

**Rockefeller Report: Student Focus Group
Conducted in Conjunction with the Democratic Presidential Debate at
Dartmouth College**

September 26, 2007
Professor Ronald G. Shaiko, Facilitator



Sixteen Dartmouth undergraduate students—eight women and eight men, ranging in age from 18 to 22, each of whom declared to be an undecided registered voter in the State of New Hampshire—participated in a focus group prior to and immediately following the Democratic Presidential Debate at Dartmouth College. The sixteen students were selected from a pool of approximately 1,700 Dartmouth students who had expressed interest in attending the Presidential Debate in Spaulding Arena. Those students who were unsuccessful in attaining a ticket to the debate were then emailed a solicitation to participate in the focus group. In order to participate, the student must be a registered New Hampshire voter, an enrolled student at Dartmouth, an undecided voter, and available to participate in the focus group, to watch the debate together as a group, and to remain for the debriefing following the debate. More than 100 students responded to the solicitation. From those students, sixteen students were selected. Criteria used in the selection process included gender, class standing ('08 to '11), major, race/ethnicity, home state, and partisan affiliation.

At 2:00pm on Wednesday, September 26, 2007, the sixteen students selected to participate in the focus group convened in Room 116 of the Hanover Inn with Professor Ronald G. Shaiko, Senior Fellow and Associate Director for Curricular and Research Programs at the Rockefeller Center. Professor Shaiko was assisted by Professor Will

O’Neal, Research Associate and Ford Foundation Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Rockefeller Center. The afternoon session lasted two hours.

Professor Shaiko began the focus group by asking students about their first political experiences. For most students, their first political recollections date back to the late 1980s and early 1990s. They vaguely remembered the Gulf War during the presidency George H.W. Bush. They have a similarly vague view of President Bush, the elder. For many, the Monica Lewinsky scandal was the real political event/issue that they can recall. Others recalled the Bosnia conflict or the genocide in Rwanda as their first global political event. Virtually all participants identified 9/11 as an important event that caused them to think more seriously about the global political system.

Following this question, the discussion moved to agents of political socialization. Students were asked to discuss those individuals or institutions that have had a significant impact on their political views. Many students mentioned their parents, their peers, their schools, and some discussed the role the media has played in their political socialization. One student identified “The West Wing” as an important element in sparking his interest in politics and policymaking. From this discussion, the group moved to an exercise in placing themselves on an ideological continuum from strong liberal through moderate to strong conservative. Eight students fell in the liberal range; five students fell in the moderate range; and three students fell in the conservative range. Professor Shaiko then compared their self-placements with results from the National Freshman Survey conducted annually by researchers at UCLA (N=270,000). From the most recent survey, 28 percent of respondents were liberal, 44 percent were moderate, and 24 percent were conservative. Shaiko also pointed out that, in national surveys, the moderate category consistently garners the largest plurality of responses—40 percent. This figure has remained consistent through the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and through this decade.

Following the discussion of political ideology, the group moved on to assessments of the two presidents whom the students have been most aware of in their lives—President Bill Clinton and President George W. Bush. The discussion began with Bill Clinton. Students were asked to discuss his strengths and weaknesses as well as his defining characteristics. Following the discussion of Clinton, students turned their attention to President George Bush. The point of this part of the exercise was to begin thinking about strengths and weaknesses and key attributes that the students found to be important defining each of the presidents or lacking in their presidencies.

With the detailed assessment of two presidents completed, the group then turned to an assessment of the two major political parties. Interestingly, neither party received terribly strong endorsements. More students tended to lean toward the Democratic Party, but most found the party to lacking in clear direction. While several students disagreed with the Republican Party, they believed that the party stood for something, rather than sending mixed or conflicting signals to voters.

After assessing Presidents Clinton and Bush as well as the Democratic and Republican Parties, the group began the task of constructing a list of key characteristics that they believe are important in selecting the next president. The first step was to articulate all of the possible characteristics that might be important in making the decision to vote for a particular candidate. After a wide-ranging discussion, the students had compiled a list of fourteen attributes or characteristics: honesty/character, experience, patriotism, charisma, electability, popularity, past electoral success, a single policy issue (single-issue voter), practical planner, international credibility, leadership, party/party loyalty, skill sets/diplomacy, Supreme Court appointment role.

