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The 2004 Presidential Election and Young Voters

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Young people's interest in this year's presidential election is at its highest since 1992. According to a September MTV/CIRCLE poll conducted by CBS News, 81 percent of young registered voters are paying close attention to the campaign, compared to 85 percent in 1992, the last time youth voter turnout broke its decline. Additionally, 80 percent of young registered voters say they intend to vote on Election Day, although it is very likely that a smaller proportion will actually turn out to vote.

Among young people, support for specific candidates has varied, and at this point in the race, it is unclear who will win the youth vote. Furthermore, young people cannot easily be classified as Republican, Democrat or Independent; no single political party dominates the youth vote.

In this Fact Sheet, we present evidence on the views, political partisanship, and top issues of young people in the 2004 presidential race. Approximately 14 million young people will be eligible to vote in a presidential election for the first-time this year, and their participation will be an important beginning to a life of political engagement.

The Youth Population and the Number of New Voters

Since 2000, 14 million young people have turned 18 and are eligible to vote in their first presidential election. This amounts to 3.5 million new eligible voters per year between 2000 and 2004, with approximately 9.8 million new young white voters, 1.7 million new young Latino voters, and 2.1 million new young African American voters.

During this same period, the number of young people between 18 and 25 has grown from 27 million in 2000 to 28 million in 2004. Similarly, the number of young citizens between 18 and 29 has grown from 39.3 million in 2000 to 40.7 million in 2004, reflecting a growing population of young people eligible to vote in federal elections. In fact, the population of eligible young people has grown

to levels not seen since the early 1980s, and it is likely to continue to grow in coming years. While there are more young people eligible to vote in 2004 than in the previous four election years, young people represent a declining proportion of the voting eligible population. Since the 1970s, the percentage of eligible voters who are between the ages of 18-29 has fallen from 30 percent in 1972 to 21 percent in 2004. See Table 1.

Table 1 – Citizen Population Estimates 1972 to 2004

| Presidential Election Year | Population in Thousands | | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|---|
| | 18-25 Year Old Eligible Voters | Percentage of Voting Eligible Adults Ages 18-25 | 18-29 Year Old Eligible Ages Voters | Percentage of Voting Eligible Adults Ages 18-29 |
| 2004 | 28,060 | 14% | 40,667 | 21% |
| 2000 | 26,917 | 14% | 39,332 | 21% |
| 1996 | 26,002 | 15% | 39,523 | 22% |
| 1992 | 24,813 | 15% | 38,739 | 23% |
| 1988 | 26,981 | 16% | 42,273 | 26% |
| 1984 | 29,575 | 19% | 45,032 | 29% |
| 1980 | 29,288 | 20% | 42,940 | 30% |
| 1976 | 28,930 | 21% | 41,952 | 30% |
| 1972 | 26,710 | 21% | 37,443 | 30% |

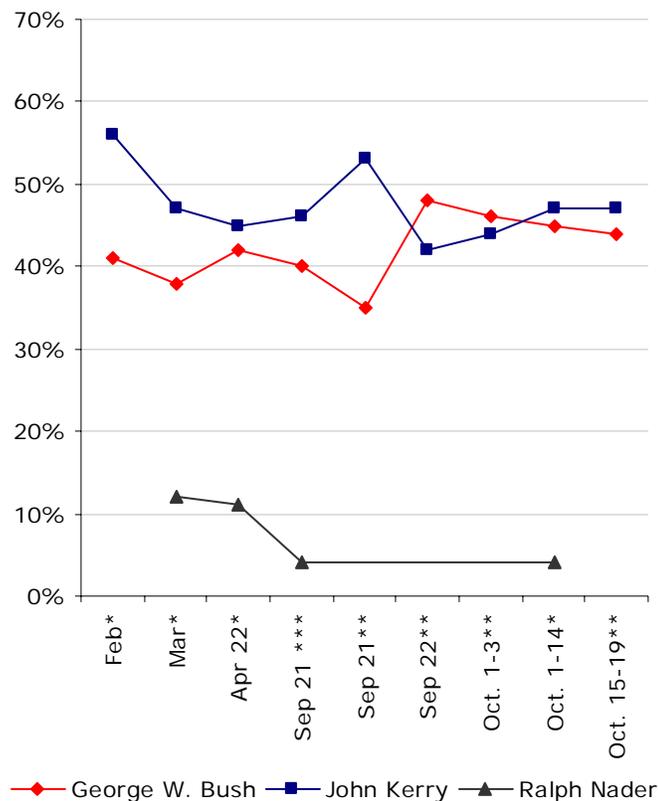
Source: November Current Population Survey for 1972 to 2000; March Current Population Survey for 2004.

