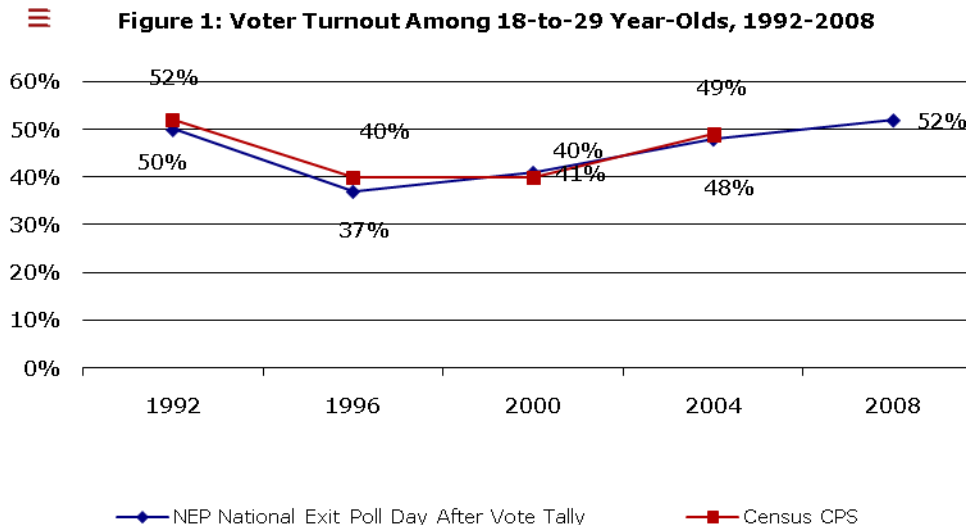


Young Voters in the 2008 Presidential Election

By CIRCLE Staff
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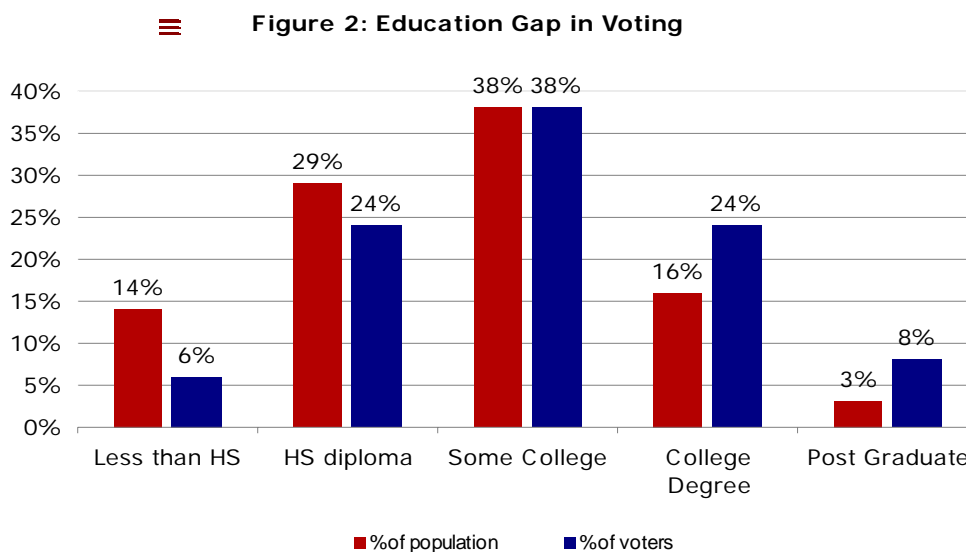
An estimated 23 million young Americans under the age of 30 voted in the 2008 presidential election, an increase of 3.4 million compared with 2004. CIRCLE estimates that youth voter turnout rose to between 52 and 53 percent, an increase of four to five percentage points over CIRCLE's estimate based on the 2004 exit polls. The 2004 election was a strong one for youth turnout, reversing a long history of decline. If we compare 2008 with 2000, the increase in youth turnout is at least 11 percentage points.¹



Notes: In 2008, youth turnout was estimated based on the popular count projection by Curtis Gans. See endnote #5 for description of estimation methods.