Once the students had presented these characteristics, they were asked if they could tighten up the list by combining or eliminating some of the attributes. After some discussion, the following attributes remained: charisma, leadership, experience, patriotism, accountability/plan, international credibility, honesty/character, pragmatism, and electability.

At this point, the students were asked if they could rank-order these remaining attributes to construct a list of the top five or six attributes or characteristics they would like to find in their candidate for president. The group reached the following consensus on the top six attributes: 1) leadership, 2) experience, 3) honesty/character, 4) charisma, 5) accountability/plan and 6) pragmatism/diplomacy. They did want to include one additional element with an asterisk attached to it—electability. None of the students wished to place electability on the top six list, but many said that this dimension was important in eliminating candidates from consideration.

The students also discussed other disqualifying attributes—lack of experience, no leadership skills, age (upper limit of about 70/lower limit around 40), and physical health. Religion was also discussed as was divorce. There was no consensus regarding whether either element was clearly disqualifying, although a candidate with multiple divorces seemed to be problematic for some students. Interestingly, neither gender nor race was mentioned by students as a disqualifying circumstance.

The concluding exercise for the students in the afternoon session allowed students to apply any or all of the five top characteristics to each of the eight Democratic presidential candidates participating in the debate. Students attributed one or more characteristics to each of the eight candidates: Clinton—experience, Obama—charisma, Dodd—experience, Richardson—experience, leadership, Edwards—leadership, accountability/plan, Biden—experience, honesty, Kucinich—honesty, Gravel—honesty. Candidates Gravel and Kucinich were clearly viewed as less serious contenders, although both were viewed as the only candidates willing to “speak truth to power.” Students knew more about Clinton, Obama, and Edwards than Dodd, Biden, and Richardson. The afternoon focus group concluded at 4:00pm with instructions to return to the focus group room at 8:45pm in order to watch the Democratic Presidential Debate together.

At approximately 11:05pm, the focus group reconvened to discuss the debate and the views of the students regarding the candidate performances on the key dimensions the group discussed in the afternoon session. After discussing the general format of the debate, the students were asked whether, as a result of watching the debate, their general views of each of the candidates improved, diminished, or remained the same. The results of their assessments are as follows:

Candidate	View Improved	Remained the Same	View Diminished
Obama	2	8	6
Dodd	9	7	0
Richardson	9	5	2
Clinton	8	5	3
Edwards	4	10	2
Biden	7	5	4
Kucinich	9	5	2
Gravel	5	4	6

Following their general assessments, the students were asked to identify the candidates who demonstrated one or more of the six characteristics or attributes they had developed in the afternoon session. For leadership, the students identified Clinton, Dodd, Biden,

Kucinich, and Richardson. For experience, they noted Richardson, Biden, Dodd, Edwards, and Kucinich. For honesty and character, they identified Gravel, Kucinich, and Edwards. For charisma, Gravel, Kucinich, and Dodd were identified. For accountability/plan, they selected Edwards, Biden, Richardson, and Kucinich. And, for pragmatism/diplomacy, the students identified Clinton, Obama, and Richardson.

While the goal of the focus group was neither to declare a winner or a loser in the debate, it was obvious that Barack Obama did not fare as well as other candidates in the focus group. It is interesting to note that the students identified charisma as his most readily identifiable characteristic in the session prior to the debate, yet was not identified as having demonstrated his charisma in the debate. Overall, most of the students remained undecided following the debate. Nonetheless, the students claimed that the focus group exercise served them in giving some structure to their decision making processes. The post-debate focus group session concluded at 12:00am.

Any questions regarding this report should be directed to: Professor Ronald G. Shaiko at the Rockefeller Center. He may be reached by telephone at (603) 646-9146 or via email at Ronald.G.Shaiko@Dartmouth.edu.