

Flytedesk Election Survey 2020:

Student reactions to the election and GOTV ads

Overview

In the weeks just before and just after the 2020 election, Flytedesk administered a survey to students at college campuses across the US. Some of these campuses had been targeted by Flytedesk with election-related ads, and some were untreated campuses. The survey asked students about various aspects of their experience during the 2020 election cycle, including ad recall and voting behavior. Flytedesk recorded 2314 responses across 39 college campuses and 13 states.

We find that most students surveyed were registered voters who were highly motivated to participate in the 2020 election, but not very excited about either of the presidential candidates. We also found that students at schools where Flytedesk spent money had higher rates of ad-recall, voting knowledge, and election motivation.

Survey Results

Figure 1 shows the self reported voter registration status of the entire survey sample. We can see that the vast majority of students (~92%) were certain that they were registered to vote. This rate of registration is higher than in the general student population in the US, and likely reflects a mild response bias; students who are more likely to respond to surveys may also be more likely to register to vote. This response bias does not preclude the survey from providing useful information, however. Indeed, the remainder of the survey analysis should be understood as reflecting the sentiments and behaviors among registered students.

About 30% of the survey respondents were registered to vote at their school address. Over 60% of students were registered at their family home address, which for the majority of them was in the state where they attend school.

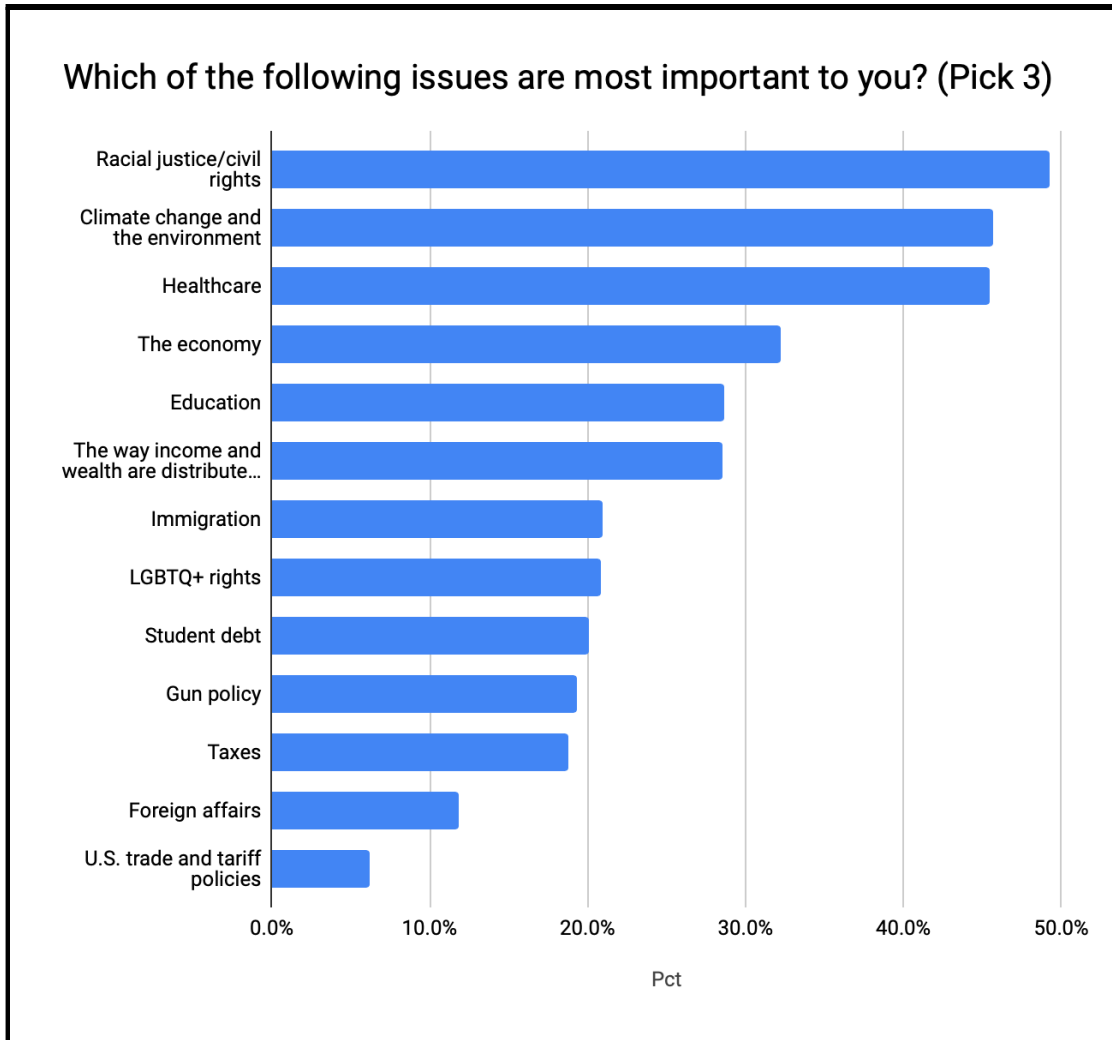
Figure 1: Voter Registration

Are you currently registered to vote? Please tell us where.	Pct
Yes, at my parents' address which is in the state where I attend school.	49.4%
Yes, at my school address.	28.6%
Yes, at my parents' address outside the state where I attend school.	13.9%
I am not eligible to vote in the 2020 election.	4.2%
No, and I do not plan to register before November.	1.8%
