

# **A SURVEY OF AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS**

*Commissioned by the Leon & Sylvia Panetta Institute for Public Policy*

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*This report analyzes the findings of a survey among American college students conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Leon & Sylvia Panetta Institute for Public Policy. The research consists of 806 interviews among a representative sample of college students at four-year institutions of higher learning throughout the country. Interviews were conducted by telephone from May 9 to 17, 2005. The margin of error is  $\pm 3.5\%$  for the overall sample and it is higher for specific subgroups.*

## ATTITUDES ON CURRENT POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

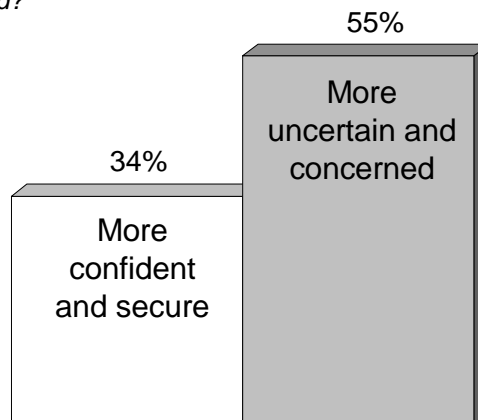
College students are divided on the country's political leadership and they feel that national politicians are neither accomplishing enough nor are focused on the right priorities. While their assessment of the current situation is mixed, they are worried and uncertain about what the future holds for the country.

College students are more liberal and Democratic than adults nationally, however, their mixed assessment of President Bush is similar to that of adults nationally.

- By 43% to 38%, college students feel that things in the nation are headed in the right direction (little movement from last year's 40% right direction, 42% wrong track). This is somewhat more optimistic than that of all adults, among whom just 35% feel that the country is headed in the right direction and fully 52% say that we are on the wrong track.<sup>1</sup>
- Yet, college students are concerned about the country's future. A majority (55%), say that they are uncertain and concerned about the country's future, which suggests that this group's optimism is somewhat tempered by what lies ahead. Concern increased five points from last year's findings.

### Students Uncertain And Concerned About The Future

*When you think about the future of the country, would you say that you feel more confident and secure or more uncertain and concerned?*



<sup>1</sup> Comparative among all adults is from a Hart/McInturff Poll conducted for NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* among 1,005 adults from May 12-16, 2005.

The data also suggest that college students are shifting their attention from international concerns toward national ones. Undergraduates express serious concern about the country's future and feel that national problems are greater than international ones.

- In spring 2001 (before 9/11), students said by 59% to 37% that national problems would be of greater concern to their generation than would international ones. By 2004, they were divided evenly (45% international, 46% national). Today that proportion is 40% international and 50% national. Students are divided on this measure by race and graduation year. While all classes cite national priorities over international, seniors and juniors are more likely to focus on international problems than are underclassmen.

<b>WHERE WILL MOST PROBLEMS COME FROM?</b>		
	<u>International</u>	<u>National</u>
	%	%
All college students	40	50
Whites	42	47
Hispanics	36	53
Blacks	30	64
Asians	34	57
Freshman	35	56
Sophomore	44	44
Juniors	40	50
Seniors	41	50

College students' attitudes about the country's political leadership have darkened significantly since the beginning of President Bush's first term and their problems with leadership are focused much more on partisanship and a lack of significant accomplishments than on a lack of understanding young people.

- Today, 54% say they are satisfied with the country's political leadership and 45% are dissatisfied, marking a 15-point increase in dissatisfaction since early 2001.
- Students are divided along partisan lines on this question, with 90% of Republicans and only 30% of Democrats expressing satisfaction with the country's leaders.
- College students' top concern about the country's political leadership is that too little is getting done for the good of their college constituents. College students cite too much partisan bickering (37%), important issues not being dealt with (36%), and our leaders being too beholden to special interests (31%) as the most important problems. College students are least likely to feel that political leaders do not understand what young people care about (just 11% mention this).

