

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE
University of California, Los Angeles

RESEARCH REPORT

**TRENDS IN POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND VOTING BEHAVIOR AMONG COLLEGE FRESHMEN
AND EARLY CAREER COLLEGE GRADUATES: WHAT ISSUES COULD DRIVE THIS ELECTION?**

Voter registration efforts and voter awareness campaigns have reached a fever pitch in this presidential election year that many consider a critical juncture in the modern history of this country. Many of these efforts are aimed at encouraging young people—especially non-registered voters, college-age voters, and recent college graduates—to exercise their constitutional right to vote. In a tight election year, with issues at stake that may affect the 18-29 year old age group, their presence at the polls this November may be more influential than ever before. Recent polling indicates that about 80% of young registered voters are closely following this year's election and plan to vote (Circle, 2004). Despite the breadth of knowledge about voting behavior in general, research studies tend to focus on voter constituencies that are more likely to vote as opposed to traditional age college students and recent college graduates, limiting our understanding of this population's political engagement. Given the revitalized efforts aimed at courting this growing constituency (e.g. Rock the Vote, Choose or Loose, etc.), there is no denying that the youth vote can become an important player in U.S. electoral politics. This research report takes a look at the potentially influential youth vote by examining trends in political attitudes—coinciding with the last three presidential elections—among college freshmen (many of whom are now eligible to vote). It also explores the political attitudes and factors that influence voting behavior among a sample of college graduates in their early career years, with a focus on occasional voters and new voters who may turn out in greater numbers for this election.

Background

Researchers in political science and population studies have done much to further our understanding of the factors that influence Americans to vote. Values and attitudes related to religious beliefs (Layman, 1997) and views on race are predictors (Abramowitz, 1994) of who turns out to vote in presidential elections, as are other factors such as reading the newspaper (Entman, 1989), voter knowledge (Bennett, 1994), and attending regular church services (Layman, 1997). Census data show that socioeconomic status, gender, home ownership, racial and ethnic background, and age are predictors of voting in a presidential election (Jamieson, Shin, & Day, 2002). However, the political science research suggests that college-age voters do not vote in presidential elections at the same rates as the general voting population. Studies by the Harvard Institute of Politics (IOP) (2000, 2001) and Bartels (2000) show partisanship or political orientation has little or moderate effect on likelihood to vote among college students and the general voting population, respectively. Harvard's IOP studies (2000, 2001) indicate that a college student's level of trust in the federal government influences their likelihood to vote, although they anticipate large turnout for this election (Ludden, 2004). Other studies have shown a relationship between college student voting behavior and civic engagement suggesting that those students most civically engaged are not necessarily making their way to the polls (Baer, 1993; Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003). Part of the discrepancy between civic engagement and voting could be that college students believe that activities such as volunteering

for specific issues would bring about greater change than voting in presidential elections (Harvard IOP, 2001). These findings contribute to our existing knowledge about civic engagement and voting among college-age students and recent college graduates, although there is little research that explicitly focuses on the relationship of students' political attitudes and the most basic measurement of political engagement—voting behavior, a gap that this research report seeks to address.

