Poll: Students Less Engaged Than Thought

By ELYSE ASHBURN

Obamamania has swept across college campuses. Students, it seems, are out campaigning, registering people to vote, singing the Democrat's praises far and wide. But a new poll of college students in four battleground states, conducted by CBS News, UWIRE, and The Chronicle provides a more nuanced view.

Most of those students weren't out knocking on doors or persuading family and friends to vote for their candidate. And they appeared to actually be paying less attention to the election than the average American does.

Still, a whopping 94 percent of students at four-year colleges in the battleground states — Colorado, North Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania — said they were registered to vote. Barack Obama had a two-to-one edge in their support over John McCain.

And the vast majority of students said they definitely planned to vote.

"Young people, once registered to vote, are very likely to go and vote — particularly college students," said Karlo Barrios Marcelo, a research consultant with the nonpartisan Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, at Tufts University.

Still, students at four-year colleges account for about 1.48 million people in those four states, or 3.9 percent of their total populations. And while college voters could certainly influence the election outcome, they aren't necessarily bringing other people to Mr. Obama's side. Among registered student voters in the poll who supported the Democrat, 42 percent said that at least one of their parents would vote differently from them. Only 21 percent of McCain supporters expected that to happen.

Limited Enthusiasm

Over all, only one in three of the students had displayed a campaign sign or tried to recruit a friend or family member to a particular campaign. Fifty-five percent of Obama supporters in the four
battleground states said they were enthusiastic about their choice, a slightly lower level of enthusiasm than in the general population, according to a recent CBS News/New York Times poll. In that national poll, 42 percent of McCain supporters said they were enthusiastic. But, in the battleground poll, only 30 percent of college students planning to vote for the Republican candidate were enthusiastic about their choice.

About half of the registered student voters said they were paying "a lot" of attention to the campaign, while 65 percent of all registered voters said they were paying a lot of attention in the CBS News/New York Times poll.

Students taking active roles in the campaign seemed to prefer tried-and-true ways of participating, the battleground poll found. Just 2 percent had posted videos about a candidate on YouTube, while 11 percent had donated to a campaign, 13 percent had helped with a voter-registration drive, and 13 percent had volunteered with a campaign. Supporters of Mr. Obama were more likely to have done all three.

About a quarter of the students had attended an event featuring one of the presidential candidates or their running mates, and about the same number had become "fans" of a candidate on a social-networking site like Facebook or MySpace.

The CBS News/UWIRE/Chronicle poll, released this week, is a Web-based survey completed by 24,848 undergraduates at 49 four-year colleges in the battleground states. The colleges were selected on the basis of criteria meant to represent all four-year institutions in each state. Students took the poll from October 6 to October 19. (See the full methodology.)

About 86 percent of students who completed the poll and were registered said they definitely planned to vote. Those figures ranged from 82 percent, in Ohio, to 91 percent, in Colorado.

Historically, getting young people to register is the biggest hurdle. Once registered, they vote at rates more in line with everyone else's. During the 2004 presidential election, for example, 60 percent of Americans age 18 to 29 were registered to vote, up from 55 percent in 2000, according to an analysis by Mr. Marcelo, at Tufts. About 82 percent of them actually made it to the polls, similar to the overall rate for registered voters. But because so many more were registered, young adults cast a larger share of the votes in 2004 than in 2000.
So, if as many students are registered to vote as say they are, they
could show up in vast numbers and have a sizable impact on the
election in those four key states.

Issues: Economy and Education

What makes the college voter tick?

Like most would-be voters, students registered to vote in the
battleground states said the economy is the No. 1 issue they would
base their vote on. About 76 percent said a candidate's stance on the
economy and jobs was extremely important to their vote, and 21
percent said it was very important.

As with the general population, students appeared to think Mr.
Obama is best positioned to deal with that issue. Of those who said
the economy was extremely important, 67 percent favored Mr.
Obama, compared with 29 percent for Mr. McCain.

