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**Rasmussen Poll on Bush Tax Cuts Is Just One of Many** by Mark Blumenthal

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"The people speak: Keep the Bush Tax Cuts." So [reads](http://www.nypost.com/p/news/national/the_people_speak_keep_bush_tax_cuts_PTDJsaRik0aKCrNCN5oDDK) the headline in today's *New York Post*.

Really?

I tend to flinch at declarations about the feelings of "the people," especially when based on survey questions that assume most Americans *have* pre-existing opinions on the subjects being probed. Just last week the Pew Research Center provided another [reminder](http://people-press.org/report/635/) that many Americans struggle to identify political figures, foreign leaders or facts central to public policy debates. They find, for example, that only 28% can identify John Roberts as the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court and only 34% know that the TARP bailout of banks and financial institutions was enacted when George W. Bush was president.

As such, one of my first rules of poll interpretation is to remember that many Americans pay scant attention to policy debates, so their answers typically amount to *reactions* to the ideas and language presented rather than expressions of *pre-existing* opinion.

With that in mind, let's go back to the lead sentence of the *New York Post* article that inspired the headline:

Americans by a wide majority want to extend former President George W. Bush's tax cuts, and more than half believe that letting them expire will further hurt the country's shaky economy, according to a survey released yesterday.

The [survey](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/business/taxes/august_2010/54_favor_extension_of_bush_tax_cuts) is an automated, recorded-voice telephone poll of 1,000 "likely voters" conducted August 1-2, 2010 conducted by Rasmussen Reports. Here are the results of the two [questions](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/toplines/pt_survey_toplines/august_2010/toplines_bush_tax_cuts_august_1_2_2010) highlighted by the *Post* article:

Should the Bush Administration tax cuts be extended or should the tax cuts end this year?

54% Tax cuts should be extended
30% Tax cuts should end this year
16% Not sure

Suppose you had a choice between extending the Bush Administration tax cuts for all Americans or extending the Bush Administration tax cuts for everyone except the wealthy. Which would you prefer?

48% Extending the Bush Administration tax cuts for all Americans
40% Extending the Bush tax cuts for everyone except the wealthy
12% Not sure

These questions follow two others that ask respondents how closely they have been following news reports about "the tax cuts implemented during the Bush years" and whether an expiration of "Bush Administration tax cuts" will help or hurt the economy. Not until the fourth question do respondents hear any mention that those tax cuts might benefit "the wealthy," and even then they do not define what "wealthy" means. You might wonder how many even heard the words "except the wealthy" in that last question before pressing the "1" or "2" on their touch-tone phones.

Now compare the Rasmussen results to two similar questions asked in recent weeks (via the [Polling Report](http://pollingreport.com/budget.htm)). First, a [survey](http://www.foxnews.com/projects/pdf/073010_Economy.pdf) of 900 registered voters conducted July 27-28, 2010 by Fox News and Opinion Dynamics:

As you may know, a series of tax cuts that were passed at the beginning of former President George W. Bush's term are set to expire this year. If you were president, would you continue the tax cuts for everyone, continue the tax cuts for everyone except families earning more than $250,000 dollars a year, or allow the tax cuts to expire and let taxes go back up to their previous level?

44% Continue for everyone 36% Continue for those under $250,000
14% Allow to expire
6% Unsure

Next, consider a similar question posed by a Pew Research/National Journal Congressional Connection [poll](http://people-press.org/report/639/) of 1,004 adults conducted July 22-25, 2010:

Which comes closer to your view about the tax cuts passed when George W. Bush was president? All of the tax cuts should remain in place. Tax cuts for the wealthy should be repealed, while others stay in place. All of the tax cuts should be repealed.

30% Keep all the tax cuts
27% Repeal the tax cuts for the wealthy
31% Repeal all the tax cuts
12% Unsure

So the Rasmussen story shows more likely voters prefer to extend the Bush tax cuts for everyone rather than letting them expire for the wealthy, while the Fox and Pew Research surveys show plurality or majority support for letting the Bush tax cuts expire entirely or only for the wealthy.

What's going on here? First, Americans like having their taxes cut. The more general the question, and the more it implies that *everyone* gets a tax cut, the more positive the response. Second, all three polls show that Republicans are more enthusiastic about keeping the Bush tax cuts in place than Democrats. That means that about a third of Americans react favorably to the notion of leaving all of the Bush tax cuts in place, regardless of question wording and format. The partisan skew in the results also tells us that the Rasmussen survey, which samples only "likely voters" (using an undisclosed definition), likely produces a more Republican-leaning sample, especially in the current environment in which Republicans are far [more](http://people-press.org/report/630/) [enthusiastic](http://www.gallup.com/poll/141557/Democrats-Maintain-Advantage-Generic-Ballot.aspx) about voting than Democrats are.

Finally, we ought to be especially cautious about that final Rasmussen question, as it provides no clear answer category for those who want to say "neither" (i.e. those who want all of the Bush tax cuts to expire).

What these seemingly contradictory results imply, however, is that a large number of Americans are hazy on the details of whose taxes were cut when George W. Bush was president, whether those cuts were intended to be temporary or permanent, what impact they have had on the deficit and the terms of the current debate. As such, their reactions to poll questions on the subject may vary widely depending on the language used and the options offered.

If you want to produce a poll finding that supports your side of the tax-cut debate, you probably can, but the voice of "the people" may not be as clear as some headlines make it out to be.

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