I am not sure	1.2%
No, but I plan to register before November.	1.0%

Students were asked to select their three most important issues from a list of 12. Figure 2 shows the percent of the sample that selected each issue in their top three most important issues. The top three most frequent issues were “Racial justice/civil rights”, “Climate change and the environment”, and “Healthcare”. The three least frequent issues were “Taxes”, “Foreign affairs”, and “U.S. trade and tariff policies”.

It is worth noting that some of the issues listed could apply to either side of an issue debate while others might not. For example, “Gun policy” could apply to students who are both for and against restrictions on gun purchases. Meanwhile, “Taxes” was listed as a separate issue from “The way income and wealth are distributed in the U.S.” This could have led students to bias one issue over another based on their political affiliation.

Figure 2: Most important issues



Students were asked how motivated they feel to vote in the 2020 election. Figure 3 shows the results. Over two thirds of students said they were “Extremely motivated.” Only 12% said they were “Neutral,” “Not voting,” or “Not motivated at all, but still voting.”

Figure 3: Voter motivation

How motivated do/did you feel to vote in the 2020 election?	Pct
Extremely motivated	75.1%
Somewhat motivated	12.7%
Neutral	4.6%
Not motivated at all, but still voting	4.1%
I am not voting	3.5%

Figure 4 shows the results of students being asked if they were excited about the candidates for President in the 2020 election. Given the high levels of motivation, it is perhaps surprising that the vast majority of students were not particularly excited about 2020’s presidential candidates. In fact only 33% said that they were somewhat or extremely excited, and nearly half said that they were “Not excited at all, but still voting”.

Figure 4: Candidate excitement

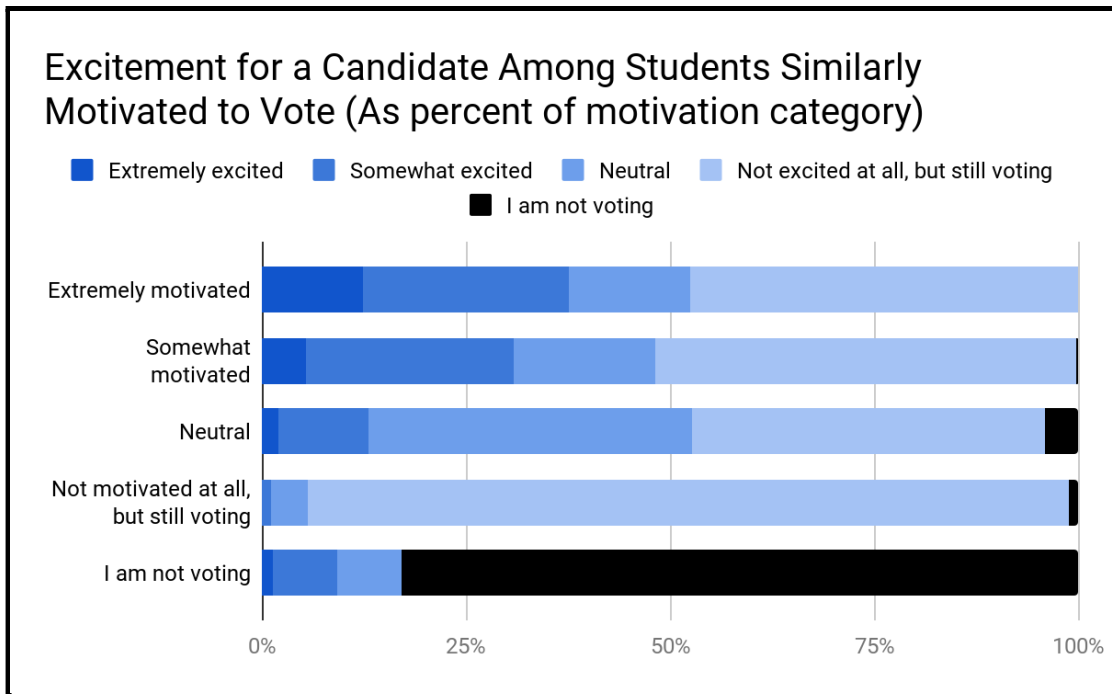
How excited are you about the candidates for President in the 2020 election ?	Pct
Extremely excited	10.1%
Somewhat excited	23.0%
Neutral	15.8%
Not excited at all, but still voting	47.8%
I am not voting	3.3%