The 2004 Presidential Race

Throughout the presidential campaign, support for presidential candidates among young registered voters has varied, although John Kerry has generally led. A Pew Research Center poll conducted in late September found 48 percent of registered voters ages 18-29 supported Bush and 42 percent supported Kerry. However, by mid-October, polls showed Kerry had regained a slight lead. Support for Ralph Nader has dropped steadily among young registered voters since March of this year. An October poll conducted by Harvard University's Institute of Politics (IOP) shows 52 percent of college students support Kerry, while 39 percent support Bush.

Although recent polling data suggest that Kerry has a slight advantage among young registered voters, many young

Graph 1: 2004 Presidential Race Among Registered Voters 18-29



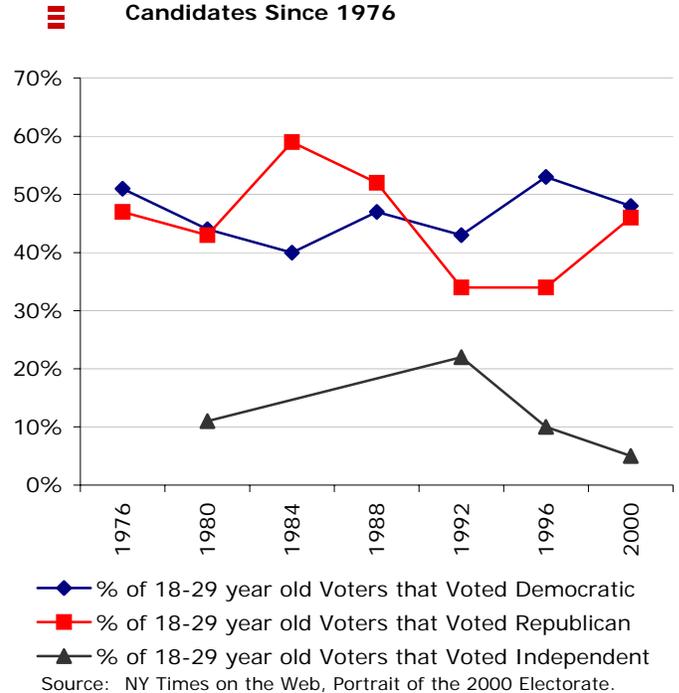
Source: "***" Newsweek/GenNEXT Poll, January to October 2004, "**" Pew Research Center Polls August and October 2004, and "****" MTV/CIRCLE Poll September 2004.

voters have not fully made up their minds. According to the MTV/CIRCLE September poll, over 20 percent of young registered voters said they could easily change their minds in the coming weeks suggesting that the youth vote is still up for grabs.

Voting Among Young People since 1976

Since 1976, the partisan orientation of young voters has changed several times. In most years, a plurality of young voters has favored the candidate who has won the largest share of the popular vote.

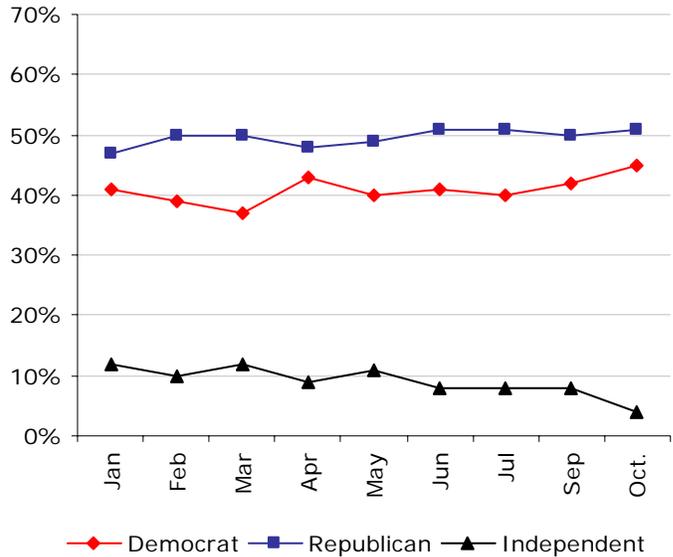
Graph 2: Voter Support of Presidential Candidates Since 1976



Political Partisanship among Young People in the 2004 Presidential Race

Throughout the presidential race, political partisanship among young people has been steady. Young people between the ages of 18-29 lean slightly more Democratic at 51% than Republican at 45% (in these surveys partisanship includes young people who either identify with a party or as an Independent with a party leaning.) Since January, the percentage of young people who identify as Independents with no partisan leaning has fallen from 12 percent to 4 percent.² See Graph 3.