As a group, college students are more Democratic and liberal than is the adult population overall. Their political persuasion does not, however, move their ratings of President Bush significantly from the public overall.

- Nearly half (48%) of college students identify themselves as Democrats while 32% are Republican. This compares with recent national surveys that show party identification as even or as having a slight Democratic advantage.
- The ideological disparity between college students and adults is more striking. Slightly more than one in three (35%) college students state their ideology as liberal and 22% say that they are conservative. Nationally, these proportions are reversed—21% say liberal and 32% conservative.
- These differences in political persuasion do not significantly alter views on President Bush. A slight plurality of college students (47%) disapprove of the job that he is doing as President while 44% approve. Among all adults, the President's marks are divided evenly at 47% approve, 47% disapprove.<sup>2</sup>
- The President's job rating carries a significant gender gap. Among women, he stands at just 38% approve, 52% disapprove. Men are much more positive, with 51% approving and 42% disapproving. (At 56% approve and 35% disapprove, business majors are much more favorable toward him than are those who major in other areas.)

## 2004 ELECTION

Among college students who say that they voted in the 2004 election (74%), 56% supported John Kerry for president and 39% supported George W. Bush. Voters' presidential vote is tied closely to party identification and ideology.

- Kerry saw his strongest support from schools with either less than 5,000 students (62%, 33%) or more than 20,000 (59%, 37%) while holding only a 12-point margin among those who attended schools with 5,000 to 20,000 students (54%, 42%).
- Students' view on whether the Iraq war was worth it is a pretty clear indicator on how they voted for president. Among those who think that the war was worth it, Bush wins by 80% to 17%; conversely, among those who think that the war was not worth it, Kerry wins by 80% to 14%.
- Religiosity also plays a significant role in presidential preference. Among those who attend church at least once a week, Bush wins by 26 points (61%, 35%). Among those who never attend church, Kerry wins by 64 points (77%, 13%).
- Among the 60% of voting college students who feel that politics is very or fairly relevant in their lives, Kerry wins over President Bush by 61% to 34%. The remainder of students—the more politically apathetic who say that politics is just somewhat or not relevant at all—indicate a near even division: 48% for President Bush and 49% for Kerry.
- College women supported John Kerry by 60% to 38%, whereas he received less support from college men (51%, 41%).

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<sup>2</sup> Comparative among all adults is from a Hart/McInturff Poll conducted for NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* among 1,005 adults from May 12-16, 2005.

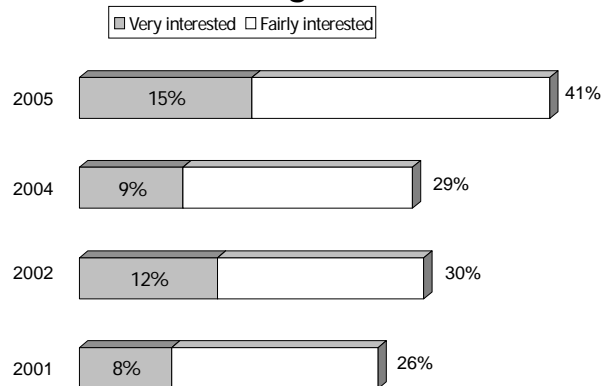
There appears to be no change in the relevance of politics in college students' lives, as the proportion saying that politics is very or fairly relevant in their lives has moved little (from 56% to 54%) since May 2004.

Hispanic and black college students feel much more strongly about the relevance of politics in their lives than do white students. Three in five Hispanics (63%) and blacks (66%) categorize politics as very or fairly relevant to their lives, whereas whites are less affected (53%) by it.

### **RIISING INTEREST IN PUBLIC SERVICE**

The survey finds college students overall to be more interested in working for government and public service than in last year's survey, with some of the highest marks we have recorded to date. A key factor in this increase is the increase in students who have been asked by someone to get involved in politics or public service. Quite simply, talking to young people about public services matters. Lastly, while a relatively small proportion of college students volunteered on political campaigns in 2004, it marks an increase over 2000, and the data suggest that this group is an excellent target for public service and is much more civically engaged than are college students overall.

