

The Next Generation of Voters: A Sample of Student Attitudes after the 2016 Presidential Election

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Because most high school students have yet to reach voting age, their attitudes about presidential elections—for example, their levels of engagement in the elections and their concerns over election outcomes—are often overlooked. But because these students represent our next generation of voters, such attitudes are an important indicator of their likely interest or participation in presidential elections in the near future.

This brief summarizes the results of a survey of student attitudes toward the presidential election of 2016 conducted shortly after the election. The participants were a random sample of students who took the ACT® test as part of a national test administration in December 2016.¹

Importance of the Election

Eighty-two percent of the students surveyed reported that they gave some or quite a lot of thought to the presidential election,² and 70% believed that the election was important.³

Levels of Engagement in the Election

A total of 67% of the students reported they followed news coverage of the presidential election very or fairly closely (Figure 1)—lower than the comparable percentage of registered voters surveyed by the Pew Research Center in June 2016 who reported these levels of engagement (86%).⁴

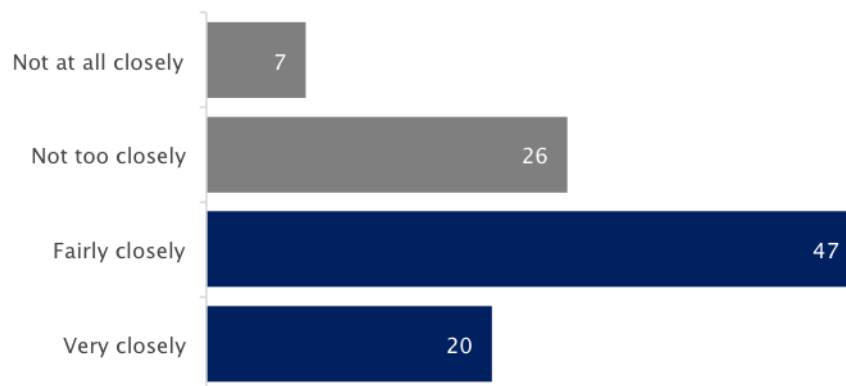


Figure 1. Percentages of survey participants reporting how closely they watched news coverage of the presidential election

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However, approximately 84% of the students surveyed reported watching one, two, or three presidential debates (Figure 2).

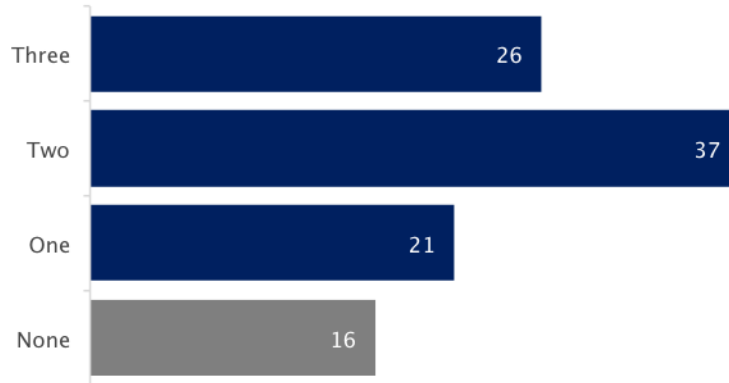


Figure 2. Percentages of survey participants reporting how many presidential debates they watched

In addition to following news coverage and watching the debates, students also discussed the election with their family, classmates, and friends. About three out of four students reported discussing the election at least once a week with each of these groups (Figure 3).

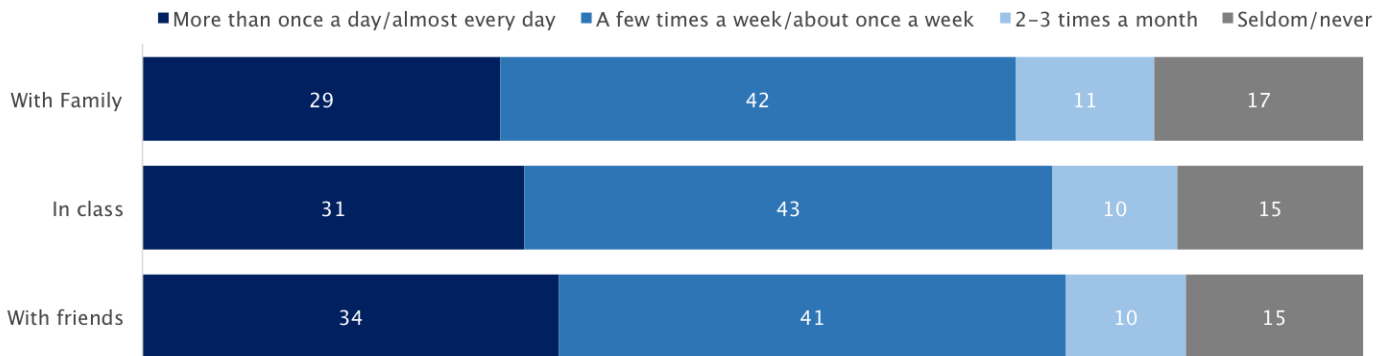


Figure 3. Percentages of survey participants reporting how often they discussed the presidential election in selected circumstances prior to the election

Sources of Election Information

The discrepancy between ACT and Pew Research Center respondents reporting how closely they watch news coverage may be because of the way in which the students receive their information about the candidates.

