

Pedagogical Benefits of Exit Polling

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Abstract: In this project, a collection of professors from universities across Pennsylvania provided the opportunity for students to administer exit poll surveys in the 2024 presidential election. Students varied in their level of involvement from completing analyses, forming survey questions, and developing research designs to strictly collecting surveys on election day. This project exemplifies the multiple benefits of integrating undergraduate students into research activity. Students completed post-activity surveys to discuss their development in response to this project. Additionally, data from the project is used in future research, often in collaboration with undergraduate students. The hope is to expand this research and more specifically identify the mechanisms by which activities outside of the classroom foster democratic values and promote civic engagement as a high-impact practice.

A huge thank you to Sarah Niebler and Lanethea Mathews-Schultz for coordinating the exit poll project and thank you to the professors at UPenn for logistics and data processing support.

Exit Poll Project

As political science professors it can be difficult to conduct salient research and provide high quality instruction considering both time and resource constraints. Oftentimes, it may feel as if teaching and research is a zero-sum game, in which the two are mutually exclusive. However, this does not have to be the case. Considering the consequential and salient nature of the 2024 election, there is ample opportunity for research as well as teaching about democracy, elections, parties, and many other topics central to American politics. To integrate research and teaching this election season, eighteen professors across eleven universities in Pennsylvania recruited students to participate in an exit poll project. The project included students from varying institutions in size, resources, public/private designation, and geographical situation. This allows for students across differing circumstances to gain hands on experience regarding surveys, elections, and civic engagement. It also provides an opportunity for professors, graduate students, and exceptional undergraduate students to collect data on research projects that may otherwise be prohibitively costly and time-consuming.

Previous studies have identified the numerous benefits to conducting exit polls with students. We focus specifically on the benefits of increasing interest in politics amongst students, effects on attitudes toward democracy, and the symbiotic relationship between researchers and student participants. Together, we recommend the expansion of these projects and assert that they are beneficial for producing salient research, teaching hands on skills, and improving civic engagement through this high-impact practice. We conclude the paper with some practical applications and benefits to implementing exit polling as well as future improvements and research directions.

Conducting the Exit Polls

The multi-institution Pennsylvania Exit Poll Project has been conducted since 2022, but participating professors have been integrating student-conducted exit polls into their classes for much longer. In August of election years, coordinating professors reach out to political scientists across Pennsylvania to gauge interest and solicit participants. This provides ample time for individual professors to coordinate interested students, receive IRB approval from their university, and determine institution-specific survey questions.

Selecting Student Participants

The selection process for student participants for the project is flexible and was unique to each university. There is no specific selection criteria required for student participants. The modal mechanism of student selection is building the exit poll project into a university course. Other universities selected students on a volunteer basis or as a part of a student organization, e.g. the Widener University Political Awareness Club (WUPAC). Lastly, some universities secured external funding to pay students for conducting surveys on election day. This allows for flexibility and adaptation for differences in student interest and university resource availability.

Integrating the exit poll project into a university course provides specific advantages. First, it guarantees sufficient student participation to conduct the exit polls since it provides an incentive for students to actively engage in the project. Additionally, accompanying projects/assignments allow for further engagement in the project including statistical analysis of the survey data, survey design ahead of the research, discussions of sampling, etc. Soliciting student participation outside the bounds of a class itself provides unique benefits. First, these students are often more motivated since they self-selected into the project. This can provide opportunities for collaboration between undergraduate students and faculty. Alternatively, student participants can be

undergraduate research assistants, work- study students, or honors students. As a high impact practice, the exit poll project is best paired with follow-up activities whether it be in a class, an organization, or independent research study.

Election Day and Beyond

The collaboration across universities allowed for a standard set of questions to be asked across Pennsylvania, with individual universities adding institution-specific questions for their students to ask. This allows for statewide data to be collected, but also specific questions to be asked of individuals within your district. Not only does this provide unique survey data to each university, but it also allows students to compare voters across voting districts, urban/rural divides, etc. Ahead of election day, advising professors were expected to meet with participating students and train them on the exit poll process. For universities using this as a classroom activity this was incorporated into class time. During the training session, students were made aware of state and local laws regarding elections and conducting surveys. This included the mandatory distance from the polling location, how to communicate with voters, and basic principles of conducting surveys. This provides a high impact teaching opportunity for students to learn about election laws, bureaucratic impact, surveys, community engagement, and much more, all before going into the field.

