

Report on the 2020 North Dakota Student Political Engagement Survey

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Introduction

The Upper Midwest Regional Center on Public Policy at North Dakota State University (NDSU) sponsored the collection and analysis of survey data in this study. The authors sent an invitation to participate in the survey via email to students enrolled at the eleven North Dakota University System colleges and universities on November 4, the day after the 2020 elections. Three reminders were forwarded to students before the survey ended on November 17. Of 42,263 students invited to participate, 3,432 completed the survey for a response rate of 8.12%.

Respondent demographics are found in the Appendix.

This is the fourth North Dakota Student Political Engagement Survey with previous efforts taking place after the 2014, 2016, and 2018 elections. The results and analysis of those surveys can be found on the Center's webpage.ⁱ The 2020 survey was not based upon a random sample and, therefore, may not fully reflect the experiences of the general population of North Dakota college and university students.

Survey Findings

Student Electoral Turnout and Vote

Students were asked, 'Did you vote in the 2020 election?' with three response options: 'Yes,' 'No,' and 'I attempted to vote but was unable to.' These responses are presented in Table 1 in the Appendix by college and university. Of the 2,498 respondents, some 92.7% voted successfully in the 2020 election, 4.9% did not vote, and 2.4% attempted to vote but were unable to do so. Voter turnout was greatest amongst University of North Dakota respondents at 95.2% and lowest amongst Valley City State University respondents at 80.2%.

Some 21.8% of respondents reported voting in person before Election Day, 20.1% voting in person on Election Day, 45.7% mailed in a ballot, and 12.3% dropped off their ballot.

In contrast, the North Dakota Secretary of State reported 62.7% turnout across the state for the November 2020 elections.ⁱⁱ However, turnout varied considerably by county with a

low of 40.7% in Rollette County and a high of 87.6% in Billings County. Cass County reported 61.5% turnout and Grand Forks had 55.8% turnout.ⁱⁱⁱ

Table 2 in the Appendix presents vote by higher ed institution for President, U.S. Representative, and Governor in 2020. It includes only those respondents who reported casting a vote. Those who reported skipping a particular race were not included in that race's tally. Some 52.3% of all respondents supported Joe Biden (D) for President while 41.6% voted for Donald Trump (R) and 6.1% voted for some other candidate. Support for Biden was strongest amongst University of North Dakota respondents at 59.7% followed by North Dakota State University respondents at 53.4%. Support for Biden was weakest amongst North Dakota State College of Science respondents at 23.5% and Dickinson State respondents at 27.6%.

The North Dakota Secretary of State reported that Trump received 65.1% of all North Dakotan votes while Biden got 31.8%.^{iv} Support varied by county, with Trump receiving a low of 21.8% in Sioux County and a high of 89.0% of the vote in Slope County. Trump received 49.5% in Cass County and 54.9% in Grand Forks County.^v In addition, 44.3% of voters in the City of Fargo supported Trump as did 47.1% in the City of Grand Forks.^{vi}

More than 60.1% of survey respondents supported Kelly Armstrong (R) for U.S. Representative while 37.0% voted for Zach Raknerud (D), and 2.9% voted for some other candidate. Support for Armstrong was strongest amongst Mayville State respondents at 81.5%. Support for Armstrong was weakest amongst University of North Dakota respondents at 51.4%.

Statewide amongst all voters, Armstrong received 69.0% and Raknerud 27.6%. Support varied by county, with Armstrong receiving a low of 25.1% in Sioux County and a high of 89.6% of the vote in Slope County. Armstrong received 55.5% in Cass County and 61.0% in Grand Forks County.^{vii}

53.2% of survey respondents voted for Doug Burgum (R) in the governor's election while 40.9% voted for Shelly Lenz (D) and 5.9% voted for some other candidate. Support for Burgum was strongest amongst Dakota College at Bottineau with 87.5% and weakest amongst University of North Dakota respondents at 45.8%

Statewide amongst all voters, Burgum received 65.8% and Lenz got 25.4%.^{viii} Burgum did best in Renville County with 81.0% of the vote. He was weakest in Sioux County at 28.9%. Cass County provided Burgum with 59.3% while Grand Forks County gave him 62.8%.

