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Many teenagers pessimistic about country's future

August 5, 2008

WASHINGTON -- With the ongoing Iraq war, slumping U.S. economy and rising gas prices, America's teenagers are feeling weighed down.

Just 53 percent of students age 13 to 19 are optimistic about the direction the U.S. is heading, according to a poll released Tuesday by the Horatio Alger Association, a nonprofit education group. The findings represented a 22-percentage-point drop from 2003, when three-quarters of teenagers said in a similar survey they were hopeful about the nation's future.

Pessimism was even more prevalent among minority students. About 47 percent of young African Americans and 43 percent of Hispanic teenagers said they are worried about the country's future, compared with 36 percent of Caucasian students.

Teenagers have the same concerns as adults on many social and political issues, said Peter D. Hart, chairman of the polling firm that conducted the survey for the education group. Only about 13 percent of registered voters think the country is on the right track, according to a NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll released July 23.

"The wall is coming down between the adult world and that of our children," Hart said at a news conference disclosing the survey results. "The bad things that are happening in our society—whether it's about the economy, energy, health care or the war in Iraq—all are being felt by young people."

Students listed the economy as the most important issue in the upcoming election, followed by the Iraq War and the environment. In the NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, adults said the economy, gas prices and the Iraq War were most important—the environment ranked seventh.

Thomas Maranges, 18, of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., said even though many young people are getting involved in the political process this year, a number still feel unsure that they can make a difference.

"I think students are pessimistic about the direction our country is headed because they are becoming disenchanted with the political system," Maranges said in an interview after taking part in a panel discussion of the survey. "They feel like they've lost control."

Only 12 percent of teenagers polled said they are "very closely" following this year's presidential campaign. But 75 percent said they think the outcome of the race will make a big difference in the direction the country is headed.

Devron Lovick, who sat on the student panel with Maranges, said the Internet has allowed more students to get informed about political issues.

"We are in a position now where information regarding the elections is more available to us than it has been in the past," said Lovick, 16, of Philadelphia. "So not only are our problems bigger now, but they're also much more apparent."

The poll surveyed 1,006 students ages 13 to 19 and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.