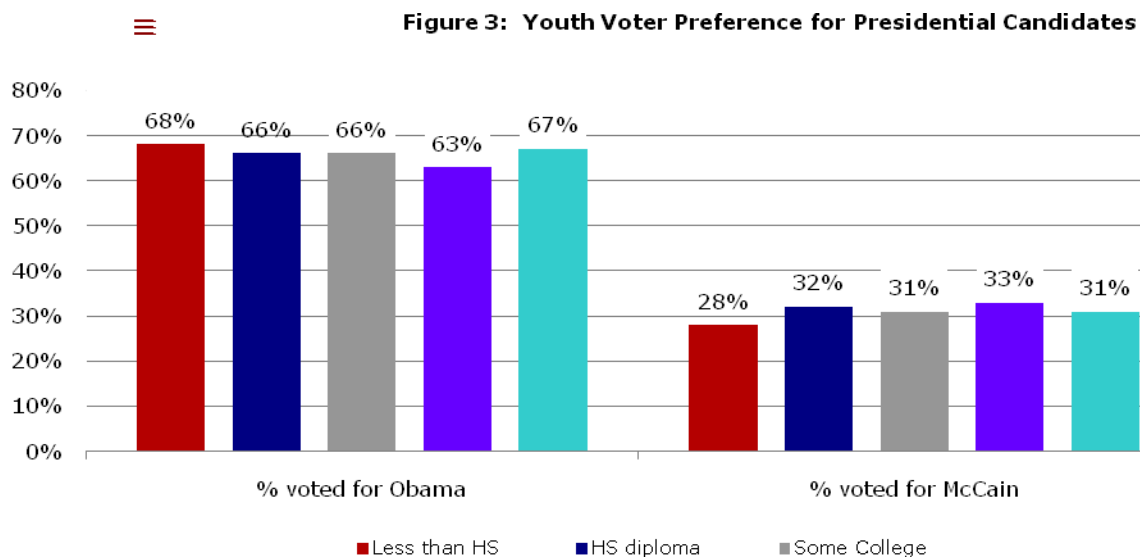
Educational Gap Remains

Continuing the trend observed in the past elections, young people with no college experience were underrepresented in this election.³ Although 57% of U.S. citizens between ages of 18 and 29 have ever attended college, 70% of the young voters had gone to college, meaning that college-educated youth were much more likely to vote (Figure 2). Furthermore, people with less than a high school diploma represented only six percent of the young voters, compared to 14% in the general population. Young people with no high school diplomas showed lower trust in the electoral process (14% “not at all” confident that votes would be counted accurately compared to 1-2% for youths with high school diploma or higher), showed higher levels of support for health-care coverage than other groups (18% compared to 9% overall), were more racially diverse and more likely to be African American (27%) or Latino (22%), while less likely to be white (47%). Finally, young voters with no high school diploma reported making up their mind about their vote relatively late (46% in October or later) compared to other groups (30% overall).



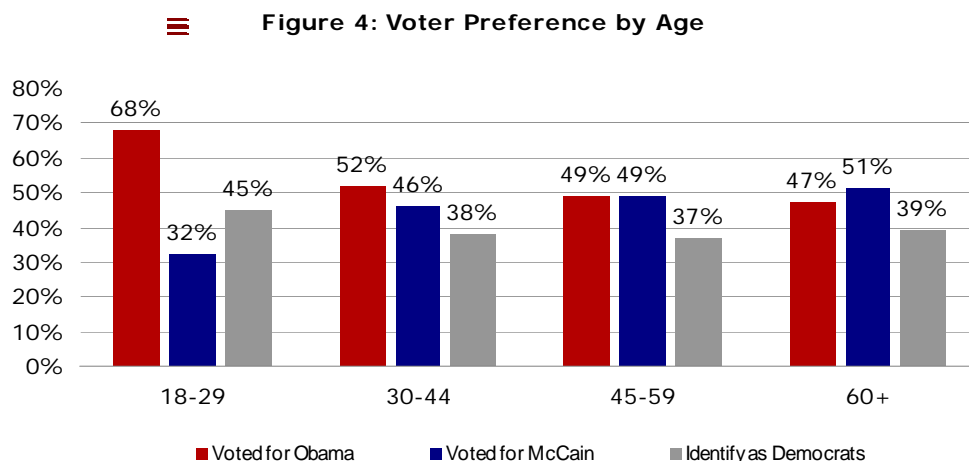
Source: 2008 National Election Pool, National Exit Poll⁴

Although youth with and without college experience differed in many ways, they had one important thing in common: They showed overwhelming support for the Democratic candidate Barack Obama (Figure 3). There was remarkably little difference in candidate preference between young Americans with different educational attainment, ranging from 63% (college graduates) to 68% (youth without high school diploma).



