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

Suzanne Soule

soule@civiced.org

Jennifer Nairne

nairne@civiced.org

Paper prepared for the Midwestern Political Science Meeting,

Chicago, April 1-5, 2009.

Abstract

What does the 2008 U.S. presidential 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, PEW and ANES data are due to be released in March 2009, Census data in the spring as well). We will also present data on 400 alumni from a high school civics program, We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution. These data are interesting because we ask open-ended questions to typical American National Election Study (ANES) questions by asking respondents, for instance, why did you vote, or did political contacting by a party or candidate influence your decision to vote or who to vote for? Alumni conceive of voting as integral to good citizenship. They use websites to stay well-informed, and are able to distinguish between the two parties by noting different policy and ideological stances. They express more patience with the give and take of compromise essential to representative democracy. Data presented here then will draw from nationally representative samples of youth (now characterized as voters under 30), as well as a survey of nearly 400 We the People alumni.

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). Is this concern justified? It is true that schools devote less time to democratic education, especially for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (Kahne and Middaugh 2008). Underprivileged youth have fewer opportunities to participate in interactive programs that teach knowledge and skills necessary for effective participatory citizenship. In addition to learning opportunity gaps, have Americans changed their norms of what it means to be a good citizen? Certainly readership of newspapers has fallen sharply (Wattenberg 2007), although we find in our data that young voters stay well informed through various websites. Dalton argues that generational change, living standards education, experience and other factors are changing our citizenship norms (2008). Data show movement from norms based on “citizen duty,” clustering on voting, paying taxes and obeying the law, to the norm of “engaged citizenship,” whereby people are independent, assertive citizens concerned with others. In our study of We the People alumni, we find support for both norms; a majority of alumni hybridize the two, by combining voting with helping those who are worse off in America, plus being active in voluntary organizations.

Data Sources: National Samples and an Online Survey of We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution Alumni Survey Design

National data on youth turnout come from a variety of sources. The first is 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. The second data source we use is the preliminary ANES 2008 Panel Study. These data were just released and are not yet weighted, so for comparison purposes, we screen respondents on the basis of age (born in 1971 or later), ethnicity (only white and Asian respondents) and those with higher education levels as a proxy for SES.

Original data from We the People: the Citizen and the Constitution alumni presented in this paper derive from an online sample of over 400 respondents. Alumni took part in the We the People program when they were in high school. We the People 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.[1]

The We the People program is nationwide, hence alumni live throughout who live throughout the U.S. Some students self-select into the We the People program, often because they had a sibling or friend participate in it, or because they are interested in government. Others take the class because that is what is being offered. Graduates may volunteer to be a part of the alumni network.

A link to the online survey was emailed to 2,500 respondents on the list in December 2008, and as of March, over 500 have responded to the link.[2] Youth sampled here then are more likely to

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

[2] We are working hard to increase our response rate, and offered alumni an opportunity to be in a drawing for iPod shuffles. However, despite our best efforts, 111 respondents opened but never started the survey. These respondents were eliminated from the survey.

follow public affairs and are political engaged enough in the election to write thoughtful responses to open-ended questions. We feel that this sample is of interest because these are very politically engaged young adults who are likely to be active opinion leaders in their communities over time.

Alumni respondents 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-three percent of the respondents were female, were 71% white and 14% Asian American. The sample then, is one typical of students who receive high quality civic education, versus immigrant youth with low socioeconomic status enrolled in failing schools. We surmise that due to the length of the questionnaire and the large number of open-ended responses, 111 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.[3]

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

National data on youth turnout 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 estimate that between 52-53% of votes under 30 turned out (CIRCLE Fact Sheet updated Dec 1, 2008). They find a 4-5% increase since the previous election; 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.

[3] 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.

In these nationally representative studies, we find that the emerging political cohort is more ethnically and racially diverse, and more secular than older voters (Keeter et al., November 12, 2008). Overall, 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 voters were black, and 14% Hispanic. Nationwide approximately 6% of young voters 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. [4]

When we turn to the Advance Release of the ANES 2008 Time Series data, we see that how we measure voter turnout is in flux. Social desirability has been shown to lead to respondents claiming they turned out at rates higher than actual turnout. The following are different ways that ANES surveys are asking voters whether they turned out to vote. We include the question we put to We the People alumni, the standard question used in 2004 and previous ANES surveys that gives nonvoters a "softer landing."

