

Electoral Engagement and College Experience

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In all Presidential and Midterm election years, young people with college experience are more likely to vote, compared to their counterparts with no college experience. Although college attendance has grown since 1972, a gap in voter turnout between young people with college experience and without college experience still persists. Data suggest, however, that there are strategies and initiatives that may help to overcome these turnout disparities and lessen the turnout gap.

Young Americans' educational attainment has improved significantly over the past 30 years.² At the present, there are an estimated 22 million 18- to 29-year-old American citizens who have no college experience, a number slightly lower than the 27 million young people without a college education in 1972. This group comprises approximately 45 percent of the estimated total of 50 million 18- to 29-year-old citizens in America.³ Despite the growth in educational attainment, young people without college experience vote at significantly lower levels than their college educated counterparts.

In this fact sheet, we compare “college attending” and “non-college attending” young people. We examine the two groups' electoral engagement and political preferences in the 2008 presidential election. For this fact sheet, non-college attending young people are defined as those who have no experience attending technical/vocational programs, associates degree programs, or four year college programs. This group includes those youth who have completed a high school education or GED and those who have not. The college attending group is comprised of young people who have been enrolled in college in the past, or are currently enrolled. One should be cautious in interpreting the results presented here, as it is possible that some non-college attending 18- to 29-year-olds may be contemplating attending college, and may enter college after the age of 29. People often acquire education somewhat later in life, as shown by the following fact: in 2008, within the population of 18- to 24-year-olds, 19 percent reported no high school diploma, but among those 25 and older, only 11 percent reported no high school diploma.

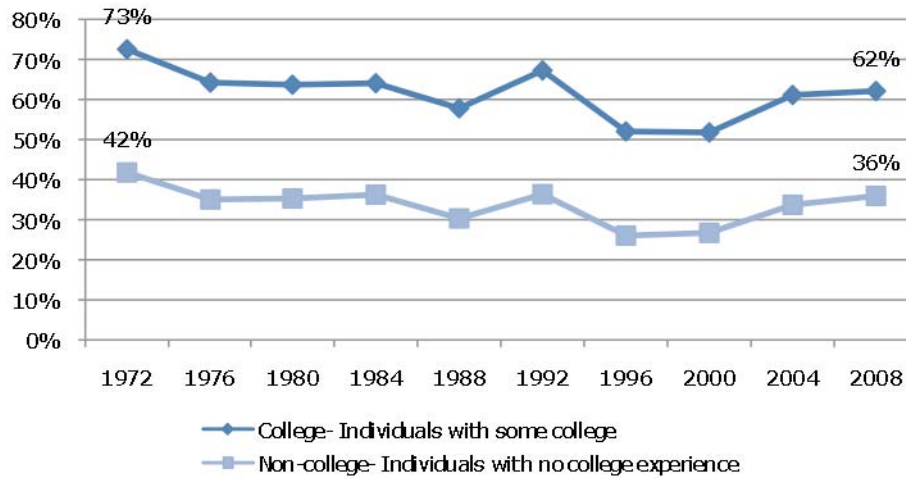
Voter Turnout

Voter turnout⁴ for young people ages 18 to 29 rose slightly in 2008 (from 49 to 51 percent). Between the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections, turnout increased by one percentage point among college-educated young people and by two percentage points among non-college youth. Since 2000, however, turnout among college-educated youth has increased

by 12 percentage points and non-college youth turnout has increased by nine percentage points. Non-college attending young Americans have consistently voted at levels below college attending youth in both presidential and midterm election years. In the 2008 election, turnout for college-educated 18- to 29-year-olds was 62 percent—26 percentage points higher than the turnout rate for non-college youth (See Figure 1). Turnout disparities in midterm elections have been equally drastic, as exhibited in Figure 2 below. In 2006, turnout among college youth was 17 percentage points higher than that of non-college youth. (See Table 1A and 1B in the appendix for full voter turnout figures.)