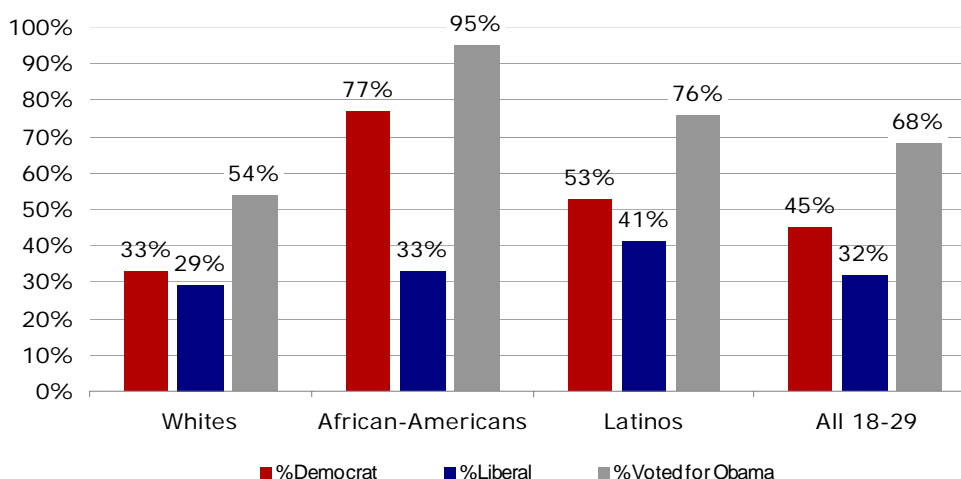
Young Voters Strongly Support Barack Obama and the Democratic Party

Barack Obama received his strongest support from the 18-to-29 year-old voting bloc; more than two-thirds of these voters cast their ballot for the Obama/Biden ticket. Senator McCain received about a third of the youth votes. Moreover, young people were more likely to self-identify as a “Democrat” (45%) than an “Independent or Something Else” (29%) or a “Republican” (26%).



One of the most striking characteristics of this election was young people’s united support for Barack Obama, which seemed to cross racial and partisan lines. For example, just thirty-three percent of young white voters self-identified as “Democrat,” yet 54% voted for the Democratic candidate. Similar trends were seen with African-Americans and Latinos: a significant number of youth self-identified as Republicans yet voted for Barack Obama, the Democratic presidential candidate (see Figure 5).

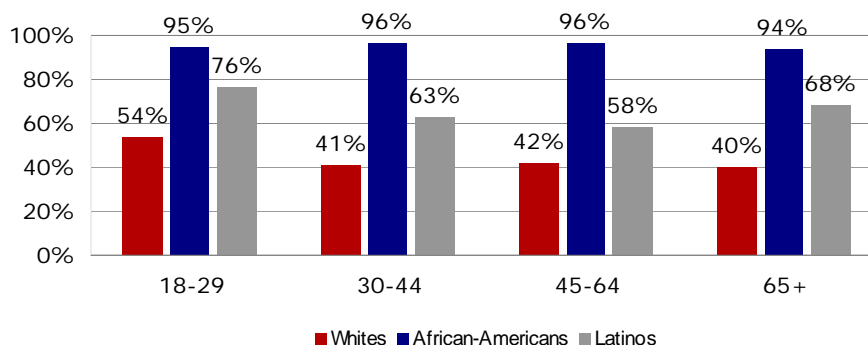
≡ **Figure 5: Party Identification and Voting by Race**



Source: 2008 National Election Pool, National Exit Poll

Young people also supported the Democratic candidates in the U.S. House of Representatives races; 60% of young people voted for a Democratic candidate versus 33% for a Republican candidate. Among all voters, 52% voted for a Democratic candidate versus 43% for a Republican candidate.

