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2016 Election

# Young Voters in the 2016 General Election

Data and analysis of youth turnout, vote  
choice, and composition of electorate

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## Introduction

Since Election Day, CIRCLE's analysis has focused on [whom](#) young people voted for, [how many](#) voted, and [which segments](#) of the youth population cast their ballots—placing each in historical context by examining trends from recent elections. Today's analysis looks more deeply at the youth vote in the 2016 presidential race, offering a breakdown of young people's support for each major candidate and for the political parties they represent. We also consider the long-term implications, for both Democrats and Republicans, of a youth electorate that is increasingly loathe to identify strongly with either major party.

Our analysis reveals that **President-elect Donald Trump, while “losing” the youth vote overall by 55% to 37%, garnered support from segments of the youth electorate:** Whites, evangelicals, and young people in rural areas. Not surprisingly, he also drew significant support from young people whose ideas and concerns tracked closely with the key themes of his campaign: the state of the country, an interest in stronger immigration controls, and a perceived untrustworthiness of his opponent, Hillary Clinton.

On the other hand, while **Clinton won by large margins among demographic groups like unmarried young women and youth of color**, she lacked key support from young Whites, young men, and young White moderates. Some of these groups previously backed President Obama by wide margins in 2008 and 2012.

Thus, the demographic diversity of young people played a significant role in the election, and the youth electorate's ideological diversity has both immediate and long-term consequences for both parties and for American politics. The young people who voted in 2016 were more liberal but less likely to identify as Democrats—and no more likely to identify as Republicans than in 2008. The need to engage these increasingly Independent and independent-minded young voters, in future elections and beyond the ballot box, may emerge as one of the most significant stories of this historic election.

## Youth Turnout Similar to 2012; Diverse, Divided Electorate

Based on currently available data<sup>1</sup>, we find no evidence that the national youth turnout decreased in 2016.<sup>2</sup> In fact, our analysis suggests that **young people voted at a similar rate to 2012—close to 50%**. Youth turnout was higher (55%), in the aggregate, in eleven “battleground” states<sup>3</sup> that were projected to be competitive in the presidential contest or have a tightly contested Senate race. This also follows longtime trends, and research suggests that the

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<sup>1</sup> Data and analysis based on estimates from the National Exit Poll conducted by Edison Research.

<sup>2</sup> It has been [widely reported](#) that the general voting-eligible population (VEP) turnout is down compared to previous presidential elections. Readers may wonder why we estimate that youth voter turnout held steady even though the share of young voters is the same as in 2012. This is partially because the rate of population growth for the 18-29 age group is slightly slower than in the 30+ population. Therefore, the increase in the population denominator for our turnout calculation was larger among the older citizen population than for 18-29s. Between 2012 and 2016, the 18 to 29-year-old citizen population grew by 3.0%, while the 30-and-over population grew by 4.4%. For the youth population, the increase in the estimated vote count kept pace with population growth, while for the older population, the [slight increase in overall vote count](#) did not keep pace with the growth in population size. Thus, the 30+ group's turnout likely fell.

