

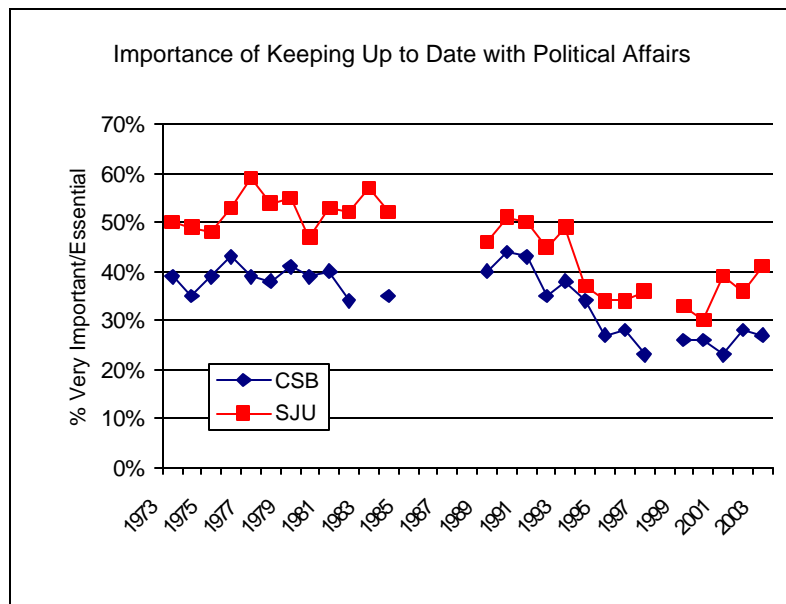
Political interest among new entering CSB/SJU students is rising

Political Interest among New Entering Students

For most new entering students at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, the fall of their first year will provide their initial opportunity to vote in local, state, and national elections. We do not know precisely how many of our students vote – in part because we cannot separate students from non-students at the polling places on each campus and because we do not know how many students vote absentee in their home districts. However, the evidence we do have from the 2002 elections suggests that at least two-thirds of all locally-registered CSB/SJU students voted. The *Survey of the American Freshman* has for 30 years queried students about the level and importance of their political engagement and asked them to identify a political orientation, as well as their position on a number of topical social and political issues. The data that follow summarizes major findings and trends among new entering Saint Benedict and Saint John's students.

Interest in Politics

- Like new entering students around the country, after a decade of nearly steady decline, political interest among new Saint Benedict and Saint John's students began to rebound in 2000 and 2001. Last fall, fully one-third of all new CSB/SJU students said that "keeping up to date with political affairs" was a very important or essential life goal, identical to responses from all new entering students nationally.
- The percentage of new CSB/SJU students who frequently "discuss politics" also has increased in the last decade, rising from 17% in fall 1993 to 22% last fall. The change among Saint Benedict and Saint John's students mirrors the change among students nationally.
- Similar to new male and female college students nationally, there are large and persistent gaps in expressed political interest between Saint Benedict and Saint John's students. Last fall, 41% of all new entering SJU students identified "keeping up to date with political affairs" as an important or essential life objective (the highest level of interest since 1993), compared to just 27% of new CSB students. Since 1973, levels of political interest among new Saint Benedict and Saint John's students have been within five percentage points of each other only twice (in 1994 and 2000). Saint John's students also are more likely than Saint Benedict students to indicate that "influencing the political structure" is a key life goal (24% vs. 13% in fall 2003).



Political Orientation

- Similar to trends nationally, the past three decades have produced a shift from the political left to the political right among new entering Saint Benedict and Saint John’s students. Between fall 1973 and fall 1981 (the period marking the demise of Richard Nixon and the rise of Ronald Reagan), the percentage of CSB/SJU students who identified themselves as politically liberal plummeted from 40% to just 22%. The percentage who identified themselves as middle-of-the-road rose modestly, but the percentage defining themselves as politically conservative doubled, rising from just 10% to 21%.
- Though five presidential elections have passed since 1981, little has changed either at CSB/SJU or nationally in the way new students describe their political orientation. Last fall, approximately half (52%) of all new CSB/SJU identified themselves as politically middle-of-the-road. The remaining students were equally divided among liberals and conservatives. Nationally, half of all students described themselves as middle-of-the-road. Students nationally were somewhat more likely than CSB/SJU students to identify themselves as politically liberal (27% vs. 24%). New Saint John’s students in fall 2003 were nearly twice as likely as new Saint Benedict to identify themselves as politically “conservative” (31% vs. 18%), but also more likely to describe themselves as politically “liberal” (25% vs. 23%). Nearly 6 in 10 new CSB students described themselves as politically “middle-of-the-road,” compared to less than half of all new SJU students. Students who identified a particular political orientation (conservative or liberal) were more likely than students describing themselves as “middle-of-the-road” to express high levels of political interest and engagement.

Issue Politics

The *Survey of the American Freshman* also asks students to identify their position on a number of topical and often contentious social and political issues. In general, student responses are correlated with their political orientation, with students representing the middle of the spectrum providing the swing. The data below represent the viewpoints of new entering students at CSB/SJU and nationally in fall 2003 on a number of significant issues:

Fall 2003 (% Agree or Agree Strongly)	New Entering Students		
	New CSB/SJU Students	All New Entering Students Nationally	New Entering Catholic College Students
The death penalty should be abolished	47%	33%	38%
Same-sex couples should have the right to legal marital status	58%	59%	59%
Abortion should be legal	38%	55%	47%
Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished	52%	53%	50%
The federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns	77%	77%	80%
Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now	59%	53%	54%
Realistically, an individual can do little to bring about change in our society	22%	28%	27%

For additional information, please contact Jon McGee at 5287 or at jmcgee@csbsju.edu. If you would to read past issues of the *Trends* monthly research newsletter, please visit our website at <http://www.csbsju.edu/institutionalresearch/Trends/trends.htm>