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Executive Summary

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The 15th Biannual Youth Survey on Politics and Public Service

October 2008

Introduction

The Institute of Politics and the Survey Group wish to thank Erin Ashwell (Harvard '02) and Trevor Dryer (Harvard '02) who conceived of this survey project eight years ago while sophomores at Harvard College. Their primary question: Why were their fellow students across the country seemingly so involved in community service yet turned off by politics? And then, as importantly, what could we do about it?

Over the course of more than 15 research projects, the students at the Institute of Politics have helped answer these questions and many more. And now, on the eve of the third presidential campaign since the founding of the poll, we will put the original hypothesis to test: Are young people (still) turned off by politics?

Based on the highest turnout in 32 years in the 2004 presidential election, heightened engagement in the 2006 midterm elections and recordbreaking turnouts in most of the contested primary and caucus states in the 2008 presidential cycle, the answer appears to be a resounding no.

As we will explain in this report, unlike the winter and spring of 2000 when this project began, young Americans appear to engage in both community service and politics. Many of the barriers to entry for those wishing to be more involved in politics have dissipated over the last several years as the issues have become more pressing and registration and voting somewhat easier -- while advancements in technology have allowed political candidates to communicate, target and mobilize young voters more efficiently.

Less than two weeks before we elect our 44th President, we will report on many insights into the important 18-24 year old segment of the Millennial Generation, but will call particular attention to five overarching findings:

- Barack Obama leads John McCain by 26 points, 56 percent to 30 percent
- The economy is the most important issue for a majority of 18 to 24 year old voters, 10 times more than in 2007
- The President that both Obama and McCain voters wish the next president could be most like is Bill Clinton
- Nearly three-in-five 18 to 24 year olds are personally interested in participating in some form of public service to help the country -- with Democrats and Republicans being equally interested
- The efficacy of political engagement as a means to solve our nation's challenges is at a high-water mark since the founding of this poll.

The interviewing period for this survey of n=2,406 18 to 24 year-olds was September 12 to October 6,

2008. During the time that the survey was in the field, Lehman Brothers collapsed, the stock market crashed, and two presidential and one vice presidential debate was held. The IOP poll was conducted online by our research partner Harris Interactive.

IOP Polling Director John Della Volpe supervised the survey group of students. As always, the IOP survey group would like to thank IOP Director, Bill Purcell and Executive Director Catherine McLaughlin for their insight and support over the course of this and all IOP projects.

Demographic and Political Profile

For this survey we completed n=1,214 online interviews with current undergraduates and n=1,192 online interviews with 18 to 24 year-olds who are not currently enrolled in a four-year college and then weighted these segments and target populations so that the final results and totals are representative of the overall 18 to 24 year-old population sampled (N=2,406).

Demographic profile:

- 49 percent male, 51 percent female
- 41 percent between 18 and 20 years olds, 59 percent between 21 and 24 years old
- 59 percent White, 14 percent Hispanic, 12 percent Black/African-American
- 21 percent are Catholic, 13 percent Protestant, 11 percent Fundamental/ Evangelical, 2 percent Jewish, 2 percent Mormon, one percent Muslim, 13 percent
- another religion and 25 percent no religious preference
- 37 percent say that religion is a very important part of their life;
- 89 percent own a cell phone, 41 percent have a landline and 4 percent have VOIP telephone service.

Current educational status:

- 11 percent of the sample are in high school, 3 percent in trade/vocational school, 8 percent in a 2-year junior or community college, 27 percent in a four-year college or university, 5 percent in graduate school, business school or professional school, and 43 percent are not enrolled in any school
- 72 percent of college students attend a public institution, 28 percent a private one
- 48 percent of students attend a college in an urban or city area, 32 percent in a suburb and 20 percent in a small town.

Political and ideological profile:

- 79 percent say they are registered to vote
- 63 percent say they will definitely vote in the 2008 general election
- 33 percent say that they voted in a primary or participated in a caucus in 2008
- 43 percent consider themselves to be politically engaged or active
- 36 percent consider themselves Democrats, 25 percent Republicans and 39 percent Independent.