On Election Day, each university conducted their exit polls independently. The standard procedure is for students to meet with the advising professor in the morning, receive exit poll materials (surveys, folders, clipboards, etc.) and disperse to their previously assigned polling locations. Universities were recommended to put students into pairs and send them to voting locations in their area. In some cases, polling places were chosen to avoid high density student polling places to prevent contamination from surveying classmates and attempt to broaden the sample. Students were given shifts to conduct exit polls as well as instructions regarding election

laws and how to conduct surveys effectively and ethically. Specific polling place locations and hours of coverage were at the discretion of the participating institution. At many universities students were given two-hour shifts. Penn State students were paired up and conducted exit polls for six hours shifts across eight precincts, with the assumption that each pollster conducts ten surveys per hour. Students then brought their completed surveys to the professor's office where they were scanned and sent to UPenn. The raw data from the exit polls included 3,811 unique observations. After data verification via MTurkers, there were 2,293 observations.

This process allows for a symbiotic relationship in which students gain experience and researchers collect data. It is understood that utilizing students as surveyors is a cost-effective method of collecting data that provides useful experience to the students (Williamson 2011). Working in the field provides students with hands-on experience that can further bolster their resumes and provide a glimpse into careers that often interest political science students. Participating in the exit poll project with undergraduate students can provide opportunities for further collaboration and learning experiences.

Impacts of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning has been utilized across political science pedagogy in recent years. Whether described as project-based learning, experiential learning, or something else, numerous practitioners have argued for the positive benefits of applied learning as a high impact practice (Roland 2017). Experiential learning opportunities allow students to take ownership of their education and gain "real-world" experience outside the four walls of a classroom. Sometimes, these practices occur by way of a game or simulation. Evidence suggests that students that participate in active learning via simulation report higher levels of knowledge and interest in the topic (Alberda 2016). It reasons to believe that real world experiential learning could provide benefits that simulations do not.

In related election related experiences, best practices in college voter education and registration include starting small, organizing early, creating strategic partnerships, and keeping good records (Wilson 2022). These same practices were relevant in our project. By having a small group of motivated students, advising professors can provide individualized instruction and tailor the activity to the students' interests. Early planning in the exit poll project allows for coordination with election authorities. Additionally, beginning engagement with students early provides opportunities for teaching survey design and planning future analysis.

There has been an increased focus in providing students with hands on experience to increase their interest levels, better achieve learning outcomes, and prepare students for work after university. In conducting surveys, students gain greater appreciation and interest in politics as well as hands-on experience (Croco et al 2019). The ability to conduct surveys and analyze survey data are marketable skills that students can use post-graduation. In an increasingly competitive workforce for college graduates, and an emphasis placed on these marketable skills, the exit poll project is a benefit to students as they plan for life after university. Similarly, evidence suggests that positive educational experiences with innovative teaching methods have improved social capital (Myers 2020). Networking is an extremely important and often overlooked skill, and engaging with the community is an incredible opportunity for students to better understand their neighbors and make connections that they otherwise would not have made.

When considering the benefits of the exit polling experience, it is understood that there is large variation in experiences across universities (Cole 2003). Along with the differences in resources and students, there are different demographics and geographical considerations. Conducting coordinated exit polls with additional universities provides political perspective and community engagement beyond single university projects (Emery, Howard, & Evans 2014). The

experiences of students at Susquehanna and Penn State are likely unique, and communicating those differences allows for greater perspective.

We build on previous suggestions for strategies to use when conducting exit polls as an experiential learning exercise (Berry & Robinson 2012). In discussing the importance of exit polls specifically, the literature has been clear on its impact. Their low cost and high-quality data output, along with the experience of conducting the exit polls for the students, achieves multiple goals held by students, departments and universities (Thornburg & Botsch 2023). When considering the subject area-specific benefits, student evaluations suggest that exit polling is effective at engaging students in research methods (Evans & Lagergren 2007). Previous evidence also suggests that students participating in exit poll projects are better able to connect theory to methodology while branching out withing the community (Lelieveldt & Rossen 2009). Altogether, we can see the educational impact that conducting exit polls has on students.