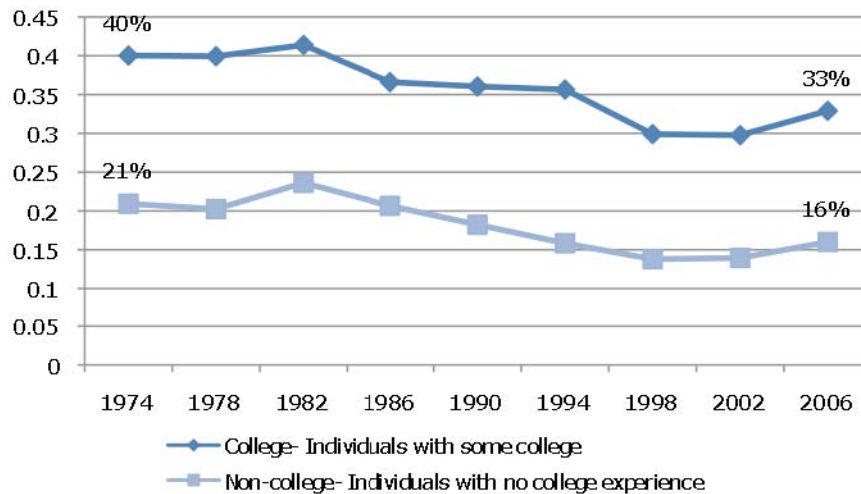
Figure 1: 18- to 29-Year-Old Citizen Turnout by Educational Level, Presidential Years



Source: CPS 1972-2008



Figure 2: 18- to 29-Year-Old Citizen Turnout by Educational Level, Midterm Years

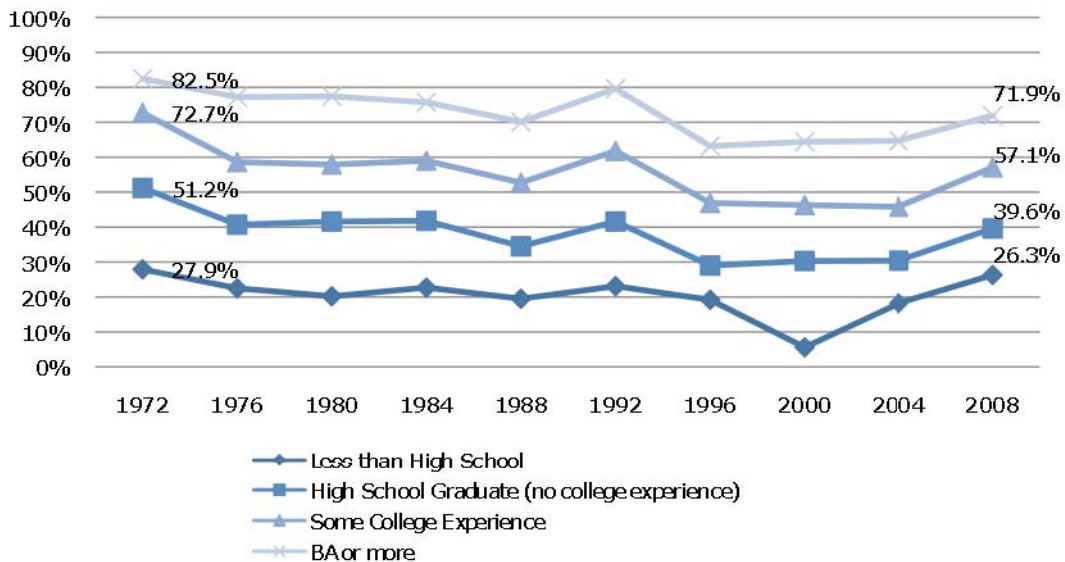


Source: CPS 1972-2008

Turnout disparities are even more telling when we break the college attending category into four smaller, more specific categories: those with less than a high school diploma, high school graduates (including those who have earned their GED), those with some college experience, and those with a Bachelor’s degree or higher. In 2008, 72 percent of respondents with a Bachelor’s degree or higher reported that they had voted on Election Day. This number is almost 21 percentage points higher than the national average for 18-to-29 year-olds. Among those with some college experience, 57 percent voted. Turnout among high school graduates was 39 percent, down from 51 percent in 1972, up since 1996. Finally only about one-quarter of young people with less than a high school diploma voted in 2008.



