

IGNORANCE, PARTISANSHIP DRIVE FALSE BELIEFS ABOUT OBAMA, IRAQ

False beliefs about the invasion of Iraq and President Obama's citizenship still flourish among Americans, according to the most recent national survey from Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind. More than four-in-ten Americans say it is likely that U.S. forces found active weapons of mass destruction program in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, and nearly a fifth say that President Obama "probably" or "definitely" is not a citizen of the United States. Beliefs like these are strongly connected with partisanship and media choices, with Republicans and Fox News viewers being more likely to endorse them, but conspiracies thrive elsewhere, as well: twenty percent of non-white Americans, for instance, think that the Secret Service is intentionally leaving Obama unprotected.

"Our leaders in Washington can't seem to agree on much," said Dan Cassino, a professor of political science and the director of experimental research for the poll. "But when the public can't even agree on basic facts about politics, maybe we shouldn't be surprised."

Overall, 42 percent of Americans believe that U.S. forces found active weapons of mass destruction program in Iraq. Republicans are more likely to hold this belief than Democrats: fifty-one percent of Republicans think it's "probably" or "definitely" true that an active program was found after the 2003 invasion, with 14 percent saying that it was definitely true. Still, large portions of other groups think that the WMD program, a major part of the justification for the invasion, was actually found, including 32 percent of Democrats. Part of the confusion may come from reports that individual chemical weapons shells, and related items have been found in Iraq, mostly thought to be vestiges of a WMD program shut down after the U.S.-led invasion in 1991.

"People who think we did the right thing in invading Iraq seem to be revising their memories to retroactively justify the invasion," said Cassino. "This sort of motivated reasoning is pretty common: when people want to believe something, they'll twist the facts to fit it."

The major split in these views seems to arise from partisanship, and the broadcast media divide on the issue bears this out. Respondents were asked about which news sources, in particular, they get their news from, as well as which television news they consider to be their primary source of information. Individuals who reported getting their news from Fox were more likely to say that the WMD program had been found, with 52 percent saying that it was "probably" or "definitely" true, and those who get their news from MSNBC were the least likely, with only 14 percent saying the same.

“It’s easier for people to maintain false beliefs when they avoid media sources that might refute them,” said Cassino. “So it’s no surprise that people who watch ideological media are better able to hold on to these sorts of beliefs.”

Another commonly held false political belief concerns the president. Despite six years in office, and the release of his long-form birth certificate, 19 percent of Americans say that it’s “definitely” or “probably” true that President Barack Obama is not legally a citizen of the United States. This belief is most prevalent among the president’s opponents: 34 percent of Republicans think it’s likely, along with 22 percent of independents, and just seven percent of Democrats.

Media choices seem to play a role in this belief, as well. Thirty percent of Fox News viewers say that Obama is “probably” or “definitely” not a citizen, and another nine percent say that they do not know. In comparison, only 13 percent of CNN viewers, and seven percent of MSNBC viewers say the same. Individuals who say that their main source of news consists of political satire programs, like *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight*, are least likely to think Obama isn’t a citizen, with only 11 percent saying so, compared with 24 percent who primarily rely on cable or network broadcasts. In a prior survey, in [December 2012](#), 36 percent of Americans, and 64 percent of Republicans, agreed with the broader statement that “President Obama is hiding important information about his background and early life.”

“Birtherism has become less of a hot topic since Obama’s reelection, but that doesn’t mean that it’s gone away,” said Cassino. “It seems that there’s literally nothing that can be done to convince skeptics that Obama really was born in Hawaii.”

Higher levels of political knowledge tend to reduce the likelihood that Americans will endorse these false beliefs. To measure how much attention respondents are paying to current events, the survey asked three questions about the government: Which party currently controls the House of Representatives? What are the three branches of government? Name the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. All told, one third of respondents were unable to answer any of the questions correctly, 26 percent got one right, 27 percent got two right, and just 13 percent correctly answered all three. On the questions of Obama’s citizenship and WMD in Iraq, higher levels of political knowledge correspond with lower levels of belief. Of those who were unable to answer any of the questions correctly, 21 percent say that Obama is “definitely” or “probably” not a citizen, and 46 percent say that a WMD program was found in Iraq. Among the smaller group that answered all of the questions correctly, these figures fall to 13 and 20 percent, respectively.