Previous studies state that polling place observation in itself is a valuable experience for students with both short- and long-term benefits in understanding of electoral science and voting behavior (Mann et al 2018). It reasons to believe that engaging with voters, rather than simply observing, has an even greater impact on students understanding of these processes. When it comes to topics that are typically understood as complex (e.g. methods or statistical analysis), experiential learning improves student engagement and allows students a better understanding of the material (Kenyon 2017). Together, this illustrates the high impact nature of the exit poll project and similar experiential learning activities. To investigate the impact of our project on student learning, democratic attitudes, and civic engagement, we distributed a post-activity survey to participating students.

Data and Methods

The pedagogical research component of the exit polling project described in this paper is based on post-activity survey responses from 52 student participants gathered between November 12th - December 1st. The Qualtrics survey instrument was designed to capture specific indicators like gained knowledge as well as general impressions of the experience. The survey instrument was approved by both principal researchers' institutional review boards. The full survey instrument is in the Appendix.

The instrument contained basic academic demographics like year in school and major as well as open and closed-ended survey items which asked participants about learning outcomes and reflections. For example, a key battery asks participants to rate their interest in various aspects of the election day polling place from poll workers to political surveys. Another question asks how “valuable” the exit polling experience was for the participant. Further, the survey contains a question that asks about knowledge prior to and after participating in the exit polling project. Given the nature of our post-activity design and the lack of a pre-test, we are tentative in drawing firm conclusions.

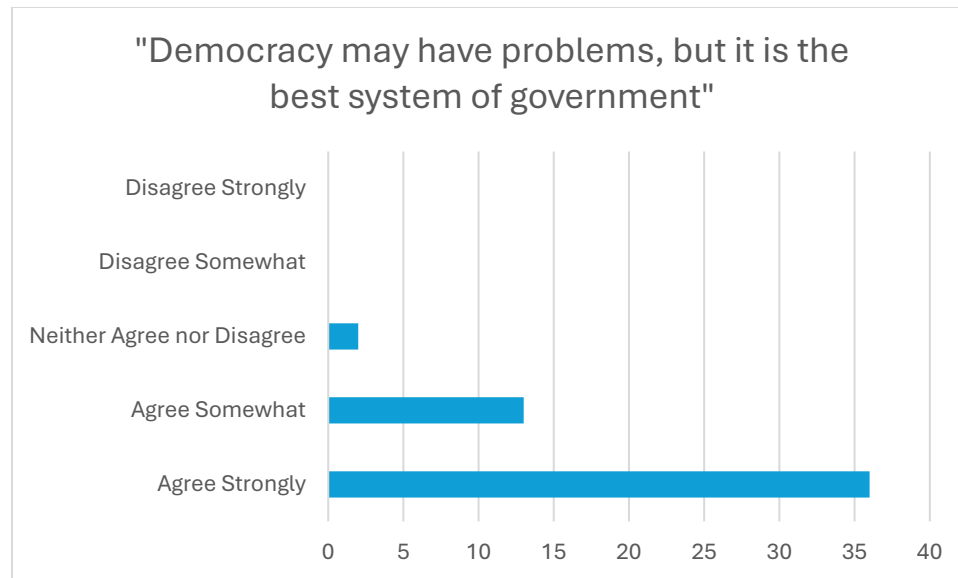
Student Reactions

Responses included students from 8/11 participating universities except RMU, Villanova, and Wilkes. Of respondents, we heard from individuals across class standing. Nearly all respondents participated in the conducting of exit polls at polling locations across Pennsylvania. This includes directly interacting with voters and collecting surveys. Universities differ in post-exit poll activities. For example, a select group of students at Penn State are completing an independent

study course and research project using the data collected from the exit polls. Other universities incorporate the exit polls into a research design or elections course.

Participation in the project was almost exclusively political science majors or minors. This is unsurprising considering the self-selection into the project or the classes incorporating the project. Of survey respondents, we saw variety across class standing. This may present an obstacle in terms of skill level, previous experiences and coursework. Understanding the students participating in the project allows advising professors to tailor the project to the students' preexisting knowledge, their needs, and their interests.

Our results show that attitudes toward democracy amongst participants are positive overall and at a higher rate than the general public recorded in broader survey research (Claassen & Magalhães 2023). The importance of democracy in American politics is interesting for normative purposes as scholars and practitioners highlight the significance of democratic institutions, as well as the need to preserve and safeguard them. Not a single survey respondent disagreed with the statement, "Democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government." We reason that participating in the exit poll project contributed to these attitudes toward democracy. We also recognize the possibility that those in favor of democracy were more likely to participate in the project than those that are not supportive of democracy.