#### **Interest In Working For Government**

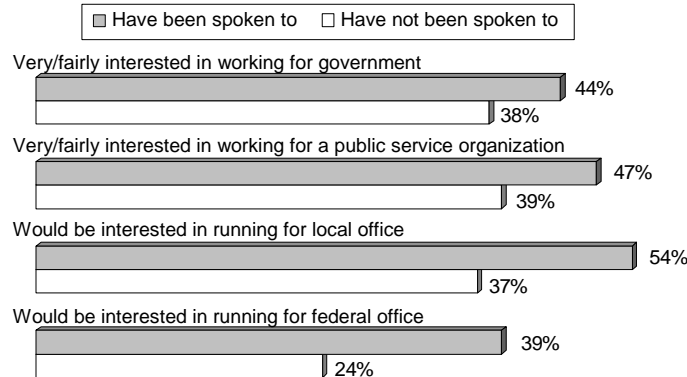


- Two in five (41%) college students say that they are interested in working for government—the highest proportion we have recorded on this measure and up 12-points from last year's survey.
- Two in five (44%) undergraduates say that they are interested in working for a public service organization—this is 14-points higher than in last year's survey and also the highest number we have recorded.
- Just 10% say that they are interested in the military; while we do not have historical trend on this, the proportion is quite low.

- Overall, 71% of college students say that they have been active in volunteer activities in their local communities; this marks an 18-point increase from last year and is the highest proportion we have recorded.
- A majority (56%) now say that someone has spoken with them about getting involved in politics or public service. This is an 11-point increase from last year. College students who have been asked to get involved are more likely than those who have not been asked to express an interest in working in government (44% compared with 38%) or public service (47% compared to 39%). They also are more interested in running for local office (54% compared to 37%) and federal office (39% compared to 24%).

### Increased Interest In Service/Office

*Results among those who have and have not been spoken to about a getting involved in politics or public service*



- While just 9% of students say that they volunteered on a political campaign in the 2004 election, this is up from 6% who said they did so 2001. Students who majored in the social sciences and humanities volunteered at a greater rate (13% and 14%, respectively) than those who majored in math/science/computer science (6%) and business (7%). Twice as many students who are dissatisfied (12%) with the current political leadership volunteered than those who are satisfied (6%).
- This group is a target for public service. Those who volunteered are much more likely to be interested in running for federal office (54% compared to 32% overall) as well as local or state office (73% compared to 47% overall). Moreover, 56% are interested in working for government (41% overall). A near unanimous 97% of volunteers voted in the 2004 election (compared with 76% of non-volunteers).
- Interest in running for local elected office is at the highest mark we have recorded (47%). The proportion of college students who are interested in running for federal office is unchanged from 2001 (32%).

## ECONOMIC OUTLOOK AND JOB MARKET

College students offer a guarded view on the economy and job market today. Half (51%) feel that the state of the nation's economy is good or excellent, while nearly as many (47%) say not so good or poor. While clearly a divided verdict, this represents improvement over the past year. In May 2004, just 40% rated the economy as good or excellent.

- Family economic status strongly influences students' outlook: just 38% of students from families with below-average incomes give the economy positive marks, compared with 59% of those from households with above-average incomes.
- Only half (51%) of students expect to end up better off financially than their parents, a surprisingly low proportion given young people's traditional optimism. Most other students (41%) expect to match their parents financially, while only 6% expect to end up worse off.
- Most Hispanic (70%) and African-American (76%) students expect to surpass their parents in economic terms, but only 47% of white students feel the same way.

On the job front, students send a somewhat mixed message. Fully 64% say that it is hard rather than easy for a new graduate to find an acceptable job in today's job market (just 28% say "easy"). While this result marks some improvement over the past 12 months—71% said hard last year—it still suggests that students see a challenging market for new graduates seeking employment.

