SHU’s Class of 2016: An Election Survey

A Study Conducted By Students in the Honors First Year Seminar


Introduction to Campus Project:

The President of the United States is the most powerful individual in the entire world. With all the media coverage, advertising and campaigning it is impossible to not notice a presidential election. Every four years, our nation comes together to decide who will be the head of our country. Americans across the nation line up to cast their vote and have their voices heard. On the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November, the power to elect a new president lies in the hands of the American people. One of the more interesting demographic groups within the electorate is the youth vote. Many people claim that young persons are apathetic, uninvolved and disconnected. There may be some truth to this, considering that many young adults can be quite uninformed despite having access to information more readily available than ever. That said, it is always intriguing to study the political views and opinions of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty four. This age group is the future of our country, and such knowledge can give us insight into the direction of our country’s public policies and politics. It is for this reason that it is important for political parties and their candidates to appeal to young voters during an election year.
As students enrolled in an honors course pertaining to the 2012 election, we wanted to learn about the political views and values of our peers. Thus, we conducted a nonscientific survey across campus, with the class of 2016 as the focus of our study. One hundred-fifty freshman students filled out surveys which we developed and administered as a research team. Fifty surveys containing a variety of political questions were distributed by hand to each of the three freshman dorm buildings according to the 3:2 female- to- male ratio which is characteristic of Sacred Heart University. The three freshman dorms, Roncalli Hall, Seton Hall and Merton Hall were visited on the following days: 10/8/12, 10/10/12, and 10/14/12. The surveys were filled out on the spot. In total, 90 female and 60 male freshman students agreed to complete our survey. Additionally, eleven in-depth interviews were conducted to gather more personal information from the students. The data were used to present a political portrait of the class of 2016. The ultimate goal of our endeavor was to conduct a study that would allow us to generalize about the political orientations and values of the university’s newest class of students. We were confident that the end result of our project would allow for a deeper understanding of how Sacred Heart’s freshman class views politics and, more specifically, the 2012 presidential election.

**Policy Issues Deemed Most Important:**

Regarding policy issues, students were asked to place a number (one through three) next to the issues which they felt were the most important with respect to their voting decision. The policy options included: national security, health care, immigration, abortion, energy, the environment, the economy, entitlement reform (Medicare and Social Security), taxes, legalization of marijuana, education, gun control, the national debt, and gay rights.
Among the 150 respondents, 45% chose the economy as one of their the top three concerns, with 26% selecting this policy issue as the top priority. Clearly the economic state of the country is a critical issue among the class of 2016. Thirty-seven percent of the students identified national security as among their top three concerns, with 15% placing this issue in the very top category. Healthcare came in third place with 42% ranking health care as one of their top three concerns, and 14% selecting this issue as their number one of consideration. Even though all issues listed in our survey are important to the country, such as the national debt and entitlement reform, it was apparent that the economy, national security and health care were the main concerns of our freshman students.

**Gender Variation and Policy Issues**

Among the female students, health care was placed in the top category by 47% of the 90 females surveyed. That is an astounding number of females regarding one specific issue from such a wide variety of choices. Coming in a close second and third place were national security at 41%, followed by the economy, at 38%. Most male students placed the economy as their top ranked issue out of the different policy options. Fifty-six percent of the 60 male respondents had identified this issue as their top priority. Following closely behind was health care at 35%, and national security at 32% A surprising result among the male respondents was that national debt was tied with national security as their third most important policy concern. It is clear that rising national debt is beginning to concern the younger generation of male college students. Generally speaking however, it appears that while there is some variation between male and female students, the top issues during the 2012 campaign seem to be generally agreed upon.
Portrayals of Candidates:

During the campaign, President Barack Obama portrayed himself as a common man. In his fight for the battleground states, Obama presented the image that he was the only one who truly understood what average Americans were going through. He used familial pronouns to create a bond with his audience, saying “we” and “our.” He cast Governor Mitt Romney and Congressman Paul Ryan as men who did not understand the needs of average Americans. The President often presented the idea that Romney and Ryan only cared about the wealthiest and most conservative Americans, aka the notorious 1%.

Romney portrayed the President as an angry man seeking power. Throughout the campaign he tried to destroy Obama’s most powerful asset: his natural likeability. He frequently criticized the President for not understanding what needed to be done to save the country. Romney portrayed himself as a successful and experienced businessman who could be trusted with managing the economy. Romney’s running mate, Paul Ryan, portrayed himself as a family man who cared about average Americans. Romney and Ryan attempted to show the country that they were the logical choice to conquer our gravest issue: the economic crisis.

