

**Article: “What Political Scientists Should Know about the Survey of First-Year Students in 2000”**

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# What Political Scientists Should Know about the Survey of First-Year Students in 2000\*

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The report by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles on college or university first-year students in 2000 contains information that is important to political scientists (Kellogg 2001; Sax et al. 2000). As did Sheilah Mann's (1999) analysis of the 1998 survey, we summarize those facets of the data about freshmen in 2000 that ought to interest members of the discipline.

HERI releases data from annual surveys that are conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, which Linda Sax directs. The 2000 report is the thirty-fifth time HERI has released data on young people beginning their college or university careers. Typically gathered during freshmen orientation and the initial week of fall classes, HERI's data pertain mostly to students' experiences as high school seniors and their expectations of experiences in institutions of higher learning. This year, the data were collected on 269,413 students in 434 four-year colleges and universities. Two-year institutions, which had been supplying fewer respondents, were not included. The Institute believes the data are representative of the 1.1 million persons entering last fall as full-time, first-year students in four-year colleges or universities (Sax et al. 2000, 2).

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## Information about Intentions to Major in Political Science

An obvious question political scientists will ask is how many freshmen plan to major in the discipline. As Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini note, "[o]ne's major field of study creates a potentially important subenvironment during college. It not only focuses one's intellectual efforts in a particular direction, but it also has an influence on the kinds of students and faculty with whom one interacts" (1991, 613-14; see also Astin 1997). According to Martin Finkelstein, Robert Seal, and Jack Schuster, "[t]he liberal arts base of the academy is shrinking," while enrollments in professional and "occupational" majors have risen (1998, 21). HERI's reports tend to confirm their observation. Just under three percent of first-year students in 2000 (2.9 percent of men, 2.8 percent of women) said they expected to major in political science (Sax et al. 2000). About one-tenth of all freshmen said they would major in a Social Science department (Psychology is the most popular, with political science second), while one-eighth mentioned "Arts and Humanities," nearly 17 percent identified "Business," 11 percent said "Education," nearly 12 percent picked a "Professional" program (medicine, nursing, architecture, etc.), almost nine percent listed "Engineering," nearly as many selected one of the natural sciences, and the rest were either undecided or picked other fields.

At first blush, the percentage of incoming students selecting a political science major appears slightly higher than in recent years. An increase in the percentage of first-year students intending to major in political science meshes with data from APSA's survey of political science departments in 1998-1999 (Mann 2001). About two percent of freshmen intended to declare a political science major in 1998 (1.8 percent of men and 2.1 of women [Sax et al. 1998]), while 2.2 percent of all first-year students said they would become political science majors in 1999 (the percentage of women and men was identical

[Sax et al. 1999]). Since increased interest in political science as a major and a department in which to take courses is associated with presidential campaigns (Mann 2001), one ought to anticipate some increased interest in political science in the 2000 survey.

Unhappily, there are technical problems when we seek to compare trends in major declarations. According to HERI's staff (2001), the 2.8 percent figure from the 2000 survey "cannot be compared to previous years, as we did not include community colleges in this year's results, only Baccalaureate Institutions." Eventually HERI will release data making it easier to compare 2000 to earlier surveys. For now, one should note that excluding two-year institutions enhances the percentage of students saying they intend to major in the humanities and social sciences, including political science.

A longer perspective also cautions against being too sanguine. HERI data from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s show no growth in the percentage of incoming first-year students picking political science as a prospective major (Astin et al. 1997, 51-52). In 1995, HERI reported that 3.4 percent of all first-year students planned to declare a political science major (Sax et al. 1995). Surveys of political science departments have shown substantial declines in students majoring in political science and in students enrolling in its courses (Mann 1996). Mann's analysis of HERI reports shows declines between 1986 and 1995 in the percentage of first-year students intending to major in political science (1996, 531).

In short, although HERI's 2000 report may offer political scientists some satisfaction, over the longer run the Institute's data and those from APSA's surveys of departments do not. A small percentage of students entering college or university intends to major in political science. At least for now, and judged in terms of freshmen claiming they intend to major in political science, the discipline's future is static. Political scientists need to understand that, in straightened economic circumstances, college and

university administrators tend to allocate tenure-track positions on the basis of numbers of students majoring and/or taking classes in a department.