“It’s tempting to believe that people have these beliefs because they just don’t know better,” said Cassino. “But statements like these are about what people want to believe, and no amount of education is going to trump that.”

Not all conspiracy theories and false beliefs come from the right side of the political spectrum. Just 13 percent of Americans think that the recent lapses on the part of the Secret Service are part of an intentional plot to leave the president unprotected, but 20 percent of non-whites think it's "probably" or "definitely" true. This belief doesn't seem to be related to television media choices, but Democrats are more likely to endorse it than Republicans, largely because non-whites are disproportionately Democratic.

"African-Americans are more likely to believe that in governmental conspiracies in general," said Cassino. "However, given the past assassinations of civil rights leaders, and medical experimentations carried out by the government on African-Americans, it's understandable."

The Fairleigh Dickinson University poll of 964 was conducted by telephone with both landline and cell phones from December 8 through December 15, 2014 and has a margin of error of +/- three percentage points.

Methodology, questions, and tables on the web at: <http://publicmind.fdu.edu>

Radio actualities at 201.692.2846

For more information, please call 201.692.7032

Methodology

The most recent survey by Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind was conducted by telephone from December 8 through December 15 using a randomly selected sample of 964 adults nationwide. One can be 95 percent confident that the error attributable to sampling has a range of +/- three percentage points. The margin of error for subgroups is larger and varies by the size of that subgroup. Survey results are also subject to non-sampling error. This kind of error, which cannot be measured, arises from a number of factors including, but not limited to, non-response (eligible individuals refusing to be interviewed), question wording, the order in which questions are asked, and variations among interviewers.

PublicMind interviews are conducted by Opinion America of Cedar Knolls, NJ, with professionally trained interviewers using a CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) system. Random selection is achieved by computerized random-digit dialing. This technique gives every person with a landline phone number (including those with unlisted numbers) an equal chance of being selected.

Landline households are supplemented with a separate, randomly selected sample of cell-phone respondents interviewed in the same time frame. The total combined sample is mathematically weighted to match known demographics of age, race and gender.

Tables

American forces found an active weapons of mass destruction program in Iraq									
	Overall	Party ID			Race		Education		
		Dem	Indp	Rep	White	Non-White	HS or less	Some College	College Grad +
Definitely True	11	8	8	14	12	9	11	14	9
Probably True	31	24	38	37	31	31	40	34	25
Probably Not True	23	24	21	22	22	24	20	21	25
Definitely Not True	26	38	21	18	25	30	17	23	34
Don't Know (Vol)	9	7	11	9	9	6	13	8	7
Refused (Vol)	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0

American forces found an active weapons of mass destruction program in Iraq									
	Overall	Age				Knowledge Score			
		18-29	30-44	45-59	60+	0	1	2	3
Definitely True	11	8	10	13	11	10	12	13	9
Probably True	31	40	27	30	29	36	39	24	11
Probably Not True	23	26	31	16	18	21	24	23	25
Definitely Not True	26	18	22	33	32	20	20	33	49
Don't Know (Vol)	9	8	9	8	10	12	6	7	6
Refused (Vol)	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0

American forces found an active weapons of mass destruction program in Iraq											
	Overall	Source				Network		Primary Source			
		CNN	Fox	MSNBC	Daily Show	Yes	No	Cable news	Network news	Political satire	Combo
Definitely True	11	12	18	2	11	11	12	15	8	20	10
Probably True	31	29	34	12	20	31	27	30	33	39	26
Probably Not True	23	23	26	24	37	22	25	29	20	9	21
Definitely Not True	26	28	15	55	28	26	31	20	32	25	31
Don't Know (Vol)	9	8	8	7	5	9	5	6	8	7	12
Refused (Vol)	1										