Student Attitudes Towards Candidates

Respondents were queried about their attitudes towards candidates using a five-point feeling thermometer where a '0' represents 'Very Cold,' '50' means 'Neither Warm nor Cold,' and '100' represents 'Very Warm.' The full results are found below in Table 3.

As can be seen, respondents tended to have 'Cold' feelings towards the presidential candidates with 58.1% giving Trump a '0' or '25' and 45.0% giving Biden a '0' or '25.' Conversely, 35.4% of respondents held 'Warm' and 'Very Warm' feelings towards Trump with 39.6% holding similar feelings toward Biden. Thus, respondents tended to have either cold feelings or warm feeling towards the national candidates.

Table 3 Feeling Thermometers for Elected Officials

	Kevin Cramer	John Hoeven	Donald Trump	Mike Pence	Joe Biden	Kamala Harris
0 (Very cold)	15.7%	8.2%	47.4%	40.3%	26.5%	32.9%
25	12.6%	11.2%	10.7%	12.4%	18.5%	10.9%
50 (Neither Warm nor Cold)	55.2%	58.4%	6.5%	16.5%	15.5%	20.5%
75	11.1%	13.2%	17.4%	13.3%	30.7%	19.0%
100 (Very Warm)	5.4%	8.9%	18.0%	17.6%	8.9%	16.7%
N	2,192	2,189	2,285	2,273	2,281	2,269

In contrast, most respondents gave US Senators Kevin Cramer and John Hoeven a '50,' meaning they elicited 'Neither Warm nor Cold' feelings. This means they did not feel strongly about the Senators either way

Student Attitudes Towards Groups

Students were also queried about their attitudes towards certain groups in society using a five-point feeling thermometer. The results are found in Table 4.

Respondents had warmer feelings towards Liberals (36.0%) than Conservatives (29.8%). In addition, they had cooler feelings towards Black Lives Matters (32.6%) than Law Enforcement (26.3%). However, both groups were held in relatively high regard with majorities giving them a '75' or '100.' Finally, respondents generally had warm feelings towards Immigrants (57.1%) and Refugees (51.6%). Only small proportions felt Cold or Very Cold towards these two groups.

Table 4 Feeling Thermometers for Groups

	Liberals	Conservatives	Black Lives Matter	Law Enforcement	Immigrants	Refugees
0 (Very cold)	17.6%	17.0%	19.6%	7.7%	2.2%	3.6%
25	18.6%	26.8%	13.0%	18.6%	7.4%	9.6%
50 (Neither Warm nor Cold)	27.8%	26.5%	16.1%	22.0%	33.3%	35.2%
75	23.2%	18.1%	18.7%	22.9%	26.2%	23.7%
100 (Very Warm)	12.8%	11.7%	32.6%	28.9%	30.9%	27.9%
N	2,274	2,271	2,280	2,284	1,143	1,130

Respondents were asked about the amount of discrimination people endured in the United States by gender and religion. As demonstrated in Table 5, men and Christians were seen as facing the least amount of discrimination, with 72.9% indicating that men face 'None at All' or 'A little' while 62.4% stating that Christians face 'None at All' or 'A little.' In contrast, 66.5% of respondents believed Muslims faced 'A lot' or 'A Great Deal' of discrimination.