Figure 3: Voter Turnout Among 18-to 29-Year-Old Citizens in Presidential Years, by Educational Attainment

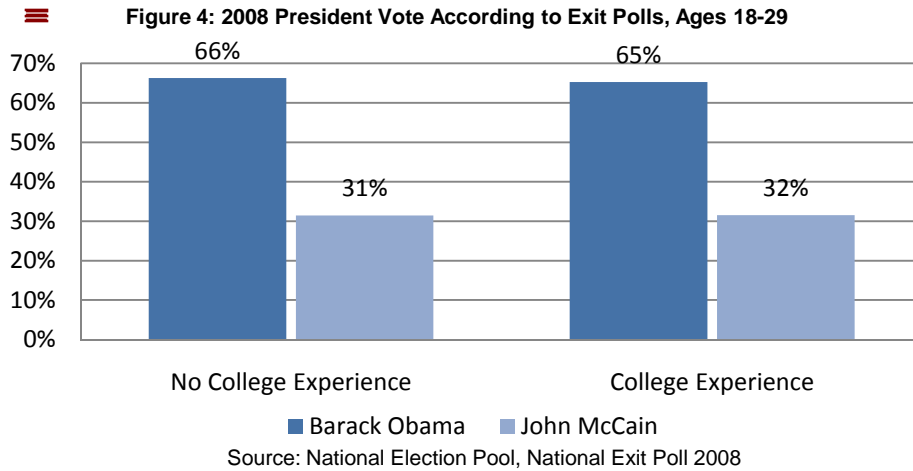


Source: CPS 1972-2008

Some strategies may help to overcome these turnout disparities. In recent years, many states have implemented election reform laws, including Election Day registration, mail-in ballots, early voting, absentee voting laws, and extended poll hours. Research indicates that these measures may help increase youth voter turnout. For example, the research⁵ found that longer polling hours improved part-time students’ turnout, as these young people often must manage their work and school schedules. Among all part-time students (college, professional and vocational school students), turnout was boosted by five percentage points in states that offered longer polling hours. Among part-time college students, turnout was boosted by six percentage points.

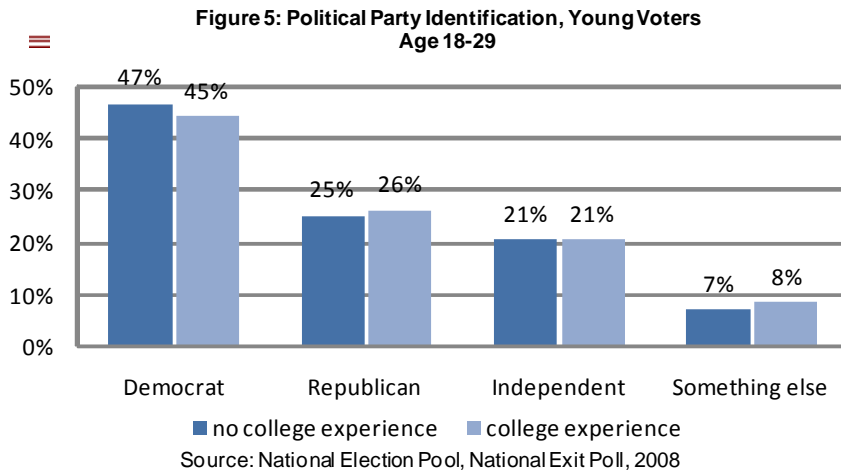
Support for Presidential Candidates in 2008

Young people were strong supporters of candidate Barack Obama, regardless of educational attainment. Of young voters, 65 percent with college experience and 66 percent without college experience voted for Barack Obama in 2008.



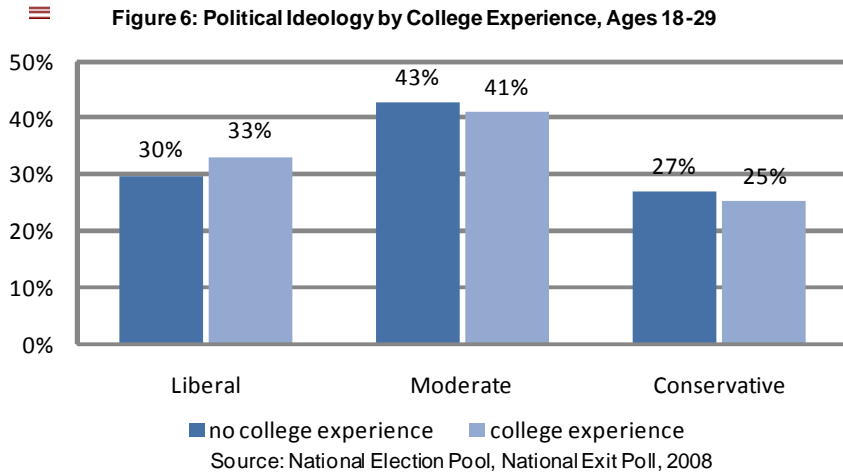
Political Party Identification

In 2008, 18- to 29-year-old voters with college experience were slightly more likely to self-identify as “Republican” than their non-college counterparts. However, almost half of both college and non-college voters self-identified with the Democratic Party (compared to roughly a third in each group in 2004).