In an attempt to make national data more comparable with our alumni data, in the 2008 ANES Panel Study we control for age, race and education. Only white and Asian American voters, born after 1971, with at least a high school diploma or GED are included from the ANES data. ANES surveyors heavily oversampled Latino populations, and to a lesser extent African Americans, in an attempt to obtain the necessary response rate while controlling for costs. By eliminating these groups entirely, the subset population is rendered more similar to the alumni group and the need to control for the oversampling is circumvented. However, because the full report is not available and the advance release of the data does not include a review of weighing the data, this analysis is only preliminary and must be viewed as suggestive only. The overall number of 2008 ANES respondents is 284.

Table 1: Accurately Measuring Voter Turnout

[4] 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).

	Question	ANES		WTP	
OLD	In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they weren't registered, they were sick, or they just didn't have time. Which of the following statements best describes you:	(n=141)		(n=346)	
		• Did Not Vote	32%	• Did Not Vote	5%
		• Voted	68%	• Voted	95%
NEW	During the past 6 years, did you USUALLY VOTE in national, state, and local elections, or did you USUALLY NOT VOTE?	(n=143)			
		• Usually Not Vote	38%		
		• Usually Vote	62%		
	During the months leading up to the elections that were held on November 4th, did you ever plan to vote, or didn't you plan to do that?	(n=143)			
		• Didn't Plan to Vote	13%		
		• Planned to Vote	87%		
	Which one of the following best describes what you did in the elections that were held November 4th?*	(n=143)			
		• Definitely did not Vote	22%		
		• Definitely Voted	77%		
	Summary	Old and New (n = 284)		(n=358)	
		• Did not vote	27%	• Did Not Vote	10%
		• Voted	73%	• Voted	95%

* Definitely did not vote in the elections 22%; Definitely voted in person at a polling place on election day 50%; Definitely voted in person at a polling place before election day 16%; Definitely voted by mailing a ballot to elections officials before the election 11%; Not completely sure whether voted or not 1%**

* *If 6, R asked follow up question (old): “If you had to guess, would you say that you probably did vote in the elections, or probably did not vote in the elections?” 1 person responded: probably did not vote in the elections

ANES included a number of new questions in an attempt to better capture voter turnout (see Table1). A subset of the sample population was randomly assigned to either an "OLD" (standard) version of the questions or to "NEW" versions. The designation of a respondent to OLD/NEW was made in the Pre-election wave and continued for the Post-election wave. Sometimes the number of questions corresponding to each question version varied and will be documented in the full report. The number of respondents interviewed was roughly double that of 2004 in order to obtain a sufficiently large number of respondents to permit adequate statistical analysis for each version of the question.

The two main theories regarding the problem of over-reporting voter turnout are social desirability and/or memory failure. These theories are well documented across disciplines in academic literature (see Belli, et al. 1999 and 2001,Karp and Brockington, Stocke' and Stark). Although the "long version" (labeled "OLD" in Table 1) of the voter turnout item used in 2000 and 2004 decreased over-reporting for those voters least likely to vote, there was an 8% increase in over-reporting in the aggregate (Duff, et al.). The new version of the question is designed to mitigate over-reporting by probing respondents' memories of voting very close to Election Day. A modified version of this new question was used in the ANES 2006 Pilot Study and uses this probing as a way to separate a respondents' memory of voting habits from their actual voting record for November 2008. Further analysis is needed to determine the accuracy of the new item in measuring voter turnout.

Among We the People alumni who were eligible to vote (21 were too young), 95% reported turning out to vote, with 50% voting in person on election day, and 44% by absentee ballot. Additionally, 76% 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; 76% reported that they had attempted to persuade others to about which candidate or party to vote for or against.

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 (CIRCLE). Once the ANES data are weighted, we will see if this finding holds as well.

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, an estimated 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).

The Youth Vote: Enthused, Turning Out and Turning Left

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?", 58% of We the People alumni scored themselves a 5 (on a scale of 1-5). This indicates they cared very much (plus an additional 29% ranked themselves a 4). To a lesser degree, 37% of alumni reported they cared very much about the outcome of the US House elections (with an additional 32% scoring a 4). So the majority of alumni cared a lot about the election outcome. 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.*

Nationally, the leftward trend among younger voters was evident in 2004 and 2006, where a majority of voted Democratic. However, this election was a Democratic sweep for the presidency among younger voters; PEW reports that 66% of voters under 30 voted for Obama (Pew, 1). In our sample the results were similar, where 65% of alumni reported voting for Obama, and 19% for McCain.

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).

We the People alumni differentiated systematically between the parties, as evidenced in their open-ended comments that touched on ideology and issue positions. Alumni see more differences emerging between the parties. Regulating the economy surfaced as a key difference, along with specific controversial social issues and religion. 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 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.*

2008 Technology, Recruitment and Persuasion

Youth actively participated 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).