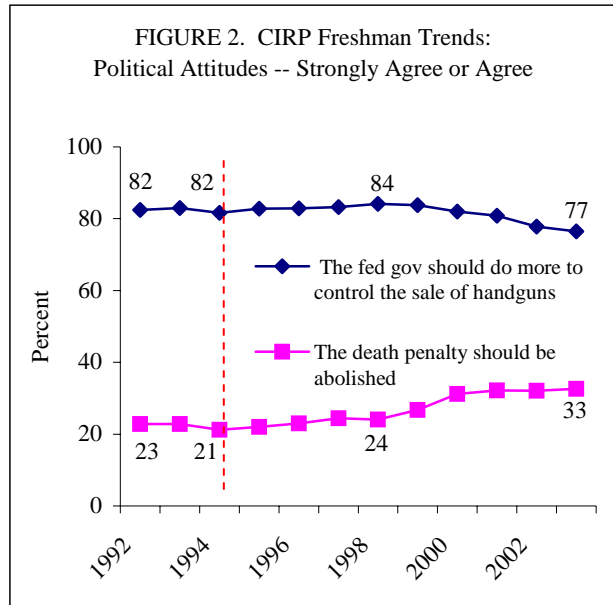
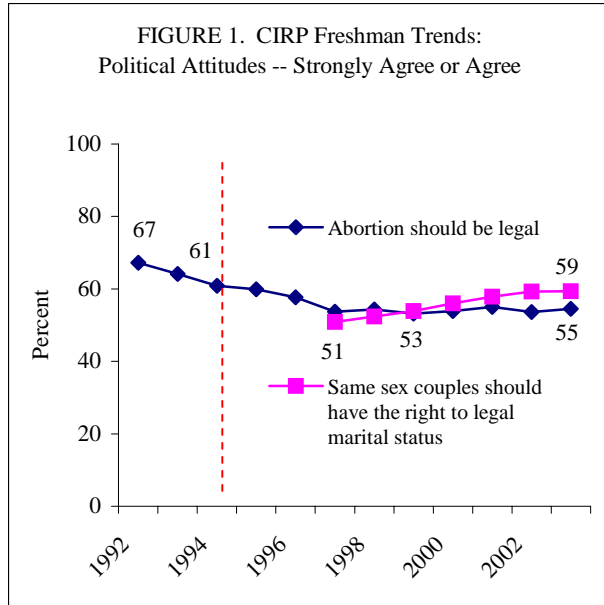
College Freshman Trends in Political Attitudes

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) has monitored college freshman trends through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) Freshman Survey since its inception in 1966, encompassing several generations of college students, numerous political and social movements, and vast societal and cultural change. In these nearly four decades, a span of time that laid witness to the largest ever expansion of access to higher education, the CIRP trends have supplied a consistent pulse for assessing the changing behaviors, views, and values of incoming college freshmen. While the trends have allowed us to track each successive wave of college freshmen, they have also served as a proxy with which to gauge broader public opinion on key public policy issues among the nation's youth. It is worth noting that the opinions of entering college freshmen are potentially shaped by parental, cultural, and community norms and values. Nonetheless, the CIRP trends on entering college students have helped us to better understand this key segment of our population. It is also worth noting that the CIRP has monitored students' political orientation (e.g. conservative, liberal, middle of the road) and their view on key issues over the decades, but does not inquire about students' party affiliation (e.g. Democrat, Republican).

Our data show there has generally been a moderate shift towards "middle of the road" in students' political orientation over the last few decades (Sax, Lindholm, Astin, Korn, Saenz & Mahoney, 2003), and yet a great deal of heterogeneity in political attitudes may exist. Moreover, there has been a stark decline since the 1960s in freshmen reports of keeping up with political affairs and discussing politics, although a small resurgence in political interest has occurred in the last three years. (The CIRP report on the views and behaviors of 2004 freshmen will be available on the HERI website in January 2005.) Most salient for the current report are the trends that reflect student opinion on a variety of critical social and policy issues. We selected issues that have made recent national news to illustrate trends over the last three presidential election cycles in Figures 1 and 2. We also highlight the views of the 1994 freshman cohort, a population that subsequently became the focus of a ten-year follow-up study on civic engagement (See the project on Understanding Service Learning on the HERI website and future briefs).

Figure 1 shows that the majority of college freshmen feel that abortion should be a legal right. Although support for legalized abortion has declined since 1992, with a low in 1999 of 53%, this view has been steadily gaining ground with over 55% of all entering freshmen expressing support in 2003. With the results of the 2004 election looming, it has been widely discussed that appointments of Supreme Court Justices over the next few years could effectively result in a reexamination of the decision in *Roe vs. Wade* and the right to a legal abortion. One issue at the forefront of current public discourse that is also steadily gaining support, is whether same sex couples should have a right to legal marital status. Over 59% of entering freshmen in 2003 support legal marital status for same-sex couples, up from 51% in 1997 when we first began monitoring this issue. Although an effort to enact a constitutional amendment to ban same sex marriage failed in Congress this year, it is clearly an issue that college students

could influence at the polls because about a dozen states will have the issue on ballots in November (“U.S. Election,” 2004).