Voting profile (of college students):

- 75 percent of college students are registered at their home address, 22 percent at their school address
- 41 percent of college students were encouraged to register to vote; 53 percent were encouraged to vote
- 42 percent of college students plan to vote at their local polling place, 37 percent by absentee ballot.

Social networking status:

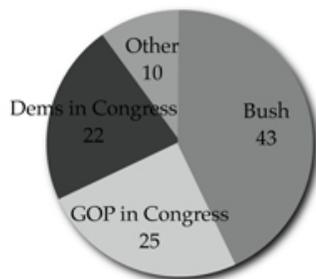
- 86 percent of college students have a Facebook account, 35 percent have used it to promote a candidate or issue
- 60 percent of all 18 to 24 year olds have a MySpace account, 18 percent have used it to promote a candidate or cause.

With a Call for Change, Obama Leads McCain by 26 Points

“Change Election” is an Understatement

With less than 10 percent of young people believing that the nation is headed in the right direction (9% right direction, 63% wrong track) -- young voters, as much as or more than anyone in the electorate, are seeking change in Washington. Asked to distribute 100-points to indicate who they believe was responsible for the current state of the nation, 43 points were assigned to President Bush, 25 points to the Republicans in Congress, 22 points to the Democrats in Congress -- and 10 points to others.

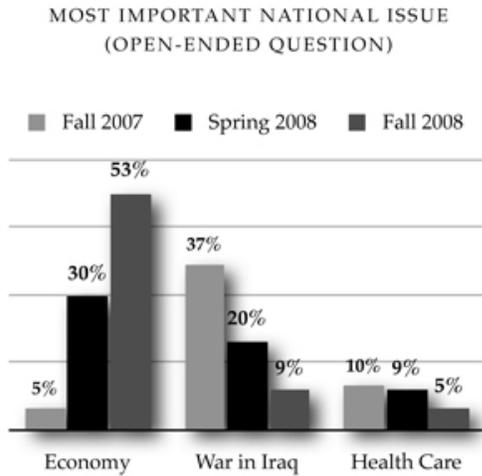
HOW MUCH DO YOU THINK EACH IS
RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CURRENT STATE OF
THE NATION



Economy, 10 Times the Concern It Was in 2007

Economy, 10 Times the Concern It Was in 2007

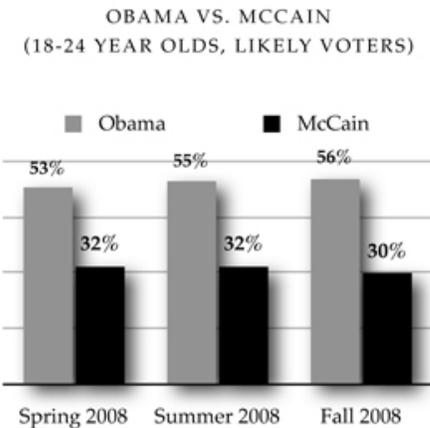
Barely on the youth polling radar screen one year ago, the economy overwhelms every other issue in our most recent study. A majority of voters (53%) indicate the the economy (and/or rising oil and gas prices and/or jobs) is the one issue that concerns them most -- which is 10 times as many who said the same thing one year ago.



Obama Leads McCain by 26 Points

While the national horse race among all voters 18-plus has fluctuated a good deal over the last six months (McCain led by two in early April, Obama by one in June, Obama by two in September, and by 10 as this report is being written) -- the preferences of likely young voters have not wavered substantially since Spring 2008.

Senator Obama enjoys a 26 percentage point lead over Senator McCain, 56 percent to 30 percent; 15 percent are undecided. Among those most steadfast in the decision to vote, those who say that they will “definitely” be voting, Obama leads Senator McCain 59 percent to 31 percent. As the following graph indicates, Senator Obama’s margin among 18 to 24 year olds has grown by five percentage points since our Spring survey.



