

Youth Turnout in the 2008 Presidential Election; Data from the We the
People Civic Education Alumni Network

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Abstract

In this paper, we present preliminary voter turnout exit poll data reported on younger political cohorts in the 2008 presidential elections. The overall trend is that youth are turning out to vote at higher levels than in previous elections, and that they are becoming more liberal. Next, we report on a sample of youth who took part in a rigorous civic education high school program, We the People; the Citizen and the Constitution. The 300 We the People alumni demonstrated great interest and engagement in the political process. They clearly distinguished between the two parties by providing policy and ideological stances. Presidential candidates, especially Obama, reached out to younger voters in the 2008 election. However, being contacted during the campaign did not sway alumni's decision to turn out or to vote. Young voters were mobilized through their cell phones and their online networking sites, and were able to use a wide variety of online sources to gather information on candidates. The majority of alumni expressed optimism about the future of the nation, grounded primarily in the political institutions and the resourceful spirit of Americans.

Introduction

Each generation of Americans fears that the coming political cohort lacks the skills and will to participate fully in the democratic process (Putnam 2000, Wolfe 2006). Others argue that emerging political cohorts are engaging in novel ways, while moving away from traditional citizen duties such as voting (Dalton 2008, Bennett 2007). What does this election tell us about the emerging political cohort? Data collected over time demonstrate a clear life-cycle effect, whereby younger voters, especially those who are less well-educated, participate at lower rates than do voters at later life stages (Dalton 2008, Jennings and Stoker 2008). In this paper we will look at the data that are available from the 2008 election from exit polls that are largely presented by CIRCLE and PEW (ANES data are due to be released in March 2009, Census data in the Spring as well). We will also present data on alumni from a high school civics program, We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution. These data are interesting because we go beyond traditional American National Election Study (ANES) questions and ask respondents, who are very interested and engaged in politics, to give us reasons for participating and choosing candidates. For instance, did political contacting influence their decision to vote, or their vote choice? Did they see differences between the parties? Which sites did they visit to gather political information?

Voter Turnout Is Rising Among this Diverse Cohort: Estimated Turnout of 52%

Data on turnout presented here come from CIRCLE's collection of vote tallies as presented by Curtis Gans, director of the American University's Center for the Study of the American Electorate. Census CPS data were formulated by CIRCLE using the March Demographic file. The formula used to calculate turnout used the National Election Poll, using the formula ((% of age group in the national poll) (total votes cast))/ age group's CPS citizen population. They find a 4-5% increase since the previous election, and estimate that 52-53% of youth voted. Turnout in 2004 was estimated at 50%, 40% in 2000 and 37% in 1996. Current turnout rates equal or slightly exceed youth turnout in 1992 (CIRCLE Fact Sheet updated Dec 1, 2008, 7). In real numbers, approximately 23 million Americans under the age of 30 voted in 2008, an increase of 3.4 million compared with 2004 turnout (CIRCLE Dec 1, 2008: 1). This reverses a history of decline and represents an 11% point increase in turnout since 2000, putting youth voting approximately on par with turnout in 1992.

Among We the People alumni, 91% of those who responded to the question reported that they turned out to vote. Additionally, 77% percent reported that they had voted in all previous elections for which they were eligible to vote. We the People alumni were also opinion leaders, as 76% reported that they had attempted to persuade others to about which candidate or party to vote for or against. We discuss the alumni sample more thoroughly in the next section.