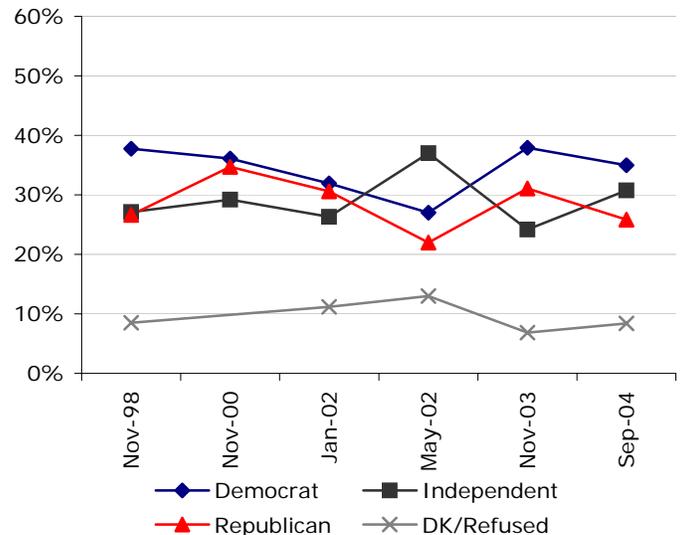
Graph 3: Political Partisanship in 2004 Among Registered Voters 18-29



Source: Newsweek/GenNEXT Poll, January to October 2004. "Leaners" are classified with the party they are leaning towards.

In surveys that count young Independents with a partisan leaning as "Independents", political partisanship among young people has been split evenly since 1998. Approximately one-third of young people identify as Democrats, one-third as Republicans, and one-third as Independents. This pattern of partisanship has been stable over the past few years, and despite a rise in the proportion who identify as Republican, there is no single party that young people overwhelmingly identify with. See Graph 4.³

Graph 4: Political Partisanship Among 18-25 Year Olds, 1998 to 2004



Source: 1998 NASS Survey, 2000 VNS National Exit Poll, 2002 CEG/CIRCLE Youth Survey, 2002 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey, 2004 CEG/CIRCLE Youth Survey, and 2004 MTV/CIRCLE Youth Survey. "Leaners" are classified as Independents.

The Issues that Concern Young People

Polls throughout the presidential election have consistently shown that the issues young people are interested in are similar to those of older voters, with some slight differences in the rankings of issues such as the cost of education. In the September MTV/CIRCLE poll, the top issues young registered voters considered important in choosing which candidate to vote for included the economy and jobs and the war in Iraq. Among college students the economy is the number one voting concern according to the Harvard IOP October poll. Forty-two percent of college students ranked the economy as a top voting issue while 38 percent of students cited the war in Iraq as the top issue.

Table 2 – The Top Issues in 2004 Young Registered Voters Consider when Choosing a Presidential Candidate

| Issue | Percentage |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| the economy and jobs | 35% |
| terrorism and national security | 22% |
| the war in Iraq | 15% |
| education | 12% |
| civil liberties and civil rights | 11% |
| crime and violence | 2% |
| dk/na | 1% |
| something else (vol.) | 1% |

Source: MTV/CIRCLE Poll, September 2004 among young people ages 18-29.

The rank order of these issues has generally been consistent since the start of the presidential race.

Interest in the Election

Polls indicate that young people's interest in this presidential campaign is higher than it has been in the past two presidential elections. For example, a recent MTV/CIRCLE poll of registered 18-29 year olds showed that over 30 percent are paying a lot of attention to this presidential campaign. This is similar to the level of interest young people expressed in 1992, when youth turnout rose.

Table 3 – Paying Attention to Presidential Campaigns

| | Sept 2004 | Sept 2000 | Sept 1996 | Sept 1992 |
|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| A Lot | 34% | 16% | 24% | 35% |
| Some | 47% | 47% | 55% | 50% |
| Not Much/none | 19% | 37% | 21% | 14% |

Source: MTV/CIRCLE Poll Sept. 2004 & CBS News Polls Sept. 2000, 1996, 1992.

Similarly, as seen in Table 4, surveys by the Pew Research Center show that interest is up among young people. However, their interest levels still lag behind those 30 and older.

Table 4 – Quite a Lot of Thought Given to the Election

| | Sept 2004 | Sept 2000 | Sept 1996 | Sept 1992 |
|-------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 18-29 | 57% | 41% | 44% | 58% |
| 30-49 | 71% | 58% | 59% | 74% |
| 50-64 | 76% | 66% | 67% | 68% |
| 65+ | 73% | 64% | 75% | 70% |

Source: Pew Research Center Polls Sept. 2004, 2000, 1996, & 1992.

Notes

¹ We thank Brent Elrod, Chris Herbst, and Kimberlee Moore for excellent research assistance. All errors in fact or interpretation are our own.

² Typically polls ask two questions about political partisanship. First, survey respondents are asked which party they identify with most, Democrats, Republicans or some other party. Second, those who identify with another party are asked if they lean Democrat or lean Republican. These two questions are used to develop a single measure of partisanship that classifies Independents that lean Democrat or Republican as Democrats or Republicans, effectively reducing the number of Independents. Graph 3 uses this method to calculate political partisanship.

³ The choice of method used to calculate the partisanship figures in Graphs 3 and 4 are driven by what data is available, and what variables are available in a dataset. However, no matter how we measure partisanship, young people are evenly split across political parties.