



*A partnership among King's College, Keystone College, Lackawanna College, Luzerne County Community College, Marywood University, Misericordia University, Penn State/Wilkes-Barre, The Commonwealth Medical College, University of Scranton, and Wilkes University*

### **The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development (The Institute)**

launched a polling program in 2014 surveying students at its 10 higher education institution partners. This fall 2016 poll assesses students' opinions about the importance of certain public policy issues and their level of civic engagement. A total of 1,419 students participated in this poll. Of all respondents, 64 percent are between the ages of 18 and 21, 24 percent are between ages 22 to 29, and an additional 8 percent fall between the ages of 30 and 44. Respondents of all other age groups were represented by less than 5 percent. Additionally, 56 percent of students surveyed identified an in-state home zip code, while 24 percent selected that their home is out-of-state. Among the students polled, the most frequently represented programs of study included healthcare (43 percent), science/mathematics (23 percent), and business (16 percent). Social science and humanities majors composed 14 and 10 percent of recipients, respectively. All other college majors were represented by less than 10 percent each.

### **Students are receiving their news information from news websites, blogs, television, and social media, supplementing or replacing traditional sources of news information.**

While the overwhelming majority of students strive to stay informed on current events (87 percent), the ways in which they access their news reflect the larger trend of new media supplanting traditional outlets. In last year's poll, television was the prevailing method of news content acquisition, with online websites and blogs coming a close second. Today, most students receive news information from websites and blogs (79 percent), television (75 percent), social media (72 percent), and word of mouth (62 percent). Even among students considering themselves relatively uninformed about current events, most claim to receive their news from social media, followed by word of mouth – a reversal from last year's findings.

Interestingly, a changing media landscape has yet to alter basic conceptions about the credibility of various news sources among their respective consumers. For the second year in a row, newspaper readers are most likely to consider themselves very informed, while people who got their news from word of mouth are most likely to consider themselves uninformed. Notably, consumers of "other" media not included by name in the survey are also highly likely to consider

themselves very informed. Student interest in the catchall nature of this category emphasizes the varied forms of new media by which today's youth learn about current issues.

### **Most students express either concern or uncertainty about the direction in which the United States and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are moving. But those who disagree on what direction the country is moving belong to opposing political parties and identify different public policy issues as the most important.**

Regarding national affairs, nearly 42 percent of students surveyed believe the country is moving in the wrong direction, with approximately 13 percent expressing optimism. Additionally, roughly 31 percent of students believe the country is moving in neither the right nor the wrong direction, with 15 percent unsure. As for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, students expressed even greater uncertainty, with nearly 45 percent declaring they were not sure in which direction Pennsylvania is moving. Even a plurality of self-identified in-state students (33 percent) claimed not to be sure in what direction the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is moving. Among those with an opinion on the question, nearly 13 percent believe the state is moving in the right direction, with approximately 18 percent indicating skepticism and 24 percent believing no change in movement has occurred.

Students believing the United States is on the right track are more likely than those who feel the opposite to identify as Democrats (72 percent), and cite healthcare, the environment, energy, and race relations as very important issues of public policy. Students believing the country is headed in the wrong direction are more likely to associate with Republicans (45 percent) or independents (32 percent), and identify jobs and the economy, terrorism and homeland security, immigration, taxes, Social Security, and government efficiency as very important issues.



*"Our students recognize the challenges our state and our nation face. This acknowledgement, commitment to voting, and civic engagement demonstrates this next generations commitment to improving the future of our state and country."*

**Patrick Leahy, President, Wilkes University**

**Although most students did not vote in the 2016 presidential primaries, a resounding majority of students are currently registered to vote and are likely to cast a vote in the general election. Among both registered voters and students very likely to vote on November 8, Democrats hold a slight edge.**

In a seventeen point increase since last year's survey, 86 percent of students indicate they are currently registered to vote, and all political parties surveyed enjoy healthy voter registration rates nearing 95 percent. 89 percent of students have given a great amount of thought to the upcoming presidential election, and 83 percent say it is at least somewhat likely they will cast a vote. A plurality of registered voters (37 percent) identify as Democrat, followed by Republicans (31 percent), independents (25 percent), and third parties (3 percent), such as the Green or Libertarian parties. When likely voters are considered, however, Democrats expand their 6-point lead over Republicans to 10 points, as 44 percent of voters pledging to vote in the upcoming presidential election identify with Democrats as opposed to 34 percent with Republicans and 17 percent with independents. 64 percent of students affiliated with political parties have also given a great amount of thought to the upcoming presidential election, with third party members leading the way at 85 percent, followed by Democrats (67 percent) and Republicans (58 percent). Finally, a strong majority of all registered voters (89 percent) also consider themselves at least somewhat knowledgeable about current events.

Regardless of party affiliation, just over 59 percent of students surveyed indicated they did not vote in the presidential primary elections this past spring. Participation rates of spring 2016 primary voters also differ by party affiliation. While 61 percent of Democrats voted in the primary elections, only 46 percent of Republicans and 39 percent of third party members did, as well. Additionally, only 9 percent of registered independents voted in spring 2016, perhaps due to Pennsylvania's closed primary system limiting their presidential choices. While students who voted in the presidential primary elections are more likely to vote in the general election than those who did not (96 to 74 percent), widespread voter enthusiasm about the general election among those who did not participate in the primary elections is not significantly dampened. Among self-identified participants at least somewhat likely to vote on November 8, 46 percent voted in the spring primaries and 53 percent did not.