To explore this phenomenon we constructed Figure 5, which shows the proportion of people in each “motivation category” who chose a specific “excitement category”. In other words this shows how excited students were likely to be about any candidate given their motivation level.

Over 60% of the students who said they were extremely motivated or somewhat motivated to vote said that they were “neutral” about the candidates or “not excited at all, but still voting”. This would perhaps suggest that getting students

excited about a candidate, while an effective motivator for some, is not a necessary part of motivating most students to vote.

Figure 5: Excitement for a Candidate Among Students Similarly Motivated to Vote



Spend Analysis

The 2020 survey sample included students from schools where Flytedesk did and did not run election-related ads. This allows us to conduct some basic comparisons to see the effectiveness of Flytedesk’s ad spending. However, it is important to note that the treated and untreated schools were not randomly assigned. Differences between the two groups -- even those that would be considered statistically significant in an experimental setting -- may reflect some degree of selection bias.

In the survey, students were asked if they recalled seeing election related ads in any of eight unique forms (campus signage, social media, etc). Figure 6 shows the ad recall rate for students in each treatment group.

Figure 6: Ad recall per spend group

School Type	Average Ad Categories Recalled	Pct of Categories Recalled
Untreated	4.07	50.9%
Treated	4.59	57.3%

When we break down ad recall for each medium in Figure 7 we see that students at the treated schools generally recalled more ads than in the untreated schools. Further examination is needed to fully understand the nuances of ad recall in a pandemic-era campus environment. For instance, it certainly raises some questions around the accuracy of ad recall seeing that students with no in person classes still reported seeing campus signage. However, it is also possible that many students stayed on or near campus even when their classes were remote -- making it plausible that some remote students did indeed see campus signage.

Figure 7: Recall rate for different ad types by spend group

Campus	Treatment	Campus Signage	College Media	Audio	TV	Digital Ads	Ads on Buses	Social	Texting
No classes in person	Untreated	36.1%	32.2%	38.1%	69.3%	74.8%	19.3%	78.7%	65.8%
	Treated	46.6%	37.1%	46.0%	79.4%	83.2%	24.1%	85.0%	71.6%
Some/all classes in person	Untreated	46.5%	34.9%	41.4%	66.0%	69.8%	19.5%	73.5%	54.9%
	Treated	49.6%	38.2%	46.2%	75.4%	75.8%	24.8%	78.1%	55.9%

Students were asked about their knowledge with regards to registering to vote. Figure 8 shows the comparison of responses to the most confident option: “I know everything I need to know.” Students at the treated schools were more likely to feel confident that they had the knowledge to register. Moreover, this treatment effect was much more pronounced in the states with *less* voter-friendly laws. Students at treated schools in these states were nine percentage points more likely to feel they had sufficient knowledge.

Figure 8: Self reported voting knowledge by spend group

"How knowledgeable do you feel about registering to vote?"				
Cost of Voting Index	Treatment Group	"I know Everything I need to Know"	Total	Pct
States with Fewer Barriers to Vote	Untreated	58	105	55.2%
	Treated	246	407	60.4%
States with More Barriers to Vote	Untreated	122	266	45.9%
	Treated	783	1425	54.9%

When looking at the correlation between treated campuses and self-reported motivation to vote, we split students into four groups based on the spend/student for each school in the sample: a control group of \$0/student, \$0-6/student, \$6-10/student, and above \$10/student.