When students were asked about the sources they used to find information about the presidential candidates and their positions, nearly three-quarters of respondents—72%—reported using social media as a news source (Figure 4, next page). Over half of the students reported using TV news (local, network, or cable), while less than half reported using national or local newspapers, news magazines, or fact-checking websites.

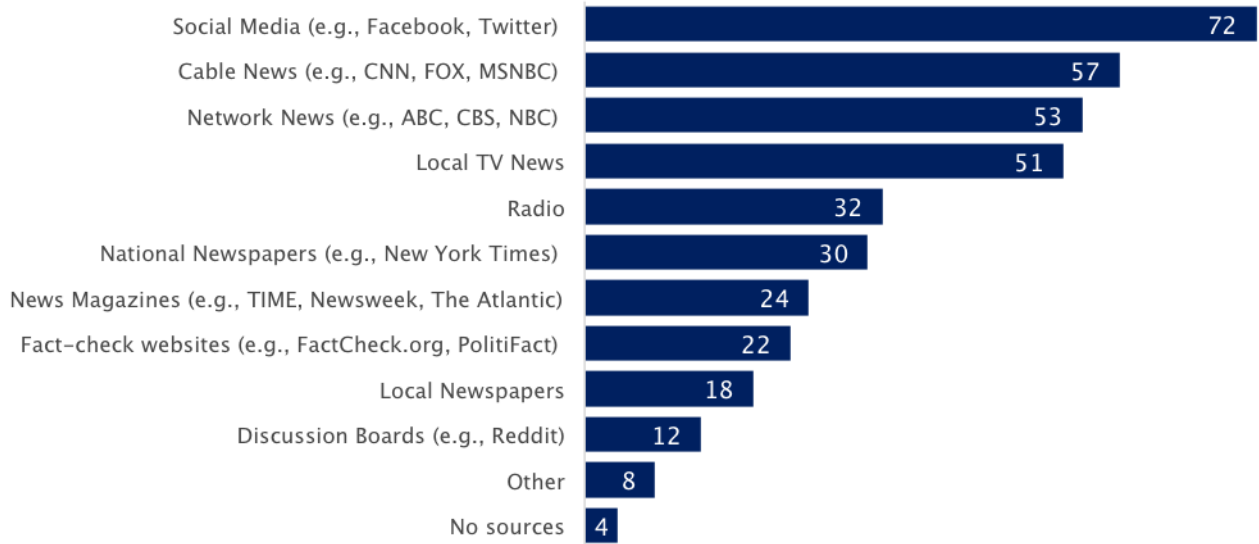


Figure 4. Percentages of survey participants reporting use of various sources to find information about the presidential candidates and their positions

Student Concerns after the Election

A number of news articles highlighted student protests and walkouts related to the election results, as well as general concerns about potential policy changes that may accompany the change in administration.⁵

Between 50% and 71% of survey respondents indicated they are a lot more or somewhat more concerned (as opposed to a lot less or somewhat less concerned, or no change) about various issues after the election than before the election (Figure 5).⁶ These issues where students reported having the most concern included race relations, other countries’ perceptions of the U.S., the U.S. standing in the world, and immigration policy.

Nevertheless, 51% of the students indicated that their concerns have had no negative impact on their learning.