Table 5 How Much Discrimination in The United States Against Gender and Religion

	Men	Women	Christians	Jewish people	Muslims
None at all	31.3%	4.3%	31.9%	7.1%	2.3%
A little	41.6%	18.5%	30.5%	30.7%	10.2%
A moderate amount	15.5%	35.5%	19.7%	33.4%	21.0%
A lot	7.3%	28.8%	11.3%	21.3%	30.8%
A great deal	4.3%	13.0%	6.6%	7.5%	35.7%
N	2,253	2,253	2,243	2,237	2,242

Table 6 indicates perceived discrimination against various groups in the United States. Respondents believed Whites endured the least amount of discrimination with 71.9% indicating they faced ‘None at all’ or ‘A little.’ Conversely, 59.9% of respondents believed Blacks faced ‘A lot’ or ‘A Great Deal’ while 56.2% believed Latinas/Latinos endured similar levels of discrimination and 50.9% claimed the same for Native Americans. Finally, 67.0% respondents felt Transgender people endured a lot or a great deal of discrimination.

Table 6 How Much Discrimination in The United States Against Groups

	Blacks	Latinas/Latinos	Native Americans	Whites	Gays & Lesbians	Transgender people
None at all	3.2%	4.1%	5.0%	41.8%	3.6%	2.7%
A little	15.9%	20.6%	19.5%	30.1%	17.7%	11.8%
A moderate amount	21.0%	28.5%	24.6%	14.6%	26.3%	18.5%
A lot	24.4%	27.7%	24.8%	8.6%	31.3%	23.6%
A great deal	35.5%	19.1%	26.1%	4.9%	21.1%	43.4%
N	2,249	2,245	2,241	2,247	2,248	2,246

Student Attitudes on Policy and Issues

Table 7 indicates the extent to which respondents supported or opposed contested policies. As can be seen, some policies proved more controversial than others: large majorities indicated their support for employers being required to pay men and women the same amount for the same work as well as the federal government taking additional steps to address climate change. Likewise, efforts to defund the police were opposed or strongly opposed by 63.6% of the respondents and 74.4% opposed or strongly opposed allowing businesses to refuse service to gays and lesbians if homosexuality violates the owner’s religious beliefs.

Table 7 Do you support or oppose...

	Employers being required to pay men and women the same amount for the same work	The federal government taking additional steps to address climate change	Efforts to defund the police	Allowing businesses to refuse services to gays and lesbians if homosexuality violates the owner’s religious beliefs	Banning abortion after 20th week of pregnancy	A policy that prevents health insurers from denying insurance to those with pre-existing conditions
Strongly support	69.2%	51.1%	12.5%	10.2%	29.2%	38.4%
Support	24.6%	30.6%	23.8%	15.6%	18.9%	23.8%
Oppose	4.4%	13.9%	20.8%	22.8%	24.1%	21.4%
Strongly oppose	1.7%	4.3%	42.8%	51.4%	27.7%	16.4%
N	2,229	2,209	2,212	2,215	2,197	2,201

Respondents were more evenly split on the question of banning abortion after the 20th week: 48.1% supported or strongly supported the policy while 51.8% opposed or strongly opposed it.

Finally, Table 8 shows how respondents judged the various actors involved in the Coronavirus pandemic. President Trump got the lowest ratings with 51.6% indicating he did a poor job. Likewise, more than a third felt North Dakota state elected officials did a poor job. Local elected officials did somewhat better, though more than half said they did a ‘Poor’ or ‘Only Fair’ job. Public Health officials did much better with 65.8% of respondents giving them ‘Good’ or ‘Excellent’ ratings. However, Hospitals and Medical Centers in the area got the highest scores with 86.9% indicating these institutions did a ‘Good’ or ‘Excellent’ job.

Table 8 How Would You Rate the Job Each is Doing Responding to the Coronavirus Outbreak?

