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College students in the 2004 Election

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November 2004

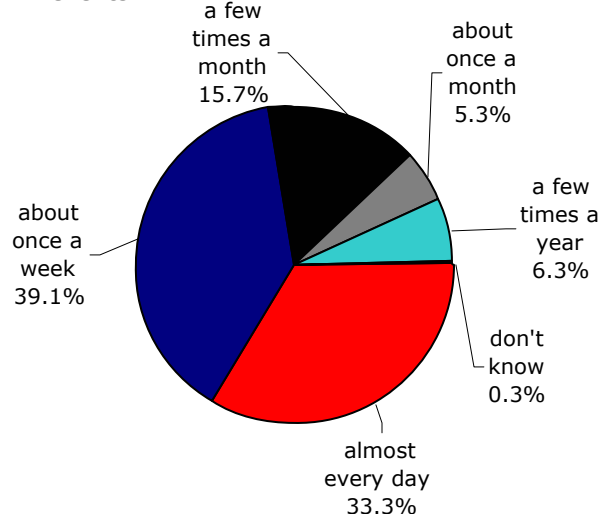
The first national, post-election study focused on college student registration and turnout in a presidential election was designed and reported by Professor Richard Niemi of the University of Rochester and Professor Michael Hanmer of Georgetown University. Assisting with the survey design were John Della Volpe, whose firm Schneiders/Della Volpe/Schulman conducted the survey, and of David King, Harvard University. Funding was provided by CIRCLE.

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. The results are preliminary and subject to adjustments after weighting.

Introduction

Efforts to mobilize youth in the 2004 campaign were perhaps the most extensive on record, with numerous groups on and off college campuses attempting to register students and to get them to the polls. At the same time, stories circulated of problems on college campuses due to laxity of campus officials in providing information about how and where to register and to possibly over-zealous local officials denying students the right to register at their campus

Graph 1: Outside of class, how often do you discuss politics and current events?



addresses. This survey confirmed the widespread mobilization efforts but, happily, found many fewer problems than anticipated.

I. Students Were Active

Students avidly followed the campaign.

More than 85% of the students said they followed the presidential election very or somewhat closely (43% very closely; 45% somewhat closely; 9% not too closely; 4% not closely at all). Nearly three-quarters said they talked about politics at least once a week (discuss politics and current events outside of class: 33% almost every day; 39% about once per week; 16% a few times per month; 12% less than once a month)

Most students were registered to vote, and turnout was high.

Nearly 90% (88%) of the students said they were registered to vote. Of these, nearly 90% (88%) said they voted. This means that overall, some 77% of the students said they voted. Similar percentages of freshmen through seniors voted.

This rate of turnout is very high when compared to non-college students. According to CIRCLE's analysis of national exit poll data and vote tallies, approximately 42% of all 18-24s voted. Thus, in 2004 as in other recent years, college students were nearly twice as likely to vote as young people who do not attend college.

For many students, this was not their first time voting. Some 36% said they had voted previously even though many were not old enough to have voted in a previous presidential election. Still, a slightly higher percentage of college students age 18-24 voted for the first time than 18-24 year olds who participated in exit polls (59% vs. 55%).

Turnout was higher among those registered at their college address.

A major argument among advocates for easier college voting is that more students would go to the polls if they could register and vote at their campus addresses. Evidence from the survey supports this conjecture. Turnout among those who registered at home and did not change their place of registration was lower, by about 8 percentage points, than turnout among those who registered for the first time at their school address and about 10 percentage points lower than those who switched their registration from their home address to their school address. Of course, these results need to be analyzed in more detail, as those registering for the first time and those switching their registration may have been more enthusiastic and more often located in battleground states.

Most voted for president, Congress, and more.

One might think that students were only interested in the presidential race, or perhaps the presidency and Congress. Even though many lived for a long time at their "home" addresses, most of that time was before they were able to vote.

Few might know or care about state or local offices. In fact, of those who voted, only 13% voted exclusively for president and another 8% voted only for president and Congress. Fully 79% voted for other offices as well.

