

Harwich Student Exit Poll Shows Advantage for Democrats

On a day off from school designed to help election officials accommodate the expected high turnout, thirty Harwich High seniors, all U.S. Government students, volunteered to conduct an exit poll of voters at the Harwich Community Center. They interviewed a total of 614 voters between 8 AM and 2 PM.

Their totals showed Obama leading McCain by 67% to 30%. Kerry was leading Beatty, 59% to 37%, and Peake leading Howell, 65% to 32%. Question 1 was getting only 29% support, but Questions 2 and 3 were both winning with 64% and 66% respectively.

Respondents were asked to identify one to three issues that were most important to them in the presidential race. By far the top issue was the economy, cited by 71%. War was cited by 54%, Health Care by 45%. The other two issues cited by at least 15% were Tax Policy and Education – 23% each. Among these issues, only those citing taxes supported McCain (52% to 44%). The other four top issues all helped Obama – 71% of those that cited the economy supported him, 75% of those that cited the war, 79% of those that cited health care, and 80% of those that cited education.

By gender, Obama had 6% greater support among women, similar to their added support for all Democrats, though the biggest gap was for Peake at 12%. For the only ballot question with a large gap, women were more likely to support question 3 by 72% to 56%. Women were also more likely to cite Health Care and Education as important issues.

By age, young people were most likely to support Obama – 75% of those under 40 as opposed to 63% of those over 60. The oldest voters were more likely to favor Republicans across the board, and less likely to support question 2 – 55% compared to 71% of younger voters. Among the issues, young people were more likely to cite education, older voters to cite social security, and middle aged to cite the war, though the economy was the leading issue for all groups.

By Party, voters not surprisingly supported their own candidates, though there were more Republicans supporting Obama (21%) than Democrats supporting McCain (4%). On the ballot question, Republicans were much more likely to support question 1 (50% to 18% for Democrats), and less likely to support question 2 (44% to 72%) and question 3 (53% to 71%). Independents as usual were the tie breakers in these party disputes, and their votes closely reflect the overall votes on the questions and for the contested offices.

We asked whether voters were influenced by the debates and advertising in the presidential race. Most weren't, especially by ads – which only 17% cited as influential, while 35% cited the debates. Of those that did, both groups were more likely to support Obama by 10%-16%, suggesting that his debate performances and ads (fueled by his greater campaign funds) helped Obama.

We also asked if respondents approved of the job President Bush has done as president. Only 12% said they approved while 79% disapproved and 8% were unsure. Even a plurality of Republicans said they disapproved – 44% to 36%, with 21% unsure. Those that approved Bush supported McCain 91% to 4% and those unsure supported him 85% to 9%. But those that disapproved supported Obama 83% to 15%. This was the greatest disparity among all the questions we asked, and suggests that Bush's unpopularity was very detrimental to McCain's campaign.

Certainly these results can't be expected to predict the national or statewide results, and there are reasons to question how well they are likely to reflect the Harwich totals. We interviewed a disproportionate number of women - almost twice as many as men (376 to 230) and their tendency to vote more democratic may skew our results. Perhaps as a result we also got nearly twice as many Democrats over Republicans (222 to 121).

Since the totals may not be completely accurate (they often aren't perhaps due to the time of day we are able to conduct our polls), the most instructive aspects of our polls are in the breakdowns, as cited above – especially the effects of key issues, gender, age, the debates, and Bush's unpopularity. For our students though, the value of the exercise lies most in the opportunity to listen to voters as they explain how they voted and why. For them, this is always fascinating and makes them all the more interested in getting and staying involved.

Please contact me with any questions.

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