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 PEW study found that 46% of adults used the internet, email and phone text messaging for political purposes in this election (Smith and Raine 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.

We the People alumni were wired into this election. Of those who answered the question, 91% percent of alumni used 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, lemondate.fr, Digg,

[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.

MuslimMatters.org, ontheissues.org, NPR online broadcasts, rawstory, dailykos.com, Missouri Family Network, rtumble.com, Utube, Facebook, and various other blogs.

In our study, we asked young people whether being contacted by a political candidate or party influenced either their decision to vote, or who to vote for. Ninety three percent of alumni reported that they were not swayed, as they had already made up their minds whether to vote and who to vote for. Sample comments from alumni:

- *Yes, I would have liked to talk to a McCain supporter, but since it seemed to be a universal assumption that all voters in my state were voting for him, this did not happen. I appreciate candidates who work for my vote.*
- *Not for the office of President of the United States, but for local offices, I was influenced by the literature and information provided by campaign workers. This is because it is much harder to get information on local candidates.*
- *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. In contrast, they sought information, cared, knew differences between candidates and parties, perhaps and an answer to why they reported that being contacted didn't persuade or influence them. Office seekers and parties might then want to target less-informed voters and local elections to maximize persuasion.

Evidence for Both Citizenship Models: Civic Duty and Critical Engagement

While we have many ways we ask the voting question, there is less research that asks respondents why they vote. Studies have shown that youth, especially those from diverse communities lack a sense of civic duty, a known driver to the polls (Campbell 2008). Table 2 summarizes why We the People alumni chose to abstain or to vote in the 2008 election.

Table 2: Why did you choose to vote or not vote?

N = 94 comments

Civic duty/obligation/responsibility	25
Important/fundamental to democracy	19
Voting is a privilege/my right	12
Influence government policies/legislation	11
Candidate represents me/want my voice heard/express my opinions	11
Parents/teachers/WTP influenced me to vote	9
Can't complain if you don't vote	7
Influential/historic election/want to be part of US history	7
I always vote	6
Because government decisions impact me	5
I believed in the candidate	4
Battle state/wanted my candidate to win	3
For the future	2
Anti-Bush/Anti-McCain/Anti-Republican	2
Want change in Washington/government leadership	2

As noted in Table 2, civic duty, obligation and responsibility top the list for motivating this cohort to get to the polls. This segment of the electorate bucks the trend that they lack a sense of civic duty that would drive them to the polls. In a 2002 CIRCLE poll survey of young people, 20% considered voting a responsibility and 9% felt it was a duty. In contrast, 34% thought that voting was choice and 31% called it a right (Wattenberg, 2007, 130-131, see also Campbell and Blais). Our sample of alumni is well-educated and studied government extensively in high school. Dalton found that better educated voters were more likely to embrace both citizen duty and engaged citizenship models of behavior, which our data confirm.

So some norms of citizenship are the same, while others may be changing. When asked to select from a list of what it takes to be a good citizen, there was a good deal of variance (see Table 3). However, the highest percentage, 27%, picked 1, 5 and 6, which would be an amalgam of Dalton's "dutiful" and "engaged" citizen: helping those who are worse off in America, being active in voluntary organizations and voting in elections. The next runners up were, at 10% 4, 5, and 6, followed by 8% who chose 1, 3 and 6.

Table 3: Characteristics of a Good 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. This group however, was also very active online collecting information from a wide variety of sources, which aligns with what Dalton terms the "engaged citizen" model, whereby citizens want to be independent and assertive (2008, 4).

Students that Participated in We the People Better Understand and Appreciate Representative Democracy; 60% are Optimistic

In their work on the American public's understanding of representative democracy and compromise, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse found in 1998 that the public is impatient with the compromise and time necessary in representative democracies. Using data from the 1990s, they found that 86% of the public strongly agreed/agreed with the notion that "elected officials should stop talking and just take action" (2002, 136).

We asked We the People alumni the same question, and found that only 20% of alumni felt this way. The other 80% endorsed the statement "Elected officials need to deliberate to take proper

action". Acknowledgment of the wrangling that takes place in legislatures renders the public more patient to the slow process of reconciling differences that takes place in the democratic process. This may be due to good civic education, to education overall, or it may be that this diverse generation is fundamentally different.