II. Mobilization was high; colleges, or college groups, played a role in getting students registered.

Some concern was expressed in the weeks before the election that colleges and universities receiving federal funds had failed in their duty, according to the 1998 amendments to the Higher Education Act, to make good-faith efforts to distribute voter registration forms to every student. While our survey did not directly measure efforts by college administrations, close to half (46%) of the students recalled being encouraged "by your college or a group at you college" to register.

Students themselves were good mobilizers. Sixty-two percent said that they had encouraged or helped someone else to vote.

Political parties were also active on campus; more active in battleground states.

Contacting college students can be difficult for the parties because campuses are to some extent closed to outsiders and because students change addresses relatively often. Given these problems, the extent of contacting was impressive. Overall, 47% of students were contacted by a political party by phone/in person, by mail/email, or both. When compared to the results from exit polls, 18-24 year olds overall were more likely to be contacted by phone or in person (31%) than 18-24 year college students (25%). Nonetheless, the rate of contacting among college students was impressive.

Students going to college in battleground states were more likely to be mobilized: 57% going to college in battleground states were contacted by a political party by phone/in person, by mail/email, or both compared to 41% going to college in a non-battle ground state.

More students were contacted by a political party by mail or email than by phone/in person. Overall, 38% of students reported being contacted by mail or email and 25% by phone or in person. (Twenty-three percent were contacted by mail/email only, 10% by phone/in person only, and 15% by mail/email and phone/in person.)

Contacting varied by whether the student attends a college in a battleground state. Overall, 43% of those going to college in battleground states were contacted by mail/email compared to 34% in non-battleground states; and overall, 33% of those going to college in battleground states were contacted by phone/in person compared to 19% attending a college in a non-battleground state.

III. Most Students Voted at Home, and Most Found Voting Easy.

A chief concern for those promoting higher turnout among college students is whether they would find voting difficult—either because of the perceived hassle in voting absentee or problems incurred when trying to vote at their campus locations. Data from the survey suggests that such problems were much less frequent than might have been anticipated.

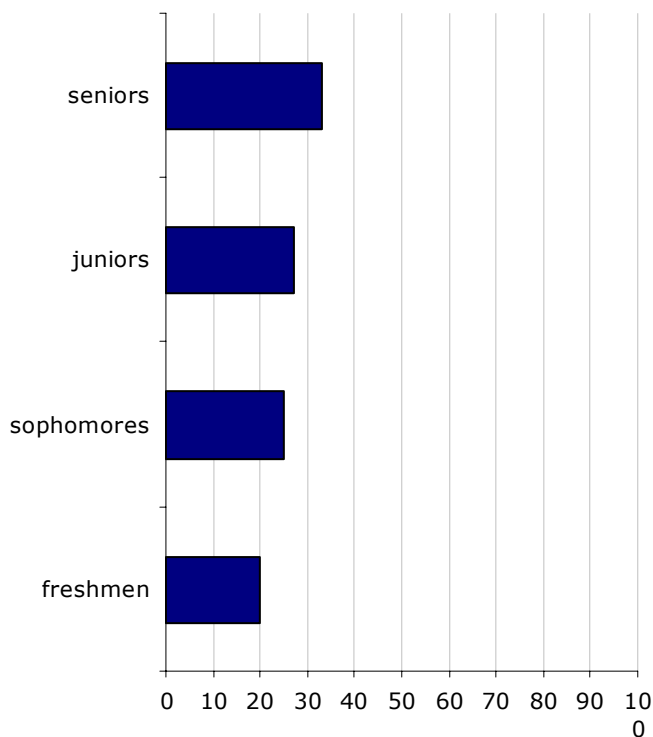
One of the reasons for the absence of problems might be the percentage voting in their home town (in person or absentee). Of those who were registered, two-thirds are registered in their home town (67% home town; 33% college town). Freshmen and sophomores were equally likely to be registered in their home town (68% and 67%); juniors and seniors were slightly less likely to be registered there (64% and 59%).

Interestingly, 78% of those registered at home prefer to be registered there. This means, however, that more than one in five (22%) of those registered at home would prefer to register at their school address. Among students who were not registered, 44% would prefer to register at their college address. Overall, 26% of those not registered at their school address would prefer to register there.

The further along in school students were, the more they preferred to register in their college town. Not surprisingly, college students were much more likely to vote by absentee ballot (37%) than were 18-29 year olds who were surveyed recently by Declare Yourself (10%).

