



## CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research on  
Civic Learning & Engagement

### The New Social-Issues Voters *How Today's Youth are Redefining "Moral Values"*

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Following last November's election, pollsters and pundits immediately focused on voters' concerns with "moral values" as the primary explanation for President George W. Bush's four-percentage-point, 34-electoral vote victory. This explanation found support in exit polls conducted on Election Day; the National Election Pool (NEP) national exit poll found that a plurality of respondents (23 percent) claimed that "moral values" comprised the most important factor influencing their voting preference. Although no single issue drew a majority of support, more respondents chose "moral values" as their primary issue than chose "economy and jobs" (21 percent), terrorism (15 percent) or Iraq (14 percent).<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1 – Top Issues Among Voters in the 2004 Election by Age Group**

<i>Top Issue</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Voters Age:</i>	
	<i>Voters</i>	<i>18-24</i>	<i>25+</i>
Taxes	5%	8%	5%
Education	4%	8%	4%
Iraq	15%	14%	15%
Terrorism	19%	15%	19%
Economy/Jobs	20%	21%	20%
Moral Values	22%	23%	22%
Health Care	8%	6%	8%

Source: Author's Tabulations from the National Election Pool National Exit Poll 2004.

According to the NEP national exit poll, 69 percent of the moral-values voters age 18-24 (henceforth, MVVs) reported voting for President Bush, while only 29 percent said they voted for John Kerry. This figure represented the largest percentage of voters who preferred Bush on any particular issue, in contrast to the young voters who selected the economy and the war in Iraq as "most

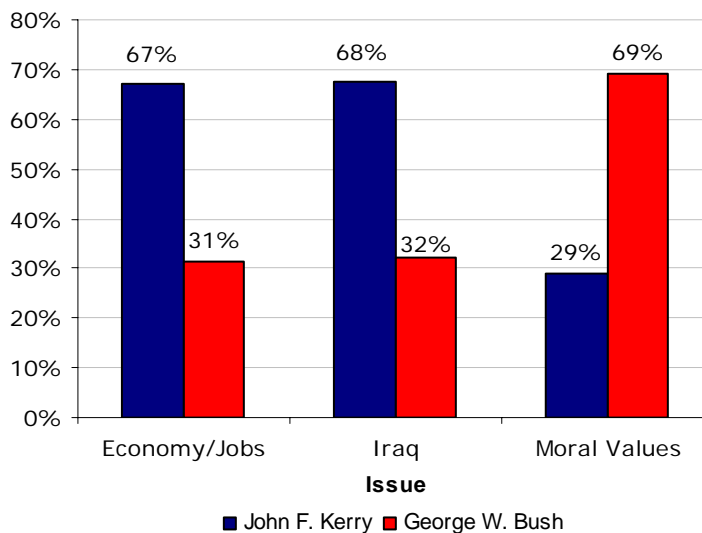
important.” These voters chose Kerry over Bush by more than a 2-1 margin (see graph 1).

The percentage of young voters who categorize themselves as MVVs does not differ significantly from the percentage for other age groups (see graphs 2, 3), even though young people are confronted with many issues and concerns particular to their age group, including the needs to do well in school, to gain admittance to and pay for college, and to avoid contracting a sexually transmitted disease.<sup>3</sup>