When young Obama voters were asked to describe as thoughtfully as possible the reason that they are supporting the Illinois Senator, 30 percent mentioned, “can make a change” and 14 percent said “fresh new voice and perspective” -- for a total of 44 percent citing change related themes. A sample of the verbatim comments we received for this question include:

“He speaks to my generation in a way that no other candidate has and actually addresses the concerns that are specific to us. He represents change and hope in a political climate that is falling apart in a way that speaks to even the most cynical and bitter citizen.” - 18 year-old white male at Oregon State

“He supports progress toward a better global reputation and foreign relations. He supports a

healthcare system that is on the side of the people, not the corporations. He represents a change in the direction of the nation, toward greater equality for men, women, and minorities.” - 20 year old white female enrolled at Georgia Tech

“He is a dynamic candidate who understands the struggles faced by the poor, middle class, and generally disadvantaged. He is ready to set the nation on a different path than it is heading.” - 20-year old African American female enrolled at Barnard College

An additional 18 percent said that they agree with his policies, 12 percent are voting for him because he’s the Democrat, 11 percent because he will improve the economy -- and 10 percent because he is not John McCain.

For supporters of John McCain, it is largely about his experience. Slightly more than one-fifth (22%) cite his experience as the major reason they are supporting him, 18 percent say they are voting for him because they agree with his policies, 14 percent because of his military experience and his patriotism, 12 percent because of his vice presidential pick and 10 percent because he is not Barack Obama.

“I’m supporting John McCain for president because his views best fit mine. I’m anti-abortion, pro tax-cuts, pro strong national security and pro government reform. Obviously Barack Obama’s views don’t fit my own and therefore I feel he’s the wrong choice for America.” - 20 year old white male unenrolled

“He and Sarah Palin stand for the beliefs of what this country was founded on. I believe this -- he has the experience to run the United States. I believe that he and she put God in a high place in their lives.” - 23 year old white female, enrolled at Youngstown State

“McCain has the character, experience, and policy that will restore America’s greatness. His pick of Sarah Palin has also enhanced his bona fides.” - 19 year old white male, enrolled at University of Texas at Dallas

As the table below indicates, Senator Obama hold significant leads throughout most segments of the 18 to 24 year old electorate, including by 32 points among women and 25 points among Independents.

OBAMA VS. MCCAIN
BY SUBGROUPS

	OBAMA	MCCAIN
ALL LIKELY VOTERS	56%	30%
"DEFINITE" VOTERS	59%	31%
WITH LANDLINE	53%	32%
WITHOUT LANDLINE	58%	28%
MALE	51%	32%
FEMALE	60%	28%
DEMOCRAT	88%	5%
REPUBLICAN	12%	75%
INDEPENDENT	45%	20%
WHITE	47%	39%
AFRICAN AMERICAN	89%	3%
HISPANIC	62%	21%
ASIAN	69%	17%
IN HIGH SCHOOL	55%	28%
2 YR COLLEGE	60%	29%
4 YR COLLEGE	55%	30%
GRADUATE SCHOOL	54%	30%
NO COLLEGE	54%	30%

More than Half of 18-24 Year Olds Interested in Volunteering for a Presidential Campaign

Among the 18 to 24 year olds who are currently pledged to support Senator Obama, more than half (57%) feel so strongly that they would be interested in volunteering for the campaign if they were asked (17% very interested, 40% somewhat); while fewer in number, nearly half (47%) of Senator McCain's young supporters feel the same way. In fact, 16 percent of the Senator's supporters are very interested and another 30 percent are somewhat interested in volunteering.

Overall, high school students (36% are very interested) and African Americans (28% are very interested) are the subgroups most willing to volunteer for a campaign that they support.

Palin Pick Did Not Help, Likely Hurt Ticket

Young voters were asked whether each candidate's choice for Vice President made them more or less likely to vote for their ticket in November. Barack Obama's choice of Senator Joe Biden of Delaware seemed to have very little affect on the ticket. Sixty percent (60%) said that the pick made no difference, 21 percent indicated that the pick made them more likely to vote for Obama, while 19 percent said that the pick made them less likely to vote for Obama -- a net effect of 2 points, positive.

