Fewer Young Voters See Themselves as Democrats

By KIRK JOHNSON

FORT COLLINS, Colo. — The college vote is up for grabs this year — to an extent that would have seemed unlikely two years ago, when a generation of young people seemed to swoon over Barack Obama.

Though many students are liberals on social issues, the economic reality of a weak job market has taken a toll on their loyalties: far fewer 18- to 29-year-olds now identify themselves as Democrats compared with 2008.

“Is the recession, which is hitting young people very hard, doing lasting or permanent damage to what looked like a good Democratic advantage with this age group?” asked Scott Keeter, the director of survey research at the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan group. “The jury is still out.”

How and whether millions of college students vote will help determine if Republicans win enough seats to retake the House or Senate, overturning the balance of power on Capitol Hill, and with it, Mr. Obama’s agenda. If students tune out and stay home it will also carry a profound message for American society about a generation that seemed so ready, so recently, to grab national politics by the lapels and shake.

All those questions are in play here in Larimer County, about an hour north of Denver, for the more than 25,000 students at Colorado State University.

Larimer, like much of Colorado, was once solidly Republican but went Democratic in the last few elections and is now contested by both sides. It is seen as a signal beacon for an increasingly unpredictable state.

Kristin Johnson, 23, like many other students interviewed here in recent days, said that a vote for Democrats in 2008, however passionate it was, did not a Democrat make. But she bristles just as much at the idea of being called a Republican.
“It’s like picking a team when you really don’t want to root for either team,” said Ms. Johnson, a communication studies major, who said she was undecided about parties and politics going into the general election campaign.

She is not the only one. Because the university draws about 80 percent of its enrollment from within Colorado — mostly from Denver and its suburbs — it is also a sort of mirror within a mirror for Colorado’s political culture. Moderate and conservative views are common; a campus monoculture of liberalism is not.

Leah Rosen, a history major from Denver, still vividly remembers witnessing a fistfight outside her dormitory room on election night in 2008 between Obama supporters and McCain supporters. National exit polls back then gave Mr. Obama a 66 percent edge among young people, to 32 percent for Senator John McCain, the Republican presidential nominee.

Larimer is the focal point for a nationally watched House race in Colorado’s Fourth District, where Betsy Markey, a Democrat, is fighting for a second term in a traditionally Republican seat, against a Republican challenger, Cory Gardner.

Senator Michael Bennet, a Democrat appointed last year to fill a vacant seat, is also in a toss-up contest against a Republican candidate, Ken Buck, who has local connections as the Weld County district attorney in Greeley, 20 miles southeast of Fort Collins.

Many students here, especially seniors nearing graduation, said that worries about the economy, and about getting a job after graduation, had filtered through the campus, dampening enthusiasm for Democrats in Congress and Mr. Obama.

Philip Stricker, 21, a biology major who voted for Mr. Obama but says he has not been paying much attention to politics lately, uses a nontechnical term to describe the phenomenon.

“There’s a vibe,” he said on a recent afternoon, while pumping weights at the gym. “Right now it seems like Republicans just care a lot more than Democrats.”

A spokeswoman for the university’s chapter of College Democrats, Mandi Asay, 22, said her group battled apathy on one hand and anger on the other.

“People are angry — about the budget deficit, health care plan, angry about this and that,” she said. “I feel like Republicans definitely, definitely have a chance of getting back on their feet.”
The College Republican National Committee, which works with campus groups around the nation, is making economic angst a focus of its vote-hunting efforts — especially over the national debt, and the idea that young people will be saddled with it.

The Democratic National Committee, by contrast, is trying to reinforce, or re-establish, the bond that many students felt in 2008 with Mr. Obama, and to use that link to bolster support for Democrats. A spokesman for the committee, Brad Woodhouse, said he thought the surveys showing the erosion of Americans identifying as Democrats were misleading partly because voters connected differently with politics in 2008 — more through a person, Mr. Obama, than a party. That makes the task of building party allegiance different from past patterns, he said.

For decades in politics, Republican and Democratic strategists have put their faith in the so-called rule of three, which says that patterns in youth, once established by votes in three consecutive elections, become habit and identity.

Self-identification figures for Democrats — in national polls asking young people what party they lean more toward — peaked at 62 percent in July 2008, according to the Pew Research Center. By late last year, the number had dropped eight percentage points, to 54 percent, though researchers saw an uptick earlier this year, back to 57 percent. Republican gains roughly mirrored Democratic losses.

Some academics who study voting patterns say that the rule of three is too simplistic, and that lots of factors combine to determine a person’s place on the political spectrum. Individual votes, said Donald P. Green, a professor of political science at Yale who studies voter behavior, matter less than the social fabric that people grow into — in jobs, social life, community and values.

In any case, he and others said, there is no doubt that many young people in Larimer County are still finding their way, at a time when everyone agrees that the stakes are enormous.

“We’re at a crossroads in our nation’s future, and we have to decide where to go,” said Chase Eckerdt, 21, a political science major and director of community affairs in the student government, which last week began a new online voter-registration drive through its Web site. The drive, in conjunction with Rock the Vote, the national nonpartisan youth group, aims to register 10,000 students by November.

More than 39 percent of the residents in Fort Collins, skewed by the university’s numbers, are age 18 to 34, compared with about 23 percent nationally.
Sarah Buck, 21, an Obama supporter in 2008, said she planned to vote mainly for Democrats again this fall, even though she said she did not call herself a Democrat. She still believes in Mr. Obama and his agenda and thinks electing more Democrats generally supports the president.

“I’m voting the same way for support at the top,” said Ms. Buck, a communication studies major.

Sarah Hutt, 21, a double major in Spanish and business, said she would vote Republican, as she did in 2008, but for broader reasons. Then, she said, her opposition to abortion nudged her toward supporting Mr. McCain. This time, it is about economics.

“I’m definitely going to float more toward the Republican spectrum of things,” Ms. Hutt said.