

Young Voters in the 2012 Presidential Election: The Educational Gap Remains

By CIRCLE Staff
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An estimated 23 million young Americans under the age of 30 voted in the 2012 presidential election, representing a 50% turnout among eligible young people—a comparable turnout to 2008. In 2008, young people came out to cast their votes in record numbers, and we estimated that 52% of young eligible young Americans voted that year.

Members of the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in U.S. history, today's young people also have diverse experiences. Some have children, some have at least one parent born in a different country, some do not have the resources to attend college. Much previous research has shown a strong correlation between college experience and political engagement. Our recent report, [*That's Not Democracy: How Out-of-School Youth Engage in Civic Life and What Stands In Their Way*](#), shows they are interested in participation but face a systematic lack of civic opportunities. Not being asked to participate can have detrimental effects on motivation and efficacy. Since early civic engagement can lead to engagement later in life, whether we close this gap will have a significant effect on the future of democracy.

In this fact sheet, we describe youth participation in the 2012 election by educational attainment. The majority of this CIRCLE fact sheet summarizes findings from the 2012 National Exit Poll conducted by Edison Research. The respondents are actual voters; citizens who did *not* vote are excluded. The exit polls do attempt to include early and absentee voters in proportion to their numbers. Unless otherwise noted, the phrase "young voters" refers to those between the ages of 18 and 29. "30+ voters" refers to ages 30 and older. "All voters" means ages 18 and older.

Education Gap among Young Voters Remains

About 40 percent of young eligible voters between the age of 18 to 29 have not attended college. Historically, there have been significant differences in youth political engagement by educational attainment. Continuing the trend observed in the past elections, young people without college experience were underrepresented in this election. Although 60% of the U.S. citizens between ages of 18-29 have gone to college, 71% of the young voters had attended college, meaning that college-educated young people were overrepresented among young people who voted. In 2008, 70% of the young voters had college experience, while only 57% of U.S. citizens between the ages of 18 and 29 had college experience. Broken down further, it is clear that youth who are college graduates are overrepresented among all young voters, whereas youth with less than college experience are extremely underrepresented among youth who voted.

**Young Voters by Educational Attainment, 2012
Presidential Election**

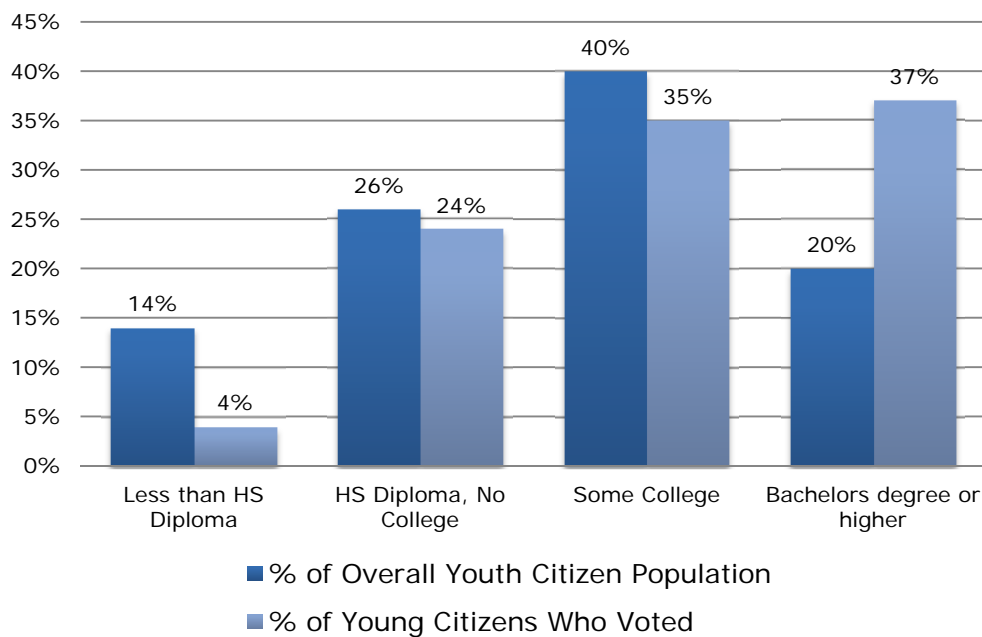


Table 1: Day After-Turnout 2008 & 2012 by College Experience

	No College, 2008	No College, 2012	College Experience, 2008	College Experience, 2012
Share among young voters	30%	29%	70%	71%
% youth population	43%	40%	57%	60%

