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Press Release: Harwich Students' Exit Poll Sheds Light on Voters' Decisions

Harwich High School seniors studying American Government conducted an exit poll of voters today. They interviewed 490 people as they left the busy Harwich Community Center polling place. Overall, 56% of interviewees supported Sen. Kerry and 41% supported Pres. Bush. In the other races, Delahunt led Jones (66% to 29%), O'Leary led Lese and Gonzaga (58% to 33% and 5%, respectively), and Gomes led Peake (66% to 32%, Harwich being Rep. Gomes' hometown). The War in Iraq was the dominant issue, cited by 68% of voters as one of their most important issues. The others most often chosen were the Economy and Jobs (37%), Terrorism and Homeland Security (36%), and Health Care (32%). Of those surveyed, most disapproved of the job Pres. Bush has done (51% to 40%), and most oppose the war in Iraq (52% to 45%).

The war in Iraq emerges from our survey as the critical issue in this election. Not only was it most cited among our list of issues, but it also made the greatest impact in how people voted. Those who supported the war favored Bush (81% to 17%) and those who opposed favored Kerry (89% to 7%). The great disparity in these numbers dwarfs the differences seen in any other issues.

There was a clear gender gap in the presidential race, as men were 9% more likely to support Bush (46%) compared to women (37%) though both genders preferred Kerry in our poll (51% for men, 60% for women). This reflects a similar gap in the support for the war in Iraq – men supporting the war (51% to 47%) and women opposing (56% to 42%). There was remarkable similarity in the issues identified as important by each gender, though women considered health care, education and abortion to be more important issues, while men emphasized taxes more.

There were also interesting differences among younger (18-39) middle aged (40-59) and older (60+) age groups. The older and younger groups were most supportive of Kerry (59% and 57%) compared to middle aged voters (54%). For older voters this may be due their strong opposition to the war (61% to 37%). Ironically, most younger voters support the war in Iraq (50% to 44%), however their support for Kerry may be due to their relatively greater emphasis on the issues of the economy and jobs (41%) and education (28%). Middle aged voters, while evenly split on the war, may have been relatively supportive of Bush due to the greater importance they placed on terrorism and homeland security issues.

In looking at party identification, the most interesting result was the success Kerry enjoyed among independent voters (58% to 38% over Bush) – independent voters usually are seen as swing voters in close elections. In the other races, independent voters in our survey strongly favored the incumbents Delahunt (71% to 25%), O'Leary (60% to 32% over Lese), and Gomes (68% to 29%).

There were major differences in voter preference based on which issues they identified as critical (respondents were asked to identify one to three issues from a list of ten provided). Among those who identified the War in Iraq as an issue, most favored Kerry (61% to 37%), while those who emphasized terrorism and homeland security favored Bush (57% to 40%). The other two issues most often cited favored Kerry - the economy (64% to 34%) and health care (71% to 28%). The rest of the issues were all cited by less than 15% of voters, but most of these also favored Kerry – the environment (90% to 10%) the budget deficit (73% to 20%), education (62% to 32%), social security (62% to 33%), and abortion (50% to 46%). Those who emphasized taxes as an issue supported Bush (68% to 28%).

A great majority of respondents said they watched at least one of the presidential debates – 88%. Those that did were more likely to support Kerry (58% to 40%) and those that did not were more likely to support Bush (48% to 45%).

While extending the results of our survey to the overall races is very hazardous given that only Harwich voters were interviewed, some of the trends here may give indicators for how the larger races will play out. The

importance of the War in Iraq, the gender gap, age discrepancies, the preferences of independent voters, and the way different issues favored candidates all seem to be important lessons in our exit poll.