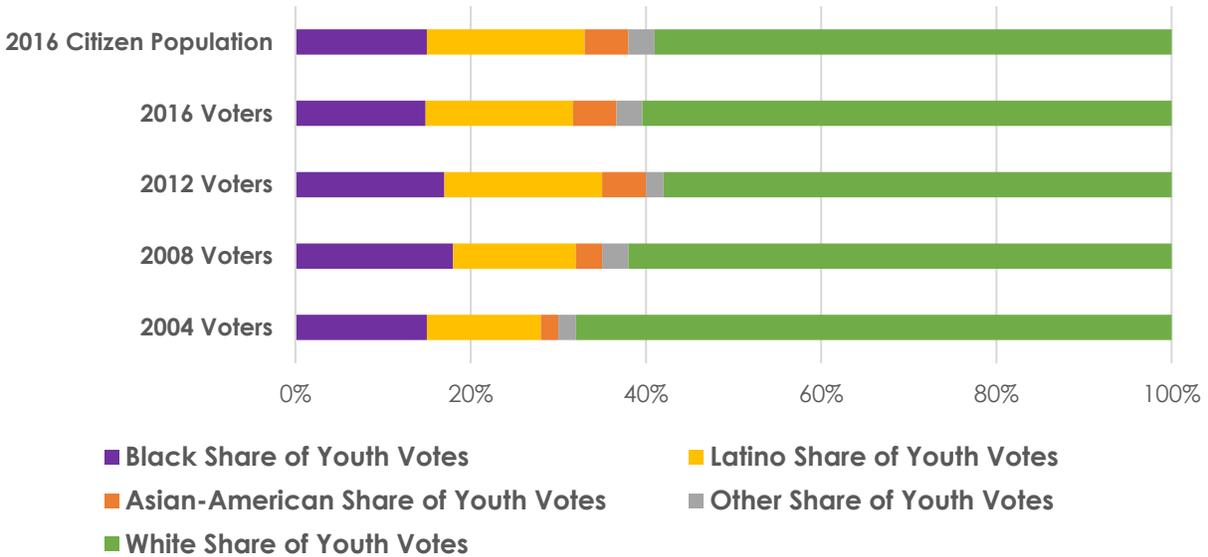
<sup>3</sup> Thirteen states were rated either a “toss-up” or “lean” by at least two out of nine analysts listed on the New York Times presidential or Senate forecasts ([http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/presidential-polls-forecast.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/presidential-polls-forecast.html?_r=0) and <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/senate-election-forecast.html>). Although Arizona and Utah were in that original list, these two are **not** included in our current estimate of aggregate battleground-state turnout because a large number of votes have yet to be counted in those states. Therefore, 11 states are included in this aggregated estimate of battleground-state youth turnout: CO, FL, GA, IA, MI, NC, NH, NV, OH, PA, WI.

elements associated with competitive races (advertisements, canvassing, voter outreach, etc.) likely contribute to increased turnout, though others have found that ideological homogeneity increases turnout.

**The 2016 youth electorate closely mirrors the general population of young citizens** and remained just as racially and ethnically diverse as it has been since 2008, with roughly the same proportion of Whites as in the past two presidential races. There was, however a surge of young, White men in the 2016 electorate—more on that below. On the other hand, the 2016 youth electorate was less representative of the general population in regards to education: young people without college experience, already historically underrepresented, made up a smaller share of the young people who cast ballots than they have in recent elections. As our poll of Millennials and previous analyses have shown, these differences in educational attainment and life experiences of youth shape their views on public issues and influence their decisions in the voting booth.



### Estimated Share of Young Voters, by Race and Ethnicity

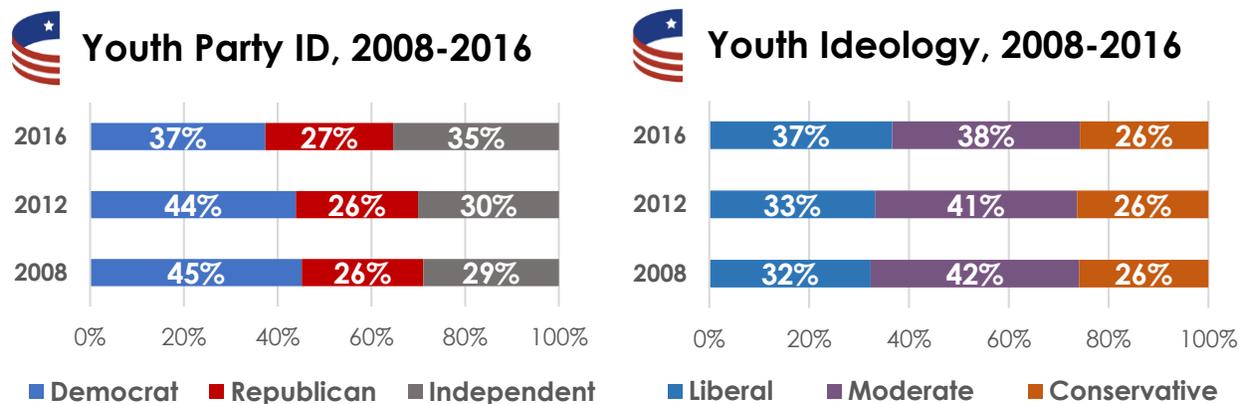


Source: Tisch College's CIRCLE analysis of the Edison Research National Exit Poll, 2004-2016; and the Census Current Population Survey 2016 March Supplement.