However, among

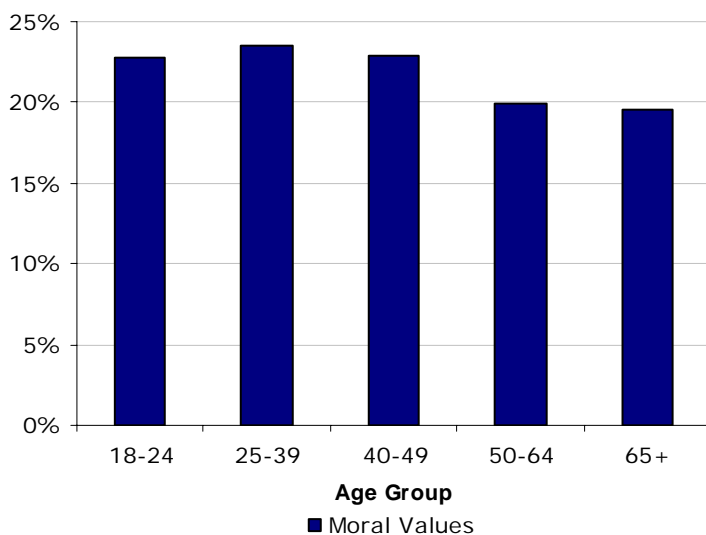
American young adults (ages 18-25), the party divide among MVVs is not as immediately apparent as it is among older Americans. According to the National Youth Survey<sup>4</sup> released by CIRCLE in January of 2004, 48 percent of young Democrats claimed that moral issues were a very important<sup>5</sup> consideration when forming their candidate preference, while the same percentage of Republicans did so. (Unlike the exit polls, the National

**Graph 1: Voting by Most Important Issue in 2004 Among 18-24 Year Old Voters**



Source: National Election Pool National Exit Poll, November 2004.

**Graph 2: Percent of Voters Claiming Moral Values as Most Important Issue, by Age Group**

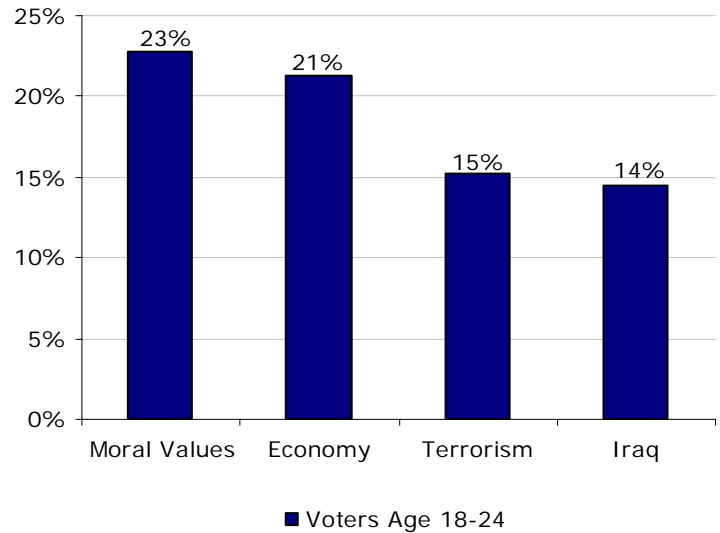


Source: National Exit Poll, November 2004

Youth Survey did not force respondents to choose one “most important” issue.) More independents – 62 percent – reported that moral values were a very important consideration in determining for whom to vote (see graph 4). Although equal percentages of young Democrats and Republicans said that moral issues were “very important” in determining their voting preferences, more than twice as many voters who identified moral values as the single most important criterion voted for Bush as for Kerry.

Some might consider the number of young Democrats who consider moral values "very important" surprising, as young people tend to maintain a more secular and more liberal lifestyle than their parents, and religiosity and conservatism have long been considered predictors of moral values-based voting.<sup>6</sup> However, though they are less likely to identify with traditional definitions of faith, young people still maintain an internal spirituality and a keen sensitivity to moral issues.

≡ **Graph 3: Issues Claimed As "Most Important" By 18-24 Year Old Voters**



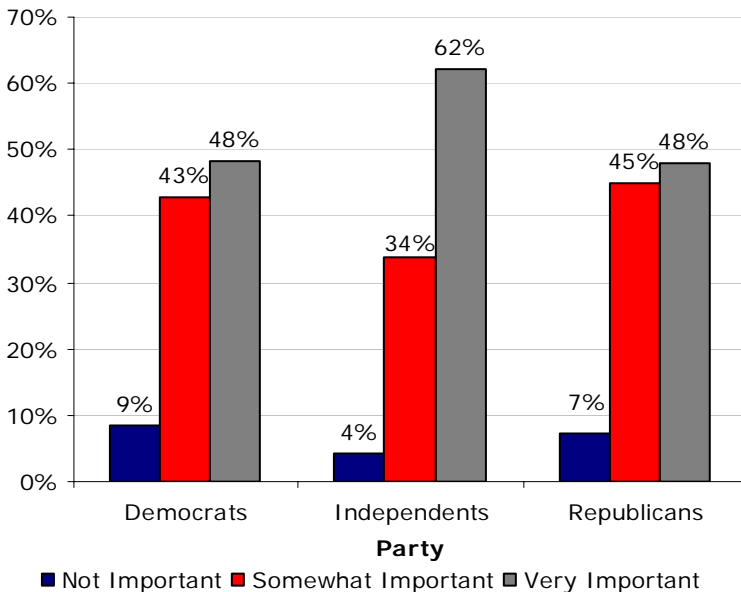
Source: National Exit Poll, November 2004

