



No Hunger for a Culture War -- Dissatisfied with President Bush, young voters are concerned about the economy and foreign policy, not social issues

In the latest NEWSWEEK/Ipsos GENEXT poll, 18-29 year-olds say they are most concerned about unemployment, the economy and national security this election year. The firebrand issues hardly show up on young voters' radar screens.

For the Newsweek Genext Poll, Ipsos-Public Affairs interviewed 370 registered voters aged 18 to 29, from Feb. 2 to Feb. 17. The margin of error is plus or minus 5.1 percentage points. For the NEWSWEEK poll of registered voters, Princeton Survey Research Associates interviewed 1,019 adults aged 18 and older Feb. 19 and Feb. 20 by telephone. That margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Public Release Date: Posted on Thursday, February 26, 2004

Contact: Thomas Riehle
202-463-7300
thomas.riehle@ipsos-na.com

By Jonathan Darman
Newsweek.com

Newsweek -- Feb. 23, 2004 - Social issues are supposed to set young people on fire. Abortion, the environment, equal rights—in the late 20th century, these issues made young Americans vote, rally and riot in the streets. But that may be changing. In the latest NEWSWEEK GENEXT poll, 18-29 year-olds say they are most concerned about unemployment, the economy and national security this election year. The firebrand issues hardly show up on young voters' radar screens.

That lack of interest in social issues could prove significant in a presidential race where both parties are attempting to frame their opponents' positions on topics like gay marriage as extremist, accenting America's cultural divide.

On the surface, 18-to-29-year-olds' political interests appear remarkably similar to those of older voters. President Bush's support in the under-30 set has declined considerably in the past month. Less than half (46 percent) of young voters say they approve of the way Bush is handling his job as president, down from 54 percent who approved of the president's performance only one month ago.

Even more striking is the percentage of young voters who say they would definitely vote for someone else in the November election, which rose 13 points to 47 percent in the past month. Indeed, Bush trailed Democratic frontrunner Sen. John Kerry substantially in a hypothetical match-up, with 56 percent saying they would likely vote for Kerry compared only 41 percent saying they would likely vote for Bush (Kerry's Democratic rival, Sen. John Edwards, led Bush 53 percent to 44 percent).

The dramatic decline in Bush's support from young voters reflects his changing political fortunes in the electorate overall. In the past two months, plagued by lingering doubts about the credibility of pre-war intelligence on Iraq, persistent worries about the strength of the U.S. economy and a field of Democratic candidates bashing his record day-in and day-out, Bush has watched his support in national polls plummet to some of the lowest points in his presidency. In the latest NEWSWEEK poll of registered voters, only 48 percent said they view the president favorably while fully 52 percent say they would not like to see him win another four years (43 percent say they would—an all-time low in the NEWSWEEK poll). Kerry led Bush 48 percent to 45 percent in the poll of registered voters, a slight lead within the margin of error.

But the GENEXT poll suggested that, as in the broader electorate, Bush's support from young voters could alter dramatically in the months between now and the November election. Among swing voters under 30, a substantial majority (68 percent) said they generally approve of Bush's performance in option, up from 51 percent one month ago.

And with young voters so closely split, the topics that shape the 2004 election could prove make-or-break for Democrats and Republicans. Remembering 2000's famed red state/blue state divide and mindful of polls that show the presidency could once again be decided by a few thousand voters in a handful of swing states, G.O.P strategists have hinted they plan to use cultural issues as a wedge. Voters caught a glimpse of that strategy last week, when President Bush spoke out against the gay marriages taking place in San Francisco and First Lady Laura Bush called gay marriage "a very, very shocking issue" while on a campaign swing through western states.

But while some in the Republican party are eager for a culture war, young voters are considerably less interested and could tune out a campaign that puts divisive social issues at its center. In the GENEXT poll, the economy topped young voters' list of election-year concerns, with 25 percent calling it the most important matter facing America today. Education also ranked high, with 24 percent calling it the most important issue. A large proportion of young voters also said they were concerned about global affairs, with 21 percent calling foreign policy their most important issue.

By comparison, only 7 percent of young voters said gay marriage was the most important issue facing America today. And in fact, the GENEXT poll suggests a broad apathy among young voters to topics that have created some of the most heated rhetoric in the political sphere over the past thirty years. For a generation that grew up celebrating Earth Day in schools amidst dire warnings about climate change and the destruction of the rain forest, voters under 30 appear remarkably uninterested in the environment, with only 6 percent saying they thought the environment was the most important issue facing America today. Abortion, one of the issues that has most defined the difference between Republicans and Democrats in the last four decades, barely registered among the young voters. Only 3 percent called abortion the most important issue America faces.

About Ipsos Public Affairs

Ipsos Public Affairs, headquartered in Washington D.C., is a non-partisan, objective, survey-based research company made up of campaign and political polling veterans as well as seasoned research professionals. The company conducts strategic research initiatives for a diverse number of American and international organizations based not only on public opinion research, but often elite stakeholder, corporate and media opinion research. It has offices in New York City, Chicago, San Ramon (CA), and Washington, with affiliates around the world. Ipsos Public Affairs also conducts national and international public opinion polling on behalf of the The Associated Press, the world's oldest and largest news organization. Ipsos Public Affairs is a member of the Ipsos Group, a leading global survey-based research firm.

To learn more, visit www.ipsos-pa.com.

.