Alternatively, the pick of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin by John McCain was seen as a net negative among all likely voters. In contrast to the Biden pick, only 35 percent said that the pick made no difference, 25 percent said that the choice made them more likely to support the McCain ticket and 40 percent said the choice made them less likely -- a net effect of 15 points, negative. Since the Vice Presidential picks were designed in part to strengthen each candidate's base and influence Independents and women, the following is a table that illustrates the affect on these groups.

VICE PRESIDENTIAL SELECTIONS
(NET EFFECT: MORE LIKELY - LESS LIKELY
TO VOTE FOR TICKET)

	BIDEN: NET EFFECT	PALIN: NET EFFECT
ALL LIKELY VOTERS	+2%	-15%
MALE	-1%	-14%
FEMALE	+5%	-15%
DEMOCRAT	+25%	-48%
REPUBLICAN	-27%	+40%
INDEPENDENT	-8%	-22%
CLINTON VOTERS	+27%	-24%

At best, the Palin pick might have hardened some of the Republican base, but did not have a transformative impact as evidenced by these data and the horse race before and after the selection.

Obama Preferred on Most Major Issues, Including “Bringing Change” to Washington and Improving the Economy

In a survey that was conducted in the weeks before the Democratic National Convention, we asked N=1,031 18 to 24 year olds which candidate they trusted more on 10 important issues -- ranging from domestic priorities to foreign policy to macro-level change attributes. At that time, Senator Obama led Senator McCain handily on 8 of the ten, with a slight lead on terrorism and a slight deficit on readiness to be Commander in Chief.

Since that time, on the issues that favored Senator Obama, his lead has been extended by one to four points. On the issues that were tied or Senator McCain held an advantage, they remain unchanged -- the only issue where there has been significant movement is health care. Before the two conventions, Senator Obama led Senator McCain by 18 points on health care; that lead is now 28 points.

The following graph shows the change on these issues since July -- the numbers represent the net difference between Obama and McCain on each issue. For example, a +5 means that five percent more people trust Obama on the issue over McCain; e.g., 45 percent may trust Obama more and 40 percent may trust McCain more. The net therefore would be 5.

WHICH CANDIDATE DO YOU TRUST MORE
TO HANDLE EACH OF THESE ISSUES?
(NET DIFFERENCE OBAMA OVER MCCAIN)

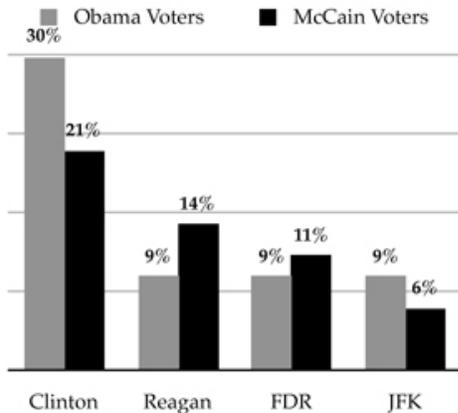


The Clinton Presidency is the Preferred Model for this Generation

In an open-ended question, all respondents were asked which previous or current president they would like our next president to be most like. In a landslide victory, 26 percent to 11 percent, President Bill Clinton beat President Ronald Reagan. Franklin Delano Roosevelt garnered 9 percent, while John F. Kennedy and Abraham Lincoln each received 7 percent.

Bill Clinton received more votes by Democrats (32%), Republicans (18%) and Independents (24%) than any other. Surprisingly, even among McCain supporters, more would prefer the next president to be like Bill Clinton (21%) than Ronald Reagan (14%), one of McCain’s political heroes.

WHICH PREVIOUS OR CURRENT PRESIDENT WOULD YOU LIKE OUR NEXT PRESIDENT TO BE MOST LIKE? (AMONG SUB-GROUPS OF VOTERS)



Public Service and the Rise of Political Efficacy

Nearly Half of All 18-24 Year Olds Volunteer for Community Service

Approximately half (47%) of all 18 to 24 year olds in our study indicated that they had volunteered for community service in the last 12 months -- a third of whom report to have volunteered at least once a month or more, with more than two-thirds (67%) doing so about once a month or less. Among college students, the rate of community volunteerism is 57 percent, which is down 5 points in the last year (62%), but even with 2006 (57%).