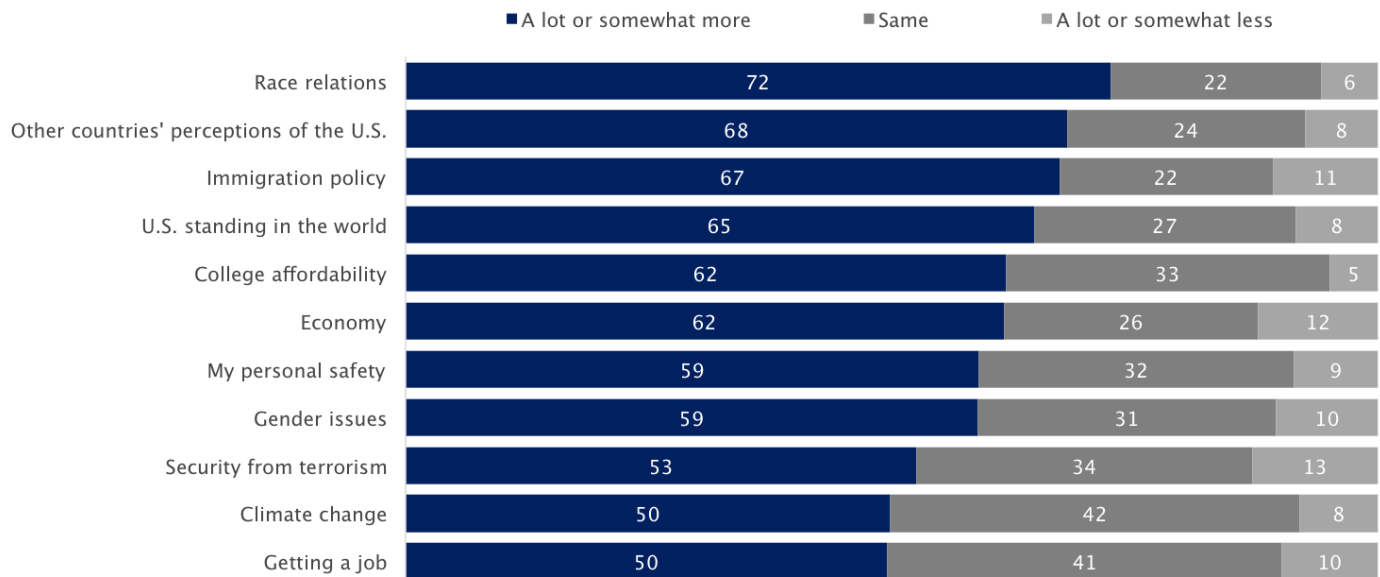


Figure 5. Percentages of survey participants reporting increases, decreases, or no change in their concerns about selected issues after the election

Respectfulness of Classroom Discussions of the Election

Finally, almost half of the students (49%) reported that discussions about the election in school were always or almost always respectful of different points of view (Figure 6).

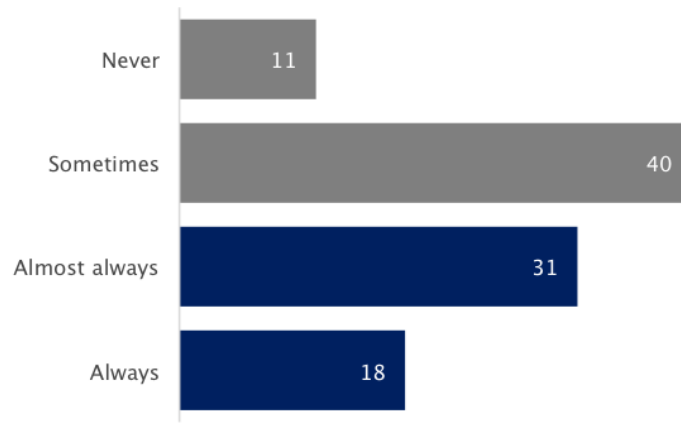


Figure 6. Percentages of survey participants reporting how often classroom discussions about the election were respectful of different points of view

Summary

Our next generation of voters has established that they were interested in the election and concerned about the outcome. Further, the majority of students reported receiving news through social media. More work is needed to determine how student news source selection may shape student attitudes, particularly as recent research suggests that students are not adept at identifying false news.⁷

Notes

- 58,964 test-takers were invited to participate in the online survey, and approximately 7,000 participated. The majority of survey items were adapted from Pew Research Center surveys prior to the election.
- Students were asked “Leading up to the presidential election, how much thought did you give it?” 44% reported “Quite a lot;” 38% “Some;” 13% “Only a little;” and 5% “None.” Of Pew respondents in June 2016, 83% reported quite a lot or some thought about the election. Pew Research Center, *June 2016 Voter Attitudes Survey, Final Topline* (June 15–26, 2016), <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/07/07-07-16-Voter-attitudes-topline-for-release.pdf>.
- This is slightly less than the percentage of registered voters surveyed by Pew Research Center in October 2016. 77% of Pew participants stated that it really matters who wins the election. Pew Research Center, *October 2016 Political Survey, Final Topline* (October 20–25, 2016), <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/10/27141250/10-27-16-October-topline-for-release.pdf>.
- Pew Research Center, June 2016 Voter Attitudes Survey. The Pew Research survey sampled all registered voters and was not limited to high school students.
- Madeline Will, “For Teachers, Hard Conversations Are Just Getting Started,” *Education Week*, November 14, 2016; Justin Minkel, “The Long Road Ahead: What Children Need From Us After the Election of Donald Trump,” *Education Week*, November 15, 2016; Julie Bosman, “At Iowa High School, Election Results Kindle Tensions and Protests,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 2016. Southern Poverty Law Center, *After Election Day; The Trump Effect: The Impact of the 2016 Presidential Election On Our Nation’s Schools* (2016), https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/the_trump_effect.pdf.
- Items were adapted from a Pew Research Center item about changes in the country since 2008. Pew Research Center, *2016 Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel* (Wave 22 October) (October 25–November 8, 2016), <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/11/10130000/11-10-16-election-update-topline-for-release.pdf>.
- Stanford History Education Group, *Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning* (2016), <https://sheg.stanford.edu/upload/V3LessonPlans/Executive%20Summary%2011.21.16.pdf>; Leo Doran, “Students Struggle with Spotting Fake News, Stanford Researchers Say,” *Education Week*, November 30, 2016, http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2016/11/students_struggle_with_spottin.html.