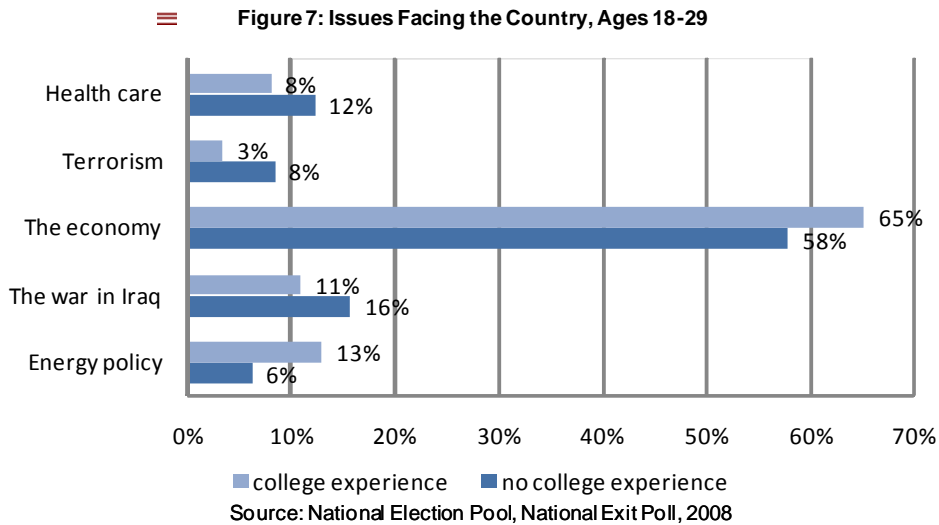
Political Ideology

In 2008, nearly four in ten young voters self-identified as “politically moderate,” roughly one-third self-identified as “politically liberal,” and nearly a quarter of all young people self-identified as “politically conservative.” There were no major differences by educational level.



Issues of Concern

Overall, young voters in the 2008 election picked “the economy” as the number one issue facing the country. Young voters with college experience were slightly more likely to choose this issue than their non-college counterparts (see Figure 7). Young people without college experience were more likely to pick “the war in Iraq” (16% vs. 11%) and “health care” (12% vs. 8%) than their counterparts with college experience.



Across all Presidential and Midterm election years, young people with college experience are more likely to vote compared to their counterparts with no college experience. Despite the fact that college attendance has grown since 1972, a gap in voter turnout between young people with college experience and without college experience still exists. Data suggest, however, that there are strategies and initiatives that may help to overcome these turnout disparities, and lessen the turnout gap.

Appendix

Table 1A: Voter Turnout Among College Citizens, 1972-2008				
	18-24 Year Olds	25 and older	18-29 Year Olds	30 and older
Midterm Election Years				
1974	35.3%	64.5%	40.0%	69.3%
1978	34.8%	65.7%	39.9%	70.6%
1982	35.2%	67.9%	41.4%	72.3%
1986	31.3%	63.4%	36.6%	67.5%
1990	30.4%	63.8%	36.0%	67.5%
1994	30.7%	62.5%	35.7%	65.7%
1998	25.7%	58.0%	29.9%	61.2%
2002	26.1%	59.0%	29.8%	61.8%
2006	28.7%	60.1%	32.9%	62.9%
Presidential Election Years				
1972	69.6%	83.8%	72.5%	85.3%
1976	60.5%	78.6%	64.2%	81.4%
1980	59.3%	81.3%	63.7%	84.3%
1984	59.5%	80.7%	64.1%	83.2%
1988	53.1%	78.0%	57.8%	80.7%
1992	63.6%	82.4%	67.2%	84.2%
1996	47.4%	72.4%	52.0%	74.6%
2000	47.7%	72.8%	51.8%	74.8%
2004	59.0%	76.1%	61.1%	77.5%
2008	59.2%	75.1%	62.1%	76.3%

