Gender Differences in Political Engagement Among the Youth

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Gender Differences in Political Engagement Among the Youth

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Introduction

The issue of gender differences in voting behavior and policy attitudes has been a recurrent theme in social science literature and political commentary in the United States. In presidential and many congressional elections, for instance, women have been observed to disproportionately support Democratic candidates, compared to men. The size of this gender gap has often been bigger than the margin of victory for Democratic candidates in congressional as well as in the 1992 and 1996 presidential races. As a result, appeals designed to attract female voters have become widespread (Manza and Brooks, 1998).

Other gender gaps in U.S. politics have also been noted, for example, in turnout rates, partisan identification, domestic and foreign policy issues, and evaluations of elected officials. An extensive body of research suggests that the gender gap in vote choice can be traced to the significant changes in the economic status of women in American society since WWII, which has had important repercussions for electoral politics. The central debate has focused on the role of structural factors, such as labor force participation and the economic “autonomy” of women, or cultural forces like support for feminist values and the women’s movement and attitudes toward the welfare state (Carroll 1988; Cook 1993).

While discussions of a gender gap in electoral politics have become widespread, political activity in 18-to 24-year-olds remains an understudied area. When young voters are mentioned at all, they are often portrayed as disengaged individuals lacking interest in politics and a sense of political efficacy. However, young voters as a potential voting group need to be recognized for their size, especially in light of the closeness of the 2000 presidential election. Overall, the 18-to 24-year-old category of voters will grow by five million by 2008 and is the next largest voting bloc after the elderly and baby-boomers. Although youth voting turnout increased somewhat in the 2000 presidential election from the 1996 election, low youth turnout (see Fig. 1) continues to be a public policy concern. Despite this concern, the majority of young Americans receive few direct appeals to their self-interest from candidates, participate little in any stage of the political process, and continue to be ignored by policy-makers.

To determine if the charge of youth abstention from the political and electoral process has any bias, this article sets out the findings of a cross-sectional investigation into political knowledge, participation, and attitudes of 18-to 24-year-old students at Grand Valley State University to arrive at a better understanding of the social, economic, and demographic structure of their political activity. In doing so, it also examines how far Grand Valley Students differ in their levels of civic engagement and political preferences by gender.

Data and Discussion

The data for this study are derived from an on-line voting behavior survey of Grand Valley State University students. The survey was collectively developed by students enrolled in a Gender and Economics course in Fall 2004 as part of a class research project. It was made available to all the registered students at Grand Valley for a period of two weeks on Blackboard. Two random drawings of $50 gift certificates to the University Book Store were announced to students taking the survey. A total of 5,600 students responded to the survey. After eliminating missing observations and retaining students in the age group 18–24 years, we were left with a sample size of 4,033. Descriptive statistics of the relevant variables for this age group are given in Table 1.

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 66.65% of the respondents were female.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 90.58% of the students who responded to the survey were white, followed by 3.25% African American, and 6.17% others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 97.12% of the respondents were single.</td>
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<td>• 66.55% of the students reported that they had a family member who was serving or had served in the military.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 36.45% of the students had a family member who was part of a labor union.</td>
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<td>• 54% of the students were raised in traditional households, followed by 34% raised in nontraditional, and 12% raised in single-parent households.</td>
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<td>• While 29.5% of the respondents were unemployed, 63.7% worked part-time and 6.8% were employed full-time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 16.54% of the students were raised in households that earned less than $35,000 per year, followed by 28.66% raised in households with income between $35,000 and $65,000 per year. The remaining 54.8% came from house holds with an annual income greater that $65,000.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 29.4% of the students identified themselves as Protestant, 26.9% as Catholic, 27.1% did not specify a religious affiliation, and 16.6% identified themselves as other.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 64.37% of the students considered religion to be an important to very important part of their lives.</td>
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</table>

1 Ms. Nikaj is a senior at Grand Valley majoring in economics.
2 We thank Michael Leahy, Informational Technology, for making this possible.
3 We thank Dr. Hari Singh, Chair Economics Department, for this financial support.

