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College Students: Mobilized, Engaged, and Backed Kerry Turnout was High, Voting was Easy, “Moral Values” Top Issue

A hallmark of the 2004 election was a historic high youth voter turnout, and college students led the way with 77% of them going to the polls. College students chose John Kerry over George W. Bush by 55-41%. But there wasn't a big shift in party identification, as the same percentage of college students as all voters, 37%, called themselves Democrats. Kerry won the college vote because Independent college students preferred him by 62-27%.

These were among the key findings of the first national post-election survey of college students. The poll of 1,200 college students also found that mobilization was high, with almost half being contacted by a political party and a college group. Nearly nine in ten followed the election closely and a similar share thought voting was easy. Two-thirds voted at home instead of on campus. There were also sharp differences in candidate preferences by college major.

Conducted the week after the election, the survey was designed by Professor Richard Niemi of the University of Rochester and Professor Michael Hanmer of Georgetown University, with the assistance of John Della Volpe, whose firm Schneiders/Della Volpe/Schulman conducted the survey, and of David King, Harvard University. It is among only a few studies of college students that include students living both on and off campus. Funding was provided by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE).

High turnout – 77% of the college students surveyed said they voted. According to CIRCLE's analysis of national exit poll data and vote tallies, approximately 42% of all 18-24s voted, up from 36.5% in 2000, and 52% of 18-29 year olds voted, up from 42% four years ago. In recent years, college students have been nearly twice as likely to vote as young people who do not attend college, CIRCLE researchers said.

Majors matter – While a majority of college students voted for Kerry, his support varied by field of study. Sixty-six percent of arts and humanities majors and 63% of social science majors voted for Kerry. Bush had the strongest support among students of education (51%), the sciences (46%) and business (46%).

Heavy mobilization – Efforts to mobilize youth in the 2004 campaign went beyond celebrity appeals and included intensive grassroots work, both partisan and nonpartisan. Almost half (47%) of all students – and 57% of those who attend college in a “battleground” state – said they were contacted by a political party during the campaign. Of those contacted, 56% voted for Kerry, while 39% voted for Bush. Close to half (46%) said they were encouraged by their college or a group at their college to register.

“Research shows that young people tend to participate when they're asked, and that's exactly what happened on college campuses this year,” said CIRCLE Director William A. Galston.

“College students tend to be interested in politics and are an easily identifiable population,” Professor Hanmer said. “The results provide strong evidence that college students were considered valuable allies of the political parties, especially in the most contested states.”

Students participated – Sixty-two percent said that they had encouraged or helped someone else to vote. That’s nearly double the roughly one third of all voters who said they had tried to influence someone else’s vote in 2000, according to the National Election Study.

Students were attentive – More than 85% said they followed the presidential election very or somewhat closely. Nearly three-quarters said they talked about politics at least once a week. By way of comparison, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) survey of college freshmen found that 22.4 percent discussed politics weekly in 2003, and that was an increase compared to 2002, following two decades of decline.

Few problems at the polls – In general, college students said they had little difficulty voting. Nearly 90% (88.8) said they found it “very easy” or “fairly easy” both to obtain and to cast an absentee ballot. Fewer than one in 25 (3.6%) said they tried to register but were unable to.

“Our results suggest that students overall had remarkably few problems,” said Niemi. “Of course, even a few problems are more than one would like. Nonetheless, the image of large numbers of students being prevented from voting (effectively by the difficulties encountered or in reality) appears to be a gross exaggeration.”

Most voted at home -- Of those who were registered, two-thirds are registered in their home town. Though turnout was high overall, turnout among those who registered at home and did not change their place of registration was more than 7 percentage points lower than turnout among those who registered for the first time at their school address and those who switched their registration from their home address to their school address.

Moral issues most important – College students were divided about the most important issue, but more (26%) cited “moral values issues such as gay marriage and abortion” than chose any other issue. A similar 22% of all Americans chose “moral values” as their top issue in the exit polls. College students who were concerned about moral issues preferred Bush over Kerry by 60% to 37%.

The situation in Iraq (cited by 22%), the economy (18%), and terrorism (15%) followed as the next most important issues for college students. For all voters, the most important issues after “moral values” were the economy (chosen by 20%), terrorism (19%), and Iraq (15%). College voters were less concerned about health care (3%) and taxes (2%) compared to older voters and young voters who are not in college.

Phone interviews were conducted with 1,200 college students, including those living on-campus, off-campus, and at home. Interviews were conducted between November 9 and 19, 2004. The margin of error for this survey is ± 2.8 percent at the 95% confidence interval, but is higher for subgroups. Today’s results are preliminary and subject to adjustments after weighting.

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Funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and Carnegie Corporation of New York, and housed at the University of Maryland’s School of Public Policy, **CIRCLE** (www.civicyouth.org) is a premier source of impartial, nonpartisan, and comprehensive data, research, and analysis on the civic engagement of young people.