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From: The Mellman Group

Re: Poll Results

Date: January 11, 2000

The following summary is based on a national survey of 800 college students under 31 years old conducted by The Mellman Group. The survey was conducted in November 1999. The margin of error for the total sample is +/- 3.5%, while the margin of error for subgroups is larger. When our results among students are compared to "adults overall," we refer to six recent surveys: a 1996 Mellman Group poll for the League of Women Voters; a January 1999 national Mellman Group survey; a February 1999 Mellman Group survey; a May 1999 Council for Excellence in Government poll; and 1996 and 1998 data from the National Election Studies conducted by the University of Michigan.

While college students have little interest in politics or political careers, they are nonetheless are civic-minded and public-spirited—showing a strong tendency, for example, to do volunteer work for causes in which they believe. They are less engaged in politics and government than are adults overall, but not because they feel more cynical or alienated. In fact, students are less cynical about politics and government than their elders. Rather, students' lower levels of engagement appear to result from a perception that politics is less relevant to them or to the issues about which they care. They do believe in giving something back to their communities, but see work in education or for non-profit organizations as better ways to accomplish those goals than careers in politics. While students overwhelmingly oppose mandatory national service proposals, they strongly favor incentives to encourage voluntary public service.

Students Are Not Very Involved In Electoral Politics

Students are less likely to vote than the population at large. More than four in ten (43%) of eligible students admit that they did not vote in the Presidential election of 1996. Two thirds (66%) of eligible students say they failed to turn out for the elections of 1998. Slightly fewer students (71%) than adults (76%) report they are currently registered to vote, but there is a clear tendency to over-report both registration and voting across the population. Students also do not spend much time either following or discussing politics. Only 27% of students follow politics "most of the time" and only 27% discuss politics at least three times a week.

Nonetheless, College Students Are Public-Spirited And Civic-Minded

Despite their lack of interest in politics, college students express their public spirit and civic-mindedness in numerous ways. Nearly three-quarters (73%) have done volunteer work in the past two years, and most (62%) more than once. Their volunteer experiences include caring for the hungry or homeless (33%), helping people in other countries (12%), and cleaning up the environment (16%). Half (50%) report making a purchase decision based on their political beliefs, and large numbers report having contacted an elected official (29%) or the media (28%) about an issue.

Students' civic-mindedness and public spirit is also evident in some of the values they profess. Finding a job that "will make a positive difference in people's lives" is considered at least "very important" by 80%. This compares to, for example, 55% who say finding a well-paying job is at least "very important." Seventy percent (70%) put a similarly high value on working to make their community, or country (69%), a better place. Yet, "serving" one's country or following current events are important to many fewer (44% and 46%, respectively).

There Is Substantial Interest In Public Service Careers, Though Not In Politics

Many students expect to spend part of their careers in jobs that reflect their civic-mindedness, including working for "non-profits" (17% "very likely," 63% total likely), in "public service" (18% "very likely," 56% total likely), and in "public affairs" (7% "very likely," 40% total likely). Interest in these careers cuts across demographic groups, however women (62% total likely), and social science majors (73% total likely) are somewhat more likely to say they will pursue a career in public service.

However, public service does not mean politics or government to these students. Nearly half (49%) say that a career in public service involves working for a non-profit, in their mind. Only about a third (38%) equate public service with work in government.

Far Fewer Students Are Interested In Political Careers Or Work In Government

Far fewer students express an interest in pursuing careers in "politics" (6% "very likely," 25% total likely) or "government" (8% "very likely," 36% total likely) than are interested in "public service" or "public affairs."

Students do not see politics as a particularly good way of achieving any of their career goals. Hi-tech and education are seen as the best way to challenge oneself, while those careers, plus medicine, are seen as the best ways to do something "exciting and interesting." Business affords the best opportunities for promotion, while hi-tech, law, medicine, and business are thought to be the best ways to earn a living. Even in the areas where politics should have natural advantages it lags behind other careers. For example, 32% say that education is the best way to make a difference for society, compared to only 8% who say that about politics. Similarly, 27% say the best way to give something back to one's community is through non-profit work and 22% say through education, compared to 17% for politics.

Cynicism And Alienation Cannot Account For The Low Level Of Interest And Participation In Politics

Alienation is often cited as the source of lower participation among young people in politics. If this were in fact the causal link, we would expect students to be more cynical and alienated than other segments

of the population. Instead, students are *less* alienated than the public overall. One measure of alienation is the extent to which people feel negatively toward both major parties. Few students (9%) have an unfavorable impression of both political parties. Further, students are more likely to feel favorably toward both parties (29%) than is the public overall (21%). A plurality of students (46%) are partisan, having a favorable impression of one party, but not the other.

Compared to the public overall, students are less likely to feel government is run for the benefit of special interests (students: 49%; public 1998: 64%). Students are also more likely to trust the government to do what is right "just about always" or "most of the time" (students: 41%; public 1998: 29%). In addition, students are no more likely to find politicians crooked than is the public overall (students: 39% "quite a few" are crooked; public: 41% "quite a few").

However, Students Are Less Likely To Find Government Relevant To Them Personally

While higher levels of cynicism and alienation cannot account for lower levels of student participation, the sense that politics is irrelevant to students can. On these measures, there are meaningful differences between students and others.

Students are less likely than adults overall to see politics as relevant to their lives. Government is substantially more likely to be seen as playing no role in the lives of students (35% no role) than in the lives of the general population (17% no role). Further, a slim plurality of students (48%) says government does not address the issues that concern them.

While Students Oppose A National Service Requirement, They Overwhelmingly Favor Incentives For National Service

Aside from the Peace Corps (87% heard of), few students are aware of current public service opportunities available to students nationally. Most know little or nothing about Americorps or Vista. Teach for America has a wider audience, but still nearly half of students (46%) are largely unaware of this organization.

Despite their community spirit, students oppose compulsory national service by a wide margin (25% favor, 60% oppose). However, an even greater number favor an incentive program that would exchange work in public service for temporary forbearance on their student loans (80% favor, 10% oppose).

This suggests that students will respond favorably to an incentive to pursue work in a field in which many already express an interest. They also need to know more about their options for public service and receive encouragement