This year's youth electorate was also diverse in terms of party affiliation and political ideology. **Young people who cast ballots in 2016 were more likely to identify as liberal** than in recent elections (32% in 2008 to 37% in 2016), **but they were less likely to identify as Democrats** (45% in 2008 to 37% in 2016). While young people who identify as Democrats remained the largest group within this year's youth electorate, it is no longer a dominant group, and this year there were nearly as many young voters who identified as Independents or with other political parties (35%).

This shift suggests that young people increasingly embrace a liberal ideology but do not necessarily see the Democratic Party as an institution that can represent and advance those ideas. Alternatively, young voters who identified as Democrats when they cast ballots in 2008 and 2012 may have been drawn to the party and the voting booth by the inspiring candidacy

of Barack Obama, but may not be otherwise committed to the Party and perhaps decided not to vote in 2016.



Source: Tisch College's CIRCLE analysis of the Edison Research National Exit Poll, 2008-2016

On the other hand, Republican-affiliated youth were likely overrepresented in the 2016 electorate. Large pre-election surveys of youth found that anywhere between 16% ([GenForward](#)) and 22% ([Pew Research](#)) of young people in the general population identify as Republican. However, **among all youth who cast ballots this year, 28% identified as Republican.**

[Our own pre-election poll](#) (in which 25% of Millennials identified as registered Republicans) points to one possible explanation. The young Trump supporters in our survey reported being more energized and more likely to vote than Clinton supporters, suggesting that registered Republican youth, most of whom were Trump voters, turned out at a higher rate than registered Democratic youth.

## Major Parties Struggling with Youth

In the 2016 election, less than 4 in 10 young voters identified with the Democratic Party and less than 3 in 10 identified with the Republican Party, which suggests that America's two major political parties are having trouble attracting and maintaining a substantial and committed youth base. Some lack of support may be attributable to a dearth of sustained outreach: our recent Millennial poll found that, just weeks before Election Day, only [30% of youth](#) had been contacted by a presidential campaign or political party.

Young people may also be showing their disagreement and discontent with both parties. The Republican Party has a small base among youth, who are increasingly liberal as a whole, and even young conservatives' ideology [does not necessarily align](#) well with that of older Republicans. Given young people's ideologically leftward shift, it may become even more difficult for Republicans to increase their youth base.

