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HOW NOTRE DAME VOTED

Political Attitudes and Engagement of Notre Dame Students in the 2016 Election

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College campuses are often centers of political interest and engagement, especially during presidential election years. At Notre Dame, a variety of campus events—1,500 students attended an ND Votes Debate Watch, for example—raised awareness of relevant issues in the year preceding the 2016 election. This report examines undergraduate and graduate students’ political orientations and voting trends based on an extensive post-election survey conducted since 2004² by researchers at the Center for Social Concerns. We document below how students voted, what issues were salient in their decision making, and what sources they consulted for political news.

SAMPLE/METHOD

The week after the November 2016 election, a sample of 50% of on-campus undergraduates, all off-campus undergraduates, and most graduate students at the University were invited by email to complete a survey as part of a larger Center for Social Concerns study. Of the 8,571 students invited, 2,956 completed the survey (a response rate of 34%), 61% of whom were undergraduates. Note that those who participated may be more highly attuned to political matters than their non-participating peers. Most of our analyses below focus on the aggregate responses of both graduate and undergraduate students, 47% of whom were female, and 61% of whom were Catholic.³

¹ Special thanks to Tara Hudson, Patrena Kedik, Katie Edler, and Katie McCauley for their assistance.

² The Center for Social Concerns has conducted similar studies following the 2004, 2008, and 2012 presidential elections, providing historical context at points. Contact the Center for Social Concerns for additional details regarding sample and method. Unless otherwise mentioned, the analyses below are for both Notre Dame graduate and undergraduate students.

³ Demographic characteristics exclude 17% of the sample who did not respond to demographic questions.

CAMPUS VOTING TRENDS

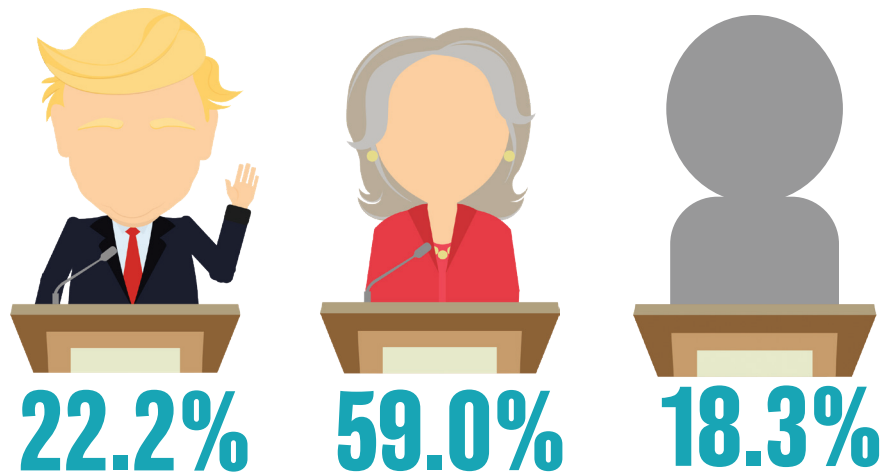
Although young adults may represent an increasingly pivotal demographic, they have been cited for lower voting rates and lack of connection to traditional political structures (CIRCLE, 2016). For the 2016 election, despite concerns that low favorability ratings of party nominees and the divisive nature of the campaign would curtail voting, turnout rates for Notre Dame students did not differ significantly from the 2012 election. Of survey respondents who were eligible, 83.1% indicated that they voted in 2016, most through early voting or absentee ballots. Although the percentage of respondents who voted in the election is higher than the national average (47.1%)⁴ for similar age youth, the voluntary nature of our survey may elevate rates (since individuals most interested in political matters may be more likely both to vote and to complete the survey).

It may also be important to note that students at more selective colleges and universities have historically shown higher interest in political matters (see research by the Higher Education Research Institute, 2004).

Approximately 59.0% of the sample reported voting for Hillary Clinton and 22.2% voted for Donald Trump (see Figure 1). A greater proportion of students opted to vote for a third-party or write-in candidate in 2016 (18.3%) than in 2012 (6.9%).⁵ Graduate student voting was fairly consistent with that of undergraduates (see Figure 2).