**Trends in moral-values voting**

also emerge not only between young people and the generations that preceded them but also within the young adult population itself. The youngest respondents in the 2004 National Youth Survey (15-17 year olds) reported slightly higher levels of importance of moral issues than the older respondents

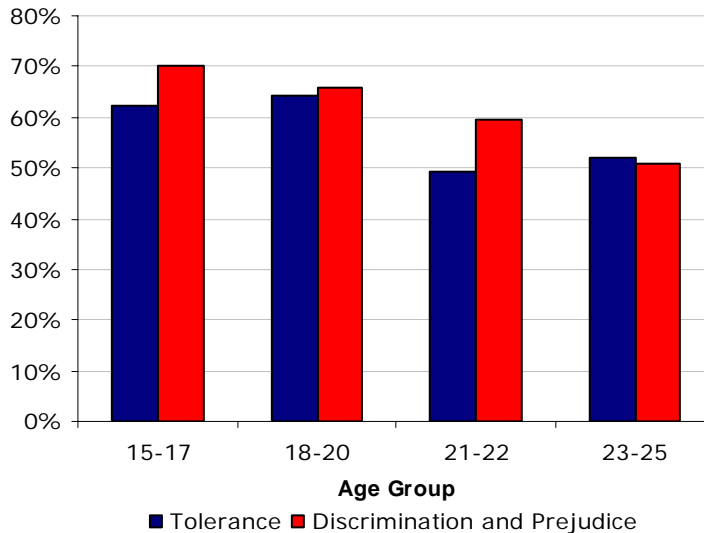
(23-25 year olds), although the difference was not statistically significant. Also, the youngest respondents surveyed reported significantly higher levels of tolerance and concern about prejudice and discrimination (see graph 5).

≡ **Graph 4: Importance of Moral Issues in Deciding Whom to Vote for, 18-24 Year Olds**



Source: National Youth Survey, January 2004

**Graph 5: Percent of Young People Claiming Tolerance and Discrimination as "Very Important", by Age Group**

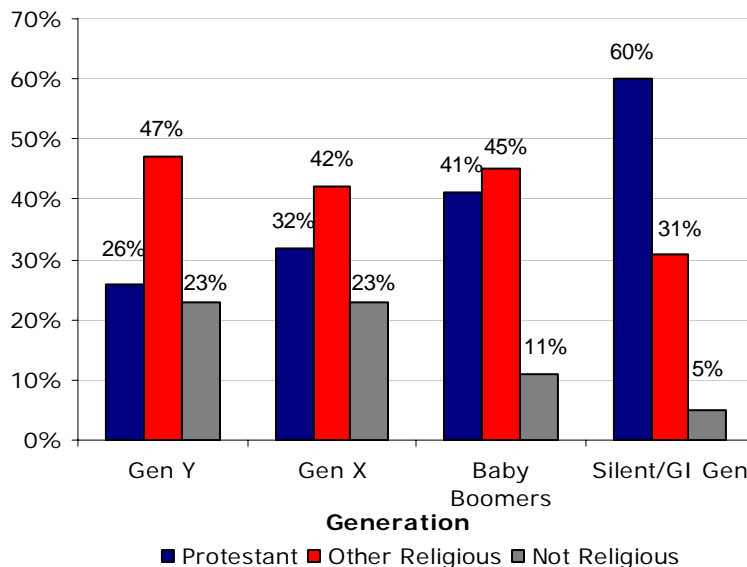


Source: National Youth Survey, January 2004

***What Makes Moral Values Important to Young People?***

Adults consider moral values important for a number of reasons: either because of their religious inclinations; because they are raising families; because their social networks revolve around religious conservative or religious progressive ideas; or for several other reasons.<sup>7</sup> However, it is less clear why younger people are also very concerned about the role of moral values in today's society, especially considering the number of issues that concern their particular generation.