share				
Estimated vote count	6,888,000	6,672,797	15,621,000	16,336,847
18-29 youth population	18,902,637	18,459,475	24,697,049	27,241,518
Estimated turnout	36%	35%	63%	66%

*Estimate based on the share of votes by groups, multiplied by estimated numbers of votes cast.

Furthermore, young people with no college experience represented only 29% of young voters compared to 40% in the general young citizen population (both voters and non-voters).

Demographic Snapshot

Non-college youth voters were more ethnically diverse than their college educated peers. The racial and ethnic makeup of non-college voters was: 49% White, 22% Black, 24% Latino, and 4% Asian. The racial and ethnic makeup of young voters with college experience was: 61% White, 14% Black, 17% Latino and 6% Asian.

Among youth without college experience who voted in 2008, 66.5% were first-time voters. While this year's poll did not ask about first-time voter status, looking at the 18 to 24 age group might provide some insights since a large portion of those individuals age 18 to 21 are eligible to vote for the first time in this Election. In 2012, 76% of non-college youth were under 25, whereas among college voters, 50% were 18-24.

Youth voters without college experience were much more likely to describe themselves as evangelical Christians (37%) compared to youth with college experience (29%).

Additional demographic differences among young voters by educational attainment include:

- Non-college youth more likely to have children under 18 in their households than youth with college experience
- Non-college youth are more interested in unemployment as an issue than youth with college experience
- A higher percentage of non-college identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual than youth with college experience
- A higher percentage of non-college have lower incomes than college youth

- Youth with college experience are more likely to be married with children than youth without college experience
- There is a greater percentage of men, and men who are non-working, in the non-college youth group
- There is a greater percentage of mothers with no full-time jobs in the non-college youth group, whereas there is a greater of working women among young voters with college experience.

Youth Vote Choice and Perception of Candidates by College Experience

Youth with and without college experience did not differ much in their vote choices. There was a decline in youth support of Obama from 2008 and 2012, but that is represented in all education categories. Sixty percent of youth with college experience voted for Obama, while 37% voted for Romney. Similarly, 60% of youth without college experience voted for Obama, and 36% voted for Romney. In 2008, 32% of youth without college experience and youth with college experience voted for McCain.

Deciding Whom to Support

Seventy-four percent of youth with college experience decided whom to vote for before October, and 24% decided between October and Election Day. In contrast, 35% of youth without college experience made their decision closer to the election (between October and Election Day), and 56% decided before that.

Reasons for choosing the candidate differed by college experience. When asked what qualities mattered most in deciding how they voted, 34% of youth without college experience said "caring about people like them" mattered most, whereas youth with college experience said the most important quality was to "have a vision for the future" (32%). More generally, youth with college experience were more likely to care about the candidates' values and visions for the future. This was similar in 2008, when 35% of youth without college experience felt that "leadership/personal quality of the candidate" was more important than "positions on the issues", whereas 25% of youth with college experience felt the same way.

Among youth without college experience, 27% said that Obama's response to Hurricane Sandy was the most important factor in their vote for president, compared to 10% of youth with college experience. This suggests that Obama's response was critical in swaying nearly a third of the non-college youth vote. Current events may have played an important role for this group of youth without college experience, who decided on their vote within a month of the Election.

Perceptions of the Obama Administration

Youth with college experience were more likely to approve of the President (69%), compared to youth without college experience (52%).

A higher percentage of non-college youth strongly approved of Obama (37% compared to 27% of youth with college experience) but youth without college experience were more likely to strongly disapprove of Obama (24% compared to 17% with college experience). In other words, youth without college experience were more likely to express both strong approval and disapproval than youth with college experience. In terms of their vote choice, youth without college experience were more divided about their approval of the President, compared to youth with college experience.