President Obama is not legally a citizen of the United States			
	Party ID	Race	Education

	Overall	Dem	Indp	Rep	White	Non-White	HS or less	Some College	College Grad +
Definitely True	6	3	6	10	8	4	7	8	6
Probably True	13	4	16	24	16	7	15	18	10
Probably Not True	21	14	20	27	19	24	30	20	16
Definitely Not True	51	75	46	30	48	59	37	44	63
Don't Know (Vol)	7	3	11	9	8	5	11	7	5
Refused (Vol)	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	3	0

President Obama is not legally a citizen of the United States											
	Overall	Source				Network		Primary Source			
		CNN	Fox	MSNBC	Daily Show	Yes	No	Cable news	Network news	Political satire	Combo
Definitely True	6	4	11	2	5	8	6	7	7	9	5
Probably True	13	9	19	5	11	15	8	17	17	2	12
Probably Not True	21	20	30	5	11	18	28	23	18	18	19
Definitely Not True	51	62	30	81	72	53	49	44	52	61	62
Don't Know (Vol)	7	5	9	5	0	6	9	9	5	7	3
Refused (Vol)	1	0	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	0

President Obama is not legally a citizen of the United States										
	Overall	Age				Knowledge Score				
		18-29	30-44	45-59	60+	0	1	2	3	
Definitely True	6	3	5	10	8	6	8	7	5	
Probably True	13	13	13	15	12	15	12	15	8	
Probably Not True	21	27	25	15	17	23	23	16	15	
Definitely Not True	51	51	49	53	53	44	49	57	67	
Don't Know (Vol)	7	5	8	6	8	10	8	4	5	
Refused (Vol)	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	0	

The Secret Service is intentionally leaving President Obama unprotected

	Overall	Party ID			Race		Education		
		Dem	Indp	Rep	White	Non-White	HS or less	Some College	College Grad +
Definitely True	5	6	5	3	4	8	6	7	3
Probably True	8	10	7	5	6	12	12	8	5
Probably Not True	31	27	33	33	31	31	37	31	28
Definitely Not True	50	51	48	55	54	41	36	46	61
Don't Know (Vol)	5	6	8	3	5	7	9	7	3
Refused (Vol)	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1

The Secret Service is intentionally leaving President Obama unprotected											
	Overall	Source				Network		Primary Source			
		CNN	Fox	MSNBC	Daily Show	Yes	No	Cable news	Network news	Political satire	Combo
Definitely True	5	7	5	5	4	5	8	6	5	12	4
Probably True	8	9	7	12	12	7	7	10	6	9	9
Probably Not True	31	31	26	24	35	29	36	29	31	26	25
Definitely Not True	50	48	60	60	47	54	42	52	53	42	56
Don't Know (Vol)	5	5	3	0	3	4	7	3	5	12	6
Refused (Vol)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Number of Political Knowledge Items Answered Correctly											
	Overall	Source				Network		Primary Source			
		CNN	Fox	MSNBC	Daily Show	Yes	No	Cable news	Network news	Political satire	Combo
0	33	20	11	18	8	18	13	14	21	17	16
1	26	31	28	18	31	33	32	31	37	30	23
2	27	35	40	24	34	33	38	36	30	38	37
3	13	13	21	39	27	16	18	19	12	16	24
<i>Mean</i>	<i>1.2</i>	<i>1.4</i>	<i>1.7</i>	<i>1.8</i>	<i>1.8</i>	<i>1.5</i>	<i>1.6</i>	<i>1.6</i>	<i>1.3</i>	<i>1.5</i>	<i>1.7</i>

Number of the 3 conspiracies that were "probably" or "definitely" true									
	Overall	Party ID			Race		Education		
		Dem	Indp	Rep	White	Non-White	HS or less	Some College	College Grad +
0	55	66	50	46	55	56	45	51	64
1	31	26	35	37	32	32	40	33	26
2	12	7	13	15	12	10	13	15	9
3	2	1	2	2	1	2	2	1	1

Party Identification											
	Overall	Source				Network		Primary Source			
		CNN	Fox	MSNBC	Daily Show	Yes	No	Cable news	Network news	Political satire	Combo
Republicans	42	61	19	76	74	43	45	39	41	61	46
Democrats	20	20	6	8	9	18	23	13	21	16	19
Independents	38	20	75	16	17	39	32	48	38	23	35

Exact Question Wording and Order

US1 through US3 released December 17, 2014

EDUC1 thru EDUC6 held for future release

H1 through H4 released...