## Political Disengagement among College or University Freshmen

Other data from 2000 also offer political scientists a “glass half-full or half-empty.” Only 28.1 percent of incoming freshmen told HERI that they believed “keeping up to date with political affairs” was “essential” or “very important” (Sax et al. 2000). Nearly a third of young men (31.8 percent) placed great weight on “keeping up” with politics, compared to a quarter of young women (25.1 percent). This is the lowest percentage since HERI began reporting on first-year students in 1966, when the percentage was 60.3 (Kellogg 2001, A47; see also Astin et al. 1997, 28). Young people’s lack of interest in public affairs these days is well known (Bennett 1997). What makes this year’s figure particularly distressing is that incoming students’ low level of interest occurred during a presidential election year and, as Sax notes, “freshman interest in politics traditionally increases during a presidential election year” (<[www.apsanet.org/teach/freshmen.cfm](http://www.apsanet.org/teach/freshmen.cfm)>). Moreover, only 16.4 percent of the freshmen claimed to have discussed politics in the past year, up slightly from the two previous years (Sax et al. 1998, 1999), but below 1968’s high-water mark of 29.9 percent. (Male freshmen were slightly more likely to report engaging in political discussions than were women [19.9 percent versus 13.6 percent].) Women’s lack of interest in public affairs, relative to men, is a continuing feature of U.S. politics (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Verba, Burns, and Lehman Schlozman 1997).

Other data from the 2000 HERI report are also disconcerting. For example, fewer than one-fifth of the 2000 first-year students (17.6 percent) thought that influencing the political structure was essential or very important. Again, young men were more likely than young women to think “influencing the political structure” was essential or very important (20.4 percent versus 15.3 percent). Approximately a third (30.9 percent) said that “becoming a community leader” was essential or very important. Gender is not a factor here. Just over a quarter (27.2 percent) of the first-year students agreed that “realistically, an individual can do little to bring about changes in our society.” Young men were more pessimistic in this regard

than young women (31.6 percent versus 23.6 percent). Moreover, just under a quarter of the freshmen (22.8 percent) said they had frequently “voted in a student election” in the last year. Young women were slightly more likely than young men to say they engaged in this activity (21.5 percent of men versus 23.9 percent of women).

Data on first-year students’ expectations about their likely college experiences are also not encouraging to many political scientists. Less than one-tenth (7.3) said they anticipated participating in student government while in college or university. Only one in twenty (5.1 percent) expected to “participate in student protests or demonstrations” while in college or university. Such low percentages of incoming students anticipating taking part in college or university politics makes us wonder if we are witnessing a return to the “silent generation” of college students of the 1950s (Altbach 1997).

There are some heartening numbers. Approximately three-fifths of the 2000 freshmen say that “helping others who are in difficulty” is essential or very important. Young women are much more likely than young men to subscribe to this view (68.8 percent versus 52.8 percent). Could it be that young women are more engaged “civically” than young men, but are less “interested” or “prepared” to make the connection between their social and civic values and public policies and institutions? The point is arguable, but worth considering.

Slightly over two-fifths of the incoming freshmen (45.4 percent) claimed to have “frequently or occasionally” participated in organized demonstrations during the past year. Forty-seven percent of young women said they had demonstrated, compared to 43.4 percent of young men. One cannot help considering the possibility that what the HERI report underscores is youthful exuberance and lack of community attachments, and not necessarily political commitment and participation.

Some political scientists will be pleased to learn that four-fifths (81.0 percent) of the first-year students said that they had “performed volunteer work” in the past year. Young women were more likely than young men to report doing volunteer work (85.1 percent versus 76.0 percent). Volunteer work is a facet of “community service” and “service-learning,” which some political scientists believe are important to citizenship education (see Battistoni and Hudson 1997; and the recent symposium

“Service Learning in Political Science” in *PS* [Battistoni 2000].)