**Graph 6: Religious Belief Across Generations**

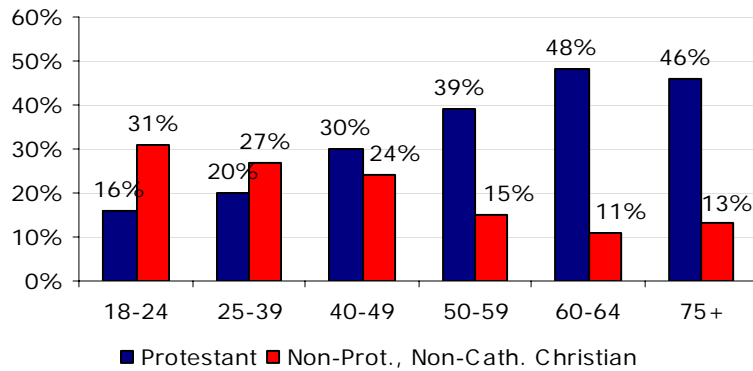


Source: "OMG! How Generation Y Is Redefining Faith In The iPod Era", Reboot, 2005

According to the National Youth Survey, born-again young evangelical Christian voters are more likely than others to report that moral values are important to

them; however, in 2004, both born-again and others reported that moral values were relatively important (born-again mean = 8.19; non-born-again mean = 7.27).<sup>8</sup> While, as expected, young born-again Christians maintained more conservative opinions on issues such as support for gay marriage<sup>9</sup> (mean = 2.75) and support for gay adoption (mean = 2.74) than non-born-again young people (gay marriage mean = 2.26; gay adoption mean = 2.27)<sup>10</sup>, both care equally about social and moral issues such as abortion, teen pregnancy, and discrimination.<sup>11</sup>

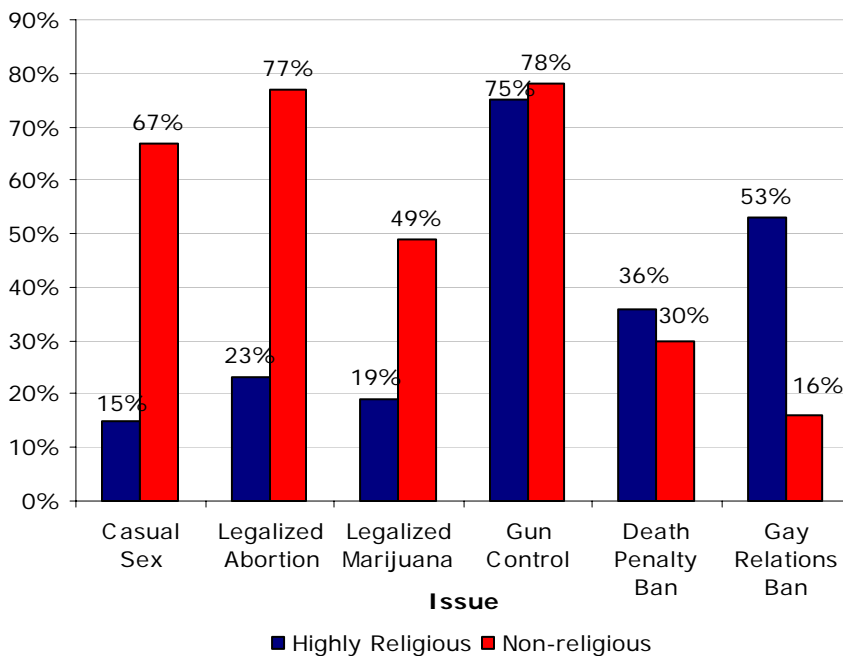
**Graph 7: Percent of Protestants and Non-Catholic, Non-Protestant Christians in Age Group Among Voters**