We asked freshman students the following question “What do you primarily look for in a presidential candidate?” Each student had the ability to select one of the following categories: morals, a good business sense, a good communicator, charisma, experience, or a non-descript category identified as “other.” After tallying the results it was concluded that Sacred Heart students, both male and female, viewed “morals” and a “good business sense” as the most essential qualities for an American president. More specifically, 41% of the students selected morals, 24% a good business sense, 13% experience, 10% communication skills 3% charisma,
and 10% other traits as essential presidential attributes. It is apparent that when evaluating the qualities of a presidential candidate, the Class of 2016 will consider the candidate’s morals, as well as his or her understanding of business, as highly relevant to their voting decision; moreso than the candidate’s experience, ability to communicate, or charisma.

**Gender Variation and Candidate Perceptions**

Of the sixty male freshman, our data showed that 32% favored a candidate with a strong business sense, 30% viewed morals as the most essential attribute, 13% favored experience, 10% favored good communication skills, 5% considered charisma to be the most essential characteristics, while 10% checked a quality not listed. The females in our sample viewed a candidate’s morals and a good business sense as the most essential qualities. Forty-eight percent, almost half, of female students selected morals as the most essential quality, 20% selected a strong business sense, 12% selected experience, 9% selected communication skills, 2% charisma and 9% selected the “other,” category. It is intriguing that among the six candidate traits both male and freshman students placed a high emphasis on the moral character of those who seek the presidency, as well as the candidate’s ability to manage business affairs. When we compare the findings from this data set to the forthcoming data set presented below regarding voter choice, in which Mitt Romney emerged as the students’ preferred candidate, it appears, at least on the surface, that our freshman students’ support for Romney was due in part to a perception that he was the more trustworthy and perhaps the more moral candidate, as well as the candidate most proficient in business affairs.

**Party Polarization:**

Over the past several years, the United States has progressively become more politically polarized. Polarization refers to the drastic gap between political parties. Generally, this implies that if you consider yourself a Republican, then you vote for the Republican candidate. And if
you perceive yourself to be a Democrat, then you will naturally vote for a Democrat. The parties have also grown more hostile towards each other, slandering their opponents as a way to make themselves look better.

When it comes to our nation on a whole, the Wall Street Journal exit polls discovered that on election day 38% of American voters considered themselves Democrats, while 32% identified themselves as Republicans. The remaining 30% of voters identified themselves as Independents. A fraction of voters declared themselves as members of a third party. Moreover, partisanship appears to be guiding the electorate’s voting behavior. According to the exit polls, 92% of Democrats voted for Obama, while 93% of Republicans voted for Romney. Quite clearly, if you are a Democrat, then you vote Democrat. If you are a Republican, then you vote Republican. There is very little split ticket voting in today’s politics, with most voters voting the party line from the top of the ticket to the bottom.

With respect to the party affiliation of our freshman respondents, we discovered a contrast to the national findings. Sacred Heart’s freshman class appears to be more Republican to a much greater degree than that of the nation. Of the freshman surveyed, only 15% associated themselves with the Democratic Party, while more than twice as many, 37%, considered themselves Republican. In addition to the extreme contrast to the national findings, the students also had a greater number that fell into the “gray-area” between parties. We discovered that 19% of the students indicated that they were unaffiliated with either major party, while an astonishing 29% admitted to not knowing how to describe themselves; perhaps suggesting no knowledge of the two major parties. In total, 48% of the freshman class do not identify with either major party, compared to 30% of the country at large. There is obviously a very large disconnect to the
political process among freshman students at Sacred Heart University. The following bar graph presents the findings.

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**Gender Variation and Party Preference**

Another major factor when considering how people vote is gender. In the past, women have been leaning more Democratic, while men have been identifying more with the Republican party. Indeed, as reported by the *Wall Street Journal* exit polls, the gender gap continued to be evident in the 2012 election, with 55% of women voting for Obama and 52% of men voting for Romney. With respect to Sacred Heart’s freshmen class, we once again strayed from national trends with a plurality of males and females identifying themselves as Republicans; 41% and 35% respectively. Only 15% of females and 14% of males declared themselves as members of the Democratic Party.

**Party Affiliation and Catholic Identity:**

Another area that we surveyed concerned the relationship between the students’ religious preference and their party identification. We asked students to identify their religion, with the
options being Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Other, or Not Sure. We discovered that that 88% of students in our sample identified themselves as Catholic. This included 90% of the females and 85% of the males. Such high percentages are not surprising in light of the fact that Sacred Heart is a Catholic university. Among only the Catholic respondents, 15% identified themselves as Democrats, 37% as Republicans, 19% as unaffiliated, and 29% were not sure what their political affiliation was. It is interesting to note that previous generations of Roman Catholics were most closely allied with the Democratic Party. Our findings suggest that this is no longer the case with respect to the newest generation of Catholic voters.

