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UMass Amherst Researchers Find Growing Support for College Athletes to Share in Profits of NCAA Sports

Sixty percent say college athletes should share the profit of their name, image or likeness and nearly half say they should share in profit from broadcast rights fees

Topline results and crosstabs for the poll can be found at www.umass.edu/poll

AMHERST, Mass. – As the Final Four men’s and women’s basketball teams are set to tip off in Indianapolis this weekend, Americans continue to support calls for college athletes to share in the various profits they generate for the NCAA and its member institutions, according to researchers from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and California State University, Long Beach.

The team of researchers, who have tracked sentiment on this issue since 2014 using data collected on their behalf via the Cooperative Election Study, has found that Americans increasingly support college athletes’ ability to share the profits from their name, image or likeness (NIL), with 60% of the most recent poll’s respondents supporting the idea, up from 53% in the initial poll seven years ago. Only 16% of the poll’s 1,000 respondents oppose athletes receiving NIL compensation, down from 21% in 2014.

The most recent survey, conducted last fall, also found continued support for college athletes to share in broadcast rights revenues, long the bread-and-butter of income for college sports with some rights packages totaling billions of dollars. Nearly half (47%) of Americans now support college athletes receiving a cut of the broadcast fees, with only 23% opposed. The release of results comes just days after [the U.S. Supreme Court heard an appeal from the NCAA in *NCAA v. Alston*](#), in which the Ninth Circuit Court in Northern California decided that the NCAA must uncap the education-based benefits college athletes receive.

“With the NCAA making billions of dollars from the sale of the television rights to broadcast March Madness, a plurality of Americans support the NCAA sharing in the profit from these broadcasts with the college athletes responsible for the game’s popularity,” says [Tatishe Nteta](#), associate professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and director of the [UMass Amherst Poll](#).

Respondents are fairly split regarding the unionization of college athletes and their receiving a traditional paycheck for their performance. Thirty-seven percent support paying college athletes, while 38% oppose it, with 25% undecided. The number supporting paying athletes has increased, however, from just 28% in 2014, when 49% opposed it. Regarding the ability of college athletes to unionize, 34% support the idea and 32% oppose, with 35% undecided. In 2014 only 24% supported college athlete unionization, and 46% opposed it.

Younger Americans, African Americans and liberals all firmly come down in support of the college athletes' cause.

"The generational gap in attitudes toward providing additional financial compensation to college athletes is clear and consistent," Nteta says. "Younger and middle-aged respondents are more open to expanding financial opportunities for college athletes while older respondents support the status quo."

Over half of 18- to 29-year-olds support paying college athletes (53%) and sharing in broadcast rights (54%), while more than two-thirds support letting them receive NIL compensation (68%).

"There are huge partisan and racial divides on nearly every issue confronting Americans today," says Kevin Wallsten, professor of political science at California State University, Long Beach, who participated in the poll's research. "Questions related to the NCAA's treatment of college athletes is no exception. African Americans and Democrats are far more supportive of reforms designed to benefit college athletes than whites and Republicans."

Fifty-five percent of African Americans and 52% of Democrats support paying college athletes, while only 32% of whites and 25% of Republicans support it. Whites only expressed overall support for NIL profit sharing (59%) and Republicans did not express majority support for any of the college athlete compensation questions. African Americans and Democrats, however, expressed strong support for all initiatives, including 68% of African Americans and more than three-quarters of Democrats (77%) supporting NIL compensation.

"Though the recent Supreme Court case, *NCAA v. Alston*, focused on whether the NCAA could limit compensation and benefits related to education, it is clear from our data that Americans increasingly support college athletes' ability to profit from their sports in other ways as well," says [Lauren McCarthy](#), associate professor of political science and legal studies and director of legal studies at UMass Amherst and poll participant.

"As Wednesday's Supreme Court arguments revealed, the debates over how to appropriately compensate college athletes are alive and well," McCarthy says. "Our data shows there is majority agreement that the NCAA should lift its restrictions on athletes making money from their names, images and likenesses, but should not move towards a pay-for-play system."

"Our polling tells a clear and consistent story," says Nteta. "While Americans remain hesitant to pay college athletes a salary in addition to their scholarships, they continue to strongly support college athletes profiting from their own name, likeness, and images. Therefore, it is no surprise that a growing number of states have passed legislation allowing them to do so."

Methodology

This poll of 1,000 nationally representative respondents was conducted by YouGov via the Cooperative Election Study Sept. 29-Nov. 2, 2020. Respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) one-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file).

The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education and region. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles.

The weights were then post-stratified on voter registration status (from the 2016 Current Population Survey Voter Supplement), 2016 Presidential vote choice and a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-categories), race (4-categories) and education (4-categories), to produce the final weight.

The margin of error within this poll is 3.8%.

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