AU surveys first-time voters; finds Bush in the lead
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Thirty-five percent of eligible first-time voters say they'll vote for George Bush, 14 percent back Howard Dean, followed by Wesley Clark and Hillary Clinton with 5.7 and 5.2 percent, respectively, and 84 percent say they intend to vote, a new survey finds.If they follow through on their intentions, first-time voters may defy conventional wisdom and give Bush rather than the Democratic nominee a leg-up in the 2004 election."This is a generation that has grown up with the 'Rock the Vote campaigns,' says Michael McDonough, chairman of the Communication Studies department at Alfred University and lead investigator for the survey. "By every measure we used to test their likelihood of voting, they seemed engaged, passionate and willing to participate in '04 election. If that's the case, surprisingly, Bush has a lead."Alfred University retained Carnegie Communications, a third party research firm, to survey 798 young adults, born between November 1982 and October 1986, and therefore eligible to cast their first Presidential ballot in November 2004. The margin of error in the survey is plus or minus 5 percent.The survey, released January 16th, also suggests a white male, between the ages of 40 and 70, would be the most-popular choice of a candidate for the first-time voters, who said they were less likely to vote for a woman than a man. They also are less likely to vote for a candidate over 70, or a candidate who is gay.First-time voters proved themselves to be tolerant of some "sins" that candidates might admit. Overall, 85 percent of all respondents say they would still support a candidate who admitted to smoking marijuana, but Democrats were slightly more tolerant than Republicans, by a margin of 90 percent to 78 percent. Survey respondents were split on the issue of a candidate committing adultery; 51 percent said they would still support the candidate and 49 percent said they would not. They were a little less tolerant of a candidate who had a drunk-driving conviction, and strongly opposed to candidates guilty of tax evasion, questionable business practices and domestic abuse.The issues first-time voters care most about, according to the survey, are the economy and education. As a group, they are inclined to feel that right-to-privacy issues are more important than gay rights or censorship, and they believe that human rights are more important internationally than Afghanistan and global warming."If candidates want to persuade this pool of 20 million potential voters to actually go to the polls in November, they are going to have to talk to first-time voters about the issues young adults care about," says McDonough."This is a tough crowd to reach for politicians," says McDonough. "Ninety percent of them agreed that it's important to participate in the political process, and 78 percent said 'they cant wait' to cast their votes, but a quarter of all respondents view politicians negatively, compared to 21 percent who view them positively, and 54 percent who say they have a neutral view of politicians."Historically, first-time voters don't follow through at the polls. They have the lowest voter registration rate among the age groups, and the percentage of first-time voters casting ballots in Presidential elections has declined over 30 years from just under 50 percent in 1972to 32.3 percent in 2000.In a tight race, such as the 2000 Presidential election, getting more first-time voters to actually vote could have affected the outcome, he notes.The survey indicates first-time voters are more likely to use the Internet than any other source for political information. Network evening news ranked second as a source, with cable news and newspapers tied for third. Radio and magazines were less likely to be cited as a source of information."Clearly, the smart candidate will try to reach the first-time voters through the Internet, and talk about the issues they care about," says McDonough, whose research interests include looking at how young people relate to media.Among the Democratic candidates, Dean appears to be doing the best job of reaching first-time voters via his website, www.deanforamerica.com/"It's very interactive. It invites them to have a dialogue, something this IM generation is very comfortable with," says McDonough. "The look is clean, and the graphics very MTV-like. It's a very smart website. You dont have to slog your way through a lot of verbiage to find what out how Dean stands on the issues you care about. First-time voters will love it."His analysis of other declared candidates sites:George W. Bush: www.georgewbush.com - "This is what I'd call a red, white, and blue website. It's got a very patriotic and newspaper-y feel to it. It has some interactive capabilities, but is nowhere near as exploitive of the Internet technology as Dean's is. You can pull down a menu for his agenda - but he very much seems to be preaching to the choir with this website. His only efforts to go beyond his traditional constituencies are the sites efforts at presenting Bush's kind of conservatism as compassionate."Wesley Clark: www.clark04.com - "It's kind of a 'Where's Waldo' site. Very wooden, although it does attempt to be interactive by inviting viewers to host a Superbowl house party for Clark."John Edwards: www.johnedwards2004.com - "An ugly site, very text-heavy and crowded. It looks like a newspaper, and we all know how well first-time voters react to newspapers. His home page is like driving to Chicago. It goes on forever. His issues are appealing to first-time voters,

and with the right help, his site could be also. Unfortunately, he needs to hire Howard Dean's web designer."Richard Gephardt: www.dickgephardt2004.com - "Topping the home page is a picture of older people, the demographic that Gephardt appeals to, but probably not the age group that is going to use the Internet for political information. The website, and Gephardt's candidacy have the same feel of desperation, sort of like Roger Clemons going to the Astros for one more season. Not a good idea." John Kerry: www.johnkerry.com - "This site is sad in many ways - stuffy and very bland. It's very detail-oriented, and it's hard for the viewer to decide where to start." Dennis Kucinich: www.kucinich.us - "I'm not sure that leading with Willie Nelson's endorsement is a good idea if he wants the site to appeal to younger voters. The site's very straight-forward, but it's low-tech quality lessens its appeal. His issues - he lists healthcare first, followed by Social Security, and international trade - are also not appealing to first-time voters."Joseph Lieberman: www.joe2004.com - "It's very GI Joe. It talks as though everyone is married with two kids and a $200,000 mortgage. It's as bland as the candidate. It's very revisionist, looking back to the Clinton '90s, something the first-time voters know little about and care even less about."Al Sharpton: www.sharpton2004.org - "The worst of the candidates' websites. It has a very ego-driven message. It' s a niche website that's highly nuanced for a very narrow audience."