Note: The dashed vertical line highlights the 1994 cohort of college freshmen followed up in 2004 as early career college graduates.

Figure 2 shows that a wide majority have typically favored exerting greater control over the sale of handguns. Although there has been a decline in support since the 2000 election on this issue, over three quarters of all entering college students support a federal effort to do more in this arena. The expiration of the assault weapons ban on September 14th, 2004 was discussed in the third presidential debate, and while CIRP has not monitored the ban on assault weapons, such a proposition is likely to receive at least as much student support as controlling the sale of handguns.

Although fewer than one-half of freshman students support abolishing the death penalty, student support for this view has been growing steadily in the past decade to the point where one third now support abolition. Increases coincided with a widely publicized moratorium on the death penalty and clemency for death row inmates in 2000 by Illinois Governor George H. Ryan. Subsequently, the American Bar Association has called for a moratorium on executions (ABA, 2003).

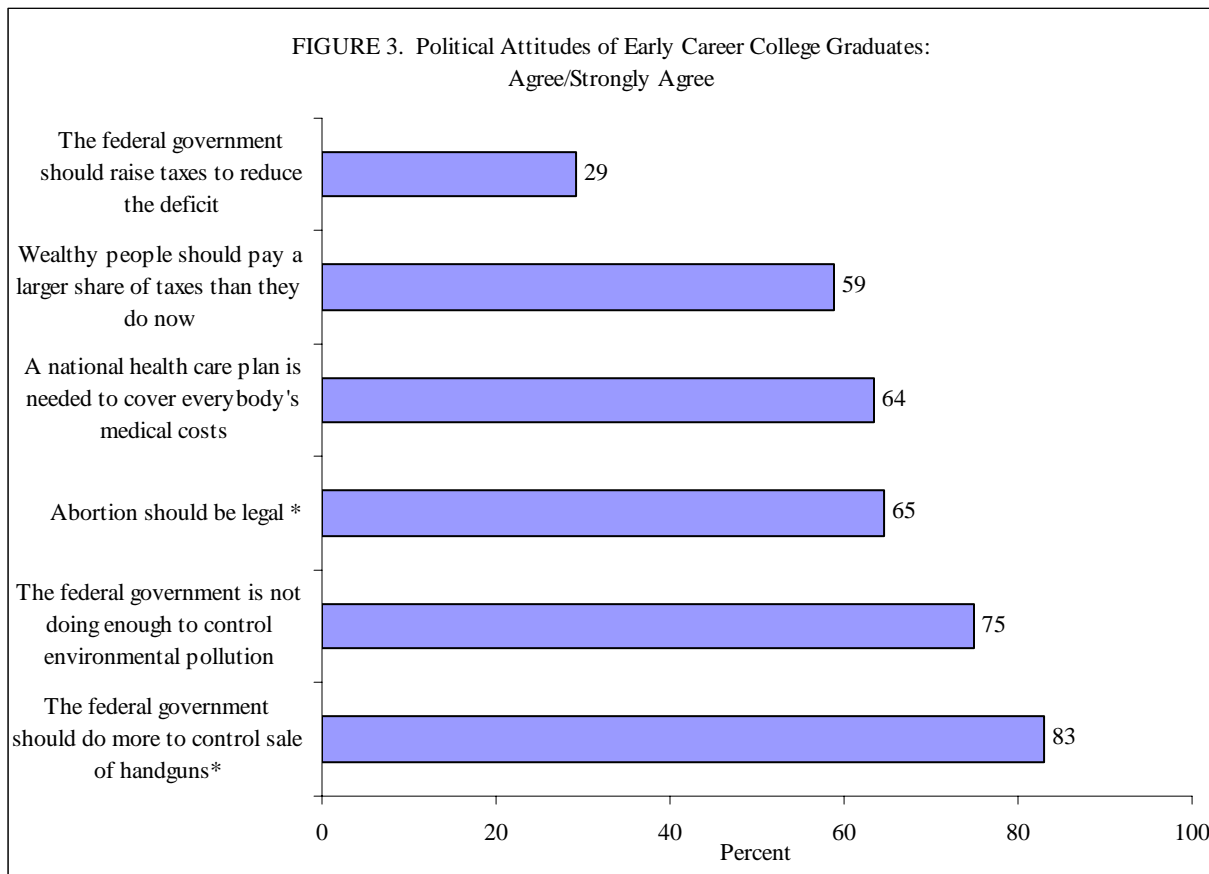
One issue we monitored, but stopped during peacetime, and then resumed after 2001 was the issue of military spending. Solid majorities of students have always opposed increased defense spending. In 1992, only 18% of entering college students agreed or strongly agreed that federal military spending should be increased, rising to 45% in 2002 (after September 11th) and then declining to 39% in 2003. Doubts about the war have arisen, and young people are concerned about the possible reinstatement of the draft.