**While students from different political parties have vastly different assessments of the general direction of the United States and the most important issues of public policy, they agree on the importance of issues such as economic management and government efficiency.**

Among Republican voters, 59 percent believe the country is headed in the wrong direction, with 6 percent feeling the opposite. Democrats, while more optimistic, are not lopsidedly so, with 26 percent believing the country is on the right track, 25 percent believing the opposite, and 49 either uncertain or believing nothing has changed. Independents



*"The results of this study show a very high level of voter registration among our regional college student population," says Thomas J. Botzman, president, Misericordia University. "This is a positive indicator for civic engagement; however, it is worth noting that most students have not attended a local government meeting. I encourage students to tap in to their vast leadership potential and engage at the local and regional level to help set direction for their communities."*

**Thomas Botzman, President,**

**Misericordia University**

and third party members split the difference, with under 10 percent believing the country is headed in the right direction and 45 percent disagreeing.

According to all students surveyed, the three most pressing public policy issues include the cost of college tuition, jobs and the economy, and healthcare, while the three least important policy issues are environmental issues, immigration, and race relations. While registered Democrats consider the cost of postsecondary education and healthcare to be the most important public policy issues, Republicans identify jobs and economy, as well as terrorism and homeland security, as two more pressing issues. Independents balance out both major parties, selecting college tuition costs as well as economic affairs to be their two most important issues. Finally, third party members chose government efficiency, as well as criminal justice and other police issues, as their most urgent public policy issues. Among issues selected as least important, Democrats identified the national debt, Republicans and independents selected race relations, and third party members chose environmental policy.

Many issues received vastly different priorities by party affiliation, with some showing a nearly 30 point gap between parties. According to the survey, the three most polarizing issues between Democrats and Republicans were environmental issues, terrorism and homeland security, and race relations. However, students across party lines feel similarly about the importance of other issues, such as economic management, Social Security, government efficiency, immigration, and taxes. Most notably, the cost of a college education was the only public policy issue which half or more of students from every political party identified as very important, even over issues such as economic management and homeland security.

## PUBLIC POLICY & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

**Students most likely to vote in the 2016 presidential election are civically engaged, well-informed Democrats or third party members who believe the country is headed in the right direction, yet are concerned about college tuition costs, jobs and the economy, government efficiency, and healthcare.**

Among all parties, 90 percent of students who associate with a third party – such as the Green or Libertarian parties – identify themselves as very likely to vote, making their participation rate the highest of all parties' members surveyed. Among the two major parties, however, the Democratic Party appears to have more enthusiastic voters in the upcoming presidential election, with nearly 86 percent of Democrats indicating they would be very likely to vote as opposed to 80 percent of Republicans. Students' likelihood to vote also increases with how knowledgeable they feel about current events and how much thought they have allocated to the election. Among survey participants who self-identified as uninformed, only 40 percent consider themselves somewhat likely to vote in the upcoming presidential election. But among very informed voters, nearly 92 percent claim they are likely to vote on November 8<sup>th</sup>. Additionally, 70 percent of the likeliest voters have given quite a lot of thought to the November 8<sup>th</sup> election.

Students who think the country is headed in the right direction are markedly more likely to identify themselves as reliable voters in the upcoming presidential elections than their peers who feel differently. 86 percent of students feeling optimistic about the country's direction consider themselves very likely to vote, while 69 percent of students feeling the opposite believe they are very likely to vote. The likeliest voters are also very concerned about college tuition costs, jobs and the economy, and healthcare, identifying race relations and immigration as their least important issues. Finally, students engaging in their communities are likelier to vote, as approximately 75 percent of those who volunteer regularly say they are very likely to vote in the presidential election.

**Independents unaffiliated with any particular political party are likelier to be uncommitted voters and feel disconnected from engaging in the upcoming presidential election.**

Registered independents appear to be the most reluctant voters this election season, with only 47 percent claiming they are very certain to vote in the presidential election, a nearly 30 point gap from the closest political party. Additionally, registered independents make up the plurality of voters who are only somewhat likely to vote (41 percent), followed by Republicans (33 percent) and Democrats (24 percent). Independents are also most likely to identify as unlikely or unwilling to vote in the presidential election. When likely voters are separated from all voters, turnout among independents falls by 36 percent. Even though all political parties have registered nearly 95 percent of students who feel affiliated with them, 73 percent of independent and unaffiliated voters are registered to vote – a 22 point gap. Finally, despite a healthy majority of independents considering themselves well-informed, only 43 percent have given a lot of thought to the presidential election.

**While most students have neither volunteered for a political cause nor attended a local public meeting, the vast majority of students volunteer for nonprofit organizations.**

Regardless of political persuasion, intention to vote, or awareness of current events, a strong sense of volunteerism runs through most students surveyed, as just over 80 percent of students surveyed have volunteered their time at an off-campus non-profit organization at least once. Roughly 65 percent of students report volunteering more than once, and nearly one in five do so regularly. However, 84 percent of students have never volunteered their time for a political cause or candidate, and only 10 percent have done so more than once in their lives. Finally, nearly 56 percent of students have never attended a local public meeting, such as a city council, school board, or county commissioners meeting – a slight increase from last year's survey.

Students who are more engaged in their communities are likelier to be more civically-minded, as nearly three-quarters of students who volunteer for a non-profit agency consider themselves very likely to vote, an approximately thirteen point increase over those who have never volunteered. Additionally, students who regularly volunteer at an off-campus organization or a political campaign are likelier than their peers to be very informed about current events. Finally, students who consider themselves very likely to vote are most likely to attend local public meetings, demonstrating the sincere interest in civic engagement in all levels of government that the most enthusiastic voters share.



*"In July of this year, Pope Francis challenged a gathering of young people 'to leave a mark' by choosing engagement over complacency. With steep increases in voter registration and continued strong commitment to service, the survey shows that the young women and men enrolled in regional colleges are letting their voices be heard and are continuing to make a positive difference in our community."*  
**Kevin P. Quinn, S.J., President of The University of Scranton**



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