Sixty percent of the public was found to agree that "What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out of one's principles" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 136). Only 13% of alumni agreed, while 83% endorsed the following: "compromise is an important part of the democratic process even when principles are at stake." Accepting and appreciating the need for compromise reflects thoughtful consideration of the differences that exist in the polity and in Congress today; the winner need not take all.

When given the choice whether our government would be better off if decisions were left up to "nonelected independent experts" or to "politicians and the people," 82% of alumni chose the latter. This group appreciated the messy process of representative democracy, and many cite their faith in political institutions as a reason for optimism.

The majority of alumni were optimistic. When asked an ANES question, "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. Reasons hinged on the recent elections, with some alumni optimistic, while others expressed a cautious wait and see attitude. Our political institutions and history of innovation were cited as reasons for optimism. 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.*
- *I think we have to be optimistic in order to make the world a better place. We have many challenges - the economy, for example - but we as a people will become what we believe. If we are pessimists than there is always a way to justify inaction. Optimism demands action so we must attempt the perfect. But perhaps, in so doing, we achieve the good.*
- *We have a lot of difficulty ahead of us in terms of global climate change, a struggling economy, a general dislike of us elsewhere, and failing social programs. We have, however, survived previous crises. I don't expect a silver bullet, and I think that we will lose our status as the new Rome, but that was bound at happen at some point, and I think we'll largely*

make it. I think the important thing is that the folks who don't have a way to survive on their own will be getting additional help from the government so that they can.

- *I am optimistic because I believe that wisdom generally wins over ignorance and justice over inequity. I am a progressive sort. I believe that change given time can be a very good thing. In fact, I see that the political landscape and the American ethos is constantly in a state of flux. While I hold that the government is far too large and ineffective, I have faith that there will be a turnover. Perhaps that means a revolution. I don't see that as a negative either. Perhaps I've been reading too much Jefferson?!*

Conclusion

The upturn in younger voter turnout, the thoughtful comments, and attitudes presented here may reassure those who fear that the next generation will not participate in the formal political process. Students who participated in the We the People program in high school who are now part of the alumni network continue to be engaged and active in the public arena. It would be wonderful if all students had the opportunity to acquire civic skills, knowledge and attitudes that would serve them as effective, active citizens. Today students who do not attend college, who are learning English, and who are poor are segregated into schools where the curriculum is focused on math and reading. For 43% of youth, primary, middle and high schools are their only opportunities to receive formal instruction about representative democracy, voting, elections, opinion polls, and critical consumption of media, political philosophy and the Constitution. Unequal learning opportunities, coupled with the lack of professional connections and recruitment that accompany higher status careers, may exacerbate already existing political inequalities.

While this could be an exception, the 2008 election electrified and engaged youth. Younger votes felt that this was a “historic” election and over half voted. Additionally, the ANES 2008 Panel Study is trying out various ways to frame the classic turnout question to obtain the most accurate responses. In the 2008 election, candidates reached out to younger voters, especially in battle ground states, using technology to meet them on their turf to solicit their votes, time and money. It would appear that 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. Nationally, younger voters are moving left based on issues, including their support for a more expanded role for the federal government in the economy. We the People alumni, who represent politically engaged youth, are generally optimistic about the future. They appreciate the need for deliberation and compromise that is

essential to representative democracy. Alumni are opinion leaders and utilize the internet to stay informed. Many still feel that voting is a responsibility or duty, along with working to help those who are not well off, and volunteering.

Bibliography

The American National Election Studies (2009). Advance Release of the ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers and distributors]. ANES

Bauerlein, Mark. (2008) “The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future.” Tarcher Publishing.

Belli, R. F., Traugott, M.W.,&Beckmann, M. N. (2001). “What Leads to Voting Overreports? Contrasts of Overreporters to Validated Voters and Admitted Nonvoters in the American National Election Studies.” *Journal of Official Statistics*, 17, 479–498.

Belli, R. F., Traugott, M.W., et al. (1999). “Reducing Vote Overreporting in Surveys. Social Desirability, Memory Failure, and Source Monitoring. Public Opinion Quarterly, 63, 90–108.

Bennett, W. Lance. (2008) “Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age.” *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, Edited by W. Lance Bennett. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 1-24.

Bimber, Bruce. (1998) “The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism.” *Polity*, 31(1). 133-160.

Campbell, David E. (2006) “Why We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape Our Civic Life.” Princeton University Press.

CIRCLE. “Young Voters in the 2008 Presidential Election,” November 24, 2008, updated 12/01/08.

Dahl, Robert A. (1998) “On Democracy.” Yale University Press.

Dalton, Russell (2008). “The Good Citizen; How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics.” CQ Press: Washington, DC.