≡ **Figure 6: Percent Voted for Obama by Race and Age**



Source: 2008 National Election Pool, National Exit Poll

Like Adults, The Economy was the Top Voting Issue for Young People

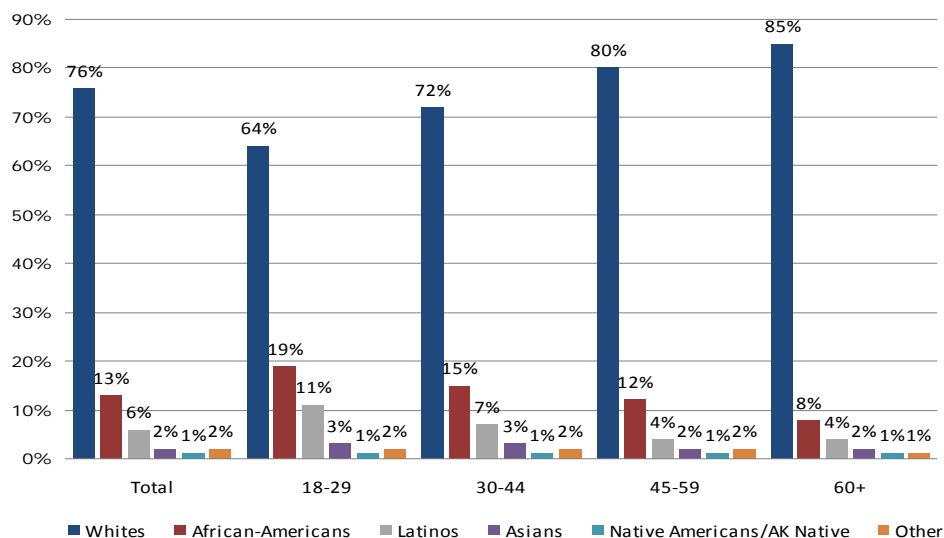
The economy was clearly the top voting issue for young and old voters alike. 61% of young people identified the economy as their top voting issue, compared to 63% of all voters. When asked about the economy, 93% of young people (compared to 92% of all voters) felt the state of the U.S. economy was "not so good" or "poor." Young people were slightly more optimistic about the future of the economy: 54% thought that over the next year the economy would improve (compared to 47% of all voters).

10% of all voters and 12% of young voters said the War in Iraq was their top voting issue followed by health care and energy policy. Young people (ages 18-24) were much more strongly against the Iraq war than older Americans: 50% strongly disapproved, versus 42% of all voters. Moreover, non-white young voters were more likely to voice strong opposition to the war (74% of Blacks, 64% of Latinos) than young white voters (36%).

A Diverse Cohort

Young voters (age 18-29) are more diverse than older voters, according to the exit polls. Eleven percent classified themselves as Hispanic/Latino, a larger share than in the proportion in the electorate as a whole (6%). Nineteen percent of young voters self-identified as Black, compared to 13% of all voters. Six percent identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, compared to four percent of the whole electorate.

Figure 7: Racial/Ethnic Composition of the 2008 Electorate, by Age



Source: 2008 National Election Pool, National Exit Poll

Though young voters from diverse groups agreed on major issues and provided strong support for Barack Obama, young voters did show some variation between and within groups. Although young African American voters were overwhelmingly supportive (95%) of the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, a large portion of them (58%) considered themselves “born-again” or “evangelical” Christians, and 21% considered themselves “conservative,” suggesting that young African-American voters represented diverse views and political ideologies.

Women Were More Mobilized

Young women cast 55% of the votes for the 18 to 29 age group, which was consistent with the overall trend (53% of all votes were cast by women). However, this pattern was especially strong for young African American voters, 61% of whom were women. One exception to this pattern was seen among the young voters without high school diploma. Within this group, men cast more (57%) of the votes than women (43%). This gender balance reflects the proportion in the general population for this particular group (55% males, 45% females).

Other Differences Between the Youth Voting Bloc and the Overall Electorate

- Young people were more likely to oppose U.S. offshore oil drilling than the general voting population (39% versus 28%).
- Young voters were more likely to identify as “liberal” than the general voting population. Thirty-two percent of young voters (ages 18-29) called themselves liberal (versus 22% of all voters) and just 26% said they were conservative (versus 34% for all voters). In 2004, 31% of young people considered themselves “liberal” compared to 21% of the electorate.
- Young voters were most likely to identify as members of the Democratic Party (45% versus 39% of all voters). In the 2004 presidential election, 37% of young people identified themselves as members of the Democratic Party (the same percentage as the electorate as a whole).
- Young people were more likely than older people to say that candidates' race was a factor (24% versus 19% of all voters).

- Young people were much more likely than others to feel that Obama was in touch with people like themselves: 69% of young voters versus 57% of all voters.
- 46% of young voters would be "excited" if Obama won, versus 30% of the overall electorate and just 20% of voters over the age of 60.
- Young people were slightly more likely than older people to be contacted by someone on behalf of the Obama campaign (16% versus 13% of the entire electorate). But young were less likely than others to be contacted on behalf of the McCain campaign: four percent versus six percent of the entire electorate.