Dissatisfaction with Donald Trump seemed to splinter respondents who in general expressed an orientation to vote Republican, with 25.4% indicating a vote for a third-party or write-in candidate. In comparison, only 1.73% of

Figure 1. How Notre Dame Voted in 2016 (combined undergraduate and graduate student sample)



⁴ This percentage refers to the national voting rate among students at 4-year, private institutions and is based on a study conducted by the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education at Tufts University. A 2016 HERI Survey suggests that students at highly selective universities like Notre Dame have even higher levels of voter engagement.

⁵ The rate of third-party voting at Notre Dame seems somewhat higher than national averages, though matched comparison data are not available.

Figure 2. 2016 Notre Dame Student Voting by College and Academic Level

Presidential Vote, by College	First Year	Arts & Letters	Business	Science	Engineering	Architecture	Total Undergrad	Graduate: Master's, Law, Ph.D.
Voted for Hillary Clinton	55.4%	72.7%	42.6%	60.7%	50.9%	66.7%	58.3%	60.2%
Voted for Donald Trump	27.3%	14.4%	36.0%	21.3%	26.4%	33.3%	24.0%	19.5%
Voted for third-party candidate	17.4%	13.0%	21.5%	18.0%	22.7%	0.0%	17.7%	19.3%
n =	121	362	242	183	216	15	1139	727

Democratic-leaning respondents voted for third-party candidates. Thus the percentage of votes at Notre Dame for the Republican candidate in 2016 decreased by more than half compared to 2012: 49.8% voted for the Republican nominee in 2012 (Mitt Romney) compared to 22.2% in 2016.

Voting preferences differed significantly by gender, class year, and College at Notre Dame. Figure 2 presents voting rates across the Colleges and among graduate students. The highest percentage of Clinton voters (72.7%) appears in the College of Arts and Letters, while College of Business students voted in the highest numbers for Donald Trump (36.0%).⁶

The voting differences by College in the 2016 election echo similar trends from past survey data at Notre Dame. Our data are not sufficient to ascertain if such differences are a result of students self-selection into Colleges, if the Colleges themselves affect student voting trends, or both. Further research will explore this question.

By year at college, undergraduate students appear to vote increasingly Democratic over the course of their education, a trend paralleled by past Notre Dame survey data. The percentage of students who cast Democratic votes increased each year as students progressed to senior year, although the data are descriptive and could result from inherent differences between student populations per class year.⁷

Differences across gender were salient: 72% of females voted for Hillary Clinton compared to 47% of males (who showed a higher rate of third-party voting than female respondents).⁸ Figure 3 presents various survey responses by gender.

Non-Catholic respondents voted for Clinton at a higher rate (76.0%) than their Catholic counterparts (49.0%). Catholic respondents indicated higher rates of third-party voting, with 23.3% of Catholic respondents voting for a third-party or write-in candidate compared to 10.7% of non-Catholic respondents.

⁶ Analyses for “Vote by College” include only undergraduate responses; respondents from the School of Architecture were not sufficient for reliable analyses.

⁷ Analyses for “Vote by Class Year” include only undergraduate responses.