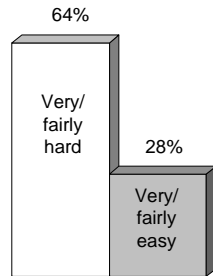
- Students majoring in the social sciences (71% hard) and humanities (70%) perceive a more daunting job market than those in the hard sciences (62%) or business (61%), perhaps reflecting differing employment opportunities in those respective fields.

Even while some say that these are hard times for new graduates, the large majority of students express confidence that they personally will find an acceptable job. Fully 75% are very or fairly confident that they can achieve that goal. So despite a tough market, most college students retain an optimistic personal outlook.

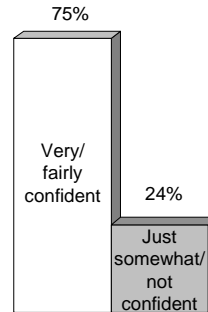
- The differences by educational field are even more dramatic: students majoring in the hard sciences (80%) or business (83%) are much more confident in their own job prospects than are those in the social sciences (68%) or humanities (62%). Interestingly, Bush voters (86% confident) are significantly more confident than Kerry voters (68%).

## Students' View Of The Job Market

Would you say that it is hard or easy for someone who recently graduated from college to find an acceptable job in today's market?



How confident are you that you will be able to find a job that is acceptable to you?



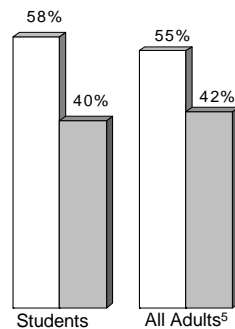
## ATTITUDES ON SOCIAL ISSUES

College students' more liberal ideological bent is definitely reflected in their attitudes on social issues. This is particularly the case when it comes to same-sex marriages. The more tolerant attitudes on same-sex marriage could be explained by the larger percentage of college students who know someone who is gay or lesbian. College students also are slightly more pro-choice on abortion than is the public overall. Social issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion carry significant partisan and religious divides. Overall, while college students have more progressive views on social issues than does the public, they rate the nation's moral climate lower than they did in 2002 and cite the lack of concern for the greater good as one of the bigger problems here. While college students are worried about moral values, the majority's concern about moral values does not grow out of disapproval of same-sex marriage or abortion. Lastly, college students are much more likely to say that the judicial filibuster should be maintained.

## Students' Views On Abortion And Same-sex Marriage

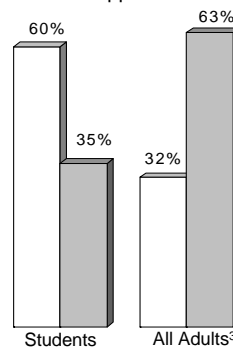
What is your position on abortion?

□ Should be Legal  
 ■ Should be Illegal



Do you favor or oppose same-sex marriages?

□ Favor  
 ■ Oppose





- College students (60% favor) are much more accepting of same-sex marriage than are all adults (30%)<sup>3</sup>.
- Students in the Northeast (77%) are much more likely to support this while those in the South (48%) are much less likely to do so.
- There is a significant partisan divide here—78% of Democrats and 69% of independents support same-sex marriage while just 29% of Republicans do.
- Religiosity is a determining factor: just 29% of weekly churchgoers favor same-sex marriages while fully 92% of those who never attend church do.
- Overall, 86% of college students know someone who is gay or lesbian compared with 62% of adults who do.<sup>4</sup> Among those who know someone who is gay or lesbian, 63% favor allowing same-sex marriages while 32% oppose. Among those who do not know someone who is gay or lesbian, however, just 43% favor allowing same-sex marriages while 49% oppose them.

Views on abortion are much more in line with the views of all adults.

