



## **Tufts Voted! A Report on the Activities of Tufts Students in Election 2004**

The results of a class project, supported by the University College of Citizenship and Public Service and the Tufts Office of Institutional Research

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Tufts University takes a great deal of pride in promoting the idea that its undergraduate students are, and should be, highly engaged in the political process. During the Matriculation Exercises in the fall of 2004, President Bacow issued a challenge to the entering class to participate in the then upcoming Presidential election. As Bacow stated it, “One of the first responsibilities of an active citizen is to vote. So, Class of 2008, get ready for your first homework assignment...each of you who is eligible to vote is expected, or perhaps I should say required, to participate in the upcoming election on November 2.”<sup>1</sup> There is little question that the reputation of Tufts holds that the University’s students are among the most politically active in the nation. In 2001, Princeton Review’s annual survey of “The Best 331 Colleges” rankings, Tufts was ranked as the seventh most politically active campus in the country.<sup>2</sup> But how much truth underlies this reputation? The students in PS115, a political science class on public opinion and survey research, set out during the fall 2004 semester to find out. This report documents the survey that was conducted, and the results that were obtained. The bottom line is that Tufts students are extraordinarily active, perhaps even more than even the most optimistic reputation would lead one to expect.

### **A Brief Overview of the Research Project**

During the fall 2004 semester, the students in PS115, Public Opinion and Survey Research, at Tufts elected to develop a research project to learn more about the political activities, including voting, of their fellow students. From the perspective of Professor Kent Portney, the course’s

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<sup>1</sup> See Helene Ragovin, “President Bacow Issues Call to Citizenship to Class of 2008 Undergraduates,” in *Tufts Journal*, September 13, 2004. Found at: <http://tuftsjournal.tufts.edu/archive/2004/september/features/matriculation.shtml> last accessed February 1, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> In the most recent rankings, Tufts does not appear among the top 20 most politically active colleges. See <http://www.review.com>

instructor, this presented an ideal way for the students to learn in detail about how to conduct a high-quality piece of survey research while addressing a set of issues of importance to the larger Tufts community. This overview provides a thumbnail sketch of the characteristics of the survey and its underlying sample. A more in-depth description is available from Professor Portney.

In order to divide the tasks involved with conducting a survey, the class was divided into three “workgroups.” The first workgroup took on responsibility for assembling, pre-testing, and revising the questionnaire. The second workgroup was given responsibility for making recommendations concerning the sample, defining the exact underlying population, the sampling frame to be applied, and all related issues. The third workgroup, the Implementation Workgroup, was responsible for revising the methods that would be used to actually carry out the survey, including assigning responsibility for taking the sample according to the sampling frame defined by the Sampling Workgroup. It was agreed from the outset that the primary focus of the survey project would be the political activeness and activities of Tufts undergraduates. Working together, the three Workgroups elected to conduct the survey over the Internet. Moreover, there was a portion of the project that went beyond the questionnaire itself. One of the agreed upon purposes of the project was to determine the extent to which Tufts students really are registered to vote and whether they really did vote in the 2004 Presidential election. So, as will be seen later, the questionnaire asked student respondents to self-report whether they were registered to vote and whether they intended to vote, and after asking permission to conduct a follow-up, the students in the class went through a “registration and vote verification” process.

**Questionnaire Development:** Each student was responsible for defining a research issue that would eventually turn into a final term paper. As part of this responsibility, each student was required to make sure that whatever questions(s) would be necessary to investigate this research issue became part of the class’s questionnaire. Drafts of these questions were submitted to the Questionnaire Workgroup, and the Workgroup assembled and revised them as necessary to produce a draft questionnaire. Working iteratively with the full class, this Workgroup pre-tested a version of the questionnaire, and made necessary changes. The final product, a paper version of which contained in the Appendix, contained about 31 questions focused mainly on students’ political attitudes and behaviors or on characteristics that one or more of the class’s students needed to engage in hypothesis testing.

**Sampling:** After reviewing a wide range of sampling options, and examining the feasibility of each, the Sampling Workgroup recommended that a random sample of Tufts students be taken as follows: the specific underlying population would be *all Tufts undergraduates enrolled in Medford during the fall 2004 semester*. Students on leave of absence, students studying abroad, and students in the Washington semester program were not part of this underlying population. After reviewing information concerning the numbers of enrolled students, a decision was made to stratify the sample by class year. As Table 1 shows, each class year contributes a slightly different percent to the overall student population, with Freshmen (the class of 2008) constituting almost 27% of the enrolled student body, and Juniors (the class of 2006) contributing the smallest portion at just over 20%. Of course, the primary reason why the Junior class is smaller than the others is that students studying abroad are disproportionately from that class year. Relying on basic sampling theory, the class estimated that in order to achieve a  $\pm 5\%$  level of precision (range of sampling error) with a 95% confidence interval, a sample of 367 respondents from a population of 4,718 students would be