Figure 9: Election motivation by spend group

"How motivated do/did you feel to vote in the 2020 election?"			
Spend/Student	"Extremely motivated"	Total	Pct
\$0	305	467	65.3%
< \$6	508	757	67.1%
\$6-10	470	656	71.6%
> \$10	344	445	77.3%

The survey asked students if they were motivated to vote in the 2020 election. Figure 9 compares the responses to the top option: "Extremely motivated". It should be noted that while there are relatively similar amounts of students in each group, the number of schools in each group are not evenly distributed, nor are they randomly assigned. However, the monotonic correlation between spending and motivation is noteworthy. Higher ad spending correlated with greater motivation to vote.

Figure 10: Voting method by spend group

"If you are planning to vote/have already done so, tell us about your voting method"			
Spend/Student	"Drop Box" + "Early In Person" + "By Mail"	Total	Pct
\$0	352	467	75.4%
< \$6	583	757	77.0%
\$6-10	501	656	76.4%
> \$10	381	445	85.6%

Students were asked for their intended method of voting in the 2020 election. Due to the differences in state election law, we chose to aggregate all responses that were not the “traditional” voting of in person on election day. Figure 10 shows the results by spend group. Once again, we see a correlation between ad spending and the proportion of students reporting pre-election day voting.

Influencer Analysis

Flytedesk and its partners ran many types of advertising and outreach campaigns on various campuses. One method was to work with on-campus influencers to promote messages about voter registration, voting information, and enthusiasm about the election.

After cross-referencing the survey responses with Flytedesk’s various treatment types, we saw only mild differences in respondents’ answers based on the treatment types -- including influencer presence -- that were implemented on their campuses. Students from campuses with paid influencers were not more likely to report having seen peers post on social media about registering to vote, nor were they significantly more likely to report enthusiasm about the candidates.

On the other hand, students on the influencer campuses were somewhat more likely to recall seeing messages about returning their ballot, and also to remember hearing a “voting is easy” type of pitch. The students from influencer-treated schools were also slightly more likely to report enthusiasm for the election.

However, it is important to remember that the schools where influencers were recruited were not randomly selected, so the differences could result from other factors.

Figure 11: Social media recall by influencer spending and additional media type

"Do you recall seeing your peers post on social media about getting registered or voting?"				
Influencer Status	Additional Media Types	"Yes"	Total	Pct
Untreated Campus	Untreated	338	406	83.3%
No Paid Influencers on Campus	Non-Social Media Only	259	330	78.5%
	Social Media Only	140	155	90.3%
	Social and Non-Social Media	283	326	86.8%
	Aggregate No Influencers	682	811	84.1%
Paid Influencers on Campus	Non-Social Media Only	81	100	81.0%
	Social and Non-Social Media	733	885	82.8%
	Aggregate Influencers	814	985	82.6%

Figure 12: Message recall by influencer spending and additional media type

"Do you recall seeing messages like the following"					
Influencer Status	Additional Media Types	Register to Vote	Vote Early	Return Your Ballot	Voting is Quick and Easy
Untreated Campus	Untreated	88.2%	81.8%	41.4%	60.8%
No Paid Influencers on Campus	Non-Social Media Only	87.3%	86.1%	26.1%	58.2%
	Social Media Only	91.6%	87.7%	36.8%	58.1%
	Social and Non-Social Media	88.3%	84.4%	50.6%	59.5%
	Aggregate No Influencers	88.5%	85.7%	38.0%	58.7%
Paid Influencers on Campus	Non-Social Media Only	89.0%	87.0%	43.0%	68.0%
	Social and Non-Social Media	86.8%	84.3%	49.5%	66.6%
	Aggregate Influencers	87.0%	84.6%	48.8%	66.7%

Figure 13: Excitement for a candidate by influencer spending and media type

"How excited are you about the candidates for President in the 2020 election ?"				
Influencer Status	Additional Media Types	"Extremely Excited"	Total	Pct
Untreated Campus	Untreated	43	406	10.6%
No Paid Influencers on Campus	Non-Social Media Only	36	330	10.9%
	Social Media Only	10	155	6.5%
	Social and Non-Social Media	26	326	8.0%
	Aggregate No Influencers	72	811	8.9%
Paid Influencers on Campus	Non-Social Media Only	17	100	17.0%
	Social and Non-Social Media	77	885	8.7%
	Aggregate Influencers	94	985	9.5%