Even here, however, we find worrisome information. Over half of the incoming first-year students in 2000 (55.8 percent) said that they had “performed community service as part of a class.” The percentage was 59.5 among young women, compared to 51.2 percent of young men. Slightly over a fourth (27.3 percent) of the 2000 entering freshmen said that their high school required community service for graduation, so we do not know what proportion of students who report taking part in community service and volunteer programs did so because the activities were required. Less than five percent (4.4) of the incoming first-year class said they spent more than 10 hours per week performing volunteer work during their senior year in high school. Nearly a third (31.0 percent) said they spent no time on volunteer activities as secondary school seniors. Moreover, data from recent HERI reports on surveys of freshmen reveal that less than a quarter expect to take part in community service activities while in college or university (Sax et al. 1998, 5; Sax et al. 1999, 31).

HERI’s data from 2000 give a sense of how much or little young people value community service/volunteer activities. Less than a quarter (23.8 percent) think the chances are “very good” that they will “participate in volunteer or community-service work” while in college or university. Fewer than a fifth (17.6 percent) believe it is essential or very important to become “involved in programs to clean up the environment.” There are no gender differences on this item. Approximately a fifth (22.7 percent) say that “participating in a community-action program” is essential or very important. Young women are more likely to believe that taking part in such programs is essential or very important (26.1 percent versus 18.5 percent). Only about a third (30.8 percent) believe in the importance of “helping to promote racial understanding.” The percentage is slightly higher among young women (32.9) than among young men (28.1). Sax and her coauthors noted freshmen’s declining commitment to social activism in 1999 (1999, 5–6), and the 2000 data show that the trend has continued.

Indeed, what first-year students seem to value most is materialism and family life (see also Levine and Cureton 1998). Nearly three-quarters (73.4 percent) of the freshmen in 2000 felt that “being very well off financially” is essential or very important (Sax et al. 2000, 26). This is identical to the figure from 1999 (Sax et al. 1999, 29), and nearly as large as

**TABLE 1**  
**2000 Freshmen's Attitudes about Political and Social Issues, by Gender**

Issue <sup>a</sup>	Total	Men	Women
There is too much concern in the courts for the rights of criminals	66.5	67.8	65.5
Abortion should be legal	53.9	54.5	53.5
The death penalty should be abolished	31.2	27.4	34.3
If two people really like each other, it's all right for them to have sex even if they've known each other for only a very short time	41.8	54.6	31.3
Marijuana should be legalized	34.2	40.4	29.1
It is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships	27.2	36.0	20.1
Employers should be allowed to require drug testing of employees or job applicants	76.5	73.3	79.2
The federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns	82.0	72.6	89.6
Racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America	20.5	24.4	17.3
Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now	52.2	53.0	51.5
Colleges should prohibit racist/sexist speech on campus	61.8	56.4	66.1
Same-sex couples should have the right to legal marital status	56.0	47.2	63.1
Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished	49.9	56.2	44.7
The activities of married women are best confined to the home and family	22.2	28.7	16.8
People should have a right to know about the personal lives of public figures	26.4	28.7	24.4

<sup>a</sup>Percentage agreeing strongly or somewhat.

Source: University of California, Los Angeles's Higher Education Research Institute's report on college and university first-year students, 2000.

1998's percentage (74.0) (Sax et al. 1998, 29). Since the 1980s, HERI's data have shown that over 70 percent of incoming freshmen accord great importance to the pursuit of wealth (Astin et al. 1997). A larger percentage of young men than young women subscribed to this belief in 2000 (76.1 versus 71.1). HERI reports also show that being "able to make more money" has been a prime reason given for attending college or university since the late 1970s (Astin et al. 1997, 13), and the 2000 data show a continu-

ing pattern (Sax et al. 2000, 27). Over 70 percent (73.1) of 2000 freshmen said that "raising a family" is essential or very important. Young women and young men are nearly the same in this belief. This is up very slightly from 1999 (71.3 percent) (Sax et al. 1999, 29) but identical to 1998 (73.0 percent) (Sax et al. 1998, 29).

First-year students' interest in material values has drawn comments from experts. Alex Kellogg quotes John Gardner, Director of Brevard (N.C.) Col-

lege's Policy Center on the First Year of College, as follows: "We've just gone through a decade—perhaps more than any in history—where the whole country has worshiped the pursuit of wealth. Many of these students want to cash in on it, too" (Kellogg 2001, 47A).

