

AU poll finds young voters maintain interest in election

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With just under 100 days until the November election, first-time voters appear to be sustaining their interest in the election, according to a second poll by Alfred University professor Michael McDonough. McDonough, who is chair of AU's Communication Studies division, is conducting a series of election-year polls of first-time voters, those who are between the ages of 18 and 22. Census figures indicate 20 million young adults will be eligible to vote for the first time this November. His first poll, conducted in January 2004 as the round of primaries and caucuses was just beginning, found 84% said they intend to vote, compared to 32.3% of that age group who actually voted in the 2000 Presidential election. Conducted about six months later, the second poll indicates that the first-time voters are maintaining a high level of interest in the election, with 92.9% saying they are "very" or "somewhat interested" in the election. Only 7.1% said they had little or no interest in the race. "If this level of interest is sustained through November, these first-time voters could be a real force in the election," said McDonough. "The interest is definitely there. It's really up to the candidates to keep their interest piqued enough to get them to the polls in November. If those young adults who say they are interested actually vote, then that could be more than 18 million voters, or roughly 12 million more young voters between 2000 and 2004. That represents real power to sway the results of an election." He attributes efforts such as MTV's "Choose or Lose: 20 Million Strong" initiative for what appears to be stronger and more sustained interest in the upcoming election, and predicts that if the interest carries through to the polling booth, first-time voters could play a pivotal role in the election. On behalf of the Alfred University researcher, Carnegie Communications, a third party research firm with access to e-mail addresses for several million teen-agers and young adults, polled 728 young adults eligible to vote for the first time in a Presidential election. The margin of error in the poll is plus or minus 5 percent. The web-based poll was conducted in late June and early July. In January, 35% of the respondents said they were supporting Bush. The Democratic field at the time was still wide open, with no one candidate emerging as a clear favorite. Howard Dean was the highest with 14.1% and Democratic nominee John Kerry received only 1.8%. John Edwards, Kerry's running mate, was the choice of 1.3% of the respondents. Six months later, however, young voters appeared to be backing Kerry, with 51.8% saying they are most likely to vote for Kerry, compared to 31.6% who said they would vote for Bush. Another 11.8% said they were undecided, and 4.8% said they would support Ralph Nader. First-time voters in the second poll split along party lines when it came to supporting one of the major candidates. Not surprisingly, 88.1% of those who identified with the Republican party said they are likely to vote for George W. Bush, and 88.9% of those who identified themselves as Democrats said they will vote for John Kerry. While less than one percent of the Democrats said they would vote for Bush, 6.4% of the Republicans said they intend to vote for Kerry. Among independent voters, however, Kerry fared much better than Bush, with 37.9% saying they will likely vote for Kerry, compared to 20.1% who said they are likely to vote for Bush. A full 31% of the independent voters, however, say they have not yet decided. The remaining 10.9% said they would support Ralph Nader, the 2000 Green Party candidate who did not win endorsement for another run this year. "There were two major changes in the respondents between the first poll and the second," noted McDonough. "In January, 36.6% of the respondents identified themselves as Republicans, compared to 30% in the second poll; 34% said they were Democrats, compared to 46.4% six months later; and the remaining 29.5% said they were independent or supported another political party, compared to 23.6% in the second poll." "The 5% margin of error in both surveys is not sufficient to explain the shift," said McDonough. "Some of the change could be attributed to those who had not made up their minds in January deciding to support the Democratic party, but it also appears as though the Republican party is actually losing ground to the Democratic party at this point." The second shift, McDonough noted, is more first-time voters characterized themselves as liberal in their political beliefs in the second poll than in the first. In January, 34.2% said they were liberal, but that number increased to 41.2% in the second poll. Those who described their political beliefs as "middle-of-the-road" increased slightly also, from 33.6% in January to 36.9% in July, but those who said they were conservative dipped from 26.4% in January to 21.9% six months later. Those numbers are not inconsistent with what McDonough anticipated. "Younger adults are more apt to consider themselves liberal or 'middle-of-the-road' in their political beliefs," said McDonough. "They do not see Bush as liberal, nor is he portrayed that way by the media." Respondents were asked if they saw Bush or Kerry as better suited to handle major issues facing the country now. "Domestic issues, such as gay rights, are most important to this group of first-time voters, and they think Kerry is the man here," said McDonough. "Bush's idea of amending the constitution doesn't fly. With this group of potential

voters, terrorism is not the issue the candidates or the media think it is." First-time voters did not see one candidate as clearly better suited to handle terrorism or national security than the other. Among the respondents to the second poll, there was a difference in how men and women plan to vote, with 34.8% of the men saying they would support Bush, compared to 29.3% of the women; 55% of the women said they will support Kerry, as did 47.4% of the men. More than three-quarters of the respondents said they have seen at least one political ad during this election season, although Republicans, at 89.5%, were most apt to have seen an ad, followed by Democrats at 80.5%. Independents were less likely to have seen a political ad, although 77.6% said they have seen at least one. Fifty percent of those who identified themselves as independents said political ads are "not very effective" or "not at all effective," compared to 45.3% of the Democrats and only 29.5% of the Republicans. The young voters are most apt to turn to network news for their information, with 53.2% of all respondents saying they watch network news "several times a week" or daily. Newspapers were the next most popular source of information; 51.9% said they read a paper at least several times a week. Nearly 47% said they watch cable news several times a week or more to stay informed about the election, and 43.9% said they use the internet at least several times a week, closely followed (42.3) by those who listened to radio at least several times a week. Magazines were the least popular source of election information. Only 19.1% said they read a magazine daily or several times a week. While they turn to the media for information about the election, only 2.4% said they thought the media accurately reflects the perspective of first-time voters. Sixty percent said the media is "not accurate at all" or "not very accurate" in portraying their viewpoints.