This emerging political cohort is more ethnically and racially diverse, and more secular than older voters (Keeter et al., November 12, 2008). Only 62% of young voters aged 18-29 identify as white, in contrast to 2000, where 74% of young voters were white. According to PEW data, 18% of young votes were black, and 14% Hispanic. Approximately 6% identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual, in contrast to 4% of the general population (Keeter, 4). Young women significantly outnumbered young men 55%, in contrast to 52% of voters aged 45-64, or 51% of voters over 65 (Circle 2008, 2). Research demonstrates that people who grow up in diverse communities are less likely to emerge with norms that underlie political engagement, chief among them the belief that a citizen should vote (Campbell 2006). Increasing ethnic, religious and economic diversity then, adds urgency to the need for quality civic instruction. It would be interesting to

track these new voters to see whether those that are growing up in more diverse communities are less inclined to vote. ¹

Education has been found to be strongly related to turnout. One puzzle for scholars of political socialization has been, why hasn't turnout increased with rising levels of education (Rosenstone and Hanson)? One answer to this puzzle can be seen in the preliminary data from the 2008 presidential election. While 57% of U.S. citizens aged 18-29 attended college, they represented 70% of young voters (Circle 1-2). Meanwhile, only 6% of youth with less than a high school degree voted. This group comprises 14% of the young population. Further, of the 29% of the population with only a HS diploma, 24% voted. Dalton has found that the rising levels of education have not reversed the general decline in turnout. Using data from the 2000 election, he argued that the greater mass of lesser educated in the older generation pulls down their turnout, while the greater mass of educated among younger cohorts pulls up turnout overall (Dalton 2008, 69-70). A recent study from "The Editorial Projects in Education Research Center," using data obtained from the 2003-04 academic year, demonstrates that students attending urban schools have a graduation rate 15 percentage points lower than their peers in the suburbs (Swanson 2008). Additionally, when looking at the largest metropolitan areas in the US, urban students are graduating at half the rate of their suburban peers (Swanson 2008). On the national level, 1.2 million students fail to graduate with a high school diploma in the US, 23% of whom resided in one of the 50 largest cities (Swanson 2008).

Using panel data, Jennings and Stoker find that by the time students get to college, their political participation preferences are fairly formed (Jennings and Stoker 2008). Most of the "action," that is the formation of attitudes, skills and the acquisition of basic knowledge of the political process, has already taken place by the time youth get to college. Unfortunately, many American students don't have access to quality civic education programs. A study of high school civic opportunities found that a student's race and academic track, and a school's average socioeconomic status (SES) determines the availability of the school-based civic learning opportunities that promote voting and broader forms of civic engagement (Kahn and Middaugh 2008). High school students attending wealthier schools, those who are college-bound and white get more of these opportunities than low-income minority students. Schools, rather than

¹ School themselves may become communities for youth where democratic norms are practiced and embodied. Analysis of longitudinal data revealed that attending a high school where the norm that encouraged voting was strong boosted the likelihood of turning out to vote by 10% (Campbell 2006, 169).

helping to equalize the capacity and commitments needed for democratic participation, appear to be exacerbating this inequality by providing more preparation for those who are already likely to attain a disproportionate amount of civic and political voice. Overall time for social studies education generally has been shrinking with the emphasis on math and reading skills, which may be one reason that non-college bound youth are voting even less often.

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution Alumni Survey Design

The study to be presented in this paper derives from a sample of over 300 respondents who took part in the We the People program when they were in high school. We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution is a civics curriculum for elementary, middle, and high school students developed by the Center for Civic Education. The program is intended to foster civic competence and responsibility among America's youth. It is authorized by the No Child Left Behind Act and funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The program is designed to foster a deep understanding of America's democratic institutions and processes while reinforcing the contemporary relevance of American founding documents. As part of the curriculum, students are expected to participate in a simulated congressional hearing, for which they hone public speaking and analytical skills, and work in small groups in order before fielding questions. Students have the opportunity to participate in a formal hearing, starting at their schools, congressional districts, advancing to a state competition.²

We might then conceive that youth who are registered for the alumni network and who took part in this rigorous academic program are interested in public affairs. A link to the online survey was emailed 2,000 respondents on the list, and as of December 29, 2008, 301 have responded to the link.³ Youth sampled here then are more likely to follow public affairs and are politically engaged and interested enough in the election to write thoughtful responses to open-ended questions. The group may be representative of more politically engaged American youth. We feel that this sample is of interest because these are very politically engaged youth who may become active in government or as opinion leaders in their communities over time.