For a variety of reasons that include infrastructure and dedicated networks of community and non-profit groups, the level of volunteerism is significantly higher among 18 to 24 year olds who are on college campuses than those who have never enrolled. However, the 38 percent of 18 to 24 year olds who have never enrolled in a four-year college or university that are volunteering in their communities should in no way be overlooked as they represent a significant force.

On college campuses, the following cohorts are currently more likely than others to volunteer for community service:

- **18-19 year olds (70%)**
- **Asian Americans (69%) and Whites (61%)**
- **Students who attend private colleges or universities (65%)**
- **Republicans (65%) and Democrats (57%), compared to Independents (50%).**

Levels of Political Engagement On and Off Campus

In addition to community service, 22 percent of college students volunteered for a government, political or issues-related organization at least one time in the last year. Compared to the IOP survey from the Fall of 2007, most of the various online and offline tactics that people engage in as part of public discourse have all increased -- albeit very slightly, mostly one to two points.

For example, among all 18 to 24 year olds, 52 percent reported that they have signed an online petition at least once; 27 percent have written an email or letter advocating for a political position; 24 percent have contributed to an online discussion or blog about politics; 22 percent attended a political rally or demonstration; 16 percent donated money to a campaign or cause; and 14 percent volunteered for a political campaign or issue cause. The political-related activity on campus is significant, especially compared to 18 to 24 year olds not on campus.

For example, 61 percent of college students discussed the campaign in the last day, compared to 56 percent of those not on campus. As the following table depicts, college students are significantly more likely to engage in political activities when compared to 18 to 24 year olds who have never enrolled in a college or university.

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES
(18-24 YEAR OLDS ENROLLED VS. THOSE
WHO HAVE NEVER ENROLLED IN FOUR-
YEAR COLLEGE)

	18-24 YEAR OLDS - ENROLLED IN COLLEGE	18-24 YEAR OLDS - NEVER ENROLLED
SIGNED ONLINE PETITION	53%	48%
EMAIL OR LETTER ADVOCATING PO- SITION	30%	23%
CONTRIBUTED TO BLOG OR ONLINE DISCUSSION	25%	21%
ATTENDED RALLY OR DEMONSTRA- TION	31%	13%
DONATED MONEY TO CAMPAIGN OR CAUSE	17%	11%
VOLUNTEERED FOR A CAMPAIGN OR CAUSE	15%	9%

Much More Opportunity for Civic , Political and Public Service Exists

From the earliest days of our polling, we found that a gap existed between those who are currently involved in politics and civic engagement -- and those who say they would be interested, but were unsure about how to take that first step. Therefore, we posed the question, "Imagine that a friend or peer suggested (a) attending a political rally or demonstration and (b) volunteering on a political campaign, how likely would you be to agree to attend or volunteer?"

Sixty-three percent (63%) of all 18 to 24 year olds say that they are likely to attend a rally under those circumstances and 47 percent are likely to volunteer on a campaign. Both of these percentages increased by five points in the last year. In each situation, college students (70% likely to attend rally, 53% likely to volunteer on campaign) are significantly more likely to want to engage than 18 to 24 year olds who never enrolled (53%, 39% respectively).

America's Youth are Ready to Heed a New Call for Public Service

Perhaps more importantly, as we are on the eve of a new presidential administration, nearly three-in-five (59%) of America's youngest citizens (18-24 year olds) say that they are personally interested in engaging in some form of public service to help the country -- 19 percent very interested. Unlike many other issues, the area of public or national service is one place in which no major partisan divide exists.

- 68 percent of Democrats, 63 percent of Republicans and 57 percent of Independents are interested
- 67 percent of Obama voters and 63 percent of McCain voters are interested

- 66 percent of high school students, 64 percent of college students, 73 percent of graduate students, and 49 percent of nonenrolled 18 to 24 year olds are interested
- 63 percent of women and 55 percent of men are interested.

In addition, the subgroups that seem most intense in their interest to engage in national service are African Americans (25% very interested) and Hispanics (24% very interested).

