



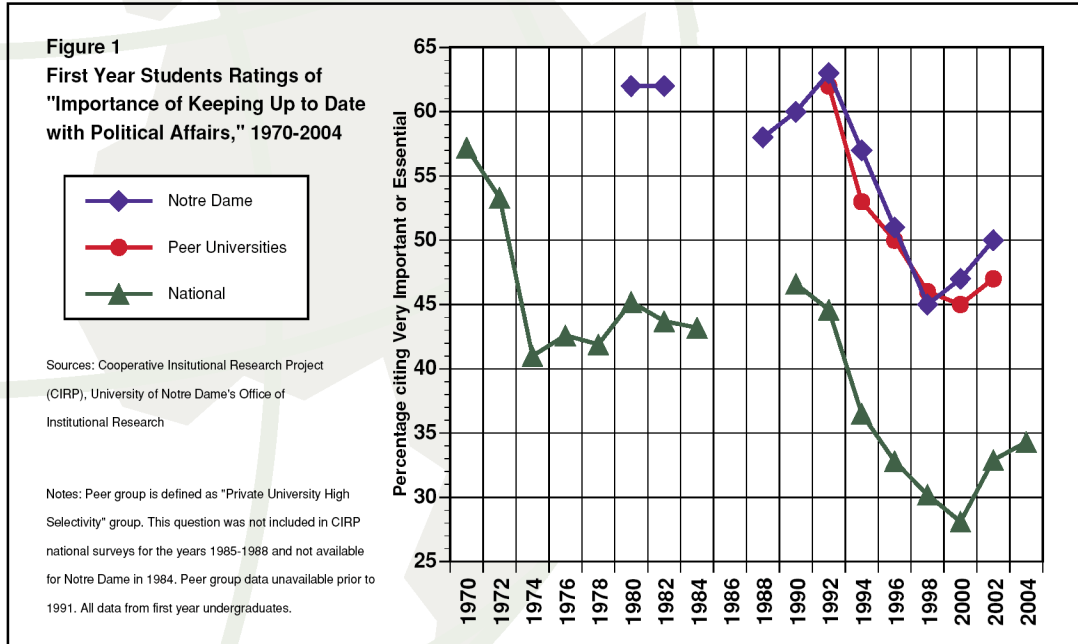
Political Engagement and College: Attitudes and Voting Trends Among Notre Dame Students

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Over the last decade, various researchers have described the current generation of American college students as apolitical, citing decreasing political interest and low voter participation rates (Sax, 1999; Loeb, 1994). However, the events of 9/11 may have spurred increasing political attention (Putnam et al., 2003), and the presidential election of 2004 prompted numerous efforts to enhance young adult participation. This report examines political interest and engagement among students at the University of Notre Dame, drawing from a post-election survey and related sources.

Sample/Method

The day after the November 2004 national election, all students at the University were invited by email to complete an online survey as part of a larger Center for Social Concerns study. Over the next seven days 1276 undergraduates (of an undergraduate student body of approximately 8000) completed the forty-item questionnaire (as did 440 graduate students). The high response rate may itself have been an indication of the salience of the election and heightened levels of political interest, though it should be noted, of course, that those who did respond may be more highly attuned to political issues. Our analyses below focus on the undergraduate respondents, of whom 55.5% were female, and 77.3 % Catholic (proportions similar to the overall Notre Dame student body). The sample was fairly well



balanced across the political spectrum, with 38.0% citing affiliation with the Republican party, 35.0% Democratic, and an additional 22.6% describing themselves as Independent.

To provide historical context, we also present data from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and Notre Dame’s Office of Institutional Research. This report provides a brief overview of our available data. Further information regarding methodology and findings is available from the Center for Social Concerns.

Political Interest and Orientation

How important, among other life goals, is “keeping up to date with political affairs”? This question has been tracked by HERI since the 1960’s. Figure 1 indicates that student interest in political affairs across the nation has declined significantly since 1970, with all-time lows reached in the late 1990’s. Students at Notre Dame and peer institutions (private universities with high admissions selectivity) indicate greater political interest—by approximately 15 percentage points—but have followed a strikingly similar pattern of declining interest. However, political interest among undergraduates—both at Notre Dame and nationally—has increased since 2001.