Most of youth sampled were born between 1971 and 1990, with the mode born in 1990 and the median in 1984. That means that the median age is 28, while most of the respondents, 17%, were aged 18, or first time voters. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents were female, were

² The first place class from each state goes on to compete at the national finals in Washington, D.C.

³ We are working hard to increase our response rate, and are now offering alumni an opportunity to be in a drawing for iPod shuffles.

71% white and 13% Asian American. We surmise that due to the length of the questionnaire and the large number of open-ended responses, 81 alumni didn't fill out the questionnaire at all. They simply logged on and logged off. So in presenting descriptive statistics, we use percentages from those who filled out the question. For instance, 30% of respondents neglected to fill out their highest education attainment. We present data on those who did, 40% of respondents had completed high school or some college, another 33% of respondents had received a BA. Despite the missing data, we feel secure in asserting that this is a well-educated group. Fifteen percent of those who answered the question had an MA degree and another 10% had earned PhDs. No one reported dropping out or having earned a GED. Alumni are whiter, more Asian American, and better educated than the general population of voters in their age group.⁴

The Youth Vote: Enthused, Turning Out and Turning Left

PEW reports that 66% of voters under 30 voted for Obama (Pew, 1). Among alumni, 91% of those who responded reported voting. When asked, "Generally speaking, would you say that you personally care a good deal which party won the presidential election this fall, or don't you care very much which party won?", 90% of alumni cared a lot or very much. Slightly fewer, 68% cared a lot/very much who about which party won the House elections as well. Seventy-three percent of alumni who responded reported voting for Obama, and 23% voted for McCain.

The leftward trend among younger voters was evident in 2004 and 2006, where a majority of voted Democratic. Is this a significant generational shift? In party identification, 45% of young voters are now Democratic and only 26% have a Republican party affiliation (PEW). Scott Keeter and coauthors call this cohort "Gen Dems" in one of their articles (Pew April 2008). Young voters are significantly more likely to favor an expanded role for government in solving troubles (69% of voters under 30, versus 48% of those aged 30-44, PEW). In addition, women voted at higher rates for Obama, with a gender gap of 7% points (PEW 2).

Alumni could differentiate between the parties, as evidenced in their open-ended comments. When asked to describe differences between the parties, respondents discussed both ideology and issue positions. Some alumni felt that the position's parties were taking was shifting. Many

⁴ One reason for the difference may be that teachers are voluntarily recruited to participate in the We the People program. Often, but not always, teachers from better schools have the time, resources, institutional support, and desire to immerse themselves in learning and then teaching students about the Constitution.

pointed to the regulation of the economy as a key difference, along with specific controversial social issues and religion. Some examples follow, in their words:

- *Republicans favor loose regulation, Democrats tighter regulation of the economy. Besides the usual social differences (gay marriage, abortion, etc.), this is the most clearly defined difference between the two parties today.*
- *Tradition, fiscal responsibility, social issues, welfare, moral issues...the list is infinite. (I really don't need to list the ways the parties differ for congress members, do I?)*
- *I think the differences come down to specific policy questions at any given time. I usually wait to see the official party stance on any given political question. I think the notion of conservative and liberal are in transition in recent years. In particular, the idea of being a "fiscal conservative" is no longer the dominant view of the Republicans only. Nor is the operational characteristic of "big government" accurate to describe Democrats.*
- *The Republicans believe in things such as free-market economy, are more prone to using military intervention, are more religious-based (Christianity) and believe some of the Christian doctrines should be used as a basis for laws that are made in the country. The Democrats believe in more government intervention in the country, such as nationalized health care, affirmative action quotas, lowering the cost of higher education, passing legislation to protect the environment, and are more liberal towards individual issues such as gay marriage, abortion and abortion.*

This election clearly excited young voters. Eighty percent of respondents in our study reported being very interested in this election. Many of them wrote that they felt this was a historic election with profound implications for their lives, for the future of our nation, and for the lives of others around the world. Describing why they were, or were not interested in the election, respondents wrote:

