

Pennsylvanians' Political Interest in 2004

According to national polls and press accounts, voter interest in the 2004 presidential election is higher than in the past several presidential elections. If interest is higher, it is likely that voter turnout will also be higher than it has been in recent elections. Keystone Poll data show this national trend is also apparent in Pennsylvania.

There are several measures of interest and voter turnout that pollsters use. When thinking about turnout, the relationship between three different measures are typically examined.

One measure is the number of people who say they are “certain” to vote. At the moment, voters in Pennsylvania show a higher level of voting certainty than they have expressed in the past, not just for an August survey, but also for surveys conducted closer to Election Day. Almost nine in 10 voters in the August Keystone Poll stated they were “certain” to vote. This is a higher expression of voting certainty at this stage of an election than in four previous races in which either a presidential or a gubernatorial election occurred (Table 1).

Table 1 Registered Voters' Interest and Undecided Voters in Recent Elections in Pennsylvania

	Sept '96	Oct '98	Sept '00	Sept '02	Aug '04
"Certain" to vote	85%	79%	80%	72%	89%
"Very interested" in campaign	42%	30%	43%	32%	56%

Asking someone about their likelihood of voting is not without its problems; first and foremost, more people will tell pollsters they are "certain" to vote than will actually vote, because that is the socially correct answer. A slightly better measure is simply to ask voters how much interest they have in the campaign. Currently, a very large portion of voters (56%) are "very interested" in this year's political campaigns. This is far higher than reported in previous Keystone Polls at comparable times in past few presidential races (Table 1).

A final indicator of interest and turnout is the proportion of undecided voters in the marquee race. A larger undecided vote usually means voters haven't really started to pay much attention to the race yet. If by the final days of a campaign, there are still many undecided voters, sizable portions

of those undecideds do not vote. Only eight percent of Pennsylvania voters are currently undecided about their presidential choice (Table 2).

Table 2 Percent of Undecided Voters in Recent Elections in Pennsylvania
Keystone Polls

	July 1996	Oct 1996	Sept 2000	Oct 2000	Aug 2004
“Certain” to vote	11%	10%	18%	9%	8%

A low undecided rate is not unprecedented in a presidential race--the 1996 presidential election had a small pool of undecided voters by the end of July, too. It may be that having a well-known incumbent in the race will yield a smaller undecided vote, even early in the campaign. It is also likely that there are so few undecided voters because of the heavy, unprecedented early campaign advertising sponsored by the candidates, the parties, and, particularly, by unaffiliated groups. Increased campaign spending often increases both campaign interest and voter turnout. Three months before the current election estimates based on Keystone Poll data indicated that turnout would be around 54% for registered voters, which for that early in a campaign is quite high. The question that now should be raised is whether the massive post Labor Day advertising by both campaigns will overwhelm

voters by its sheer volume and duration, and possibly by its negativity. If it does, a year filled with high voter interest and the promise of high levels of voter participation could result in the disappointment of lower voter turnout. But if not, turnout this year could be the highest since the 1970's.

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