- A majority (58%) of college students believe abortion should be legal while 40% say it should be illegal. This compares with 55% who say legal among all adults and 42% who say illegal.<sup>5</sup>
- Again, we see major divides by party as well as religiosity. More than seven in ten (73%) Democrats and three in five (63%) independents favor keeping abortion legal but just 34% of Republicans do so. Among weekly churchgoers, just 30% favor legalized abortion while fully 84% of those who never attend church say that abortion should remain legal.

Overall, while the data suggest that college students are more progressive than adults are on social issues, college students give the country's moral climate a middling rating and say that it has declined since 2002.

- Just 26% say that the nation's moral climate is strong (5% say very strong). This represents a 10-point decline since the 2002 survey.
- The partisan divide is not nearly as great here. For example, just 25% of Democrats say that the moral climate is strong while 22% say that it is weak. Among Republicans, 27% say strong and 29% say weak.
- Open-ended responses to this question suggest that college students feel that we have lost our morals and the country is divided morally. Again, this moral decline is not an expression by students on current controversial issues, such as same-sex marriage or abortion, but more of a concern about ethical issues. A few verbatim quotes from undergraduates typify this feeling:

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<sup>3</sup> Comparative among all adults is from a Hart/Teeter Poll conducted for NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* among 1,018 adults from March 6-8, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Comparative among all adults is from a Hart/Teeter Poll conducted for NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* among 1,018 adults from March 6-8, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Comparative among all adults is from November 2, 2004 Exit Poll

**"People seem to be only out to make a buck and don't care who they have to step on to be successful."**

**"Moral integrity in the country has gone down."**

**"I don't think there is enforcement of any ethics."**

**"People are not willing take responsibility for their actions."**

**"People in politics are either extreme or they don't care; there is no middle ground."**

When it comes to the filibuster of judicial nominees, college students overwhelmingly favor maintaining the filibuster.

- By 59% to 26%, college students favor maintaining this check, which is significantly higher than the 10-point margin among all adults (50% to 40%).<sup>6</sup>
- College Republicans favor maintaining the filibuster for judges by 53% to 34%, while nationally, Republicans say that the filibuster should be eliminated (49%, 41%).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Comparative among all adults is from a Hart/McInturff Poll conducted for NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* among 1,002 adults from March 31-April 3, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Comparative among all adults is from a Hart/McInturff Poll conducted for NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* among 1,002 adults from March 31-April 3, 2005.

## SOCIAL SECURITY

As the nation considers President Bush's proposals for changing Social Security, college students have only partially engaged this issue. Nearly three in five (57%) say that they understand the issues being discussed very well or somewhat well, but a sizable 42% acknowledge that they really do not understand the issue well. By comparison, 84% of all adults in a recent poll report understanding these issues well.<sup>8</sup>

College students are worried about the future of the Social Security system, with 57% saying that the system is in either crisis or serious trouble. That is about the same level of concern, however, as we find among the public overall (53%), and a bit lower than we find among all young adults age 18 to 34. It appears that college students are less convinced than are other young people of the notion that Social Security faces very serious problems.<sup>9</sup>

Despite their misgivings about the current system, students still believe that Social Security can work for their generation if Congress acts to strengthen the system's finances. Nearly three in five (58%) take this view, compared with just 35% who feel that the Social Security system cannot work for young people the way it worked for previous generations and therefore must be replaced.

- While the belief that Social Security can still work for young people is especially strong among Democrats (62% to 32%) and liberals (66% to 28%), it is significant that Republicans (51% to 42%) and conservatives (50% to 43%) concur (though by much smaller margins).

Perhaps this belief in Social Security's continued relevance is why just 35% embrace the president's proposal to include voluntary investment accounts in Social Security, while 48% oppose the proposal. This is about the same level of support as expressed by the general public (36%).<sup>10</sup>

- The level of opposition to private accounts varies considerably among different demographic and political groups: women are more opposed than men, students from lower-income families are more opposed than those from affluent families, and minority students are more opposed than white students. Bush and Kerry voters take the expected views on this issue, but Kerry voters are more unified in opposition than are Bush voters in support. (See table below for figures.)