Students said the candidate's views on education were second-
likeliest to influence their vote — more so than issues like the war in
Iraq, energy policy, and health care, which have figured
prominently in the campaign. Eighty-five percent of the students
said education was extremely or very important to their vote. Those
who said education was extremely important supported Mr. Obama
74 percent to 21 percent.

When it comes to higher education, registered student voters said
they were most concerned about controlling the cost of college.
Almost 64 percent said that was extremely important, followed by
the quality of higher education, the ability to discuss a range of
political views on the campus, and the availability of private loans.

The range of political views expressed on American campuses has
been a hot-button issue for years among conservative-leaning
groups that say colleges are too often dominated by liberal ideology.
The Republican Party platform adopted at the national convention
deprecated the "leftist dogmatism that dominates" many college
campuses. In the poll, though, students who identified themselves
as liberal were more likely than their conservative counterparts to
think that discussing a range of viewpoints was an important issue
in higher education.

Only 15 percent of students who are registered to vote saw
affirmative action as an extremely important issue. However, 25
percent of Hispanic students said it was, and 48 percent of black
students did.
In Colorado, which has a ballot measure this year that would ban the use of racial preferences by public colleges, students were actually less likely to say that affirmative action was a major issue. The one exception in that state was Hispanic students, who thought it was slightly more important than did Hispanic students overall.

Race and Gender

In general, college students in the battleground states overwhelmingly said the presidential campaign has focused too much on race and gender.

Only 17 percent thought racism was a very serious problem, and only 16 percent said sexism was. However, more than half of black students said racism was a very serious problem, as did around a quarter of Hispanic and of Asian students. Female students were more likely to say that sexism was a serious problem, but even so, less than a quarter said it was a major concern.

Two-thirds of all students said the United States is ready for a female president, and 79 percent said it was ready for a black president. More than a third, however, thought Mr. Obama had been treated more harshly during the campaign because of his race.

On the matter of age, 18 percent of said Mr. Obama's relative youth made him too inexperienced to run the country, and the rest were evenly split as to whether his age would help him have fresh ideas or would not make a difference. A sizable chunk (43 percent) said Mr. McCain's relatively advanced age would make it too difficult for him to do the job of president, while more than a quarter said his experience would help him do a good job. The rest said his age was irrelevant.

About two-thirds of students who were registered to vote said that Mr. Obama would improve the United States' image in the world, and a similar share said that he was someone they could relate to. Seventy-eight percent thought that the Democrat cared about people like them. Mr. Obama rated higher than Mr. McCain on every "quality" measure except effectiveness as commander in chief. Sixty-nine percent said Mr. McCain would excel in that area, compared with 52 percent for Mr. Obama.

When it came to each candidate's choice of running mate, students appeared to have much stronger opinions. They gave Joseph R. Biden Jr. mixed reviews, but more than half said they "don't much like" Sarah Palin. They took a cynical view of Mr. McCain's choice of her as a running mate, with about 73 percent saying he had picked
her to help him win rather than because she was well-qualified. Only 17 percent took a similar view of Mr. Obama's choice.

Nor did the McCain-Palin campaign's "maverick" message seem to work among these students. Sixty-five percent said Mr. McCain was a "typical Republican," while more than half said Mr. Obama was a "different kind of Democrat." Only 29 percent of registered voters in the poll thought Mr. McCain would bring real change to Washington, while 70 percent thought Mr. Obama would.

And many of the respondents indicated that a change would be welcome. Just over half of the students in the poll, registered or not, said they don't think the federal government cares much or at all about their generation.

Whatever their political persuasion, though, they did believe their votes could matter. More than four of five said the outcome of the presidential election will make a real difference.

Sara Hebel contributed to this article.

HOW THE POLL WAS CONDUCTED

The CBS News/UWIRE/Chronicle of Higher Education Poll was based on a Web questionnaire completed by 24,848 undergraduate students at 49 four-year colleges in four battleground states: Colorado, North Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. (UWIRE is a college newspaper wire service.)