	President Trump	North Dakota state elected officials	Your Local Elected Officials	Public Health Officials such as those at the CDC	Hospitals and Medical Centers in your area
Poor	51.6%	34.2%	21.8%	9.5%	2.5%
Only Fair	12.0%	28.6%	33.7%	24.7%	10.7%
Good	21.0%	28.9%	36.2%	52.0%	49.6%
Excellent	15.4%	8.3%	8.2%	13.8%	37.3%
N	2,216	2,166	2,178	2,204	2,196

Analysis

There are two central findings in this report. First, the survey respondents supported Democratic candidates in the 2020 elections at higher rates than did voters across North Dakota. Indeed, support for Biden by respondents was 21.5 percentage points higher than that found across the state, 9.4 percentage points higher for Raknerud, and 15.5 percentage points higher for Lenz. However, the results do not indicate that respondents necessarily disliked Republican officials. The feeling thermometers in Table 3 indicate more of a disinterest with more than half of the respondents having neither warm nor cold feelings about Senators Cramer and Hoeven. Instead, it seems respondents are driven

by their dislike for President Trump, particularly in regards to his response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The respondents' dissatisfaction with the responses by elected officials to the coronavirus was illustrated in Table 8. All elected officials got bad marks but President Trump's were particularly poor. This seemed to drive the vote of many respondents, even those who might otherwise have supported Republicans across the board.

Evidence can be found in a closer examination of how respondents reported voting in the races for President and U.S. Representative. Of the 1,152 respondents who reported voting in both races, 174, or 15.1% voted for both Joe Biden and Kelly Armstrong. Such a level of split-ticket voting is unusual in this polarized age: most voters support their party across all contexts.

162 of the 174 split-ticket respondents rated President Trump on the job he was doing in response to the coronavirus outbreak. Of those, 82.1% felt he was doing a poor job, 14.8% only fair, 2.5% good, and 0.60% an excellent job. In contrast, 51.6% of all respondents to this question felt Trump was doing a poor job, 12.0% only fair, 21.0% good, and 15.4% believed he was doing an excellent job. This suggests that attitudes on coronavirus policy helped drive the vote amongst respondents.

The second noteworthy finding is that college students are not happy about their present circumstances. Table 8 shows their negative attitudes towards federal, state, and local responses to the coronavirus pandemic, perhaps the biggest issue of the day. In addition, when queried on their thoughts about the state of the economy in the United States, 40.5% felt it was 'bad' or 'very bad' while 35.0% felt it was 'good' or 'very good.' When asked about the state of the economy in North Dakota, 15.3% felt it was 'bad' or very bad' while 41.6% felt it was 'good' or 'very good.'

In contrast, 18.3% of the respondents to the 2018 North Dakota Student Political Engagement Survey believed the state of economy in the United States was 'bad' or 'very bad' while 49.5% felt it was 'good' or 'very good.' Likewise, 11.8% felt the North Dakota economy was 'bad' or 'very bad' and 53.2% felt it was 'good' or 'very good.'

APPENDIX

Respondent Demographics

Responses by institution:

Bismarck State College – 175 (5.1% of total survey responses)

Dakota College at Bottineau – 26 (0.8%)

Dickinson State University – 45 (1.3%) Lake Region State College – 66 (1.9%)

Mayville State University – 74 (2.2%) Minot State University – 263 (7.7%)

North Dakota State College of Science – 94 (2.7%)

North Dakota State University – 1,078 (31.4%)

University of North Dakota – 1,270 (37.0%) Valley City State University – 116 (3.4%)

Williston State College – 78 (2.3%)

147 respondents (4.3%) did not indicate their institution.

Students were asked the type of community in which they spent the most time before college. Some 2,544 answered this question. Of these, 19.7% identified as urban, 45.3% as rural, and 35.1% as suburban.

Of 2,209 respondents, 18.9% identified as First Year, 19.5% as Sophomore, 19.4% as Junior, 22.5% as Senior, and 19.8% as Graduate or Professional.

Of 2,183 respondents, 94.2% identified as White and 5.8% identified as something else.

Of 2,156 respondents, 32.8% identified as Democrats, 33.7% as Republicans, 26.1% as Independent, and 8.3% as some other party.

Of 2,165 respondents, 61.7% identified as female.