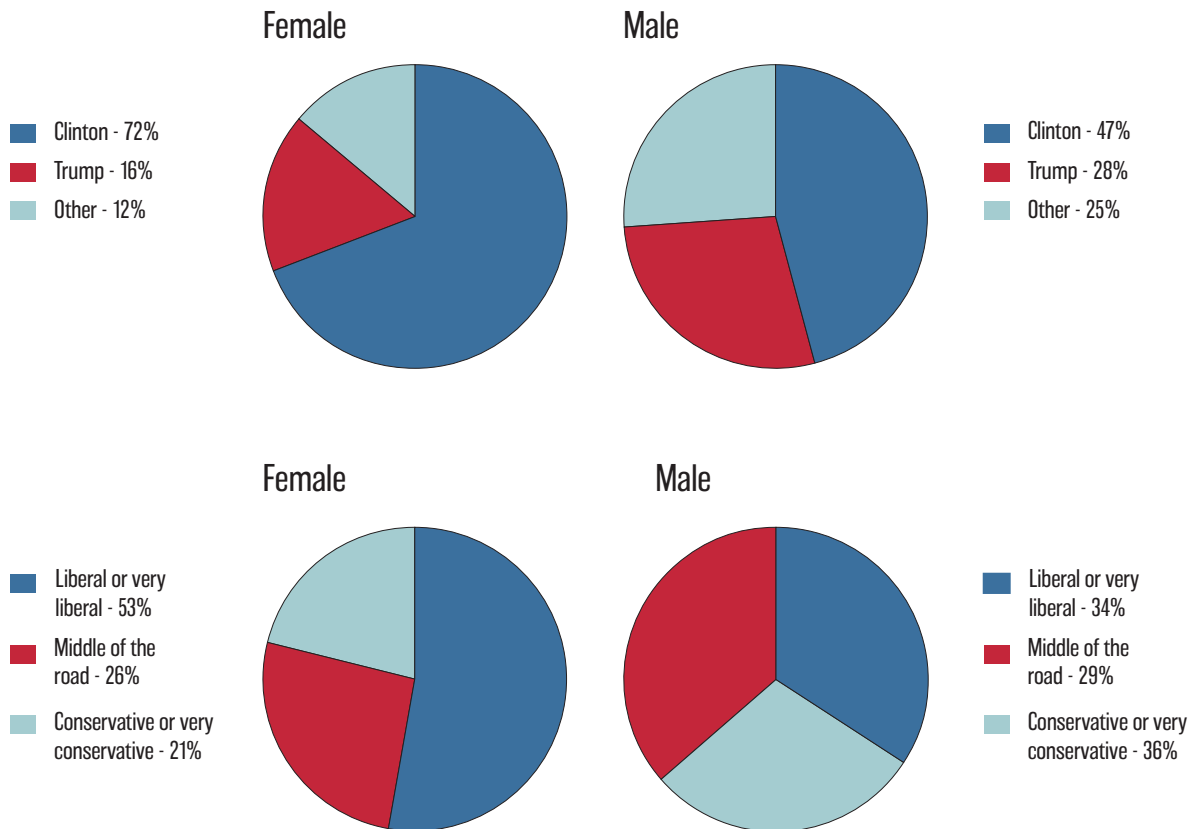
SALIENT ISSUES AMONG VOTING STUDENTS

What issues were the most important to college students as they voted? The top rated issues were the economy and political scandals (the latter seemed to occupy a more salient role than was observed in past surveys). See Figure 4.

Respondents who voted for Trump were most concerned about economy and abortion, while Clinton voters focused on a variety of issues, with

highest concern for foreign policy and political scandals. Respondents who indicated a third-party or write-in vote cited political scandals and the economy as their top two issues. Compared to male respondents, females placed a higher importance on immigration, health care, and abortion. Male respondents, on the other hand, placed a higher priority on the economy.

Figure 3. Voting and Political Orientation by Gender



⁸ Responses from those who selected “other” as gender are omitted due to the limited amount of responses.

Figure 4. Most Important Issue in Determining 2016 Presidential Vote

Clinton voters (n=1303)		Trump voters (n=539)		Third-party/other voters (n=479)	
Political/ethical scandals	22%	Economy	36%	Political/ethical scandals	23%
Other	21%	Abortion	16%	Economy	21%
Foreign Policy	12%	Other	14%	Other	20%
Environment	11%	Terrorism and homeland security	10%	Abortion	19%
Economy	10%	Political/ethical scandals	7%	Foreign Policy	5%
Immigration	9%	Immigration	5%	Environment	4%
Health care	5%	Taxes	5%	Terrorism and homeland security	2%
Education	3%	Gun laws	3%	Health care	1%
Abortion	2%	Foreign Policy	2%	Immigration	1%
Gay marriage	2%	Health care	1%	Gun laws	1%
Terrorism and homeland security	1%	Education	0%	Education	1%
Gun laws	1%	Gay marriage	0%	Taxes	1%
Taxes	1%	Environment	0%	Gay marriage	0%

CAMPUS VOTING CLIMATE AND NEWS SOURCES

Our data also provide insights into the campus political climate. Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding campus political engagement and participation. Though over 80% of survey respondents voted, and 89.1% of respondents expressed comfort talking to friends about political issues, only 45.0% reported frequently discussing such issues (among a group that demonstrated sufficient political interest to complete the survey).