Despite being more disappointed with his job as President, youth without college experience simultaneously had more “positive feelings about the administration” (69%) compared to youth with college experience (59%).

The majority of young people felt that Obama was in touch with people like them. Youth without college experience were also slightly more likely to feel that the country is generally going in the right direction (53%) compared to youth with college experience (47%). When asked whom the Obama administration’s policies favor, youth without college experience were more likely to say the middle class (63%), compared to youth with college experience (47%). However, youth with college experience were more likely to say that the Obama administration’s policies favor the poor (33%) compared to youth without college experience (22%).

Perceptions of Romney

Perceptions of how Romney would have handled the job as president differed by educational attainment. Overall, youth without college experience were more likely to feel that Romney would have been able to handle major issues well, compared to youth with college experience.

Table 2: Candidate Perceptions by College Experience

	Obama		Romney	
	No College Experience	College Experience	No College Experience	College Experience
Better handle the federal budget deficit	52%	58%	46%	37%

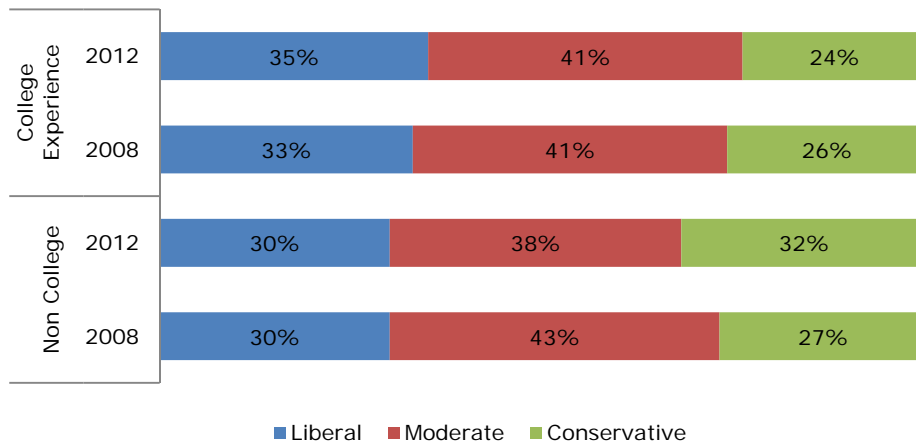
Better handle the economy	47%	60%	51%	39%
Better handle medicare	63%	66%	34%	32%
Trust to handle an international crisis	57%	73%	53%	42%

Youth with and without college experience were most likely to say that Romney’s policies favored the rich (59% and 58%); however, 12% of youth without college experience felt that Romney’s policies would favor the poor, compared to 0% of youth with college experience.

Party ID and Ideology by College Experience

In 2012, young voters without college experience and youth who had been to college were very similar in terms of party identification. Forty-five percent of non-college youth identified as Democrats, while 27% identified with the Republican and 28% as independent or something else. In 2008, 47% of non-college youth identified as Democrats, 25% as Republican, and 21% as independent or something else.

Graph 2: Party Identification by Educational Attainment, 2008 & 2012



Despite having similar political party affiliations, youth differed slightly on ideology by educational attainment. For non-college youth, 30% said they were liberal, 38% were moderate, and 32% were conservative. For college youth:

35% liberal, 41% moderate and 24% conservative. Since 2008, ideology has shifted slightly: among non-college voters, 30% identified as liberal, 43% moderate, and 27% conservative. For college, 33% said they were liberal, 41% moderate, and 26% said conservative.

Campaign Outreach

Research on what influences youth voter turnout finds that young people respond to outreach from campaigns and civic groups. Yet outreach often focuses on college campuses. This opportunity gap may be why our mid-October poll found that youth without college experience were slightly more likely to say that they would be somewhat or very likely to participate if they were given the opportunity to participate in a campaign (20%) compared to youth with college experience (15%).