The colleges were selected based on criteria meant to represent all four-year institutions in each state. Within each college, e-mail invitations to participate were sent to a random sample of undergraduates. At smaller institutions, under 3,000 undergraduates, all students were sent invitations.

Cornell University's Survey Research Institute programmed and housed the questionnaire on the Web from October 6 to October 19.

The total weighted number of respondents from each college is proportional to the number of undergraduates represented by that institution in the sampling process. Within each college, the weighted results reflect the academic class, gender, and race of each college's undergraduate population.

The data's sample size and margin of error by state are: Colorado (4,019), plus or minus two percentage points; North Carolina (7,617), plus or minus one percentage point; Ohio (5,914), plus or
minus one percentage point; Pennsylvania (7,298), plus or minus one percentage point. The error for subgroups is higher.

### STUDENT VOTERS' PREFERENCES IN 4 BATTLEGROUND STATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Obama/Biden</th>
<th>McCain/Palin</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>63.9%</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** The CBS News/UWire/Chronicle of Higher Education Poll

### WHAT MAKES COLLEGE VOTERS TICK?

Nearly 79% of registered student voters who said they will vote for John McCain said their parents will vote the same way, compared with 58% of students who said they will vote for Barack Obama.

More than 79% of registered student voters said the United States is ready for a black president, while 63% said the country is ready for a female president.

Almost 54% of registered student voters said they "don't much like" Sarah Palin, while almost 16% said they "don't much like" Joseph R. Biden Jr. Close to 20% said they "really like" Ms. Palin and about 33% said they "really like" Mr. Biden.

About 43% of registered student voters said John McCain's age makes it too difficult for him to do the work the presidency requires, while about 18% said Barack Obama's age makes him too inexperienced to do the work the presidency requires.

Almost 85% of registered student voters who support Barack Obama said their mind has been made up about their vote, compared with 77% of those who support John McCain.

On higher-education topics, controlling the costs of a college education was "extremely important" to close to 64% of registered student voters, and improving the quality of a college education was "extremely important" to almost 49%. But affirmative-action programs were "extremely important" to only 15%.

Close to 76% of registered student voters said the economy and jobs were "extremely important" to their vote. Just over 50% said education was "extremely important," a higher proportion than respondents who said the same about the war in Iraq, energy policy, health care, the environment, and immigration.
About 55% of registered student voters who support Barack Obama said they are enthusiastic about backing him, compared with 30% of those who support John McCain.

### WHO RESPONDED TO THE POLL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 and older</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year in College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Hispanic</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Generally speaking, do you usually consider yourself a [ ... ]?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How would you describe your views on most political matters?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>View</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** Figures do not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

**SOURCE:** The CBS News/UWIRE/Chronicle of Higher Education Poll

### STUDENTS: HOW POLITICALLY ENGAGED ARE THEY?

Students appear to be involved in this presidential election like none before, many observers say. While most students surveyed said they are registered to vote and definitely plan to do so, they also report relatively low levels of engagement in an array of political activities, don't use Facebook much to connect with candidates, and are less likely than adults to say they are paying "a lot" of attention to the campaign.

Only 34% said they had displayed a campaign sign or worn campaign-related apparel or a button, and just 31% said they had recruited a friend to support a campaign.

Fewer than 13% volunteered for a campaign.

Close to 65% said they had visited a candidate's Web page. But just 27% had visited a candidate's page on Facebook or MySpace, and just under 23% said they had signed up to be a fan of a candidate on a social-networking site online.

Nearly 68% said they had watched a video about a candidate on
YouTube this election season, but only 2% had posted a video about a candidate on the site.

About 51% of registered voters who are students said they were paying "a lot" of attention to the presidential campaign, compared with 65% of all adult registered voters who said so in the most recent CBS News/New York Times poll.

**SOURCE:** CBS News-UWIRE-Chronicle of Higher Education Poll