### 2000 Freshmen's Attitudes about Political and Social Issues

Political scientists will also be interested in first-year students' attitudes about a plethora of social and political issues. Table 1 depicts the data. Although methodologists might quibble about technical aspects of the Institute's queries, we take these data on their face.

The first thing that strikes the mind about these students' attitudes is how mixed they are. On some issues—such as government control of handgun sales, racial discrimination, women's role in society, and homosexuality—the students line up on the "liberal" side. On other topics, however—such as criminals' rights, abolishing the death penalty, drug testing for prospective or current business employees, legalization of marijuana, and "casual" sex between couples—majorities adopt "conservative" stances. On still other issues—affirmative action in college admissions, heavier taxation of the wealthy, and even abortion—the first-year students are roughly evenly divided.

A second aspect of these data ought to chill the blood of civil libertarians. At least judged by the question about prohibiting racist and sexist speech on campus, those who favor unfettered free speech will not find the 2000 data reassuring. Three-fifths of all entering freshmen agree that institutions of higher learning should prohibit racially or sexually offensive speech on campuses. Young women are more inclined than young men to want offensive speech banned on campus. The 2000 data are virtually unchanged from those in 1998 (Sax et al. 1998) and 1999 (Sax et al. 1999). Scott Street's article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2001) highlights the continuing debate over campuses' limitations on freedom of expression.

Third, as suggested in the preceding paragraph, there are some important differences between young men's and young women's views on several of these issues. First-year women are more likely to favor abolishing the death penalty, to want the national government to control the sale of handguns, and to accord legal

**TABLE 2**  
**First Year Students' Political Orientation in 2000, by Gender**

Political Orientation	All	Men	Women
Far left	2.9%	3.6%	2.3%
Liberal	24.8	23.2	26.2
Middle of the road	51.9	49.8	53.7
Conservative	18.9	21.3	16.9
Far right	1.4	2.1	0.8

Source: University of California, Los Angeles's Higher Education Research Institute's report on college and university first-year students, 2000.

marital status to same-sex couples. Young women are less supportive of casual sex, and they are more inclined to allow employers to administer drug tests to prospective and current employees. Even though most of both sexes oppose the notion, young men are more likely to agree that married women should confine themselves to home and family, which continues a pattern in other data (Bennett and Bennett 1999). Again, even though most freshmen reject the idea, young men are more likely to believe that racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in the U.S. Men's and women's opinions differ on a number of policy issues (see, e.g., Andersen 1997), and the data from the first-year students in 2000 reflect the pattern.

A final look at 2000 first-year students' sociopolitical beliefs focuses on what they claim about their "political orientations" (see Table 2). Although some observers stress what is perceived as "a continued shift to the political left" (Kellogg 2001, A47, A50), Table 2 can be read differently.

Kellogg, for example, comments on a rise from 26 in 1999 to 27.7 in 2000 in the percentage of first-year students who classify their political orientations as "far left" or "liberal." He ignores that the percentage of first-year students classifying themselves as "conservative" or "far right" was 19.8 in 1999 and 20.3 in 2000 (Sax et al. 1999, 2000). He also disregards HERI data from 1966 on that show declining allegiance to the left and rising self-identification with the right, a shift that began in the mid-1970s (Astin et al. 1997, 18).

We are struck by the fact that about half of the incoming students said their political orientations were middle of the road. Over half of incoming students have classified themselves as middle of the road ever since HERI began conducting surveys of college and university freshmen (Astin et al. 1997, 18–19). Since public opinion research has found that the well-educated in America tend to be the most ideologically committed (see, e.g., Flanigan and Zingale 1998, 129–30), the size of the middle of the road segment among college and university freshmen is impressive. Perhaps Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg's (1992) observation that the only ideological "extreme" that is very popular among the American public is the "extreme center" still holds, even among incoming college or university freshmen.