Because students were often voting for the first time—or the first time at their present location—it was anticipated that many would have to show identification. Concerns were raised about whether students would always have proper id. It turned out that most (71%) students who voted in person did have to show identification. Most (75%) used an in-state driver's license, but 13% of the

Graph 2. Percent of Students who Registered in their College Town



students reported using their college ID, and 5% used an out-of-state driver's license. The remainder used a passport (1%) for some other form of identification (6%).

Did students find it a real hassle to vote? Of those casting an absentee ballot, the survey inquired separately about the ease of obtaining the ballot and of casting it. Especially in light of some expectations, few students found it difficult. Nearly 90% (88.8) said they found it "very easy" or "fairly easy" both to obtain and to cast an absentee ballot. Only a handful (2.9%) found either or both of these tasks "very difficult." (To obtain and absentee ballot: 59% very easy; 32% fairly easy; 7% fairly difficult; 1% very difficult; to cast the ballot: 64% very easy; 31% fairly easy; 3% fairly difficult; 2% very difficult)

First-time voters found it just as easy to obtain an absentee ballot as those who had voted previously. They found it a bit more difficult to cast the ballot, but by this they probably meant making choices, not the process of voting.

Fewer than 1 in 25 (3.6%) said they tried to register but were unable to. Only a handful (less than 1%) claimed that they went to the polls but weren't allowed to vote.

IV. Students Were Confident but Concerned about the Counting of Votes.

Cynicism about politics is high these days among all segments of the population. Among young people, one often hears the complaint that candidates pay little attention to their interests or concerns. This year, with the election so close, students seem to have been relatively well satisfied, though a significant minority still feel left out.

Most students think that they had some or a large effect on the outcome of the presidential election. (18% a large effect; 52% some effect; 28% not much effect)

Of special concern in 2004 is whether votes would be counted correctly, particularly on new, electronic voting machines. College students might have been especially worried because they are relatively well-informed about computers (and their problems).

About a quarter of the students said they were worried about whether their vote would be counted properly (8% very worried; 20% somewhat worried; 28% not very worried; 44% not worried at all). There was a connection between the type of voting system used and how concerned students were. Those voting on lever machines were least worried about whether their vote would be counted properly and those voting on punch card and touch screen systems were most worried, but the differences were not large (percentages who were very or somewhat worried: for lever machines, 23%, optical scans, 28%; punch cards, 31%, touch screens, 31%)

V. Students Leaned to Kerry; Differed by College Major

In addition to information about registration and voting, students were asked about their candidate and issue preferences. Students tended to lean toward Kerry, but there were significant differences depending on which students one asked.

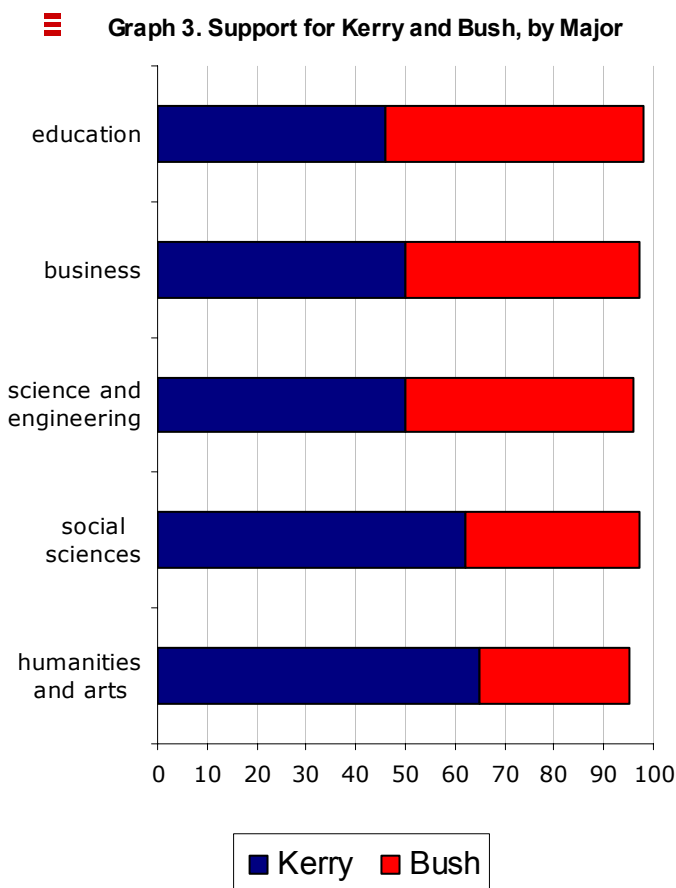
Overall, 55% of college students reported voting for Kerry while 41% reported voting for Bush. This is similar to results found in exit polls of 18-24 year olds, which found that 56% voted for Kerry and 43% for Bush.