Political Attitudes of Early Career College Graduates

While the freshman trends provide a general portrait of attitudes over the last three presidential elections, the attitudes of young college graduates provide insight into a group who may be more invested in issues such as taxes, health care, and other issues that generally gain center stage for adults in their late twenties. Moreover, recent college graduates represent the

older component of the youth vote and have a longer history of voting behavior than entering freshmen. For these reasons, we feature the political attitudes relevant to the current election and voting behavior among a cohort who completed their baccalaureate degrees within six years and are in their early career years. These individuals were followed up four years after college entry (1998) and ten years after college entry (2004) as part of a larger study of civic engagement directed by Alexander Astin, founding director of HERI.

Figure 3 reveals the 2004 responses to the follow-up survey. Respondent views reflect more support than entering freshmen on most issues. The majority of this cohort supports stepping up government efforts to control the sale of handguns (83%) and environmental pollution (75%). A majority of these early career college graduates support maintaining the legal right to an abortion (65%) and indicate that a national health care plan is needed to meet everybody's costs (64%). The majority (59%) agree that wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now, but only 29% agree that the federal government should raise taxes to reduce the deficit.



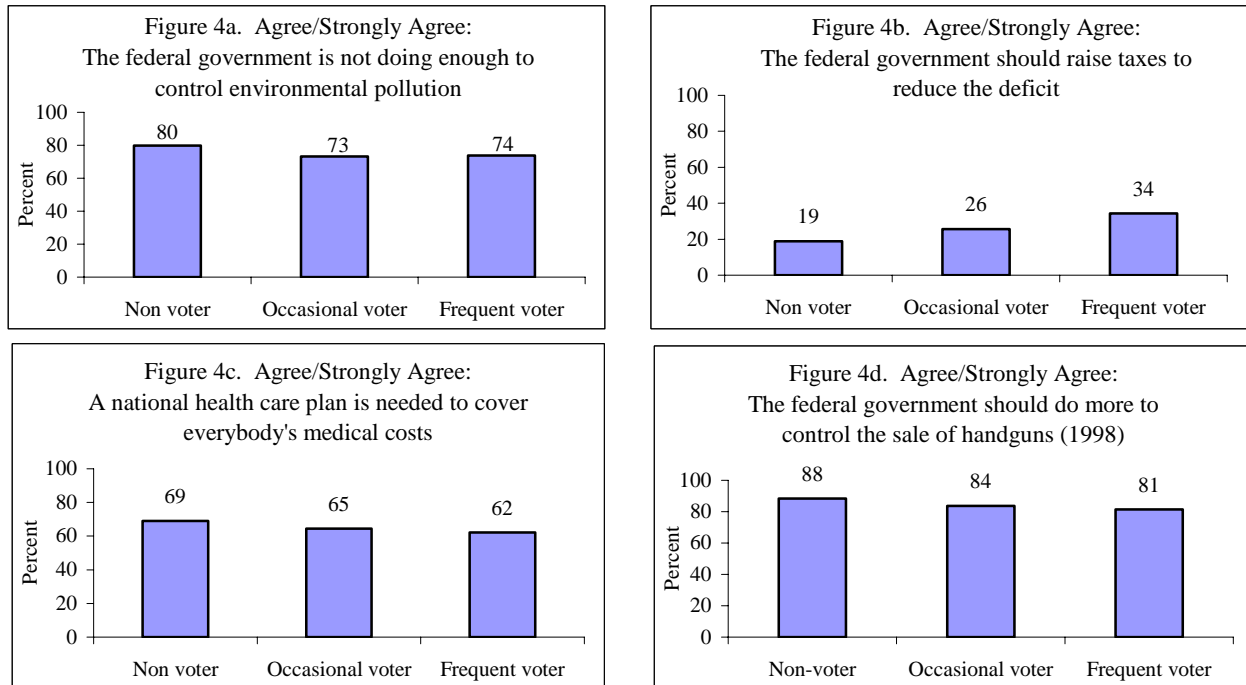
Note: An asterisk ‘*’ indicates that item was measured in the 1998 follow-up survey for this cohort; otherwise, all items were asked in the 2004 ten-year follow-up survey of post-college outcomes.