Source: Authors' Tabulations from the CPS Nov. Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2008

Table 1B: Voter Turnout Among Non-College Citizens, 1972-2008				
	18-24 Year Olds	25 and older	18-29 Year Olds	30 and older
Midterm Election Years				
1974	17.6%	46.5%	20.9%	48.8%
1978	17.6%	48.5%	20.2%	51.3%
1982	19.9%	51.0%	23.6%	54.0%
1986	17.2%	47.5%	20.7%	50.8%
1990	14.9%	45.5%	18.2%	48.5%
1994	13.9%	42.6%	15.8%	45.1%
1998	11.8%	39.9%	13.8%	42.0%
2002	12.8%	39.9%	13.9%	41.8%
2006	14.8%	40.4%	16.0%	42.4%

Presidential Election Years				
1972	37.1%	63.1%	41.8%	64.7%
1976	31.3%	59.4%	35.0%	61.4%
1980	31.4%	61.6%	35.3%	64.1%
1984	32.0%	61.6%	36.3%	64.4%
1988	26.8%	57.2%	30.3%	60.3%
1992	33.9%	60.3%	36.4%	62.7%
1996	24.7%	51.0%	26.0%	53.2%
2000	24.7%	52.0%	26.7%	53.7%
2004	33.7%	54.3%	33.7%	56.1%
2008	35.9%	53.1%	35.9%	54.8%

Source: Authors' Tabulations from the CPS Nov. Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2008

Notes

¹ Research Intern, Researcher, Senior Researcher, and Lead Researcher, respectively. We thank Mark Hugo Lopez, Emily Hoban Kirby, Jared Sagoff, and Jason P. Kolaczowski for their 2005 Fact Sheet “Electoral Engagement Among Non-College Attending Youth” upon which this fact sheet is based.

² More young people have some college experience today than in 1972, though this improvement is not evenly distributed across racial and ethnic lines. Table 1 below shows educational attainment in 1972 and in 2008 for age groups within the youth population. For example, in 1972, 16 percent of 24-year-olds had less than a high school diploma, and 37 percent had completed high school, but had never attended college. By 2008, though, just nine percent of 24-year-olds had less than a high school diploma, and 27 percent had graduated from high school, but had never attended college. Furthermore, by 2008, 29 percent of 24-year-olds had a Bachelor’s degree, an increase of nine percentage points since 1972. It is important to note, however, that the statistics below that include 18-year-olds may be lower because some 18 and 19-year-olds have not yet completed high school.

Table 1: Educational Attainment among 18- to 24-Year-Old Citizens

	Age Group					All Adults 25+
	All 18-24	18-19	20-21	22-23	24	
1972						
Less Than HS	19%	35%	16%	16%	16%	40%
HS Diploma	35%	34%	34%	37%	37%	34%
Some College	38%	41%	48%	29%	27%	13%
BA or greater	8%	0.04%	2%	17%	20%	13%
2008						
Less Than HS	14%	28%	9%	7%	9%	11%
HS Diploma	32%	37%	31%	31%	27%	28%
Some College	44%	35%	58%	43%	36%	32%
BA or greater	10%	0.3%	1%	20%	29%	30%

Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplements, 1972 and 2008.

³ Current Population Survey, 2009 March Supplement. See CIRCLE Fact Sheet “Youth Demographics - Youth with No College Experience” for more information on the trend in educational attainment among different ethnic/racial groups.

According to the *Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prison Inmates at Mid-year 2009 Report* (see <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=2200>) there were 809,100 18-to-29 year-olds in the prison system. These young people are not included in the US Census data collection.

⁴ Data for voter turnout rates are taken from the 1972 to 2008 November supplements of the Current Population Surveys. Each survey is completed within two weeks of the November elections, and interviews over 50,000 non-institutionalized individuals. For this fact sheet, voter turnout rates are calculated for U.S. Citizens only.

For information on how CIRCLE calculates voter turnout rates please see “CIRCLE Working Paper 35: The Youth Vote 2004: With a Historical Look at Youth Voting Patterns, 1972-2004.”

⁵ See CIRCLE Fact Sheet “State Election Law Reform and Youth Voter Turnout” available at http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/State_law_and_youth_turnout_Final.pdf