RENT1 through RENT2 withheld

And turning to some items in the news recently...

PN1 Can you name the three branches of government?

- 1 Correct answer: Legislative, judicial, executive (or congress, courts. Presidency)
- 2 Incorrect response
- 8 DK (vol)
- 9 Refused (vol)

PN2 Just your best guess... do you know which party controls the US House of Representatives

- 1 Republicans (correct)
- 2 Democrats
- 8 DK (vol)
- 9 Refused (vol)

PN3 And again, just your best guess, can you tell me who the current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court is?

- 1 John Roberts (correct)
- 2 Someone else
- 8 DK (vol)
- 9 Refused (vol)

For each of the following statements, could you tell me whether you think the statement is definitely true, probably true, probably not true, or definitely not true.

- 1 Definitely true
- 2 Probably true
- 3 Probably not true
- 4 Definitely not true
- 8 DK (vol)
- 9 Refused (vol)

[Randomize CONS1 thru CONS6]

CONS1 withheld for future release

CONS2 President Obama is not legally a citizen of the United States

CONS3 Global warming is a myth propagated by scientists

CONS4 Early childhood vaccinations cause autism

CONS5 The Secret Service is intentionally leaving President Obama unprotected

CONS6 American forces found active weapons of mass destruction program in Iraq

[ROTATE NEWS1 THROUGH NEWS3]

Americans now have more ways than ever before to get their news about politics and world affairs.

NEWS1 [If first in series]: Can you tell me if you get your news and information from cable news networks? [If not first in series]: What about news and information from cable news networks?

If yes, which one?

- 1 CNN
- 2 Fox
- 3 MSNBC
- 4 BBC
- 5 Other

NEWS2 [If first in series]: Can you tell me if you get your news and information from network news broadcasts, like those on CBS, ABC and NBC? [If not first in series]: What about news and information from network news broadcasts, like those on CBS, ABC and NBC?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 8 DK (vol)
- 9 Refused (vol)

NEWS3 [If first in series]: Can you tell me if you get your news and information from political satire shows, like the Daily Show, Colbert [COAL-BEAR] Report, or Last Week Tonight with John Oliver? [If not first in series]: What about news and information from political satire shows, like the Daily Show, Colbert [COAL-BEAR] Report, or Last Week Tonight with John Oliver?

If yes, which one?

Responses precoded

- 1 Daily Show
- 2 Colbert Report
- 3 Last Week Tonight with John Oliver
- 4 Other
- 8 Dk (vol)
- 9 Refused (vol)

NEWS4 *Of all of those you named, which would you say you rely on the most for news and information about politics and world affairs?*

[Open: use precodes]

- 1 Cable news
- 2 Network news
- 3 Political satire shows
- 4 Combo (vol)
- 8 DK (vol)
- 9 Refused (vol)

Sample Characteristics

		Registered voters N = 994; MoE = +/- 3
Gender	<i>Male</i>	49%
	<i>Female</i>	51%
Age	<i>18-29</i>	22%
	<i>30-44</i>	26%
	<i>45-59</i>	26%
	<i>60+</i>	24%
	<i>Refused</i>	1%
Race	<i>White</i>	68%
	<i>African American</i>	10%
	<i>Hispanic</i>	13%
	<i>Asian</i>	3%
	<i>Other/Refused</i>	7%
Party (with leaners)	<i>Dem</i>	39%
	<i>Ind/DK/Refused</i>	27%
	<i>Repub</i>	35%