Voting Behavior of Early Career College Graduates

Figures 4 a-d show a significant relationship between selected political attitudes held by early career college graduates and their voting behavior. It is important to note that only 11% of the 8,474 college-educated respondents in the ten-year follow-up survey reported they never voted, 33% were occasional voters who do not consistently come out for national, state, or local elections, and 53% represented frequent voters who reported they voted in most elections or regularly came out for national elections. Although small in number, non-voters were most likely

to support federal control of pollution, a national health care plan, the control of the sale of handguns, and the legal right to an abortion. Frequent voters (60%) are most likely to support the idea that the wealthy should pay a larger share of taxes, although only one third support the view that the government should raise taxes to reduce the deficit (see Figure 4b). We made efforts to distinguish occasional voters in subsequent analyses, controlling for background and political orientation.

Figures 4 a- d



Note: Each of the cross-tabulations displayed in these bar charts have a statistically significant chi-square of $p < .01$.

Political Attitudes and Factors Associated with Voting Behavior

We compared the self-reported “occasional” voters with those who reported they “never” voted (or non-voters) because we are interested in what might motivate this group of early career college graduates to make their way to the polls (see Table 1). Table 2 shows the results of comparing “occasional” voters with “frequent” voters. Multinomial logistic regression analyses were conducted to determine the independent effects of background characteristics, inclination to seek multiple views, political orientation, and each of the political attitudes to predict the likelihood of voting (i.e., never, occasionally, and frequently) for these recent college graduates. (For more info on multinomial logistic regression, see the methodology section at the end of the report.)

Background Characteristics

In this population of early career college graduates, women are more likely to be in the occasional voter category than among the non-voter or frequent voter categories. In regards to racial/ethnic groups, there is no difference in voting behavior among college-educated White Americans, African Americans, Latino/as, Native Americans, and those who self-reported as “other” race. However, Asian/Asian Pacific Americans are more likely to be non-voters rather

than occasional or frequent voters. The occasional voters and frequent voters are more likely than non-voters to have attended selective institutions and to have obtained a graduate degree. This pattern confirms many of the previous findings on the relationship between education level and voter participation but contributes information about the type of college that voters among this age group have attended. When compared with non-voters, occasional voters are more likely to currently reside in the Midwest as opposed to other regions in the country but when compared with the population of frequent voters, they are more likely to live in the East. Occasional voters are significantly more likely to attend religious services regularly than non-voters are, but by far, frequent voters are the group most likely to regularly attend religious services than respondents in other groups (see Table 2). This finding also confirms previous research on religious activity and voting behavior (Layman, 1997). It is interesting to note that occasional voters are more likely to be employed part-time (or looking for full-time employment) than non-voters but there are no significant differences in employment when compared with frequent voters.