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Table 2

Voting Behavior by Gender and Demographic Group

**Political Participation:** 40.24% of the students identified themselves as Republican, 29.26% identified themselves as Democrat, 13.19% as independent, and the remaining 17.31% as undecided. More women, however, were Democrat compared to men. The majority of the students reported their parents to be Republican or to vote Republican on different issues. While 91.72% of the respondents were registered to vote, 88.32% said they were planning to vote. More men than women were registered to vote and planning to vote. Men also reported caring more than women about the results of the election. They were more informed on issues and followed most of the political debates.

**Important Issues:** Overall the most important issue to college students was education, followed by the state of the economy and foreign affairs and defense. Men and women differed in their ranking of issues of importance in the Presidential election. While foreign affairs and defense, education, and the state of the economy were the top three issues of importance to men, for women they were education, health care and social welfare, followed by the state of the economy. Both men and women ranked stem cell research, same-sex marriage, the budget deficit, and the appointment of Supreme Court Justices as the least important issues in the upcoming elections.

**Information Sources:** Overall, students rely 52.81% on the televised media to stay informed, followed by 16.56% on family and friends, 16.22% on the internet, 9.2% on newspapers, and 5.21% on radio. While women get more of their information from friends and family (20.5%) compared to men (9.5 %.), men (24.6%) rely more than women (12.09%) on the internet to stay informed.

**Influence on Voting Choice:** Overall college students seem to agree that it is family followed by political debates and their faith and moral values that most influence their voting decisions. Women are influenced more by their family and political debates and less by their faith compared to men.

**Homeland Security:** 53.48% of the students believe that the U.S. has become more secure after September 11, 2001; 29.01% think that there has been no change in the state of the nation’s security; and 17.51% of the respondents see the U.S. as less secure. While, men find the U.S. more secure after 9/11/01, women find it less secure.

**Position of the U.S. in the World:** Only 23.13% of the students think that the position of the U.S. has grown stronger in the world over the last year; 40.86% believe that the U.S. has become weaker; and 36.01% think that the U.S. position in the world has not changed. Women feel that the position of the U.S. in the world has grown weaker.

**War in Iraq:** While 49.57% of the respondents approved of the war in Iraq, 50.43% disapproved. 56.73% of the men approved of the war in Iraq, and 54.02% of the women disapproved of the war. While men were more likely to approve of the war in Iraq if they had a family member serving in the military in the past or present, women were more likely to disapprove of the war under similar conditions.

**Changed Their Minds:** 13.19% of the respondents reported changing their minds about which candidate they will be voting for in the presidential elections. More women (14.36%) changed their voting choice compared to men (10.86%). Both men and women stated that their faith followed by moral values and beliefs was responsible for this change in mind.

**Candidate for Whom You Would Vote:** College students reported that if the Presidential elections were to be held during the time the survey was conducted, 51.35% would vote for President Bush, 44.63% would vote for Senator Kerry, and 4.02% would vote for Ralph Nader. Although both men (53.75%) and women (50.15%) reported voting more in favor of President Bush, more women (46.24%) reported they would vote for Senator Kerry compared to men (41.41%). Moreover, students were more likely to vote for Kerry if a member of their extended household belonged to a labor union, if they were a minority, if they were Catholic, if their parental household income was less that $35,000 a year, and if they were raised in a nontraditional or a single-parent household.
Table 2 presents data on the political knowledge, behavior, attitudes, and participation of college students in the electoral process. Results suggest that students at Grand Valley are politically active. On average they are more politically engaged than what has been observed historically for this age group throughout the country (see Fig. 1). Most students report that they care about the outcome of the elections. Over two-thirds suggest they have either followed all or some of the political debates between the presidential candidates. An overwhelming majority deems it important to vote in the presidential elections and is registered and planning to vote in large numbers.

The youth at Grand Valley, though, differ by gender on the most important issues in the upcoming presidential elections; they are well informed and are most affected by their faith, political platform of the candidates, and moral values in their vote choice. Most traditional college students identify themselves as Republican and although they believe that both the Democrats and Republicans would do a good job in Congress, for the White House they seem to prefer the Republican candidate by a small margin. The closeness of the 2004 election and the expanding size of the youth voting bank suggest that direct appeals designed to engage young voters in the 2008 presidential elections will be important.

Finally, though the results indicate gender differences in partisan identification, voting, and policy attitudes, the size of the gender gap among Grand Valley students is much smaller than what has been reported in the social science literature. This result can partly be explained by the 18-to 24-year-olds identifying themselves as politically more conservative than older students at the university.

References