavior tends to hurt a candidate when it's contemporaneous, not a thing of the past. That's why Gary Hart's dalliance with Donna Rice so damaged him in 1987, while Bill Clinton's personal past did not in 1992. Still, what bears watching, in the post-Lewinsky era, is the broader question of any concern about Bush's character.

Questions about whether Bush ever used cocaine came to a head last week; he responded by saying he had not taken any illegal drugs since at least 1974, when he was 28. Beyond that, he said, he won't say.

FRONT-RUNNER – Cocaine brouhaha aside, Bush remains the front-runner. In a matchup against Democrat Al Gore, Bush has 49 percent support, Gore 37 percent. That's down a few points for Bush from June, but not by a significant margin.

8/22/99	49	37
6/13/99	53	36

In the Republican primary contest, Bush is steady with 56 percent support, far above his closest rival, Elizabeth Dole with 14 percent. These numbers show no real change since the ballyhooed Iowa straw poll.

	Bush	Dole	Forbes	McCain	Quayle	Buch.	Keyes	Hatch	Bauer
8/22/99	56	14	6	6	5	3	3	2	1
8/9/99	54	14	4	4	3	3	2	1	1

**METHODOLOGY** - This ABC News poll was conducted by telephone Aug. 19-22, 1999, among a random national sample of 1,031 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Fieldwork by ICR-International Communications Research of Media, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet, at:

<http://www.abcnews.com/sections/us/PollVault/PollVault.html>

1. If the election for president in the year 2000 were being held today, and the candidates were (Al Gore, the Democrat), and (George W. Bush of Texas, the Republican), for whom would you vote?

	Gore	Bush	Other (vol.)	Neither/None/ Wouldn't vote (vol.)	No opin.
8/22/99	37%	49	2	8	3
6/13/99	36	53	*	8	2
6/6/99	40	53	1	4	3
3/14/99	41	54	*	3	2
2/14/99	41	49	NA	5	5
10/25/98	34	45	NA	8	13
8/21/98	41	43	NA	8	7
1/19/98	40	45	NA	7	7
9/23/97	35	40	NA	16	9

6/6, Washington Post poll. 2/14 and previous, unleaned.

2. (Asked of leaned Republicans) Suppose your state holds a Republican primary or caucus for president in 2000 and the candidates are: (READ LIST; SCRAMBLE). For whom would you vote - I'll read the list again:

Net Leaned:

	8/22/99	8/8/99	3/14/99
George W. Bush	56	54	52
Elizabeth Dole	14	14	25
Steve Forbes	6	4	4
John McCain	6	4	2
Dan Quayle	5	3	6
Pat Buchanan	3	3	3
Alan Keyes	3	2	2
Orrin Hatch	2	1	NA
Gary Bauer	1	1	1

Lamar Alexander	NA	*	1
John Kasich	NA	NA	2
Bob Smith	NA	NA	*
Other (vol.)	*	*	*
None (vol.)	1	2	*
Would not vote (vol.)	*	2	*
No opinion	3	7	2

3. Do you think Bush should answer the question of whether he used cocaine when he was younger, or should he not answer that question?

	Answer	Don't answer	No opin.
8/22/99	41	53	5

4. If Bush does not answer the question about using cocaine, would that make you more likely to vote for him, less likely, or wouldn't it make much difference in your vote? (IF MORE/LESS LIKELY: Is that much or somewhat (MORE/LESS) likely?)

	----More likely----			----Less likely----			No	No
	NET	Much	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Much	diff.	opin.
8/22/99	4	3	1	15	6	9	79	2

5. And if it turns out that Bush did use cocaine when he was younger - say, 25 years ago when he was 28 years old - would that make you more likely to vote for him, less likely, or wouldn't it make much difference in your vote?(IF MORE/LESS LIKELY, PROBE: Is that much or somewhat (MORE/LESS) likely?)

	----More likely----			----Less likely----			No	No
	NET	Much	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Much	diff.	opin.
8/22/99	3	2	1	11	5	6	84	1

6. How would you describe yourself when you were in your late 20s - as young and irresponsible, or as mature and responsible? (If under 30: How would you describe yourself - as young and irresponsible, or as mature and responsible?)

	Responsible	Irresponsible	No opin.
8/22/99	86	13	*

7. Confidentially and for statistical purposes only - have you yourself ever used cocaine, or not?

	Yes	No	No opin.
8/22/99	8	92	*
8/26/86	8	92	*
5/13/85	9	91	*