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<sup>8</sup> Comparative among all adults is from a Hart/McInturff Poll conducted for NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* among 1,008 adults from February 10-14, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Comparative among all adults is from a Hart/McInturff Poll conducted for NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* among 1,005 adults from May 12-16, 2005.

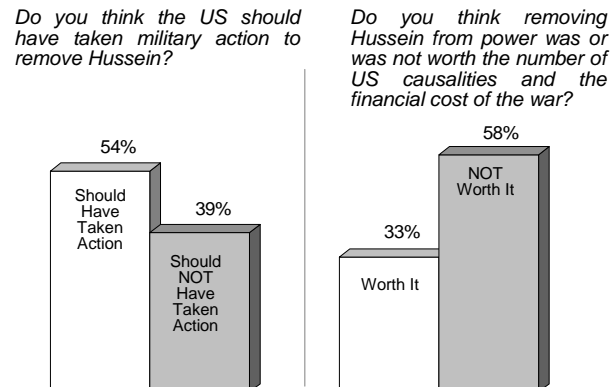
<sup>10</sup> Comparative among all adults is from a Hart/McInturff Poll conducted for NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* among 1,005 adults from May 12-16, 2005.

PRIVATE ACCOUNTS IN SOCIAL SECURITY		
	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>
	%	%
Men	40	45
Women	30	51
Whites	37	45
Hispanics	19	67
African-Americans	32	57
Above average income	42	43
Average income	35	48
Below average income	23	57
Bush voters	54	27
Kerry voters	20	65

## VIEWS OF IRAQ

America's college students are ambivalent toward the war in Iraq, but are forming an increasingly negative judgment. On the one hand, a majority supports the principle that the United States should have taken military action to remove Saddam Hussein from power (54%). A similar majority (58%), however, does not feel that the war has been worth the price paid in casualties and financial costs.

### Students' Views On Iraq



- When it comes to the issue of whether the United States should have taken military action to remove Saddam Hussein from power, college students are largely unchanged from last year. In 2004, 50% said that United States should have taken action, while 37% said that we should not have taken action. Today, 54% believe that the United States should have taken action and 39% say that we should not have taken action.
- College students offer starkly different opinions, however, when asked to weigh the number of casualties and financial costs involved. Fifty-eight percent say that

the war was not worth it, up 11-points from 2004. Support for the idea that the war was worth it also declined eight points from 2004 to just 33% today.

- These views differ widely by competing subgroups of college students. Bush voters' 75-point net margin of support for military action in Iraq and 47-point margin for Iraq being worth the costs differs drastically from Kerry voters' net opposition of negative 29-points against military action and negative 72-points opposition to the idea of the war being worth the costs. Similar margins of support and opposition are seen between Republicans (+74 military action, +49 worth it) and Democrats (-24 military action, -72 worth it); those satisfied with the country's political leadership (+60 military action, +14 worth it) and those who are not (-39 military action, -72 worth it).

### **VIEWS ON CAMPUS**

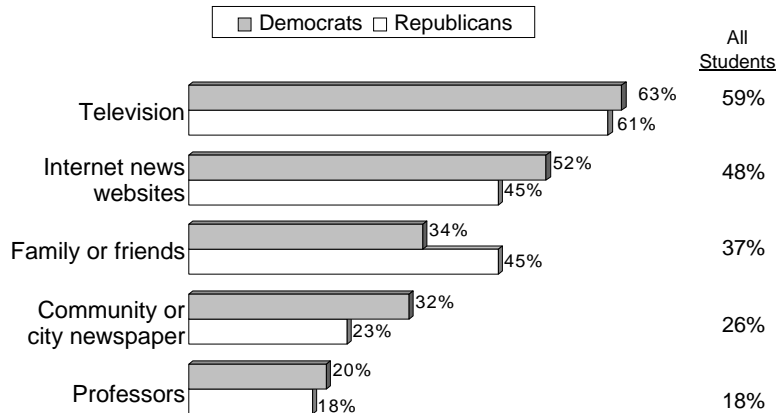
Contrary to a commonly held view today, 79% of college students think that both sides of the political spectrum, conservative and liberal students, have fair opportunities to express their views on campus. Just 11% say that conservatives on campus are denied opportunities to express their views, while only 6% say that liberals are denied that opportunity. This strong majority believing in the fairness of opportunity to express political views on their campuses is held by all subgroups, even among conservatives (68%) and liberals (88%).