Source: National Exit Poll, November 2004

Although both religious and non-religious young people reported placing similar importance on moral values, the religious makeup of voters has continued to change. While only six percent of those born before the Baby Boom reported that they were either atheist, agnostic, or held no religious preference, 23

**Graph 8: Percent of Religious and Non-Religious Four-Year College Students Approving of Key Social Issues**



Source: "The Spiritual Life of College Students," April 2005

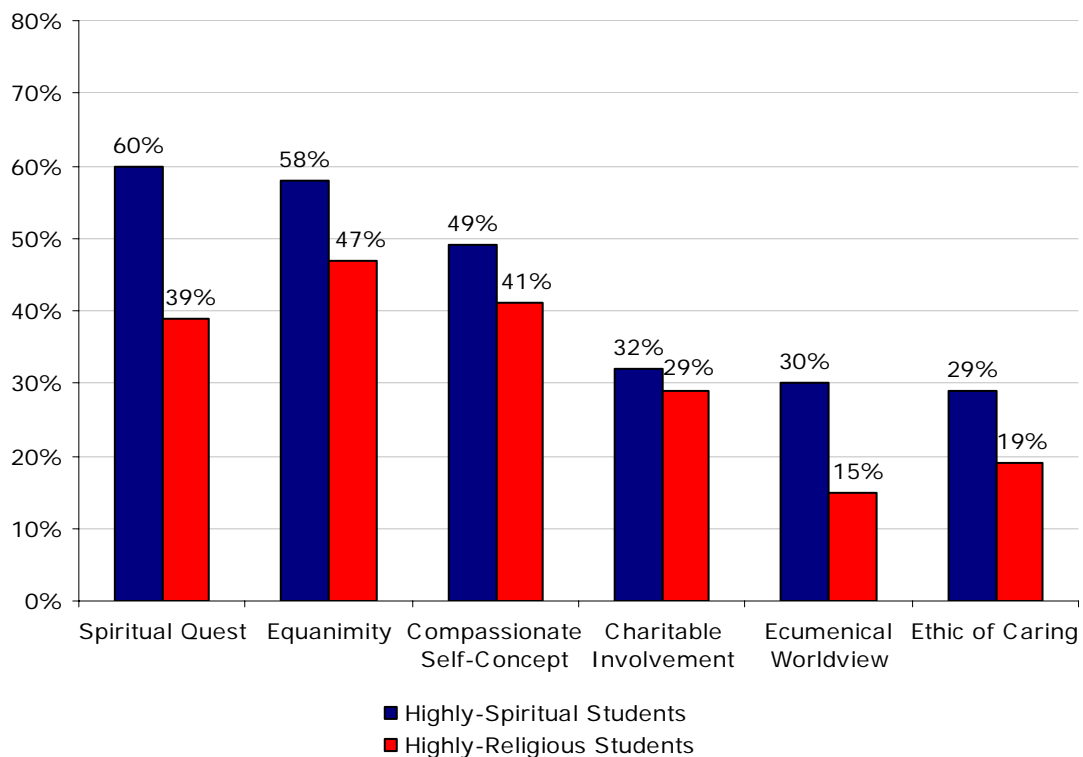
percent of the members of Generation Y<sup>12</sup> reported non-belief or no religious ties, a nearly four-fold difference (see graph 6).<sup>13</sup> Additionally, fewer young voters reported subscribing to a Protestant faith while more claim to be non-Protestant, non-Catholic Christians (see graph 7).<sup>14</sup>

Although both non-religious and highly religious college students cite moral values as important, there are striking differences between

their respective definitions of moral values. Highly religious college students of any faith are more than four times as likely to report being “conservative” or “far right” in their political beliefs, while less-religious college students are more than twice as likely to report holding “liberal” or “far left” views. Gaps between highly-religious and non-religious students manifest themselves on issues such as casual sex (only 15 percent of highly religious students condone it; while 67 percent of non-religious students do), legalized abortion (23 percent vs. 77 percent), marijuana legalization (19 percent vs. 49 percent) and homosexual relations (53 percent of highly religious students favor a ban, while 16 percent of nonreligious students do).