needed. Anticipating the likely rate of refusals and non-responses, the class estimated that an initial sample of 1,000 students with a 67% refusal rate would yield an appropriately sized final sample. As also shown in Table 1, the initial sample of 1,000 students was stratified so that each class would contribute to the sample in the same proportion as the overall population. This meant that 269 students would be sampled from the class of 2008, 207 from the class of 2007, and so on. With the assistance of the Dean's office, random samples of students from each class were drawn. Table 1 shows the actual percentage distribution of students as found in the final sample of 445 students, a number that represents about 9.5% of the total population. With this final sample size, the response rate was 44.5%, and the non-response rate was 55.5%, well within the range of what is currently considered acceptable.<sup>3</sup> The estimated level of precision (sampling error) is at least  $\pm 5\%$  with a 95% confidence interval.

**Implementation Issues:** As part of the decision to try to conduct the survey over the Internet, the class contacted Dawn Terkla, Director of the Tufts Office of Institutional Research, the only office at the University that has the technical capacity to conduct online survey research. Ms. Terkla agreed to allow the class to access the WebSurveyor software and to use the web server operated by that office, and made arrangements for Ms. Heather Roscoe, staff analyst, to work with the members of the Implementation Workgroup to convert their paper questionnaire into an online questionnaire. Once this process was completed and tested, and the project received exemption approval from the IRB on research on human subjects, each of the 20 students in the class took responsibility for contacting via e-mail 50 of the Tufts undergraduates who were randomly selected.<sup>4</sup> The class established a set protocol for making this e-mail contact. Undergraduates who were selected were asked to click on a link to the web server where the questionnaire was located, and were offered the opportunity to win an Apple iPod Mini MP3 player for completing the questionnaire.<sup>5</sup> Funding to support the modest direct expenses of this project were provided by the University College of Citizenship and Public Service.

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<sup>3</sup> As noted in footnote 4, the actual initial sample was 950 rather than 1,000 students, which means that the real response rate was  $(445/950)*100$ , or 46.8%.

<sup>4</sup> After the project got under way, one student elected not to participate and subsequently withdrew from the class. Unfortunately, the 50 students, largely from the class of 2005, he was supposed to contact were never contacted, making the true initial sample 950 students rather than 1,000. It also means that the class of 2005 was under-sampled, and accounts for the relatively small size of that stratum in the overall final sample.

<sup>5</sup> A winner was subsequently selected and presented with the iPod mini.

Table 1: Students Enrolled During the Fall 2004 semester and Sampling Information

<b>Enrolled Students Fall 2004</b>					
	<b>Population</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Initial</b>	<b>Final</b>	<b>Sample</b>
<b>Class</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Class of 2008	1273	26.90%	269	140	31.5%
Class of 2007	1267	26.78%	270	128	28.8%
Class of 2006	979	20.69%	207	86	19.3%
Class of 2005	1199	25.34%	254	91	20.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4718</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>1,000</b>	<b>445</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

### **Voting Among Tufts Students**

One of the key issues addressed by this survey was the electoral participation among Tufts undergraduates. The questionnaire used in this project asked respondents “Are you registered to vote in the U.S.?” For those who answered “yes,” respondents were asked to provide information about the city or town and state in which they were registered, and then they were asked if they intended to vote in the then up-coming Presidential election, and if so, for whom they intended to vote. Those who responded that they were not registered to vote were asked why, and were provided with the options of saying they were 1) not a U.S. citizen; 2) not of legal voting age; 3) found the registration process too difficult; or 4) other, where they could provide an open-ended explanation.

#### **Voter Registration**

Much effort has been expended to try to register as many Tufts students as possible. While the level of activity in this area has been impressive, until now there has not been any systematic information concerning how effective these efforts have been. This survey provides information that directly bears on this issue.

Among the 445 respondents, reported levels of participation – registration and voting – were impressive. As Table 2 shows, among these respondents, more than 85% indicated that they were registered to vote. This number is even more impressive in the sense that of the 64 respondents who said they were not registered, the vast majority (42, or 66%) were not registered because they were not eligible to register – they are not U.S. citizens or they are not yet of voting age. So this means that **fully 95% of those who were eligible to register to vote were actually registered!**

Table 2: Self-Reported Voter Registration Among Tufts Undergraduate Students

<b>Is Respondent Registered to Vote?</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Yes	381	85.6%
No	64	14.4%
Total	445	100.0%

### Voting

While voter registration is a laudable goal, the obvious purpose of stimulating voter registration is to stimulate participation in the electoral process. So the issue of the extent to which Tufts students voted in the 2004 Presidential election represents an important part of this assessment. In the pre-election questionnaire, respondents were asked whether they intended to vote in the up-coming presidential election, and here the results are equally impressive. As Table 3 shows, among the 381 respondents who reported being registered to vote, over 90% indicated that they would vote or already had voted. Nearly 38% indicated that they had already voted (either through absentee ballot or early voting), and another 55% indicated an intention to vote. Thus, **nearly 93% percent of those students who were eligible to vote and who were registered had either already participated or expected to do so.** Given the common wisdom about the propensity for young people, including college students, to opt out of the electoral process, this really must be considered a pretty astounding figure.