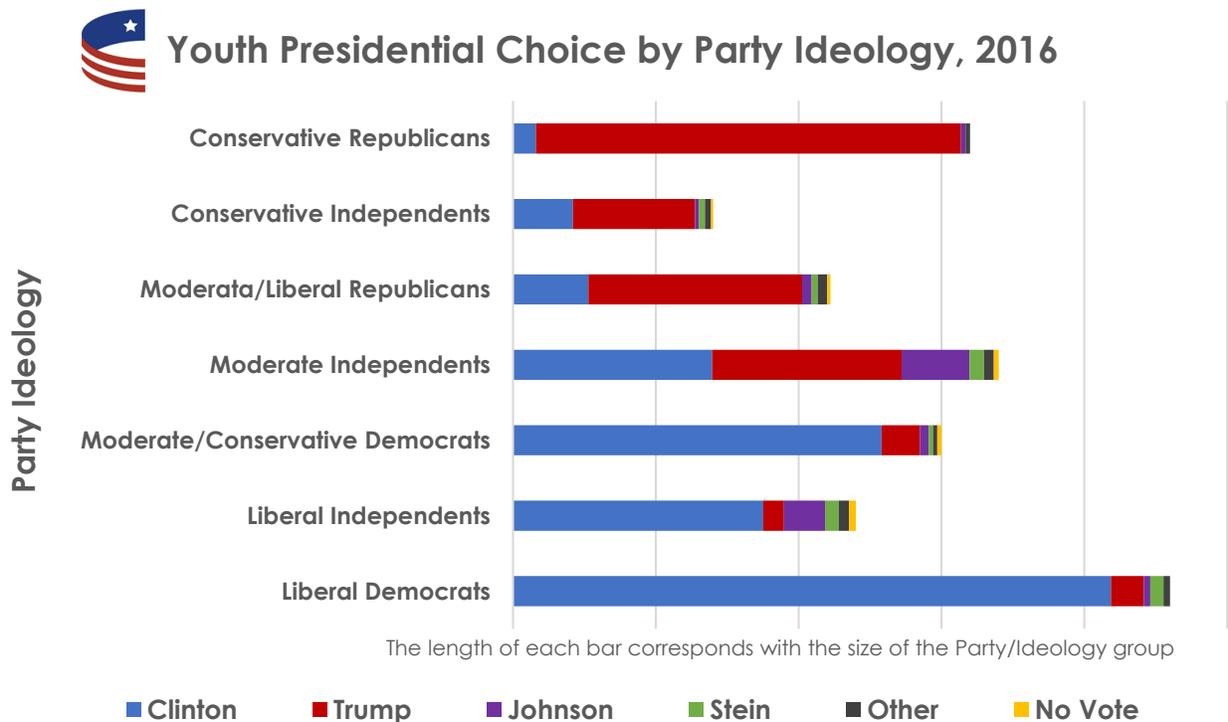
In this election, the GOP faced an additional challenge: some young Republicans' aversion to their own party's nominee. **Among young Republicans, 39% of women felt that Mr. Trump was not qualified to serve as the President**, and they were more likely than young Republican men (17% to 5%) to say that they would be "scared" if Mr. Trump were elected president. Additionally, 37% of young Republican women were bothered "a lot" by Mr. Trump's treatment of women.

Likely due, in large part, to this discomfort, almost a quarter (23%) of young Republican women voted for another candidate for president and, according to our analysis, may have voted differently down-ballot for the House of Representatives. This trend was even stronger for women who identify as moderate or liberal Republicans (11% of all young female voters), 37% of whom voted for a candidate other than Mr. Trump (30% for Clinton, 7% for others), which is far below the level of support Mr. Trump received from moderate/liberal young Republican men.

Regardless of whom they voted for, **the share of Republican-identified young voters has remained the same in the last three presidential elections**, and only about a third (37%) of young voters hold a favorable view of the Party.

At the same time, the Democratic Party seemed unable to capitalize on that ideological shift, at least in this election, when fewer young voters identified as Democrats than in the two previous presidential contests.

Meanwhile, young Independent and third-party voters are increasing in number. In the last two presidential elections, winning over a majority of these voters was an important element of President Obama’s overall youth support: He won 67% of the “Independent/other” group in 2008, and 57% in 2012. This year, **“Independents/others” made up an even larger share of the electorate but Hillary Clinton won just 49% of their votes**, compared to 33% for Donald Trump and 17% who voted for a third party candidate. Clinton won just (41%) of young Independents who consider themselves “moderate,” and less than half of young Independents overall view the Democratic Party favorably (45%).



Source: Tisch College’s CIRCLE analysis of the Edison Research National Exit Poll, 2016