Students ranked social media and national newspapers (including those online) as the top two most frequently used sources for political matters.

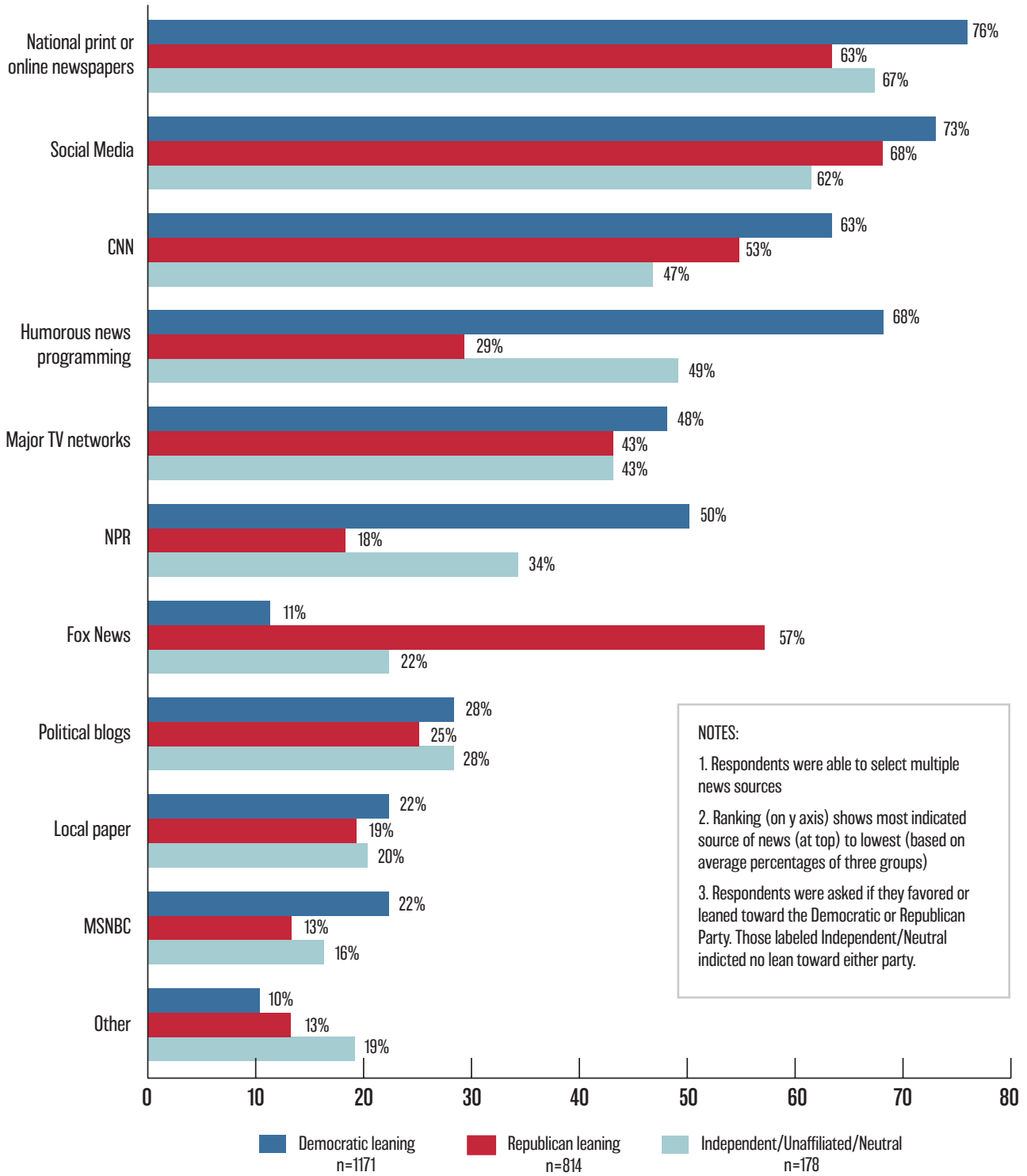
Students seem to adhere to the sources that fit, or are perceived to fit their established political viewpoint: 57.3% of respondents who identify as Republican-leaning receive their news from Fox News compared to 10.7% of students who identify

as Democrat-leaning. A much higher percentage (68.0%) of Democratic students cited humorous sources (e.g., The Daily Show) than their Republican-leaning counterparts (29.1%) as a source of political news. Figure 5 details the choice of news source by party affiliation.