- *I think, being the age we are, the results are going to directly have a significant influence on our futures.*
- *I value my civic freedoms. Being informed and engaged is my responsibility.*
- *I learned that citizen activism was important through the We the People curriculum and was just intrinsically motivated to learn more about the election.*
- *I am currently teaching American Government in California and realized that my students sometimes know more than I did. They were extremely interested and forced me to stay on my game.*
- *I work for the U.S. House of Representatives; my job is dependent on what happens in the election. I also fundraised for Barack Obama and volunteered at the Democratic National Convention in Denver.*
- *I was very interested in the recent political campaigns on the national, state, and local levels for several reasons. Our nation is facing unprecedented challenges both domestically and abroad, so for the national election, I felt a compelling responsibility to stay engaged and*

informed in order to select the candidate most capable to lead during this transformational stage in our republic's history. On the state and local levels, as an Oklahoma resident I followed the campaigns of several candidates in order to discern which public servants best represented my values and my vision for our community. In order to make an educated vote on November 4th, I clearly had to remain involved and interested in the process.

Youth were very active in Obama's campaign. For instance, in contested states 28% of young voters reported attending a campaign event (PEW 2008). Unlike in previous elections, youth were targeted heavily, especially in battle ground states.⁵ In Nevada for instance, 61% of voters under thirty had been contacted by the Obama campaign, whereas McCain reached only 26% of this demographic (PEW, 5). Nearly a quarter of under 30 voters said that someone had contacted them (PEW). In our study, we asked young people whether being contacted influenced either their decision to vote or who to vote for. We find that most alumni who filled in the open-ended responses had already made up their minds whether to vote and who to vote for. When asked whether contact mattered, typical alumni responses were:

- *Yes and No. I had issues with Obama, but one of his local volunteers came by and talked with me about them. So, I felt better about my decision. I was NEVER contacted by Sen. McCain. No it did not.*
- *I already made up my mind on who I was voting for.*
- *By the time I was contacted by both campaigns, my mind was already made up on my choice for president. Their contact did not sway me, instead it reaffirmed my decision.*
- *No. I researched the candidates and decided whom I was going to vote for.*
- *No, but it made me want to be more involved. I would have voted anyway so that contacting did not influence me.*

Less well-informed, educated and interested voters were more likely to make their minds up at the last second (PEW). Alumni, however, expressed much interest in politics this election. They sought information, cared, knew differences between candidates and parties, which may be provide an answer to why they reported that being contacted didn't persuade or influence them.

Technology in the 2008 Election Appeals to Younger Voters

Obama's high tech campaign appealed to younger voters. For the first time, a presidential candidate sent text messages to cell phones. One recent study found that phone text/SMS messages increase young voter turnout by 4.6% (www.NewVotersProject.org/Research). A

⁵ Politicians focused less on young voter turnout in previous elections, and youth said that they felt neglected by politicians (National Association of Secretaries for State 2003). Other reasons youth cited for not voting were not having enough information and not feeling that their votes would make a difference.

PEW study found that 46% of adults used the internet, email and phone text messaging for political purposes in this election (Smith and Rainie 2008). However, this was especially true for youth. Among Americans under 30, 66% of internet users have a social networking profile. Half of young profile owners used their social networking sites to get or share information about the campaign (Smith and Rainie, June 2008). Overall, Obama supporters were more likely to get political news and information online (65% vs. 56%), including watching debates, speeches, or reading position papers and transcripts (Smith and Rainie, PEW June 2008). Obama's use of new technology connected with young voters.

Of those who answered the question, 91% percent of alumni reported using the internet more than one hour per day. Among internet users, fully 41% said they were online more than five hours per day. And they were doing more than social networking; 99% percent of alumni had gone online for news or information about politics and the campaign. Ninety-two percent used the internet to gather information about candidates to assist them in making an informed decision when they voted.