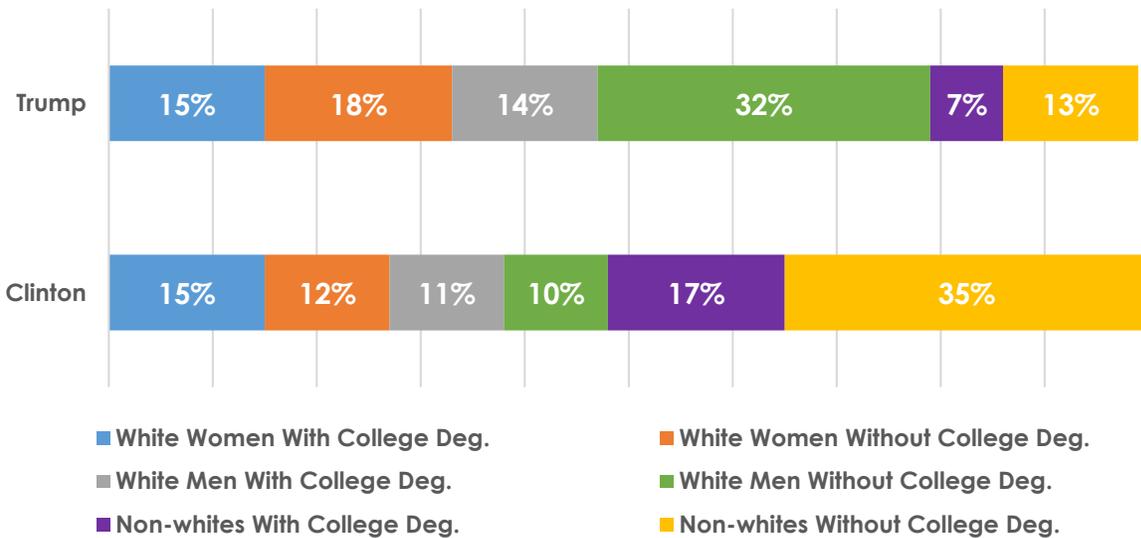
## The Youth Vote for Donald Trump

While only 37% of youth overall voted for Donald Trump on Election Day, he did outperform Hillary Clinton among some segments of youth. Young Trump voters looked very different from young Clinton voters in terms of their demographics, attitudes, concerns, and experiences.

Demographically, young **Trump voters were predominantly White (80%) and male (59%)**. His largest share of his support (32% of all youth who voted for him) came from young White men without a college degree, while Clinton's most supportive constituency was youth of color without college degrees (35%). Among young Trump voters, 62% identified as Republican and 31% of his supporters were Independents/other.



### Composition of Young Supporters by Race, Gender, and Education

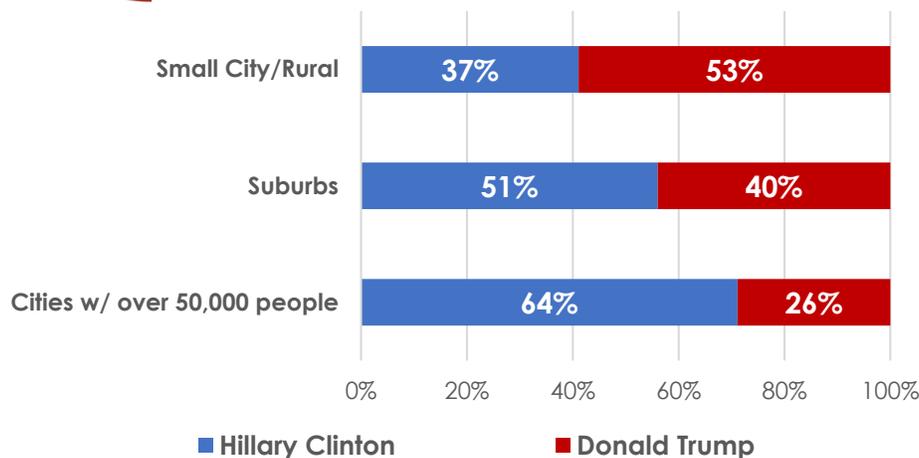


Source: Tisch College's CIRCLE analysis of the Edison Research National Exit Poll, 2016

**Twenty-one percent of young Trump supporters live in rural areas**, compared to 10% among Clinton voters. In rural areas, more than half of the voters identified as conservatives and Republicans than liberal and Democratic youth, once again confirming the notion that young people are not universally liberal, and in a majority of U.S. towns and small cities, young people are more likely to hold conservative views. Finally, the urban-rural divide is also reflected in the racial composition of youth who voted. In urban areas, Whites were just over half (53%) of young voters, while the young voters in rural areas were predominantly White (81%).



## Youth Vote Choice by Urbanicity



Source: Tisch College's CIRCLE analysis of the Edison Research National Exit Poll, 2016

**Fifty-eight percent of young Trump voters identified as born-again Christian**, and 37% attend religious services at least once a week. Young, White, born-again or evangelical Christians have been a solid Republican voting bloc in all recent Presidential elections. Even at its lowest level of support for a Republican nominee, 66% of White born-again or evangelical Christians voted for Senator McCain in 2008. This year, White born-again Christians overwhelmingly voted for Donald Trump (83%), equaling their level of support for President George W. Bush in 2000.