Students ranked **social media** and **national newspapers** (including those online) as the top two most frequently used sources for political matters.

Figure 5. News Source by Political Party Orientation



SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The data presented indicate a complex campus political climate during a polarizing election year. The campus does not fall neatly to the left or right: student views range across the political spectrum, and many chose to vote for a candidate outside of the two major political parties. In an open-ended section of the survey, some students described the campus as extremely conservative, while some others critiqued the campus as too liberal.

Taken as a whole, the differences we found with respect to gender, college, discussion of political issues among classmates, and social media use raise concerns about the variability of students' political engagement. That students often live in single-sex residence halls, attend classes primarily in their chosen College, participate relatively infrequently in political discussion, and attend to (potentially homogeneous) social media as a primary source for news, raises concerns about insularity. The University may want to consider further means to engage students across boundaries and political divisions.

The college years are an important time to foster engagement (Colby et al., 2007), and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops emphasizes the need to foster ethical thinking for faithful citizenship and political responsibility.⁹ Yet the culture for students at Notre Dame can be achievement oriented, perhaps more so since the recession of 2008. It may be tempting to forge ahead toward career goals.

Further, political ideas and the forms of knowledge that ground them seem to be in flux in an age of “alternative facts.” Students may feel unsettled within the complexities of current divisions and mistrust. Comprehensive research summarized by Foa and Mounk (2016) documents that youth in the United States (and Europe) are currently less supportive (than older citizens) of long cherished

elements of democracy such as a) the necessity to protect civil rights, b) the need to avoid living under military rule, and c) for decisions to be made by representative processes versus experts. Such principles of democracy, and the assumptions/values upon which they may cohere, are relevant to all academic disciplines, and warrant active attention within curricula. Thoughtful suggestions for enhancing political learning and engagement within higher education can be found in works by Boyte (2015) and Hollister, Wilson, and Levine (2008). The Institute for Democracy in Higher Education (Thomas et al., 2018) outlines ten recommendations “to improve campus conditions for political learning, discourse, and agency during the election season and beyond”. They emphasize the need to remove student barriers to voting, to engage faculty, teach about democracy, resist polarization, and foster a sustained coalition on campus that can enhance integrated political education.

At Notre Dame, the work of ND Votes is such a sustained coalition toward informed political engagement. This non-partisan campaign builds on student leadership and collaboration among the Center for Social Concerns, the Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy, the Constitutional



The data presented indicate a **complex campus political climate** during a polarizing election year.

⁹ See: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/>

Studies Minor, and other units. During the 2016 election cycle, ND Votes fostered a year-long discussion series addressing pressing political issues, and linked students and faculty to Turbovote (for which Notre Dame was recognized nationally).

For the 2018 midterm election, ND Votes, through a grant from the Indiana Campus Compact, is working to further 'localize' political learning through community engagement. The goal is to bridge the gap between political concepts noted in the classroom and local civic efforts. Students are working with the League of Women Voters and Civic Duty South Bend to engage local residents in voter registration efforts, offer voter education in various forms (e.g. film showings), foster dialogue in public settings, and promote turnout. ND Votes will continue efforts between elections to promote habits of civic dialogue and ongoing political engagement.

This study prompts further research questions. How may engaged forms of learning impact political engagement?¹⁰ What curricular and co-curricular initiatives may best foster political learning, critical thinking, and civic skills among students? We look forward to further research to address such questions, and welcome collaboration.

This report is part of a series published by the Center for Social Concerns at the University of Notre Dame. Research at the Center focuses on the role and impact of higher education with respect to the development of social responsibility, leadership, ethics, and faith.

For more information and other research reports, visit socialconcerns.nd.edu.

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¹⁰ Initial analysis suggest that those who serve frequently or participate in community action via the Center for Social Concerns are more politically engaged, though further research is needed.