**Voter Registration:**

**Registration Figures Compared to National Findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Registered Freshman Voters</th>
<th>National Voter Registration Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes 61%</td>
<td>Yes 70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No 39%</td>
<td>No 30%</td>
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Figure 2: A pie chart representation of voter registration statistics for SHU’s Class of 2016

Figure 2:1 A pie chart representation of voter registration statistics for the U.S.
Source: http://www.statisticbrain.com/voting-
Voter registration was our next area of inquiry. When comparing the results of our survey to national averages, it is evident from the above figures that the percentage of registered freshman students was about 10% less than the national average. We can explain the results by referring to the tendencies of young adults who tend to be politically apathetic and who are neither interested in politics nor voting. These reasons can be attributed to the fact that a majority of young adults do not follow news coverage as they do Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Although there is an effort by states and educational institutions to encourage young adults to register, for example at Sacred Heart University students were given the opportunity to register on campus, many students do not take advantage of this important opportunity. Nevertheless, at least there is an effort being made to increase the voter registration rate among young persons in the U.S. The registration figures among our freshman students are not extremely low, but there is certainly room for improvement.

**Candidate Preference:**

The next orientation we explored concerned candidate preferences among the freshman students. All of the students, whether they were registered or not, or were in fact planning to vote, were asked to express their candidate preference. Unlike national polls, our survey did not discriminate between “likely” and “unlikely” voters. Our concern was simply to gauge which presidential candidate the class of 2016 favored as we drew closer to election day. As the data in the bar graph below show, 53% of our freshman students stated that they preferred Mitt Romney as president, while thirty-five percent favored President Obama. Twelve percent preferred a third party candidate. Our findings were quite different from the national results recorded on election day in which 51% of the American electorate voted for President Obama, while 49% supported Governor Romney. Our findings were also different from pre-election surveys administered in
early October by leading polling organizations, such as Gallup and Rasmussen which at the time were suggesting a statistical dead heat. Thus, for the 2012 election, the class of 2016 at Sacred Heart University favored Governor Mitt Romney for President of the United States. This perhaps can best be explained by the issues the students regard as priorities, along with the party loyalty of the students’ parents, negative feelings towards President Obama, positive feelings towards Romney, as well as the prospective job market for college graduates. A variety of variables ultimately condition the preference of voters.

![Who would freshman vote for?](image)

**Who would freshman vote for?**

- **Obama**: 35%
- **Romney**: 53%
- **3rd Party Candidate**: 12%

**Figure 3**: A graphical representation of the favored presidential candidate for surveyed freshman at Sacred Heart University

**Personal Interviews: Findings from Focus Groups:**

In addition to the quantitative surveys, we also interviewed 11 Sacred Heart freshman for the purpose of tapping their perspectives towards the 2012 election. We asked the students to elaborate on 3 specific questions. The students were informed that their identities would be kept confidential. Here is what we discovered from our focus group interviews:

**Q. 1 How political are you? Do you follow politics closely, or do you not really care?**
Generally speaking, our individual interviews discovered that the students do care about politics and the current election, but they do not follow politics very carefully. As one student said, “I’m political enough to care about major decisions, but I don’t follow it religiously like some people do.” She also said that she doesn’t really care about politics but now that she can vote she feels the need to pay closer attention to it. Another student said that she does care but doesn’t understand politics enough to vote. One student expressed a position suggesting virtually no connection to the political process. As she put it, “I cannot be farther away from politics. I do have certain views, but I did not follow this election at all.” In contrast to this perspective, one male student said this; “I think it’s important to follow because it lowers the number of ignorant voters and I believe that those who are ignorant should not vote.” Thus with respect to the first probe, we concluded that while students might in fact care about politics they are generally uninformed and somewhat disconnected.

Q. 2 Our second question asked “How do you feel President Obama has done with his first term of office?”

The responses to this question were quite varied. One student summarized the President’s term in a measured manner, “He did the best he could do with the situation he was in.” Another student felt “he did okay considering that the world was horrible when he entered office, and that he did fairly well depending on the circumstances.” One student expressed a more sympathetic view of the President. She said, “I feel like he could have done better but I also feel all presidents could do more than they do. He wasn’t great but I don’t think he destroyed our country.” And yet another student said, “He was good except for solving the deficit.” Another student’s response also suggested an understanding of the complexity associated with presidential leadership. “I don’t agree with a lot of what he did, but some of it was necessary. I
won’t get a social security check, but I’d trade that for the money I get for school.” There were of course a number of very negative observations of the President’s performance. As one student who obviously had little support for the President said, “I think he did horribly. He made many promises he knew he wouldn’t be able to keep. Since I live in Massachusetts, Obamacare made it so that a lot of my medications were not covered by insurance.” A more caustic response was issued by this female student: “He did horrible. Unemployment rose. Taxes on middle class families rose. Debt rose. And he did everything he said he wouldn’t do.” Another student essentially reflected the views of her parents. She said, “My parents are very Republican. President Obama hasn’t done anything to improve the country. He said he was going to do a lot of stuff but he never helped us.”

