Cornell surveys students on campus and in swing states

By Susan Lang

Cornell's Survey Research Institute has launched an unprecedented national survey of U.S. college students at Cornell and in four "battleground" states on their opinions about the 2008 presidential election, on behalf of CBS News, UWire (a CBS-owned wire service) and the Chronicle of Higher Education.

The results will be broadcast by Katie Couric on the CBS Evening News Oct. 27, eight days before Election Day.

A total of 143,000 randomly selected undergraduates at 47 colleges and universities of all sizes are being surveyed. All the schools but Cornell, where 3,000 students have been contacted to participate in the survey, are in the "battleground" states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, North Carolina and Colorado.

"Cornell serves as the only control university in the survey in that it is not in a swing state, which is important from a scientific perspective," said Yasamin Miller, director of the Survey Research Institute. The poll is unique because it targets university populations.

"There is no way to gauge [students'] attitudes and opinions because they're excluded quite regularly in normal polling strategies -- we don't call dorms or cell phones when we conduct general population studies," said Miller. "But they are important because they're a significant part of the population."

Students have been invited by e-mail to participate in the poll, which takes about 10 minutes to complete and focuses primarily on the Nov. 4 election -- candidate preference, sources of election information, feelings on critical issues and how students obtain their information, including the use of social networking sites. The survey will close Oct. 19.

According to many polls, there is a stronger link between voter age and candidate preference in this election than in previous elections; younger voters show a 19-point preference toward Sen. Barack Obama, with 58 percent supporting him and 39 percent for Sen. John McCain, according to a Pew Research Center poll. People age 65 and older tend to support McCain.

In 2004, voters 18-24 had the lowest turnout of any age group, according to the Census Bureau; yet that election had the highest voter turnout since 1968, with 60.7 percent of eligible voters casting a ballot.

"We are strongly encouraging Cornell students who have been contacted to complete the survey (and to vote)," stressed Miller. "We not only want to show as good or better response than the other participating schools, but we also want to see how our students' attitudes and opinions compare with those in the other states."

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