Among the 59 percent who say that they are interested, following are the ways in which they would consider engaging:

- 75 percent, part time in their community
- 47 percent, work for the federal, state or local government
- 32 percent, use the Internet to collaborate with government

- 32 percent, get involved in a political campaign
- 25 percent, join the foreign service
- 23 percent, join national service program full-time like Teach for America or City Year

- 17 percent join the military, and
- 17 percent run for political office.

Efficacy of Political Engagement On the Rise

One of the barriers of voting and political engagement that we uncovered during our first surveys was the notion shared by many young people that political engagement was not an effective means to solve important issues facing the country. In our first study, only 36 percent of the college students we polled believed that political engagement was more effective than community service as a way to solve our nation's most important challenges. In the last three years alone, we have seen steady, positive changes in opinion on this most important issue as evidenced by the following graph. (NB: The following question was phrased differently than the question cited earlier in this paragraph and is not intended to be a direct comparison.)

As the trends in favor of the efficacy of political engagement have moved in a more positive direction in the last two years, so too have a number of attitudinal measures regarding the health of the political system in general. For example, the percentage who believe that elected officials are more aligned with the interests of this generation has increased by six points, the percentage of young people who believe that getting involved in politics is honorable has increased four points and the percentage who say that it is difficult to find ways to get involved has decreased four points. Other than partisanship, all of our other measures have remain unchanged or improved slightly over the last year

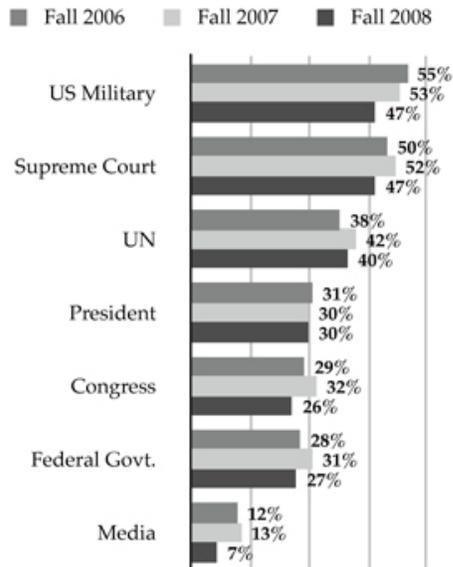
STATEMENTS ABOUT POLITICS
% WHO AGREE

	2006	2007	2008
ELECTED OFFICIALS DON'T HAVE THE SAME PRIORITIES I HAVE	75%	71%	69%
POLITICS HAS BECOME TOO PARTISAN	74%	72%	74%
RUNNING FOR OFFICE IS AN HONORABLE THING TO DO	67%	67%	68%
GETTING INVOLVED IN POLITICS IN AN HONORABLE THING TO DO	60%	63%	64%
PEOPLE LIKE ME DON'T HAVE ANY SAY ABOUT WHAT GOVERNMENT DOES	46%	46%	47%
IT IS DIFFICULT TO FIND WAYS TO BE INVOLVED IN POLITICS	44%	42%	40%
POLITICS IS NOT RELEVANT TO MY LIFE RIGHT NOW	30%	32%	28%

Trust in All Major Public Institutions Down Since 2007

Not surprisingly based on the fact that 9 percent of young Americans 18 to 24 believe that things in the country are headed in the right direction, our survey found that trust in most of the major institutions has decreased in the last year -- in most cases between five and six percentage points. The only individual or institution where trust remained the same compared to one year ago was, "The President."

HOW OFTEN DO YOU TRUST ...
TO DO THE RIGHT THING?
(ALL OF THE TIME / MOST OF THE TIME)



Registration, Mobilization Efforts and Absentee Voting

Voter Registration is Up Sharply in Last Year

Young Americans are poised to participate in this election at perhaps the highest levels since 18 to 20 year olds were awarded the right to vote in 1972.¹

More than three-out-of four (79%) 18 to 24 year olds report that they are registered to vote (a 3- point increase from our Spring 2008 survey and a 10-point jump from Fall 2007) -- and when asked, 63 percent say that they will “definitely” vote in the election. While it is unlikely that every person representing the 63 percent who say they will definitely vote will turnout, even if 85 percent of this group does, the youth voting rate would be 53 percent, the highest on record.