Data from a mid-October CIRCLE poll also shows that youth with college experience were slightly more likely to have been contacted by a campaign than youth without college experience (all young people, not young voters). Among youth with college experience, 11.5% were contacted by Obama, compared to 5.8% of youth without college experience. However, about 6.6% of youth without college experience were contacted by the Romney campaign compared to 3.5%. A recent CIRCLE fact sheet shows that young men of color may have not been in places where campaigns traditionally reach out to (through unions, or religious institutions).

According to data from 2008 exit poll, Obama campaign reached more young voters than McCain and was equally successful in reaching college and non-college youth. Among youth, voters without college experience were less likely to have been reached by the McCain campaign (10%) compared to voters with college experience (14%).

Beliefs, Issues and Views of Government

Overall, young people, regardless of educational experience, felt that the economy was the most important issue facing the country. Youth without college experience viewed the economy more positively than youth with college experience, despite feeling that their personal economic situation is worse today compared to four years ago (29% of youth without college experience, compared to 20% of college-educated youth). Nearly half of youth without college experience felt that the economy is getting better, whereas only 42% of youth with college experience felt the same.

Furthermore, youth without college experience were more likely to feel that the U.S. economic system is fair to most Americans (40%) compared to youth with

college experience (32%). However, regardless of educational attainment, a majority of young people felt that the economic system favors the wealthy. Youth, overall, blame George W. Bush for the economic problems today. However, youth with college experience are slightly more likely to blame Obama (28%) compared to youth without college experience (23%). In 2008, young voters with college experience (57%) were more likely to strongly disapprove of President Bush's job, compared to young voters without college experience (46%), who had a slightly stronger approval rating of Bush (10% vs. 4%).

Youth with college experience were slightly more likely to feel that government should do more to solve problems (60%) compared to youth without college experience (56%). In 2008, young people felt more strongly that government should do more about solving problems. Seventy-four percent of non-college youth believed that the government should do more to solve problems, while only 67% of college-educated voters felt the same way.

CIRCLE's Methodology for Estimating Youth Voter Turnout

Immediately after each national election, CIRCLE estimates voter turnout among young people (18-29 years old) based on the total vote count as reported by major news outlets, National Election Poll's exit poll estimate of youth voter share (i.e., portion of the votes cast by young people), and the U.S. Census Current Population Survey estimate of the 18-29 citizen population.

The estimated population size used in our estimates comes from the Census Bureau's March Demographic File. The following formula was used to calculate turnout percentages using the National Election Pool: Youth turnout = $[(\% \text{ votes cast by 18-29}) / (\text{total votes cast})] / \text{CPS citizen population for 18-29 year old}$.

It is important to note that the voter turnout and youth vote count figures that CIRCLE publishes immediately after the election are estimates, because votes will be tallied for days after the election, and the exit poll data are subject to reweighting. Both of these variables can change the estimates. However, the exit polls are the only data source available for estimating youth voter turnout, and CIRCLE's estimates of presidential voter turnout have tracked the Census estimates of youth turnout well in the past.

Estimates based on both data sources data have some limitations. For example, the national exit poll consists of only a few thousand young voters, and although the exit poll by Edison Research captures early voters and absentee voters by contacting them via landline and cell phone, it is a small sample relative to the millions of young people who come out to vote. Because the data collection methods have changed over time we can only go back to 1992 data. The national poll's margin of error is approximately 3 percentage points. For more

information about the exit polling by the National Election Pool and Edison Research, please refer to http://www.edisonresearch.com/exit_poll_faq.php. The Census Current Population Survey is a large, ongoing data collection of 50,000 households and about 150,000 individuals. In November of even years, the respondents are asked about voting and registration. Because of the large sample size, researchers can produce more reliable estimates of turnout and registration rates among smaller groups, such as young Hispanics or young men without college experience. We can also analyze data going back to 1972. This dataset also has some limitations. In particular, data about voting is self-reported and in some cases reported by members of the household. Self-reporting weeks after the election can cause some error or overreporting. Finally, because of the time it takes to prepare data, the CPS voting is will not be available until the following year. For more information about the Census Voting and Registration data, please refer to <http://www.census.gov/cps>