The most interesting responses to our survey came from the open-ended questions. When asked what they learned through the process, students referred to who/when people were likely to participate in the exit poll. This included enthusiasm from pollsters and participated students correctly identified concerns regarding non-response bias. It was also noted that people were more open to participating when they were aware it is non-partisan and/or for research purposes.

One response to the “most interesting occurrences during the polling?” was:

“I had a fun convo w a Kamala support who I initially assumed would be a trump support; showcasing my personal bias”

This highlights a noteworthy observation by many students regarding the lack of polarization exhibited by voters. Considering the salient nature of polarization in political science research today, and therefore, in the political science classroom, students go into this experience prepared for animosity, but this is rarely the case.

Our survey shows high levels of interest in voter access, election day operations, and political science research amongst other topics after participating in the exit poll project. Though

there is self-selection bias since we would expect that only students with some level of interest in these topics would participate in this project or these courses in the first place, these results coincide with previous studies. Additionally, nearly 90% of survey respondents said that conducting the exit polls was a valuable experience. The value of the experience can also be contributed to the social skills gained by students. We posit that engaging with the community, interacting with diverse individuals from a variety of backgrounds, and communicating complex topics is critical to the development of a student's civic mindedness and civic engagement.

As noted above, we are cautious about the results from our participant survey. In future iterations, we would want a stronger pre-/post- research design to tease out learning effects. Moreover, we regret not working earlier in the fall to facilitate coordination and "buy in" from other participating institutions and professors which would engender a better response rate and fuller data picture. In both cases, the data gathering was impacted simply by the principal researchers' low bandwidth in the semester leading up to the election.

Implementation & Outcomes

In order to implement exit polling on your campus, it is worth noting that there are a couple of different routes you can go. The project can occur within a class or absent from a class. Within a class, the students have some initial buy in (participation is grade-based), which makes recruitment of student researchers less challenging. Absent from class, exit polling activities allows for students to self-select in, leading to more enthusiastic pollsters. This can be done independently or in coordination with other universities. We were fortunate this fall to be able to join the continuing exit polling project between faculty at PA institutions.

Exit polling provides benefits to your students and in the classroom. For example, the Susquehanna University exit poll students were enrolled in the upper division Elections and Voting

Behavior course. Exit Polling served as the key final project for the course. In previous iterations, the course used standard final exam assessments as well as campaign simulations. This fall, the course implemented exit polling as an experiential learning activity on Election Day. The students then used the data generated from the collective exit poll to analyze for their final oral presentations and final papers in the course¹. The exit poll served as an excellent opportunity and centerpiece for the course during an intense and emotional election season. Informal and anecdotal feedback as well as conversations with students at the polling locations during their shifts from the SU group reflected a positive experience and an opportunity for the students to connect with the broader community. It also advanced a department-wide emphasis on incorporating more Political Science research methods skills into our non-methods courses. In this case, survey design, interviewer training, data analysis, oral presentation, and research design were intertwined in the final assessments in the course.

More broadly, this project garners significant community interest. In an effort to conduct research that is impactful and interesting for both the scholarly community and practitioners, this project achieves both. This was the case with the League of Women Voters of Center County (LWVCC). This group, amongst others, was very interested in the project and the results following the election. This provides yet another opportunity for students to engage with the community and learn through doing. On the day of the election, many voters were interested in our project, asked questions, and engaged with students.

¹ This portion of the course owes a huge debt of gratitude to Sarah Niebler of Dickinson College for sharing their post-survey assignment prompts and structure. The data piece of the project required devoting a couple course meetings to data lab and analysis instruction and learning.

Future Inquiries and Benefits

In conclusion, implementing exit polling as a high impact practice has many benefits. We highlighted the multitude of documented benefits of experiential learning generally. More specifically, this project allows for a symbiotic relationship between students and instructors that allows for teaching and research to not only coexist but thrive as a result of one another. There are clear benefits to the students outside of learning including gaining real world experience, marketable skills, and bolstering their resume. The exit poll project is flexible in both use and application, available for clubs, classes, and institutes to utilize. The project itself does not only work for big or well-resourced universities. We highlight the impact of participating in the exit poll project on greater understanding of research design, methods, polarization, and democracy. We expect that the project itself positively affected participants attitudes toward democracy. We highlight the development of social skills, civic mindedness, and civic engagement, all of which are normatively important to a democracy. Lastly, there appears to be a benefit to the broader community by way of engaging with the university.