Table 3: Self-Reported Intention to Vote Among Tufts Undergraduate Students

<b>Does Repondent Intend to Vote?</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Already Voted	144	37.9%
Yes, intend to vote	209	55.0%
No, don't intend to vote	13	3.4%
Not sure, haven't decided	14	3.7%
Totals	380	100.0%

### Registration and Vote Verification

The cynical reader will suspect that these registration and voting rates are inaccurate because they will doubt the veracity of self-reports in survey research, perhaps thinking that, since the socially-acceptable response particularly at Tufts is to report being registered and the intention to

vote. Part of this class project included an effort to conduct a registration and vote verification process after the survey was completed and the election was over. This verification process was somewhat limited in its ability to collect complete information on all of the respondents in the survey. The primary limitation was associated with the short time frame after the election in which the verification could take place (between the day after election day – November 3 -- and the day before Thanksgiving – November 24).

The verification process proceeded in several steps. The survey questionnaire asked each respondent for permission to conduct a follow-up to verify the registration and voting status. This request was made of every respondent, including those who indicated that they were not registered. Eighty percent of the respondents gave permission, and among those who did not, the vast majority said they did not intend to vote. Among those who reported being registered and intended to vote, virtually all gave permission for the follow-up. Since this is the group of respondents whose veracity the skeptic might question, it is important that this authorization was received.

Once the respondents gave permission to conduct the verification, they were asked to provide the address for the residence in the city or town where they were registered. Using the original database maintained by the Office of Institutional Research, a list of these respondent names and addresses was prepared. Each student in the class received a list of respondents who were part of his/her original list, and was responsible for conducting the follow-up. The verification process consisted of making a phone call to the office responsible for administering the election in the respondents' cities or towns.<sup>6</sup> Within the short time frame of this project, many respondents' registration and voting status could not be verified one way or another. As a general practice, county or municipal elections offices will typically not verify whether a person voted until the election has been legally certified, a process that itself often takes up to six weeks in normal elections and longer in elections where recounts are necessary. So the information generated by this verification process is somewhat incomplete.

The final tally indicated that the class was able to verify the registration status for some 224 of the 351 respondents who gave permission, or 64%, (224 of the 313 respondents who reported being registered and gave permission, or 72%). The remaining students' registration status could not be verified. Often, election offices were able to verify the registration status, but because the specific election was not yet certified, were not able to verify whether the student had actually voted. Vote verification was completed for 167 students.

Table 4 provides a summary of the results of the registration verification process. The results show that among those whose registrations could be verified, 87.5% were actually registered. Only 12.5% of the respondents were not registered. This does not tell the whole story because it does not show what proportion of students who reported being registered are not. This information is found in Table 5.

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<sup>6</sup> Elections are administered in various ways, with different types of offices exercising this responsibility. Sometimes these offices are municipal and sometimes county offices. Voter information is a matter of public record in virtually every state. Most election offices were able to provide verification over the phone, and some required a fax request that they could retain on file. Every effort was made to comply with the specific requirements of the local authorities.

Table 4: Verification of Voter Registration Among Tufts Undergraduate Students

<b>Was Student Actually Registered to Vote?</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent of Total</b>	<b>Percent of All Verified</b>
Yes	196	44.0%	87.5%
No	28	6.3%	12.5%
Could not Verify	221	49.7%	-----
Total	445	100.0%	100.0%

Table 5 provides information that allows us to make a judgment about how accurate the self-reported registration information is. In this table, the answer on to the questionnaire’s query about registration is crosstabulated with the verification data. Here we can see that only 15 of the 202 students who reported being registered and whose registration status could be verified, or 7.4%, were not registered when they said they were. Of course, these students could have simply been mistaken. Clearly, 187 students, or 92.6% of those who said they were registered, really were! This means that no fewer than 187 students were actually registered out of the total of 403 students who were eligible to register. This means that the absolute lowest registration rate among Tufts students is over 46%, and that the actual figure is much higher. Perhaps equally interesting, nine of the 22 students who reported not being registered and whose status could be verified really were registered!