Student attitudes toward government may influence levels of political interest. Undergraduates in our November 2004 sample were presented with 18 words that may describe “government.” Many students indicated negative associations, such as “partisan bickering (68%), “lying” (59.4%), “corrupt” (45.0%), and “confusing” (39.8%). Only a minority of students associated government with “responsive” (10.1%), and “insures opportunity”(14.9%). Students were also asked whether “Things in the country are headed in right direction or off on the wrong track.” Only 33.1% of Notre Dame undergraduates expressed agreement that things are headed in the right direction (a higher percentage—53.2%—of students in the College of Business agreed).

Undergraduates at Notre Dame are more likely to describe themselves as “conservative” or “far right” than college students across the nation. Figure 2 presents relevant historical trends since 1970 (drawn from samples of first year students).

Voting Trends

During the fall of 2004, interest in politics and efforts to promote voter participation among youth seemed to rise significantly. National polls indicated that approximately 80% of young people were planning to vote (CIRCLE, 2004; HERI, 2004). At Notre Dame, a “Rock the Vote” campaign, largely student led, included a faculty panel, invited speakers, conversations in residence halls, debate watches, a voter registration drive, and related initiatives to raise awareness and encourage informed political engagement. In a survey conducted in October 2004 on the Notre Dame campus (Malone, 2004), 86% of 271 respondents indicated they would definitely or probably vote.

Subsequently, the survey conducted for this report reflects a strong voter turnout.

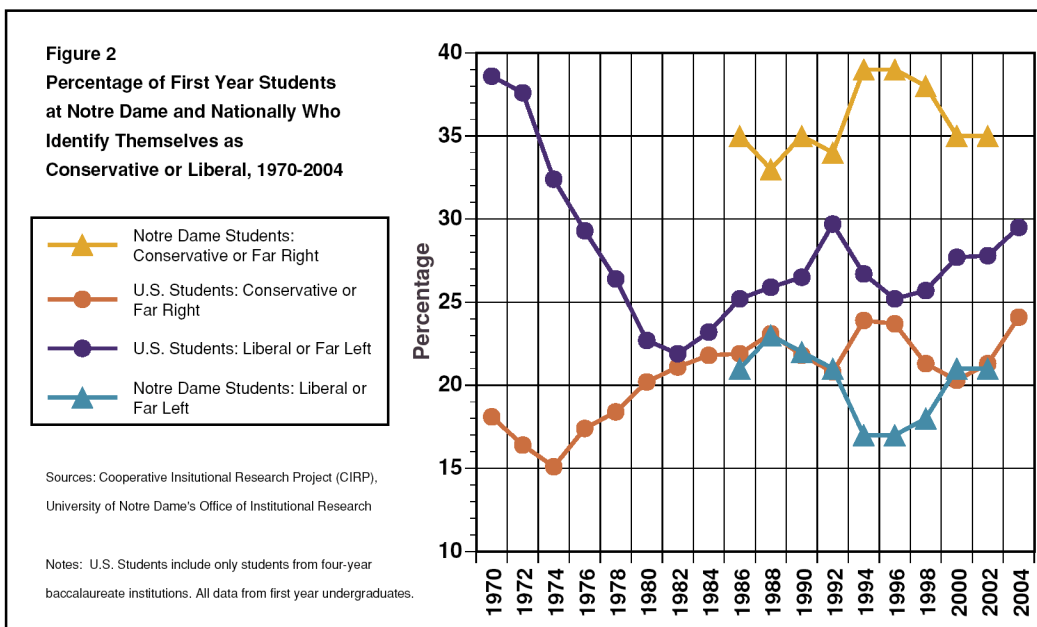


Figure 3 Presidential Vote Among Notre Dame Students, by College (Percents)

Undergraduates—>	First Year	Arts & Letters	Science	Business	Engineering	Architecture	Total Undergrads	Graduate Students
	n=249	n=504	n=181	n=173	n=122	n=39	n=1268	n=423
Voted for G. Bush	46.2%	30.8	41.7	54.9	52.5	33.3	40.9	35.1
Voted for J. Kerry	42.6	58.1	43.9	30.6	27.9	46.2	46.1	50.7
Voted for other	2.4	2.2	3.3	2.9	5.7	2.6	2.8	4.8
Didn't vote	8.8	8.9	11.1	11.6	13.9	17.9	10.3	9.5