Among those who did not vote, support for Kerry and Bush was evenly split, with 44% reporting that they would have voted for Bush and 45% for Kerry. This is strikingly different from the results of a recent study of 18-29 year olds by Declare Yourself that found that 47% of non-voters preferred Kerry and 33% Bush.

Among independents, 62% who voted chose Kerry while 27% chose Bush. Of those selecting moral values as the most important issue in determining their vote choice, 60% voted for Bush and 37% voted for Kerry.

Vote choice varies by college major: Support for Kerry was the highest among those majoring in arts and humanities (66%) and the social sciences (63%). Support for Bush was highest among those majoring in education (51%), the sciences (46%), and business (46%).

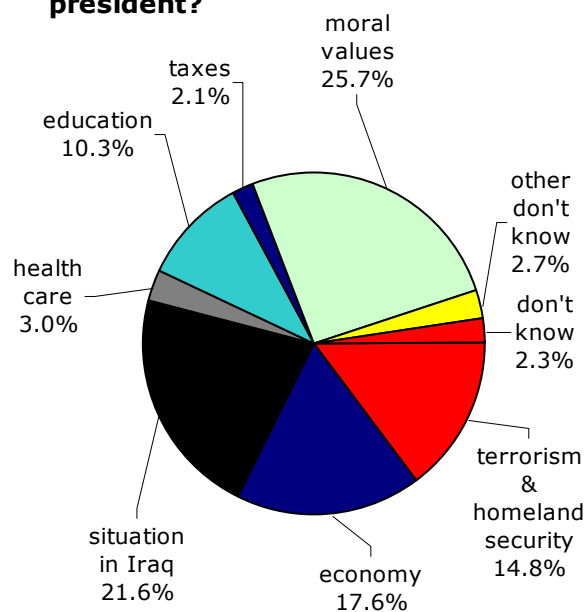
Was mobilization effective? The percentage who voted for Kerry was about the same for students who were contacted by a party (by phone or in person) and for those who were not contacted. However, there was a small difference for Bush voters. 39% of those who were contacted voted for Bush, compared to 42% who were not contacted.



Despite young people's greater propensity to vote for Kerry, their overall evaluation of President Bush is similar to that of non-students as measured in exit polls. Approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president stood at 47 approve, 48 disapprove.

However, a larger proportion of college students age 18-24 cited the war in Iraq as the most important issue in determining which candidate to vote for (22%) than did 18-24 year olds who participated in exit polls (15%). A slightly smaller gap existed between 18-24 year old college students and 18-24 year old exit poll participants with respect to moral values and education: 26% of college students cited moral values as the most important issue compared to 23% of 18-24 year olds, and 10% of college students cited education compared to 8% 18-24 year olds. A smaller proportion of college students age 18-24 cited the economy (17%), health care (3%), and taxes (2%) as the most important factor than exit poll participants who were 18-24 years old (21% reported the economy, 6% health care, and 8% taxes).

Graph 4: Which one of the following issues was most important in determining your vote for president?



The significance of students' attention to the war in Iraq is that more opposed the decision to go to war (51%) than supported the decision (46%).

Conclusion

A major lesson learned from this survey is just how active students can be and that they, at least as much as other populations, can be mobilized to get registered and to vote. Students are already interested in politics and talk about political matters frequently. Political parties, despite difficulties due to the separation of campuses from other housing, have found ways of reaching them.

Further efforts can yield even more results in the future. A significant minority of students wish to vote on their college campuses. While relatively few problems were reported with respect to registration and voting, this was in the context of unprecedented efforts to mobilize young voters in support of both candidates and changes in the law requiring colleges and universities to provide information to students.