Table 1. Characteristics of Occasional Voters in Comparison with Non-Voters

	Occasional Voters Are More Likely
<u>Background Characteristics</u>	--To be female --To be in any racial/ethnic group other than Asian (i.e. Asian Americans are likely to be non-voters) --To have attended more selective colleges --To hold a master's or higher degree --To currently reside in the Midwest --To attend religious services more often --To be employed part-time
<u>Seeks Multiple Views on Issues</u>	To Agree That: --Dissent is a critical component of democracy --One must seek out multiple news sources
<u>Political Orientation</u>	No significant difference in orientation between occasional and non-voters
<u>Views & Attitudes</u>	No Difference Between Occasional and Non-Voters: --Abortion should be legal (1998) --The federal government is not doing enough to control environmental pollution (2004) --The federal government should control the sale of handguns (1998) --A national health care plan is needed to meet everybody's medical costs (2004) To Agree That: --The federal government should raise taxes to reduce deficit (2004) To Disagree That: --The wealthy should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now (2004)

Note: Each of the relationships highlighted in this table are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Inclination to Seek Multiple Views on Issues and Political Orientation

The fact that occasional voters are less likely than frequent voters to agree that online petitions are an effective way to participate in a democracy may mean they prefer more traditional means to express their views (e.g. letter writing, face-to-face meetings). Frequent voters are the group most likely to agree that dissent is a critical component of democracy and that one must seek out multiple news sources to get a handle on the issues, although occasional voters were also significantly more likely than non-voters to support these two views.

It is important to note that while groups differ in their views on key issues, there was no significant difference between frequent, occasional, and non-voters in terms of how they characterized themselves politically (e.g. far left, liberal, middle of the road, conservative or far right). This confirms previous research that shows partisanship or political orientation has little effect on the likelihood of voting (Bartels, 2000).

Views and Attitudes

What key issues are associated with voting behaviors, controlling for other voter characteristics? There are no significant differences across voting behaviors for two views: support for legalized abortion and government efforts to do more to control environmental pollution. Both of these issues receive majority support among all early career college graduates.

In contrast, occasional voters share opinions with non-voters regarding support for federal control over handgun sales and that a national health care plan is needed to help meet everybody’s medical costs. Occasional and non-voters are significantly more likely than frequent voters to support these views.

Table 2. Characteristics of Occasional Voters in Comparison with Frequent Voters

	Occasional Voters Are More Likely:
<u>Background Characteristics</u>	--To be female --No difference among racial/ethnic groups in voting behavior --To have majored in physical sciences/ engineering major, compared with other majors --To have attended more selective colleges --To currently reside in the East --To attend religious services less often than frequent voters
<u>Seeks Multiple Views on Issues</u>	To Disagree That: --Dissent is a critical component of democracy --One must seek out multiple news sources --Online petitions are an effective way to participate
<u>Political Orientation</u>	--No significant difference in orientation between occasional and frequent voters
<u>Views & Attitudes</u>	No Difference Between Occasional and Frequent Voters: --Abortion should be legal (1998) --The federal government is not doing enough to control environmental pollution (2004) --The wealthy should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now (2004) To Agree That: --A national health care plan is needed to meet everybody’s medical costs (2004) --The federal government should control the sale of handguns (1998) To Disagree That: --The federal government should raise taxes to reduce deficit (2004)

Note: Each of the relationships highlighted in this table are statistically significant at the p<.05 level.

Occasional voters were as likely as frequent voters to support the view that the wealthy should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now, but were less likely than non-voters to support this view. This has been an issue in the Kerry-Edwards plans to finance health care and other domestic programs. While occasional voters are more likely than non-voters to support the

view that the federal government should raise taxes to reduce the deficit, they are significantly less likely to support this view than frequent voters are. However, it is important to point out again that this issue received the least support overall, with only about one third of frequent voters in favor of this approach.

Implications for the 2004 Elections

In 1971, the 26th Amendment extended the voting age to 18, but electoral participation among the youngest voters has declined since 1972, with about 42% participating in recent general elections and even less for other elections (Levine & Lopez, 2002). In the 2000 election, the 18-29 year old category (the age range for this report) was nearly equally divided between George Bush (46%) and Al Gore (48%), with student support typically going to the candidate with the popular vote in previous election years (Brownstein, 2004). More voters in this population can help decide the ultimate outcome of the upcoming election. Who actually will turn out?

