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For College Students, Political Labels Don't Always Reflect Attitudes on Social Issues or Religious Beliefs

Analysis of new survey findings released today show some unexpected relationships between students' religious and political views and attitudes on social issues, and how they label these views. Based on their attitudes toward "hot button" social issues, the four most "conservative" religious groups are Baptists, Mormons, 7th Day Adventists, and "Other Christians" (mainly Evangelicals). Large majorities of students in each of these groups (58%-80%) oppose "liberal" views such as legalizing marital status for homosexuals, keeping abortion legal, and legalizing marijuana.

However, in none of these denominations, nor in any other religious group do as many as half of the students describe themselves as either conservative or far right in their politics. Moreover, among 7th Day Adventists, students identifying themselves as "liberal" actually outnumber those identifying themselves as "conservative" (29% vs. 21%), despite their clearly conservative views on key social issues.

A new survey of 271,441 freshmen entering college in fall 2006 reveals that the most popular political label is "middle-of-the road" (embraced by 43% of the students), with the rest divided between "liberal" or "far left" (31%) and "conservative" or "far right" (26%). The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey, now in its 40th year, is administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies.¹

The most "liberal" religious groups, based on their views of the social issues outlined above [legalizing marital status for homosexuals, keeping abortion legal, and legalizing marijuana] turn out to be Buddhists, Jews, Quakers, Unitarians², and those with no religious preference. Substantial majorities of students in each of these groups support these social issues (the single exception being Buddhists, where only 45% support legalizing marijuana). However, only about half of students who are Buddhists, Quakers, or have no religious preference identify themselves as liberal or far left despite their liberal views on these issues.

¹ To view a summary of the 2006 survey results, go to <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html> (click on "Recent Findings").

² Note: since "Unitarian" was not among the religious options in the 2006 CIRP survey, all data reported here on Unitarians are from the 2004 survey.



“These findings,” says UCLA Co-principal Investigator Alexander Astin, “show that our popular stereotypes about political labels don’t always match the facts. Despite the students’ beliefs on these core issues, students are largely not identifying themselves as liberal or conservative.”

And substantial minorities of students in groups that are popularly regarded as holding strongly conservative views on selected social issues do not follow the expected pattern: more than one-third of Baptist, Mormon, 7th Day Adventist, and Other Christian students, for example, support legal marital status for same-sex couples, and nearly half of all Catholics (49%) support keeping abortion legal.

Belief in God

In an expanded version of the CIRP annual freshman survey administered in fall 2004, researchers also looked at students’ belief in God. Nearly four students in five (79%) say they believe in God, 15% say they are “not sure,” while 7 percent say they don’t believe in God. Among conservatives and those on the far right politically, 9 in 10 (90%) say they believe in God, compared to 80% among students who say their politics are “middle-of-the-road” and 64% among those who describe themselves as either liberal or far left. “While these differences are consistent with expectation,” says Astin, “the data also show that liberals are not, as claimed by some pundits, primarily secular non-believers; indeed, nearly 2 in 3 say they believe in God.”

Belief in God is highest among Muslims (99%), Seventh-Day Adventists (98%), and Baptists (97%), while atheism and agnosticism are most common among students with no religious preference (41% agnostic, 32% atheist).

To further explore students’ notions about God, researchers analyzed students’ responses to several dozen questions from the 2004 survey regarding the concept of “God.” Students appear to hold three distinctly different conceptions of God: **Personal (40%):** *Feel a “sense of connection with God/Higher Power,” feel “loved by God,” “gain spiritual strength by trusting in a Higher Power;* **All Powerful (37%):** *View God in terms such as “Creator,” “Judge,” “Supreme Being,” or “Protector;* and **Mystical (15%):** *Describe God in terms such as “Universal Spirit,” “Divine Mystery,” “Nature,” “Enlightenment,” and “Part of me”.* Ten percent of students reject all three conceptions of God.

Students who are most likely to embrace the concept of a Personal God are Baptists (71%), 7th Day Adventists (66%), Mormons (65%), Muslims (62%), and Other Christians (62%). Those most likely to see God as All Powerful include Mormons (65%), Baptists (61%) and “Other Christians” (60%). The groups most likely (19%-21%) to see God in Mystical terms are Hindus, Roman Catholics, Baptists, 7th Day Adventists, and Other Christians. Rejection of all three conceptions of God is, as expected, highest (41%) among students with no religious preference.

The 2004 freshman survey is part of a six-year UCLA project funded by the John Templeton Foundation. These same students will be followed up in the Spring of 2007 to assess changes in their religious and spiritual development and to identify aspects of the students’ undergraduate



experience that facilitate their spiritual development during the undergraduate years. The project is led by Co-Principal Investigators Alexander W. and Helen S. Astin, and Project Director Dr. Jennifer A. Lindholm. More information about all aspects of the project is available at www.spirituality.ucla.edu.

The CIRP is the nation's longest-running and most comprehensive assessment of student attitudes and plans for college. Initiated in 1966, the CIRP Freshman Survey is an annual project of the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). The survey serves as a resource for higher education throughout the world.

HERI is widely regarded as one of the premiere research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Housed at the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA, it serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in post-secondary education.

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