Harvard Poll: 70% of College Students Value Religion

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Cambridge, MA – A new national poll by Harvard University’s Institute of Politics (IOP), located at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, finds seven out of ten of America’s college students believe that religion is somewhat or very important in their lives.

However, students are sharply divided along political party lines over how strong a role religion should play in politics and government today. But they agree about the moral direction of the country. While a majority believes hot-button issues like abortion policy, gay marriage and stem cell research are issues of morality, many also agree that the Government’s response to Hurricane Katrina, education policy and Iraq war policy are also questions of morality.

“Religion is not only very important in the lives of college students today, but also religion and morality are critical to how students think about politics and form opinions on political issues,” said IOP Director Jeanne Shaheen. “The political parties and candidates should take note of the significant number of votes and key swing constituency that college students represent for the 2006 and 2008 elections.”

The survey of 1200 college students, drawn randomly from a national database of nearly 5.1 million students finds –

• Religion is important in the lives of college students, but Republicans and Democrats may never agree on the role of religion in politics today. Seven in ten college students today say religion is important or very important in their lives. What’s more, a quarter of students (25%) say they have become more spiritual since entering college, as opposed to only seven percent (7%) who say they have become less spiritual. However, they are sharply divided along party lines as to religion’s role in politics: only twenty-one percent (21%) of self-identifying Democrats say they want to hear politicians talk about religion, while more than two and a half times as many Republicans (56%) say the same. Sixty-two percent (62%) of college Republicans say that religion is losing its influence on American life and by a seven to one margin believe that is a “bad thing.” Fifty-four percent (54%) of college Democrats say that religion is increasing its influence and by a two to one margin believe that is a “bad thing.”

• Morality is playing a strong role in students’ political views. College students believe many issues at the forefront of political debate today are closely linked to morality. Not surprisingly, a majority of students agree somewhat or strongly that hot-button issues like abortion policy (61%), stem cell research (51%), and gay marriage (50%) are questions of morality; but a full fifty percent (50%) of college students also say the government’s response to Hurricane Katrina was a question of morality. Roughly four in ten Democrats and Republicans agree education policy (45% D, 38% R) and Iraq War Policy (39% D, 44% R) are questions of morality. However, Democrats greatly outnumber Republicans (52% D, 35% R) in believing healthcare policy is a question of morality and twice as many Democrats as Republicans say the same about the minimum wage (34% D, 17% R).

• Both Democrats and Republicans agree on their concern over the country’s moral direction, but students are generally optimistic about our country’s future. Fifty-four percent (54%) of college students say they somewhat agree or strongly agree that they are concerned about the moral direction of the country, up three points from a year ago. This is an issue a majority of both Democrats (57%) and Republicans (52%) agree on. Although more than four in ten (46%) college students agree that they are optimistic about the country’s future, many more young Republicans feel that way (61%) than young Democrats (37%).