Figure 14: Voting motivation by influencer spending and additional media type

"How motivated do/did you feel to vote in the 2020 election?"				
Influencer Status	Additional Media Types	"Extremely motivated"	Total	Pct
Untreated Campus	Untreated	275	406	67.7%
No Paid Influencers on Campus	Non-Social Media Only	204	330	61.8%
	Social Media Only	118	155	76.1%
	Social and Non-Social Media	238	326	73.0%
	Aggregate No Influencers	560	811	69.1%
Paid Influencers on Campus	Non-Social Media Only	75	100	75.0%
	Social and Non-Social Media	636	885	71.9%
	Aggregate Influencers	711	985	72.2%

Survey Demographics

There were 2314 recorded responses to this survey spanning at least 39 college campuses and 13 states. We say “at least” because there was an option in the survey for students to enter the name of a college that was not listed, as well as an option for respondents not currently attending a college or university. Flytedesk spent money at exactly 30 of the campuses ranging anywhere from \$0.01 per student (Texas A&M at College Station) to \$15.65 per student (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). The average spend for these campuses was \$4.77 per student.

The following are three tables that give a general overview of the demographics of the survey sample. Generally speaking the survey skewed white, female, and Democratic.

Figure 15: Survey breakdown by Race

Which of the following best describes you?	Pct
White or Caucasian	64.2%
Asian or Asian American	12.3%
Hispanic or Latino	11.5%
Black or African American	8.7%
Another race	2.7%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.4%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.2%

Figure 16: Survey breakdown by Gender

What is your gender identity?	Pct
Woman	62.0%
Man	34.8%
Non-binary/non-conforming	1.6%
Prefer not to respond	1.1%
Transgender	0.5%

Figure 17: Survey breakdown by Political Affiliation

What is your political affiliation?	Pct
Democratic Party	50.5%
Registered Independent or Unaffiliated	22.4%
Republican Party	16.4%
I am not sure	7.6%
Other (please specify)	3.1%

Conclusion

The survey found that the students surveyed had high rates of voter registration. Their top three most important issues were Racial Justice, Climate Change, and Healthcare. They were more often than not highly motivated to participate in the 2020 election, but were overall not very enthusiastic about either of the two presidential candidates.

The survey included students from schools both treated and untreated by Flytedesk. Students at the treated campuses recalled campaign-related ads on campus significantly more often than in the untreated group. This correlated with higher self-reported rates of motivation to vote and knowledge about voting. Additionally, students were more likely to have heard certain types of pro-voting messages if they were at campuses where paid influencers were spreading those messages. These findings are not conclusive, but do indicate promising opportunities in the future for further exploration of the effects of campus outreach.

Appendix: School List

The following table, alphabetized by state and then by school, shows how many students from each school were included in the analysis from this survey.

Figure 14: Respondents by State and School

State	University	Respondents
Georgia	Augusta University	34
	Georgia Southern	94
	Georgia State University	67
	University of Georgia	257
	University of West Georgia	18
	University of North Georgia	17
	Valdosta State University	47
Texas	Baylor University	1
	Sam Houston State University	1
	Texas A&M University College Station	155
	Texas State University	52
	Texas Tech	95
	University of Texas at Arlington	88
	University of Texas at Austin	142
Kentucky	Kentucky State University	1
	Northern Kentucky University	10
	University of Kentucky	60
	Western Kentucky University	10
Michigan	Central Michigan University	69
	Grand Rapids Community College	2
	Michigan State University	170
	Western Michigan University	5
North Carolina	Duke University	115
	East Carolina University	34
	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	235
Arizona	Arizona State University	9

	University of Arizona	84
Florida	Florida A&M University	5
	University of Florida	29
Pennsylvania	University of Pennsylvania	106
	University of Pittsburgh	31
Colorado	Colorado State University	11
Connecticut	Yale University	100
Illinois	Southern Illinois University	5
Iowa	University of Iowa	1
Kansas	Barton Community College	29
New York	Syracuse University	1
Wisconsin	University of Wisconsin Madison	13
Other	None of these	15
	Other (please specify)	67
	*I am not currently enrolled in college	28
	I am not currently a student	1