Table 1: ‘Did You Vote in the 2020 Election?’ by Institution.

Institution	Yes	No	Attempted to Vote but was unable to do so
Bismarck State College	91.3% (N = 118)	6.3% (N = 8)	2.4% (N = 3)
Dakota College at Bottineau	89.5% (N = 17)	5.3% (N = 1)	5.3% (N = 1)
Dickinson State University	90.6% (N = 29)	6.3% (N = 2)	3.1% (N = 1)
Lake Region State College	88.7% (N = 47)	9.4% (N = 5)	1.9% (N = 1)
Mayville State University	87.5% (N = 49)	8.9% (N = 5)	3.6% (N = 2)
Minot State University	88.7% (N = 181)	7.8% (N = 16)	3.4% (N = 7)
North Dakota State College of Science	91.4% (N = 53)	6.9% (N = 4)	1.7% (N = 1)
North Dakota State University	93.5% (N = 772)	4.4% (N = 36)	2.2% (N = 18)
University of North Dakota	95.2% (N = 925)	3.3% (N = 32)	1.5% (N = 15)
Valley City State University	80.2% (N = 69)	12.6% (N = 11)	7.0% (N = 6)
Williston State College	87.5% (N = 49)	3.6% (N = 2)	8.9% (N = 5)
Totals (statewide)	92.7% (N = 2,307)	4.9% (N = 122)	2.4% (N = 60)

Table 2: Percentage Vote and Total Responses by Institution, 2020.

Institution	Voted Trump (R) for President	Voted Burgum (R) for ND Governor	Voted Armstrong (R) for US House	Voted for Measure #1	Voted for Measure #2
Bismarck State College	56.1% (114)	61.1% (90)	73.2% (82)	28.0% (82)	31.7% (82)
Dakota College at Bottineau	56.3% (16)	87.5% (16)	80.0% (15)	43.8% (16)	53.3% (15)
Dickinson State University	65.5% (29)	37.5% (16)	76.5% (17)	50.0% (18)	38.9% (18)
Lake Region State College	54.5% (44)	71.1% (38)	78.9% (38)	37.1% (35)	30.0% (30)
Mayville State University	64.4% (45)	70.0% (30)	81.5% (27)	24.0% (25)	40.0% (25)
Minot State University	44.6% (175)	54.3% (129)	58.3% (120)	34.7% (118)	31.9% (113)
North Dakota State College of Science	68.6% (51)	60.0% (35)	75.0% (32)	45.2% (31)	33.3% (30)
North Dakota State University	40.9% (746)	53.8% (344)	58.2% (328)	42.3% (319)	38.0% (313)
University of North Dakota	34.1% (895)	45.8% (445)	51.4% (420)	46.7% (415)	40.0% (400)
Valley City State University	52.2% (67)	50.9% (57)	77.6% (58)	34.0% (53)	40.0% (55)
Williston State College	52.2% (46)	66.7% (36)	62.5% (32)	50.0% (28)	42.9% (28)
All Institutions	41.6% (2,228)	53.2% (1,236)	60.1% (1,169)	41.6% (1,140)	37.8% (1,109)

Includes only those respondents who reported casting a vote in a particular contest.

Endnotes

ⁱ See <https://www.ndsu.edu/centers/publicpolicy/>

ⁱⁱ See <https://results.sos.nd.gov/Default.aspx?map=Cty&eid=313>

ⁱⁱⁱ See <https://results.sos.nd.gov/VoterTurnoutDetails.aspx>

^{iv} See <https://results.sos.nd.gov/Default.aspx?map=Cty&eid=313>

^v See <https://results.sos.nd.gov/ResultsSW.aspx?text=All&type=SW&map=CTY>

^{vi} See <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/upshot/2020-election-map.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage>

^{vii} See <https://results.sos.nd.gov/ResultsSW.aspx?text=All&type=SW&map=CTY>

^{viii} Ibid.