

A Project to Study and Invigorate the American Electoral Process

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IRAQ ISSUE PROPELS ELECTION INTEREST:

YOUNG ADULTS AFFECTED MOST

Election interest at this stage of the 2004 presidential campaign is substantially higher than during the same period of the 2000 campaign. Of the two leading issues of the campaign, Iraq rather than the economy is the main reason for the surge.

In the Vanishing Voter Project's national survey of September 8-12, Americans were almost evenly divided when asked whether Iraq or the economy "is of greater concern to you." Forty-three percent said they were more concerned with Iraq while 37 percent said that the economy was of greater concern.

However, there was a significant difference between the two issue groups in their level of campaign involvement. Among those identifying Iraq as their major concern, 75 percent indicated they have been paying relatively close attention to the campaign. Among those for whom the economy was the larger issue, 65 percent said they were paying close attention. Americans concerned with Iraq were also more likely to indicate they "had discussed the campaign" recently. Fifty percent of the Iraq group reported a campaign-related conversation within the past day, compared with 43 percent of those who said the economy was the more important issue.

Young adults have been particularly responsive to the Iraq issue. Among adults who are 30 years of age or younger, 72 percent of those for whom Iraq is the top issue say they have been paying relatively close attention to the campaign, as compared with 48 percent of those who say the economy is the leading issue. Among older adults, the level of campaign attention is nearly the same among the two issue groups.

Percent Paying Some or a Great Deal of Attention to the Campaign by Issue Concern		
	18-29	30+
Iraq	72%	76%
Economy	48%	71%

Young adults' election involvement is perhaps higher in 2004 than in any presidential election since 1972. That election, too, was waged against the backdrop of a controversial war—the conflict in Vietnam. For sure, young adults are substantially more interested in this year's election than they were in the Bush-Gore contest four years ago. For example, 50 percent of young adults in our recent survey reported having had an election-related conversation within the past day, as compared with only 25 percent in our survey during the same week of the 2000 campaign.

The impact of the Iraq issue on young adults portends an increase in voter turnout this November. Turnout has declined substantially in recent decades, and young adults account for much of the drop. Their turnout rate in the 1972 general election was nearly 50 percent. In 2000, it was barely above 30 percent. With Iraq on this year's agenda, turnout among younger adults could be up sharply this fall.

Turnout is likely to increase more sharply among young adults who have attended or are currently in college. Compared with young adults who have not attended college, they are more attentive to the campaign and more concerned with the Iraq issue. They are also more easily mobilized. Both parties have active strategies for encouraging young adults on college campuses to register and vote. Neither party has a comparable strategy for mobilizing non-college young adults.

The results reported here are from a nationwide telephone survey of 1018 adults conducted September 8-12, 2004. The surveys have a sampling error of $\pm 4\%$. The Vanishing Voter Project is a study by the [Joan Shorenstein Center](#) on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.