Ninety-five percent (95%) of the young voters who participated in the primary and caucuses (33% of the sample) indicate that they will vote in the general election -- a strong indication that the enthusiasm displayed during the winter and spring months for voting will carry into November. Not surprising, and similar to the population as a whole, education is a predictor of who votes among the youth. For example, 71 percent of college students and 72 percent of graduate school students say that they will definitely vote in November, while 52 percent of 18 to 24 year olds not in a college program say that they will vote.

Registration Tied to Age and Education

With 79 percent of 18 to 24 year olds indicating that they are registered to vote, 80 percent saying

that they personally “care a good deal” who wins the presidential election, and 58 percent discussing the campaign in the last day -- young Americans appear to be tuned in and engaged.

The older that someone gets, the more likely they are to be registered (70% of 18-19 year olds, 77% of 20-21 year olds, and 86% of 22-24 year olds) and as mentioned before, those who are involved in some form of higher education (79% community/2-year college, 87% four-year college, 92% graduate school) are significantly more likely to be registered than those who are not (68%).

Whites (83%) are registered at about the same level as African Americans (80%) and Asians (78%), whereas Hispanics and Latinos (65%) are the least likely.

Voting Starts at Home

Consistent with our findings from previous waves of this research, there is a strong correlation between political engagement and the degree to which politics was discussed at home in childhood. For example, 53 percent of young people who consider themselves to be politically active discussed politics at home about once a week or more with their parents; 22 percent of people who are not politically active discussed politics at about that same level. Forty-two percent (42%) of “definite” voters (compared to 24% of others) discussed politics at home about once a week or more, and 43 percent of those with an interest in public service (compared to 24%) did the same.

There is a similar, though not as strong, correlation between some aspects of high school civic education and voting. In this question, we asked “Do you think your education in high school has prepared you to vote and evaluate candidates?” Sixty-three percent (63%) of the “definite” voters answered yes, compared to 48 percent of everyone else.

Mobilization Efforts and Absentee Voting

Most, but not all, mobilization efforts start on college campuses. Following are the responses among students attending four year colleges and universities regarding voter registration and turnout efforts that could aid campus organizers:

- Among college students who are registered, 75 percent of college students are registered to vote at their home address and never changed; 16 percent registered at home, then changed registration to their college or university address; and 6 percent did not register at home, only at their school
- 41 percent of college students reported that an individual or group encouraged them to register
 - Of those encouraged to register, 53 percent were encouraged by their college or a group at their college (Obama voters, 60%, significantly more likely than McCain voters, 44%, to be encouraged to register at college)
 - 74 percent of this group were given a registration form, 52 percent received help to fill out and submit the registration form, and 50 percent were told where to find registration information.

On the issue of mobilization:

- 53 percent of college students reported that an individual or group encouraged them to vote
- 83 percent of college students plan to vote in the state where they attend college
- 45 percent of college students who say that they will “definitely vote” plan to vote at their local polling place, 41 percent plan to vote absentee, and 8 percent at a place set up for early voting
- 20 percent of college students were given information by an individual or group about the absentee voting process -- students at private colleges (31%) were more than twice as likely as students at public universities (14%) to say that they received assistance.

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Jacky Kwong, '11
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* Denotes outgoing student chair

Harvard's Institute of Politics (IOP) was established in 1966 as a memorial to President Kennedy. The IOP's mission is to unite and engage students, particularly undergraduates, with academics, politicians, activists, and policymakers on a non-partisan basis and to stimulate and nurture their interest in public service and leadership. The Institute strives to promote greater understanding and cooperation between the academic world and the world of politics and public affairs. The Institute has been conducting national political polls of America's college students since 2000. More information, including past results, is available online at www.iop.harvard.edu

Footnotes:

1. According to the Current Population Survey, in 1972, 52 percent of eligible 18 to 24 year olds voted and 68 percent of citizens 25-plus participated.
In 2004, 47 percent of 18 to 24 year olds voted and 66 percent of citizens, 25-plus voted.

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