We were curious about which websites politically attentive younger voters used in 2008. We asked alumni which sites they used to gather information about the election. They provided a long list, that included: CNN.com, the New York times, foxnews.com, the candidate's websites, abcnews.com, blogs, Washington Post, msnbc.com, drudgereport.com, politico, fivethirtyeight.com, realclearpolitics.com, fark.com, slashdot.org, Google news, BBC Americas, www.ajc.com, www.mlive.com, www.axcentral.com, the Economist.com, thenation.com, newsweek.com, Slate.com, HuffingtonPost.com, glassbooth.com, lemondade.fr, Digg, MuslimMatters.org, ontheissues.org, NPR online broadcasts, rawstory, dailykos.com, Missouri Family Network, rtumble.com, Utube, Facebook, and various other blogs. Young voters who cared about this past election actively sought political information from a wide variety of online sources.

Evidence for Both Citizenship Models: Civic Duty and Critical Engagement

Going online and collecting information from a wide variety of sources aligns with what Dalton terms the "engaged citizen" model, whereby citizens want to be independent and assertive (2008, 4). Dalton also found that better educated voters were more likely to embrace both citizen duty and engaged citizenship models of behavior, which we see in our data as well. Quite a few alumni for instance, mention civic duty in their open-ended comments. When asked

the following question, the highest percentage (15% of those who responded), picked 1, 5 and 6, which would be an amalgam of Dalton's "dutiful" and "engaged" citizen:

There are different opinions as to what it takes to be a good citizen.

Please pick your top three.

- Help those who are worse off in America.(1)
- Never evade taxes.(2)
- Choose products for political, ethical and environmental reasons.(3)
- Report a crime.(4)
- Be active in voluntary organizations.(5)
- Vote in elections.(6)

According to Dalton's data, the factors split so that "dutiful citizens" clustered on questions 2, 4, and 6. The "engaged citizen" tended to choose items 1, 3 and 5. However, alumni combine the two, both embracing an activist agenda and voting.

When asked a question from the ANES, "When you think about the future of the United States as a whole, are you generally optimistic, pessimistic, or neither optimistic nor pessimistic?" we found that 60% of respondents were optimistic. Within this political engaged and attentive group, only 21% of respondents were pessimistic, and 18% were neither. We don't yet know whether optimism is widespread among all younger voters, but alumni offer interesting reasons, about why they are optimistic. Some respondents expressed a cautious wait and see attitude. Others expressed hope because of our political institutions and history of innovation. There were a number of alumni who expressed some dismay but also a feeling of inevitability that the U.S.'s role as a superpower is waning, and that we need to be ready to participate in a more multi-polar world. When asked to explain their reasons for optimism or pessimism, respondents wrote:

- *The foundations that make this nation great are still intact.*
- *Most of the optimism that I am feeling about the future of the country comes from the election. I know that the election of Barack Obama has sent a clear message to the world that we are not going to continue to engage in the practices that we have in the past. I am feeling optimistic that we will end the war in Iraq. I am hopeful that the country will be steered in the right direction with new innovative ideas, progressive policies and newly engaged citizens.*
- *Too early to tell either way, but I have feeling America is going to lose its superpower status very soon.*

- *I believe too much power has been handed over to the federal government; there is too much bureaucracy, and no way to monitor it all.*
- *In the election, voters (especially the younger generation) demonstrated that people can care about what happens to our government, and I believe that over time that will be enough to keep our course generally positive. My largest concern is continued deficit spending and the size of the debt that's being ignored.*

The upturn in younger voter turnout, the thoughtful comments and the attitudes presented here might reassure those who fear that the next generation will not participate in the formal political process. While this could be an exception, the 2008 election electrified and engaged youth.

Younger voters felt that this was a “historic” election and turned out in record numbers.

Candidates reached out to them, using technology to meet them on their turf to solicit their votes, time and money. This political cohort, in contrast to the oft-discussed Generation X, is turning out to vote and paying attention to politics, especially among those who participated in the We the People program or who entered college. Younger voters are moving left based on issues, including their support for a more expanded role for the federal government in the economy. Alumni, who represent the most politically engaged youth, are generally optimistic about the future.

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