Q. 3 Our third question asked students to respond to the final outcome of the 2012 election. We asked a very simple and straight-forward question; “How do you feel about the results of this election?”

One student we interviewed said, “A part of me did not expect President Obama to win, but he didn’t perform badly enough to be a one-term president. If you look at past presidents that only served one term, there were big problems with their presidencies.” Another student expressed joy over the results: “I’m happy that Obama won.” Another pro-Obama student put it this way: “Romney would have completely changed everything. At least with Obama we know what to expect. It would be hard to deal with Romney’s changes.” And yet another student said, “I was so happy because with Obama I can afford school, take out loans, and I am guaranteed a job. Also, Obama respects teachers, while Romney wants to cut teachers’ jobs.” But not all students were thrilled with the results. Consider the words of this student, “I’m pissed. People didn’t vote for Obama for the right reasons. People should have focused on the economy which
Romney could have fixed.” Some students were not be pleased either way. As one student put it, “I think it was an election of the lesser of two evils.” The student elaborated, “President Obama was the lesser of two evils mainly because he is harmless. Romney would have been harmful because he is an ‘uber-Republican’ and I am afraid of what social changes he would have brought about.”

In addition to our focus group questions, we asked some of the students to respond to several supplemental questions. For example, one question we asked was as follows, “How would you describe your voting experience?” Sadly, the two students interviewed for this question stated that they were in fact registered as voters but due to Hurricane Sandy they never received their absentee ballots. Another question we asked was this, “How would national morale be different if Romney won the election?” This student replied by saying, “The morale would be pretty much the same because the nation is so divided. There would still be happy and upset people. But I do think there would be more excitement for change.” A third supplemental question was as follows, “What do you think will happen in the next election (2016) with two new candidates?” This student replied, “Hopefully we will pick the best candidate that can get us out of this depression.” We asked a very broad personal question, “What qualities do you feel are important to have in a presidential candidate?” One student replied by saying, “I think a “perfect President” is both Democratic and Republican. In order to be the best ruler for our country you need to be a little bit of both and find a happy medium.” Finally, we asked, “What will it take to get you involved in politics to some degree?” The student responded by saying, “I hate politics, it takes too long. There is too much information and everything conflicts.”

From doing these personal interviews we can conclude that most of the students do in fact care about politics, however most of them are uninformed due to a lack of time and...
understanding. From the interviews we also found that personal attitudes towards Romney and Obama were split almost equally. For as many positive statements we received about Obama we discovered there were also an equal amount of positive comments towards Romney. Generally, the people we interviewed were not very informed on politics. However, they all had their own opinions on the elections. We also found that most students believe politics are important to an extent, but they would not go out of their way to research it. Instead they obtain their information from those around them and the resources that are readily available to them, such as the debates on television and newspapers.

Concluding Observations:

Based on the results from our survey and interviews, this is what we concluded about the political views of the Sacred Heart University Class of 2016:

- Among the 150 respondents, the top policy concerns relevant to their choice of candidates pertained to: the economy, national security, and healthcare.
- Among the females surveyed, the major concerns were healthcare, national security and the economy. Among the males surveyed, the major concerns appeared to be the economy, healthcare, national security as well as the national debt, which was tied with national security as a priority item.
- There are contradicting ways the candidates were portrayed in the media which apparently influenced freshman perceptions of the two candidates. Nevertheless, morals and a good sense of business were the attributes regarded as the most important among the students surveyed.
- The Class of 2016 is far more Republican than Democratic, although a large portion of the class seems disconnected from the two party system and politics in general. How this compares to campuses across the country should be a topic for further research.
- A higher percentage of Catholic students support the Republican Party compared to the Democratic Party, although a large percentage of Catholic students are unaffiliated, or do not know enough about politics to declare any form of political allegiance. It was difficult to determine if the Catholic identify of our students actually influenced political orientations and preferences.
• Well over a majority of the freshman class is registered to vote. This finding suggests that the freshman class does at least have a desire to become involved in politics and to vote on election day.

• Overall through our survey data, we discovered that the Class of 2016 favored Governor Mitt Romney for President of the United States. This we felt could best be explained by considering policy issues deemed important by the students, the party affiliation of the students’ parents, disapproval of Obama’s past performance and the appeal of Romney.

• When asked how political you were, most freshmen seemed to care about politics, but did not follow this election very closely due to a lack of time and understanding.

• When asked to reflect on President Obama’s first term in office, the responses were varied and suggested polarized perceptions of the presidential candidates.

• When the students reflected on the 2012 election, many students had varied opinions on the results, depending on their personal and political views.