Duff, Brian, Michael J. Hanmer, Won-ho Park, and Ismail K. White. (2004). “How Good is This Excuse?: Correction of Overreporting of Voter Turnout Bias in the 2002 American National Election Study.” NES Technical Report Series (Document nes010872).

The Education Trust, Inc. (2006) “Education Watch: Key Education Facts and Figures: Achievement, Attainment and Opportunity: From Elementary School through College.” http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/summaries2006/USA.pdf

Ekstrom, R. B., Goertz, M. E., Pollack, J. M., & Rock, D. A. (1986). “Who Drops Out of High School and Why? Findings from a National Study.” *Teachers College Record*, 87, 356–373.

Figueira-McDonough, J. (1992). “Community Context and Dropout Rates.” *Children and Youth Service Review*, 14, 273–288.

Flanagan, C., Levine, P., and Stettersten, R. (2008). “Civic Engagement and the Changing Transition to Adulthood.” CIRCLE, www.civicyouth.org

Hibbing, J., Theiss-Morse, B. (2002). “Stealth Democracy: Americans’ Beliefs About How Government Should Work,” Cambridge University Press: UK.

Junn, Jane and Masuoka, Natalie (2008). “Identities in Context: Politicized Racial Group Consciousness Among Asian American and Latino Youth.” *Applied Developmental Science*,12:2,93 — 101

Kaestle, Carl F. and Alyssa E Lodewick, eds. (2007) “To Educate a Nation: Federal and National Strategies of School Reform.” Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Kahne, J., Middaugh, E. and Croddy, M. (2005). “The California Survey of Civic Education. Report to Educating for Democracy: California Campaign of Civic Education.” The Constitutional Rights Foundation.

Kahne, J. and Middaugh, E. (2008) “High Quality Civic Education: What is It and Who Gets It?” *Social Education*. 72(1), pg 34–39.

Kahne, Joseph and Ellen Middaugh (2008). “Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School” CIRCLE Working Paper 59. http://www.civicsurvey.org/democracy_some_circle.pdf.

Karp, J. A., & Brockington, D. (2005). “Social Desirability and Response Validity: A Comparative Analysis of Overreporting Voter Turnout in Five Countries.” *Journal of Politics*, 67, 825–840.

Keeter, Scott and Juliana Horowitz, and Alec Tyson. “Young Voters in the 2008 Election,” a PEW report, November 12, 2008.

Keeter, Scott and Juliana Horowitz, and Alec Tyson. “Gen Dems: The Party’s Advantage Among Young Voters Widens,” a PEW report, April 28, 2008.

Krosnick, Jon, and Arthur Lupia, et al. (2009) “Background Information on the ANES 2008 Time Series Questionnaires(Advance Release Version).” American National Election Studies Time Series Study.

Lenhart, Amanda, Mary Madden, Paul Hitlin. (2005) “Teens and Technology: Youth are Leading the Transition to a Fully Wired and Mobile Nation.” Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Levine, Peter (2006). “The Civic Mission of Schools: Chief Findings and Next Steps.” *Knowledge Quest*, 34(4), 18-21.

Lupia, Arthur, Jon A. Krosnick, Pat, et al. (2009). “User’s Guide to the Advance Release of the ANES 2008 Time Series Study.” University of Michigan and Stanford University

The National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1993) “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.” A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education, US DOE.

Orfield, Gary and Frankenberg, Erica. (2004) “Brown V. Board: Where Are W e Now?” *Teaching Tolerance*. No 25, Spring.

Putnam, Robert D. (2008) “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.” Simon and Schuster, USA.

Sax, Linda J. (2004). “Citizenship Development and the American College Student.” *New Directions for Institutional Research, Special Issue: Assessing Character Outcomes in College*. 122, 65-80

Smith, Aaron and Lee Rainie.(2008).“The Internet and the 2008 Election,” a PEW report, June 15, 2008.

Stocke´, Volker and Tobias Stark. (2007). “Political Involvement and Memory Failure as Interdependent Determinants of Vote Overreporting.” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* v21:2,pg 239-257

Swanson, Christopher B. (2008) “Cities in Crisis: A Special Analytic Report on High School Graduation.” www.americaspromise.org

US Census Bureau News. “An Older and More Diverse Nation by Midcentury.” US Dept of Commerce, Washington, DC. August 14, 2008.

Wattenberg, Martin P., (2007). “Is Voting for Young People?” Pearson Education: NY.

Zukin, Cliff, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins, Michael X Delli Carpini (2006). “A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen.” Oxford University Press: USA.