However, on one moral issue, religious students support a more liberal agenda than non-religious students (see graph 8). Highly religious students are more likely than nonreligious students to support a ban on the death penalty (36 to 30 percent).

■ **Graph 9: Percent of Highly-Spiritual and Highly-Religious Four-Year College Students Scoring Highly on Social Scales**



Source: "The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose." April 2005.

From these findings, it is obvious that conservatives and organized religious groups do not have a monopoly on young MVVs, especially among those who currently attend college. So what causes other young people, the more liberal and less devout, to become MVVs? Despite not being religious, many young people claim to maintain a significant spiritual aspect of their lives.<sup>15</sup> Although only 40 percent of college students believe it is essential or very important to

“follow religious teachings in everyday life,” nearly twice that number “have an interest in spirituality” (80 percent) or “search for meaning or purpose in life” (76 percent). It is these non-religious yet spiritual students who account for many of the more liberal of the MVVs. Compared to highly religious students, highly spiritual students are more likely to have a 'compassionate self-concept,' to be involved in charitable organizations, to have an 'ecumenical worldview,' and to possess a 'caring ethic' (see graph 9).<sup>16</sup> Even many of those who are neither spiritual nor religious possess strong moral convictions and express their support for ideals of tolerance and equity.

### ***Tolerance as Defining Youth Characteristic***

The defining moral characteristic that separates today's youth from older generations may be their increased tolerance for other religions, races, and sexual orientations.<sup>17</sup> Two-thirds of students disagree with the statement that “people who don't believe in God will be punished,”<sup>18</sup> while nearly as many (63 percent) say they care greatly about issues of discrimination and prejudice.<sup>19</sup> Even among people age 15-25, the youngest are more likely to support legal recognition for homosexual marriages and are more likely to favor gay rights, although the differences are not statistically significant.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> CIRCLE Research Assistant. All errors in fact or interpretation are my own. I would like to thank Bill Galston, Emily Kirby, Peter Levine, and Mark Hugo Lopez for comments and help on previous versions of this fact sheet.

<sup>2</sup> From the National Election Pool National Exit Poll. While “moral values” received a plurality of support in the exit poll, if the war in Iraq and terrorism had been combined into one category, moral values would have been the second-most important issue. A summary of issues with the interpretation of the moral values findings can be found at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/11/05/opinion/meyer/main653931.shtml>.

<sup>3</sup> “OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era,” Reboot. April 2005. CIRCLE co-funded the study.

<sup>4</sup> Survey of 1000 young adults age 15-25, conducted November 2003. Questionnaire and toplines can be found at: [http://civicyouth.org/PopUps/youth\\_survey\\_2004\\_questionnaire.pdf](http://civicyouth.org/PopUps/youth_survey_2004_questionnaire.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> “Very Important” indicates an importance rating of 8, 9, or 10 on a scale of 1-10.

<sup>6</sup> “OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era.”

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Moral values importance measured on a scale from 0 (unimportant) to 10 (extremely important).

<sup>9</sup> Author’s calculations based on 2004 National Youth Survey

<sup>10</sup> Gay marriage and gay adoption opinions measured on a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree).

<sup>11</sup> Author’s calculations based on 2004 National Youth Survey

<sup>12</sup> Generation Y includes all people born in or after 1980. Generation X includes everyone born from 1965-1979. The Baby Boom includes everyone born from 1946-1964. The GI Generation includes everyone born from 1924-1945.

<sup>13</sup> “OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era,” Reboot. April 2005.

<sup>14</sup> National Election Pool, national exit poll conducted by Edison Research and Mitofsky International. November 2004.

<sup>15</sup> “The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose,” Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA. April 2005.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> “OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era.” Also see “Attitudes of Young People Towards Diversity” by Michael Olander, Emily Hoban Kirby, and Krista Schmitt, CIRCLE, February 2005.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*



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<sup>19</sup> "Caring greatly" indicates an importance rating of 8, 9, or 10 on a scale of 1-10. From the National Youth Survey.