### **MAJOR NEWS SOURCES**

Students were read a series of potential sources of information about politics and civic affairs and asked whether each one is a major, secondary, or minor source, or not a source for that type of information in their lives. Mainstream media took three of the top four sources of political and current affair information. The most popular source is television, with 79% saying that it is a major (59%) or secondary (20%) source. The Internet and news Web sites are second among college students, with 70% saying that they are major (48%) or secondary (22%) sources of information. Family and friends are the third ranked source (37% major, 38% secondary) source, while community or city newspapers are fourth (26% major, 28% secondary). Internet blogs came in last, with 50% saying that blogs are not a source at all.

This measure carries an interesting party divide, with Democrats more likely than Republicans to use Internet news Web sites as a major source and Republicans more likely than Democrats to use family or friends as a major source.

## Students' Major Sources For News And Current Affairs



### THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOSITY

In times defined by a polarized, partisan public, it is not hard to conceive that college Republicans and Democrats (or conservatives and liberals for that matter) hold starkly different views on many of the issues tested in this survey. Yet, what is also evidenced in this survey is the polarization of views between the religious and the secular subgroups of college students.

- Nearly three in ten (29%) college students attend church weekly. Fifty-five percent of those students believe that the country is headed in the right direction and 27% say that the country is on the wrong track. Among those who never go to church (17%), these numbers are effectively reversed: 29% right direction, 52% wrong track.
- Similarly, 43% of weekly churchgoers are more confident and secure about the country's future while 45% are more uncertain and concerned. College students who never attend church are far more pessimistic about the country's future, with just 20% saying that they are more confident and secure and 68% saying more uncertain and concerned.
- Voter registration is nearly identical for these two groups (88% weekly churchgoers, 86% non-churchgoers). Voting behavior, however, is drastically different. About the same proportion of registered voters for each cohort did not vote (10% weekly churchgoers, 11% non-churchgoers), yet 52% of weekly churchgoers supported Bush and 65% of non-churchgoers supported Kerry.
- Given the strong support for President Bush among weekly churchgoers, it follows that 65% of them are satisfied with the political leadership in the country today, with only 33% of them dissatisfied. For those who never go to church, only 31% are satisfied and 68% are dissatisfied.

- On social issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, military action in Iraq, and the debate over the filibuster in the U.S. Senate, the opinions of these groups play out as one might expect:
  - Weekly churchgoers oppose abortion being legal in most or all cases by more than two to one (68% to 30%). College students who never attend church support abortion being legal in all or most cases by more than five to one (84% to 15%).
  - As mentioned previously, only 29% of weekly churchgoers favor allowing same-sex marriage, while 92% of non-churchgoers do so.
  - While majorities of both cohorts favor maintaining the filibuster in the Senate, non-churchgoers do so by more than three times the margin of weekly churchgoers (69-point net margin of support compared with a 22-point margin among weekly churchgoers).
  - On taking action to remove Saddam Hussein from power, 64% of weekly churchgoers believe that we should have taken action while just 31% of non-churchgoers share this view.
  - While weekly churchgoers are generally split on the question of whether the war in Iraq is worth the number of casualties and the financial cost (46% say it was, 43% saying it was not), by 61 points, non-churchgoers say that the war has not been worth it (17% worth it, 78% not worth it).