The current study on the 18-29 year old population offers a glimpse into political attitudes and the potential voting behavior among entering college students and early career, college-educated individuals. Support for increases in military spending among entering college freshmen has declined to 39%, indicating concern regarding military involvement is a key issue for the 18-29 year old population. With the exception of two issues (support for abolishment of the death penalty and the federal government should raise taxes to reduce the deficit) the majority of college freshmen who are now eligible to vote and early college graduates support the wide range of issues addressed in this report. Results from the ten-year follow up survey show majority support for increasing federal initiatives to control environmental pollution (75%) and maintaining the legal right to an abortion (65%), but these are not the issues that determine the difference between frequent, occasional, or non-voters among early career college graduates. Therefore, these are not views likely to determine their likelihood to vote in this election.

In states where the marital legal status for same-sex couples is in contention, college students can have a decisive vote since the majority (59% in 2003) and a growing number of entering college students support this view. On tax issues, occasional voters (many of whom are women) share the view with frequent voters that the wealthy should pay a larger share of the taxes than they do now, an aspect of the Kerry-Edwards plan for financing health and other domestic programs. Occasional voters are more likely than frequent voters to support the view that a national health care plan is needed to help meet everybody's costs. These are areas where occasional voters might make a difference if they are thinking about these issues when they go to the polls. The view that the federal government should raise taxes to reduce the deficit, however, received the least support among all the issues in our survey of early career college graduates.

Those who have a history of voting are likely to turn out for this election. Although they strongly support many national issues we reviewed in this report, we are unclear if college-educated non-voters will go to the polls at all. The college educated occasional voters, which are larger in number, and many new voters among the college population have an opportunity to decide this election.

Methodology For This Report

This research report employed two approaches in its analyses of college freshmen and early career college graduates. In our discussion of college freshmen, we examined the political attitudes among freshmen in the last twelve years using national data from the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute's Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey. Since 1966, the CIRP has monitored college freshman trends through its annual Freshman Survey, collecting data from more than 1,800 institutions and 11 million students over the years. In 2003, the CIRP surveyed 276,449 freshman students at 413 of the nation's baccalaureate institutions. (For a complete review of the 2003 CIRP methodology, see Sax et al., 2003.) The annual freshman data in our examination of trends are weighted to provide a normative profile of the American college freshman population. For instance, the 2003 data we discuss in this report are statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.2 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year colleges and universities as freshmen in 2003 (Ibid).

The second part of this report focused on attitudes and factors that influence voting behavior among early career recent college graduates. We employed a longitudinal survey design, following a cohort of students from 250 four-year institutions who were surveyed as college freshmen in 1994, during their fourth year of college in 1998, and who were subsequently followed up in a ten-year follow-up survey in summer 2004. The ten-year follow-up survey was developed as part of a larger study on civic engagement, service learning, and college outcomes. (For a detailed report on the results of this survey and study, see the upcoming research brief on the HERI website in early 2005.) The response rate for this ten-year follow-up survey was 50%, with 8,474 total respondents. These data were then weighted to correct for non-response bias and also reflect a population that included all 1994 first-time, full-time freshmen who graduated from college within six years of enrolling. The analyses presented in this report related to early career college graduates featured both descriptive and multivariate analyses in reporting the results. (See contacts below for more detailed statistical information.) Multinomial logistic regressions were conducted to determine the independent effects of background factors, political orientation, and political attitudes likely to influence young people's voting behavior during the early career years after college. Logistic regression is a form of regression that is utilized when the dependent variable is dichotomous (i.e., has two categories). Multinomial logistic regression is a special form of logistic regression that is used to handle the case of dependent variables with more than two categories. In this report, because the focus of this study was on occasional voters, multinomial logistic regression was used to compare the occasional voters with the frequent voters, and also to compare the occasional voters with the non-voters.

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