In future iterations, we hope to include a pre- and post- test of all participating students to better identify the effects of participating in the project. Surveying all participating students will help alleviate sample size concerns as well as self-selection and non-response bias. Additionally, future studies will include knowledge-based tests rather than self-reported understanding of topics which will more accurately measure the gained knowledge from this exercise. This includes further coordination with other participating universities. Moreover, our intuition is that students are gaining a host of positive benefits from exit polling, and our instrument will be adapted to better capture the nuances and benefits beyond knowledge that come from this type of experiential learning. Beneficial to the community as well as the department and greater university.

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Appendix

Participant Survey Exit Poll

Invitation to Participate

You are invited to participate in a survey on your experience with the project. The goal of this survey is to study the effects of this active learning activity and improve the project for future participants. Your participation is voluntary. You are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from the study at any time. This survey should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete.

In order to analyze responses to our questionnaire, your answers will be recorded. Findings from this study will be reported in the news media and in scholarly journals, at academic seminars, and at research association meetings. The data will be stored at a secured location and retained indefinitely. Should you have questions regarding the research project, please contact Professor Justin Crofoot at jkc6561@psu.edu.

Exit Poll Evaluation

1. What university do you attend? _____
2. What is your major? _____
3. What year are you in school?
 - ☐ Freshman
 - ☐ Sophomore
 - ☐ Junior
 - ☐ Senior
 - ☐ Graduate Student
4. Select all of the roles and responsibilities you had in the exit poll project.
 - ☐ Survey Design
 - ☐ Conducting Surveys
 - ☐ Data Analysis
 - ☐ Other _____
5. Which most accurately describes your support for the following statement, “Democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government.”

- ☐ Agree Strongly
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Disagree Strongly

6. Describe your experience as a member of the exit poll project. What did you learn?

7. What do you wish you had known before participating in this project

8. What was the most interesting thing that happened while you were surveying?

9. What was the most frustrating thing that happened while you were surveying?

10. Please provide any other feedback regarding the project and your role in it.

11. How would you describe your knowledge of the election process PRIOR to your exit poll project participation?

- ☐ Very Little
- ☐ Small Amount
- ☐ Good Amount
- ☐ A Lot

12. How would you describe your knowledge of the election process AFTER your exit poll project participation?

- ☐ Very Little

- ☐ Small Amount
- ☐ Good Amount
- ☐ A Lot

13. If you feel that you grew in knowledge, what did you learn?

14. How interested are you to learn about the following topics now that you have experienced exit polling?

Voter Access

- ☐ Very Little
- ☐ Small Amount
- ☐ Good Amount
- ☐ A Lot

Poll Workers

- ☐ Very Little
- ☐ Small Amount
- ☐ Good Amount
- ☐ A Lot

Political Surveys

- ☐ Very Little
- ☐ Small Amount
- ☐ Good Amount
- ☐ A Lot

Election day Operations

- ☐ Very Little
- ☐ Small Amount
- ☐ Good Amount
- ☐ A Lot

Why people do or don't vote

- ☐ Very Little
- ☐ Small Amount
- ☐ Good Amount
- ☐ A Lot

Political Science Research

- ☐ Very Little
- ☐ Small Amount
- ☐ Good Amount

- ☐ A Lot

15. How valuable was the experience of exit polling in your study of political science?

- ☐ Very Little
- ☐ Small Amount
- ☐ Good Amount
- ☐ A Lot

Exit Polling Instrument Used at Susquehanna University (v1)

COLLABORATIVE PENNSYLVANIA EXIT POLL 2024 J1-___ Poll No: _____

This is a voluntary and anonymous exit poll about current events conducted for research by researchers at more than a dozen colleges and universities across Pennsylvania. Please do not write your name on this survey. This poll is not official, and is not affiliated with any government or jurisdiction. Your effort in answering these questions may make sure that the views of residents from your community are represented. There are no benefits or compensation for those taking the survey, which seeks to understand how voters think about issues. Some questions may be sensitive and you may decline to answer any questions at any point in the survey.