Table 5: Actual Vote Registration Rates by Self-Reported Registration Status

<b>Actual Registration Status</b>	<b>Self-Reported Registration Status</b>	
	Registered	Not registered
Actually registered	92.6%	40.9%
Not registered	7.4%	59.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
Percent		
Number	202	22

Finally, an effort was made to verify whether each respondent voted in the November 2 election. As noted earlier, this process was more difficult than verifying the registration status. Here, only 167 respondents’ voting could be verified. Yet the results are as impressive as the others. In Table 6, the answers to the question concerning intention to vote are crosstabulated with the vote verification. The results indicate that, among those votes could be verified, over 80% of those who said they were going to vote, and over 90% of those who said they voted, actually did vote.

Table 6: Actual Votes Cast by Self-Reported Intention to Vote

Actual Vote Status	Intention To Vote			
	Intend to vote	Already Voted	Don't intend to vote	Not sure, undecided
Actually voted	82.1%	91.2%	40.0%	60.0%
Didn't vote	17.9%	8.8%	60.0%	40.0%
Total Percent	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Number	78	57	5	5

### Participation of Tufts Students Compared

Of course, as impressive as these findings are, a central question remains: how do Tufts students compare to college students elsewhere? Although the common wisdom certainly is that young people in the age cohort of the vast majority Tufts students are chronically unengaged, there is the distinct possibility that the experience of Tufts students simply reflects a national pattern or trend. There is very little information that bears directly on this issue as it relates to the 2004 Presidential election, but perhaps the most relevant comparison comes from a study commissioned by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Maryland. A recent report,<sup>7</sup> written by Richard Niemi and Michael Hanmer, two prominent political scientists, provides some information that can be used in a direct comparison.

In this study, a nationwide random sample of 1,200 college students was surveyed between November 9 and 19, 2004, and the results carry a  $\pm 2.8\%$  level of precision with a 95% confidence interval. The results of this survey suggest that, nationwide, college students were in fact deeply engaged in the recent Presidential election. Although this study does not provide much in the way of details, the report does suggest that both registration rates and voting rates were quite high nationwide. Table 7 provides a basic comparison between the results of the CIRCLE survey and the survey conducted at Tufts. The data for Tufts students comes from the self-reports rather than the verification information because the CIRCLE survey also relies on self reports.

These results reveal two facts. First, Tufts students' experiences with voter registration are very much in line with the national experience (the different between the two surveys is well within the ranges of sampling error). About 86% of Tufts students reported being registered, and 88% of the students in the nationwide sample reported being registered. Second, Tufts students voted at a higher rate than the nationwide sample. About 93% of the Tufts students reporting voting, and 88% of the nationwide sample reported having voted.

<sup>7</sup> The report can be found at: [http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS\\_College\\_Voting.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_College_Voting.pdf) (last accessed February 1, 2005).

Table 7: Tufts Students Compared to College Students Nationwide

<b>Self-Reported Registration and Voting Status</b>	<b>Tufts Students</b>	<b>College Students Nationwide</b>
Registered to Vote	85.6% *	88.0%
Voted	92.9%**	88.0%

\* Based on the number of students reported being registered as a percent of those who were eligible to register

\*\* Students who reported intention to vote/already voted by absentee ballot prior to the election. Percentage base is the number of students who were eligible to register.

Although these numbers might initially suggest that Tufts students are simply a microcosm of college students nationwide, one central fact stands out in the comparison. The CIRCLE report suggests that students who were registered to vote in the town or city of their college campus were far more likely to have voted than those who were registered in their respective home towns. While this pattern would undoubtedly play out in the Tufts survey as well, it is likely that a far larger proportion of the Tufts student body is registered in their respective home towns that one might find in a nationwide sample. Although the CIRCLE study does not provide details on which such comparisons can be explicitly made, such a finding would argue that the voting rates for Tufts students are all the more impressive.

### Summary

The results of this survey and its subsequent registration and vote verification process point to how extremely involved the Tufts student body was in the election of 2004. A huge portion of the student body is registered to vote, and a very impressive portion of the student body actually voted. While national trends point in other directions, it is clear that Tufts students are distinctly different. Indeed, given these results, it is difficult to imagine a University whose students are more electorally engaged than those at Tufts. When nearly 86% of the students say they are registered and over 90% of these really are, and when 93% of those who are eligible to vote say they intend to vote and between 80% and 91% of these students actually did vote, this is a political participation mark that is hard to better. These registration and voting rates compare favorably to those reported in at least one major nationwide survey of college students, and suggest that Tufts students probably stand among the most participatory schools in the country. It may be a real challenge to maintain or improve these levels of participation, but this is a challenge most colleges and universities would envy.