



Differences in Voting Behavior by College Major

Lamont A. Flowers, Ph.D.

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Producing civically-minded citizens has been a goal of educational institutions for many years. As a result, social studies standards in elementary and secondary education reinforce this important aim in PreK-12 educational settings. Additionally, colleges and universities have developed initiatives and programs to promote students' involvement in democratic processes and civic engagement (Kiesa et al., 2007).

With regard to voting behavior, an important aspect of civic engagement, national data demonstrates that educational attainment positively influences voting behaviors (File, 2008, Holder, 2006). These data clearly show that Americans with higher levels of education are more likely to register to vote and vote (File, 2008). Furthermore, these statistics have not changed substantially over the years and reflect a consistent trend highlighting the impact of education on voting behavior.

The aforementioned finding also holds for African Americans. As shown in Table 1, the voting rate of African Americans with a Bachelor's degree was 69% in 2004. In comparison, the voting rate of African Americans with a high school diploma or GED was 52%. These data further reinforce the importance of educational attainment on the extent to which African American citizens register to vote and vote in elections.

COLLEGE MAJOR AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

In an attempt to understand voting practices and political behaviors, several researchers have sought to determine the influence of college on students' civic engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While this scholarly literature is not conclusive, several studies have suggested that the institutional culture, peer groups, as well as precollege civic involvement and sociopolitical dispositions may influence students' civic engagement on college campuses. Research has also examined the influence of college

major on voting behaviors (Knox, Lindsay, & Kolb, 1993). This line of research is important because as Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) note, "One's major field of study creates a potentially important subenvironment during college. It not only focuses one's intellectual efforts in a particular direction, but it also has an influence on the kinds of students and faculty with whom one interacts" (pp. 613-614). Despite the importance of college major on students' political engagement, research describing the influence of college major on African American students' voting behaviors is limited.

VOTING BEHAVIOR AND COLLEGE MAJOR

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the voting behaviors of African American college students by examining the extent to which college major influences their voting behaviors. The data addressing this research objective was drawn from the 2004 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study—a nationally representative database that contains a variety of information regarding today's college students. For this exploratory study, voting behavior was defined by two separate variables: (a) whether the student was registered to vote, and (b) if the student had ever voted in an election. Because of the wide variety of disciplines that exist, college major was defined as one of twelve fields of study and also included students who were undeclared or not in a degree program.

Table 1
Percentage of African Americans by Voting Behavior and Education Level in 2004

	Registered to Vote	Voted
Less than 9th Grade	51.7	38.5
9th to 12th Grade, No Diploma	55.1	43.1
High School Graduate or GED	61.1	52.4
Some College or Associate Degree	70.9	63.6
Bachelor's Degree	72.2	68.7
Advanced Degree	73.9	72.6

Note. Adapted from *Black Americans: A statistical sourcebook & guide to government data* (2008). Woodside, CA: Information Publications.

KEY STATISTICS

- 60% of African Americans voted in 2004 (Holder, 2006).
- In 2006, 61% of African Americans registered to vote (File, 2008).

voting behavior, and college major. To the contrary, in fact, the data revealed that approximately 80% of all African American college students registered to vote and approximately 60% of all African American students voted in an election.

The current study was more interested in examining the following research question: Of the African American students who were registered to vote or voted, what was the percentage distribution by college major? Given this research question, the data analyses only focused on those African American students from the data who reported that they had registered to vote or voted. As a result, this study also

clearly revealed differences in the selection of college majors among African American students. For example, approximately 19% of African American college students major in Business and Management fields. Thus, as might have been expected, the findings reported in Table 2 show that the largest percentage of African American students who were registered to vote or voted were students majoring in Business and Management. In light of all of the data analyzed for this *Research Brief*, it was clear that African American college students were invested in the political process and a large majority of these students had voted in an election.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In order to appropriately interpret these data, it should be noted that, this study did not seek to investigate an association between voter apathy,

Table 2
Percentage Distribution of African American Undergraduates by their Major Field of Study and Voting Behaviors

Major Field of Study	Registered to Vote	Ever Voted
Business and Management	19.5	20.4
Computer and Information Science	6.2	5.9
Education	6.3	6.6
Engineering	3.2	3.2
Health	16.6	17.0
Humanities	8.4	8.0
Life Sciences	3.1	2.9
Math	0.3	0.2
Other technical and professional	12.8	13.0
Physical Sciences	0.3	0.3
Social and Behavioral Sciences	5.7	5.8
Vocational and technical	2.6	2.6
Undeclared or not in a degree program	15.2	14.1

Data Source. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

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Correspondence regarding this report may be sent via e-mail to: houston@clemsun.edu

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