1. For U.S. President, who did you vote for today? (check one)
- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Kamala Harris (D) | ☐ Someone else |
| ☐ Donald Trump (R) | _____ |
| ☐ Jill Stein (G) | ☐ Did not vote in this race |
| ☐ Chase Oliver (L) | |

2. For U.S. Senator, who did you vote for today? (check one)
- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Bob Casey Jr. (D) | ☐ John Thomas (L) |
| ☐ Dave McCormick (R) | ☐ Someone else |
| ☐ Marty Selker (C) | _____ |
| ☐ Leila Hazou (G) | ☐ Did not vote in this race |

3. In the election for U.S. Congress, did you vote for... (check one)
- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ The Democratic candidate | ☐ Someone else |
| ☐ The Republican candidate | ☐ Did not vote in this race |

4. In the election for Representative in the PA General Assembly, did you vote for... (check one)
- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ The Democratic candidate | ☐ Someone else |
| ☐ The Republican candidate | ☐ Did not vote in this race |

5. Which of the following was the MOST important issue for you in terms of deciding your vote in the 2024 presidential election? (check one)
- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ The economy/inflation | ☐ Foreign policy/national security |
| ☐ Reproductive rights | ☐ Immigration |
| ☐ Climate change | ☐ Other _____ |

6. The following statements sometimes make people angry or upset. Please carefully read all the statements and indicate HOW MANY of them upset you. You do not need to indicate which ones.

- The way gasoline prices keep going up
- Professional athletes getting multi-million-dollar contracts
- People texting while driving
- A woman of color serving as president
- Large corporations polluting the environment

How many of these make you angry or upset? (Do not indicate which one(s)) _____ (enter # 0-5)

7. Do you think abortion should be: (check one)
- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Legal in all cases | ☐ Illegal in most cases |
| ☐ Legal in most cases | ☐ Illegal in all cases |
| | ☐ Unsure |

8. In general, do you support or oppose the extraction of natural gas from shale deposits (fracking) in Pennsylvania? (check one)
- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Strongly support | ☐ Somewhat oppose |
| ☐ Somewhat support | ☐ Strongly oppose |
| | ☐ Unsure |

9. Our nation... has a precious, fleeting opportunity to move past the bitterness, cynicism and divisive battles of the past...Not as members of any one party or faction, but as Americans. How proud are you to be an American? Are you...

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Extremely proud | ☐ Only a little proud |
| ☐ Very proud | ☐ Not proud at all |
| ☐ Moderately proud | ☐ Unsure |

10. How confident are you that this election will be conducted fairly and accurately? (check one)

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Very confident | ☐ Not too confident |
| ☐ Somewhat confident | ☐ Not confident at all |
| | ☐ Unsure |

11. Which of the following do you think is the BIGGEST threat to Pennsylvania having a safe, secure, and accurate election in 2024? (check one)

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Foreign interference in the election | ☐ The use of mail ballots |
| ☐ Voting machines malfunctioning | ☐ Suppression of individuals from voting |
| ☐ Voter fraud | ☐ Other: _____ |
| | ☐ Don't know |

12. Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the job Joe Biden is doing as President? (check one)

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ☐ Approve | ☐ Don't know |
| ☐ Disapprove | |

13. Regardless of how you voted today or in any previous election, on a scale from 1-7 where 1 indicates a strong Democrat and 7 indicates a strong Republican, where would you place yourself? (Please circle one number).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

14. Your gender: (circle one) M F Other _____

15. Your race/ethnicity: (check all that apply)

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| ☐ Asian | ☐ White |
| ☐ Black/African-American | ☐ Hispanic |
| | ☐ Other: _____ |

16. Highest educational level completed: (check one)

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Less than high school | ☐ College graduate |
| ☐ High school graduate | ☐ Postgraduate degree |
| ☐ Some college | |

17. Year you were born: _____

18. What is your religion?

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Evangelical Protestant | ☐ Muslim |
| ☐ Mainline Protestant | ☐ Agnostic or Atheist |
| ☐ Catholic | ☐ Other: _____ |
| ☐ Jewish | ☐ Don't know |

19. How often do you attend religious services? (check one)

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Every week | ☐ A few times a year |
| ☐ Almost every week | ☐ Never |
| ☐ Once or twice a month | |

[Version **]