Gender presents an interesting pattern. On the one hand, freshmen women are slightly more likely than first-year men to classify themselves on the political left, and less likely to place them-

selves on the right side of the political spectrum. On the other hand, young women are slightly more inclined to say they are middle of the road when it comes to political orientations.

### Miscellaneous Observations

Before concluding, we call political scientists' attention to first-year students' reports of the number of hours per week they spent performing a variety of activities during their final year of high school. Academics often acknowledge students' poor preparation for college or university life, and several items in HERI's 2000 data are instructive. For example, fewer than one-fifth of the incoming freshmen (16 percent) said they spent more than 10 hours per week doing homework. A small percentage (8.8) said they "read for pleasure" more than 10 hours per week. Only a tiny fragment (1.9 percent) claimed they talked with teachers outside of class for more than 10 hours a week. Most incoming students said they spent little or no time in "student clubs or groups" during their senior year in high school. On the other hand, over half (54.6 percent) reported socializing with friends for more than 10 hours a week. Nearly a third (28.3 percent) watched television for more than 10 hours in a week, and 14 percent said they "partied" for more than 10 hours a week. Almost half (49.6 percent) said they worked for pay more than 10 hours a week, and about one-fifth (19.6 percent) said they worked more than 20 hours a week. Roughly two-fifths of first-year students (42.5 percent) expect to get a job to help pay college or university expenses. Over one-in-four expect to hold at least a part-time job during the academic year. Nearly five percent (4.5) plan to work full-time as a student (Kellogg 2001, A47–A48).

A portion of college or university students has worked for pay throughout most of the twentieth century. Recently, however, professors have noted a shift in working students' priorities. Formerly, professors had students who worked. These days, some academics say they have workers who study. Political scientists need to be aware of this not-so-subtle shift in students' priorities.

College students may or may not continue patterns of activity undertaken as high school seniors. Still, it behooves political scientists to be aware of how students report they spent time before coming to college. When political scientists hear about poorly prepared or unmotivated students in political science courses, they should have a handle on some of the reasons.

### Conclusion

Political scientists are rightly concerned with teaching. "The Teacher" section in each issue of *PS* is one indicator of the importance the discipline attaches to teaching. Creation of the "Task Force on Civic Education in the Next Century" (APSA 1998) is another indication, although there is debate over what concern with "civic education" will accomplish (Bennett 1999a, 1999b; Leonard, 1999a, 1999b; Schachter 1998).

What sometimes seems to be missing, however, are data on students (see, however, Fox and Ronkowski 1997; Mann 1999; Mayer and Coleman 2000). Faculty must be aware of what their students bring to class, and political scientists must take heed of what their students are like. As Mann noted in connection with HERI's report of the first-year class of 1998 (1999, 265), low interest in politics is consistent with research on declining civic engagement in America (Putnam 2000), and the freshmen in 2000 continue to demonstrate lessened interest in government and public affairs.

A decade ago, John Wahlke wrote that the political science major "should aim at turning politically interested and concerned students, whatever their career plans or their other interests, into politically literate college graduates" (1991, 50). Wahlke's assertion remains a worthwhile goal. However, what are members of the profession to do with a generation of mostly disinterested students? Coping with and overcoming youthful indifference to politics will not be easy, but political scientists need to know how college or university students feel about these matters.

Political scientists also need to take account of the divided social and political viewpoints that students will bring to their classes. HERI's reports do not permit a test of the proposition, but one wonders how consistent students' sociopolitical attitudes would be if one could employ the same procedure Philip Converse (1964) used to measure the mass public's and political elite's political viewpoints in the late 1950s. Converse's study is old, but internal consistency of political attitudes is still thought to be one component of political "sophistication" (however, see Luskin 1987). Young women tend to be more centrist and liberal, while young men incline toward the conservative side of the political spectrum, which is consistent with how men and women have voted in recent presidential elections.

Finally, we urge political scientists to pay attention to what incoming students say about how they spent time in their final year of secondary school. If it is

true that college and university students are poorly prepared to cope with college- or university-level material, HERI's reports provide valuable clues.

As political scientists seek to make the major an important part of the undergraduate experience, they need to be aware of what the students who will en-

roll in their classes and major in their discipline are like. HERI's data make interesting reading.

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## Notes

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