New Voters

As would be expected, many young voters were first-time voters: 64% of 18-24 year-olds and 43% of 18-29 year-olds were first time voters. This compares to just 11% of all voters.

Young voters were relatively late to make up their minds: only 50% of young voters said they had made up their minds before September compared to 60% of the entire electorate.

It was speculated before the election, this campaign seemed to mobilize a large number of African American and Latino voters. Forty-five percent of 18-to-29 years-old African-American voters and 61% of 18-to-29 year-old Latino voters cast their ballots for the first time, compared to 37% of young white voters.

CIRCLE Methodology for Estimating Youth Voter Turnout

As mentioned at the beginning of this fact sheet, all national voter statistics that are reported by age are *estimates*. Estimates youth voter turnout in presidential elections can be produced using either the U.S. Census Current Population Survey (CPS) or the National Election Pool (NEP) national exit poll. Immediately following the presidential election, the NEP exit polls are the *only* data source available for estimating youth voter. However, exit polls do have some limitations. First, the exit poll methodology has changed over the years though it has been relatively consistent since 1992. Therefore, we use the exit polls to estimate youth turnout starting in 1992, but not before. Second, some voters refuse to answer exit polls, and surveys that are taken at polling places cannot capture early or absentee voters. In 2008, the NEP supplemented its exit polls with telephone surveys in selected states, but the turnout figures may still be inaccurate because of the nationwide prevalence of early and absentee voting.

The Census Bureau's CPS is a better dataset for estimating youth turnout. Each year, the survey samples more than 50,000 individuals of the non-institutionalized population in the United States, and includes many questions about voting participation, registration, citizenship, and other background factors. It is a much larger dataset than either the state or national exit polls, and it can be used to estimate turnout for different age groups over time. This dataset also has some limitations. In particular, data about voting is self-reported. Respondents may say that they voted even if they did not. Nevertheless, this data source remains the best for comparing turnout by age. While this source would provide a more reliable estimate of youth voter turnout, it will not be available until sometime in 2009.

The important point to remember is that both methods produce a similar trendline as shown in Figure 1 (page 1). Below is a table comparing the turnout estimates using the two methods. All three methods show the same directional change in youth voting.

**Table 1: 18-29 Year-Old Turnout Estimates,
NEP National Exit Polls and Census CPS**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Census Current Population Survey</i>	<i>% point change since previous election</i>	<i>National Exit Poll (day after vote tally)⁶</i>	<i>% point change since previous election</i>
2008	N/A		52-53%	+4-5 points
2004	49%	+9 points	48%	+6 points
2000	40%	Same	41%	+5 points
1996	40%	-12 point	37%	-13 points
1992	52%	+8 points	50%	
1988	44%	-5 points	N/A	
1984	49%	+1 points	N/A	
1980	48%	-1 point	N/A	
1976	49%	-6 points	N/A	
1972	55%		N/A	

NOTES

¹ It is important to note that all national voter statistics that are reported by age are *estimates*. See pp. 5-6 for details.

² The December 1st version of this fact sheet had an error in graph 1. The December 1, 2008 version of the fact sheet reported that turnout in 1996 according to the CPS method was 37%. The correct turnout rate for 1996 was 40%.

³ See CIRCLE Fact Sheet "Electoral Engagement Among Non-College Attending Youth" (July 2005)

⁴ Share of population at various educational attainment levels were obtained from author's tabulations of the CPS March supplement data.

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⁵. The following formula was used to calculate turnout percentages using the National Election Pool, National Exit Poll = $[(\% \text{ of age group in ntl poll})(\text{total votes cast})]/\text{age group's CPS citizen population}$.

The source of votes cast varies from year to year. For 1992, 1996, and 2000 the "day after" vote tallies came from the AP as of 6 am the day after the election as published in the Washington Post. For 2004 the vote tallies came from CIRCLE's collection of vote tallies as reported by the media as of 6 am the day after the election. The "final" vote tallies for 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004 came from the Federal Election Commission (FEC). In 2008, CIRCLE used overall vote count projections by Curtis Gans, director of American University's Center for the Study of the American Electorate. All figures used to calculate turnout are available upon request.

The estimated population size used in our estimates derives from two different sources. For 1992, 1996 and 2000 population estimates came from the Census Bureau's November Voting Supplement. For 2004 and 2008 population estimates came from the Census Bureau's March Demographic File.

Caution should be used when comparing estimates between years due to the above factors. Our turnout estimates should be used to determine a directional change in voting. Turnout figures are only estimates.