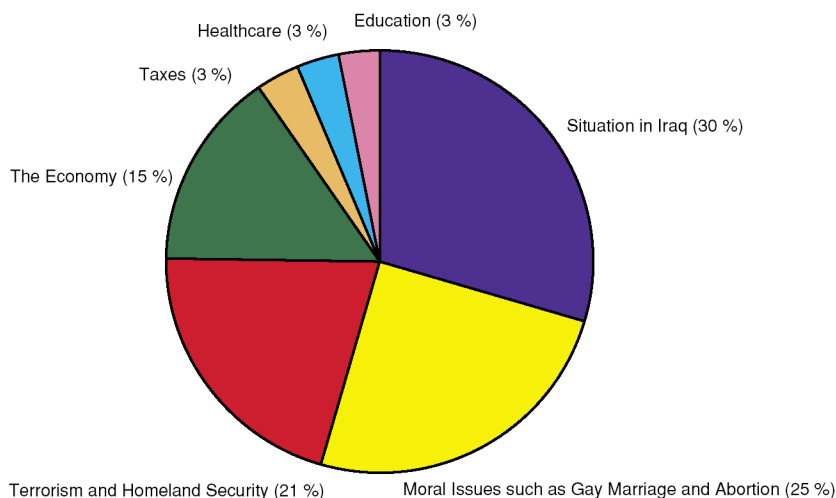
Data from Online Survey, Conducted November, 2004 Item 6: In the recent election, for whom did you vote for President of the United States?

Of 1272 Notre Dame undergraduates surveyed, 89.7% voted (most by absentee ballot). (Among graduate students, 90.1% of 441 respondents voted, more often in a local precinct). Undergraduate voter participation was highest among students in the College of Arts and Letters and First Year of Studies, but at least 82% of the students in each college/school indicated voting.

Approximately 40.9% of the undergraduate sample indicated voting for George W. Bush, and 46.1% for John Kerry, consistent with national exit polls showing stronger college student support for the Democratic candidate. Differences by college (see Figure 3) were noted, with Arts and Letters undergraduates at Notre Dame showing the highest rate for Kerry (58.1%), while College of Business students were more likely to vote for President Bush (54.9%).

Salient Political Issues and Higher Education

What issues were most important to college students as they voted? Figure 4 shows that among Notre Dame undergraduates in the Fall of 2004, the most salient concerns raised were the “Situation in Iraq” and “Moral issues such as gay marriage and abortion.” Such issues parallel those raised by students and adults across the nation during the election.

Figure 4 Most Important Issue Among Notre Dame Undergraduates in Determining Presidential Vote

Source: Notre Dame Political Engagement Survey, November 2004, n = 1276 Notre Dame undergraduates
Item 7: Which of the following issues was Most Important in determining your vote for President this year?

An important question for higher education is whether college life itself enhances political interest. Two-thirds (66.7%) of our Notre Dame undergraduate sample (November 2004) agreed that “My attention to political matters has increased as a result of my education at Notre Dame.” Results were fairly consistent across the Colleges, with the strongest agreement from students in First Year of Studies and the College of Arts and Letters. Yet external factors also were salient: more than 74% agreed that “my attention to political matters has increased as a result of the attacks of September 11th, 2001.” Note that most students in the graduating class of 2005 were beginning their college careers during the fall of 2001.

Summary and Future Research

The data presented indicate that after years of declining political interest, current students show some renewed attention to political affairs, possibly in response to events such as 9/11 and the Iraq war. At Notre Dame, students are more politically interested and conservative than students nationally. While many express some negative associations about government, a high percentage reported voting in the presidential election.

It is important to note that no causal relationships can be determined from the research design used here, and this brief report does not permit presentation of more extensive analyses (please contact the author for more information). Future research may shed light on student attitudes and behaviors in the political realm, what may prompt informed political engagement, and the role of higher education. Of particular interest is the potential relation between community-based learning experiences and student political interest.

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Special thanks to Tom Trozzolo and Tracy Wickham for their assistance in producing this report.

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The Center's research is supported by a grant from the Kathleen Andrews Family.

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