Mr. Trump also garnered substantial support from youth who felt strongly—and negatively—about the state of the country and about the direction it needs to go. **Eighty-eight percent of Trump voters said that the U.S. is “on the wrong track,”** and 72% of Trump voters wanted a President that can “bring change.” Young Trump voters were three times more likely than Clinton voters to be angry at the government (27% vs. 9%), and a majority had a desire to strengthen border security (61% supported building a U.S.-Mexico border wall). A quarter of young Trump voters expressed concerns about having their votes counted in this election. Strikingly, **virtually none (3%) of Trump’s supporters said they believe Hillary Clinton is honest**, and virtually all of them (93%) were bothered by allegations surrounding her use of a private email server while Secretary of State.

Donald Trump's strengths with the kinds of young people outlined above may have helped him make up for his broader unpopularity among youth overall. Trump's youth base was relatively small but fervent; according to our pre-election poll, his supporters were [more energized and enthusiastic](#) about him than Clinton supporters were about her. Generally speaking, Trump performed better among the actual youth electorate than he did among the nationally representative sample of Millennials in our survey. For instance, while our poll found that only 30% of young White women supported Mr. Trump, 42% of young, White, female voters supported him on Election Day.

While **Mr. Trump may have overcome his perceived unfavorability, it's possible that its effects may have trickled down the ballot.** According to our analysis of the exit poll data, young voters were slightly less likely than older voters to select a Senate candidate from the same party as

their choice for President. Among youth, just over three-quarters (76%) voted for a Senate and presidential candidate of the same party, while 82% of voters over 30 did so.

Moderate and conservative youth's support for House GOP candidates may have also been affected by the top of the ticket. The decision of young conservatives who chose not to vote for Donald Trump likely trickled down to their House choice: only 80% of young moderate/liberal Republican women voted for House GOP candidates, compared to 89% among their male counterparts. Looking the other way, 19% of young people who voted for a House GOP candidate did not vote for Trump—and 11% voted for Clinton. By comparison, just 12% of young people who voted for a House Democratic candidate eschewed voting for Clinton, and only 5% voted for Mr. Trump.

## The Youth Vote for Hillary Clinton

Compared to 2008 and 2012, the Democratic Party lost what may have seemed like dominance among youth. While there was an increase in the proportion of youth in the electorate who think of themselves as liberal, there was a decline in the proportion of young voters who identified as Democrats, and an increasing share of “Independents/others.” While Clinton drew strong support from youth of color and other demographic groups, she struggled with other segments of the youth population, such as young Whites and moderate men.

Young Clinton voters were much more diverse than Trump supporters. **Less than half of young Clinton supporters were White (47%)**, 23% were Black, 21% Latino, and 6% Asian. Reflecting the racial diversity of Clinton supporters, the biggest share of her votes came from youth of color without a college degree (35%). Twenty percent of youth who voted for Clinton identified as born-again or evangelical Christian (compared to 58% of Mr. Trump) and 15% of her supporters reported being married, compared to 29% of Trump supporters. Among Clinton voters, 62% identified as Democrats and 31% as Independents, a similar proportion to Mr. Trump's level of support from his party's supporters and from Independent voters.

Clinton voters were particularly bothered by their perception of Mr. Trump's treatment of women: 88% reported it bothered them “a lot,” and 66% said they would be “scared” if Trump were to become the President (another 30% said they would be “concerned.”) While this may suggest that her supporters mostly voted “against” Trump, more than “for” Clinton, **a vast majority of her voters (83%) viewed her favorably**. Likewise, youth who said that a candidate's “qualifications” was the most important factor for deciding their vote went overwhelmingly (89%) for the former Secretary of State.

Clinton supporters also saw in their chosen candidate someone who they believed could better address the issues most important to them—issues, in many cases, starkly different from the ones cited by Trump voters. For example, **80% of Clinton supporters believe that the U.S. criminal justice system is unfair to black people**, a belief shared by just one-third (33%) of Trump voters.

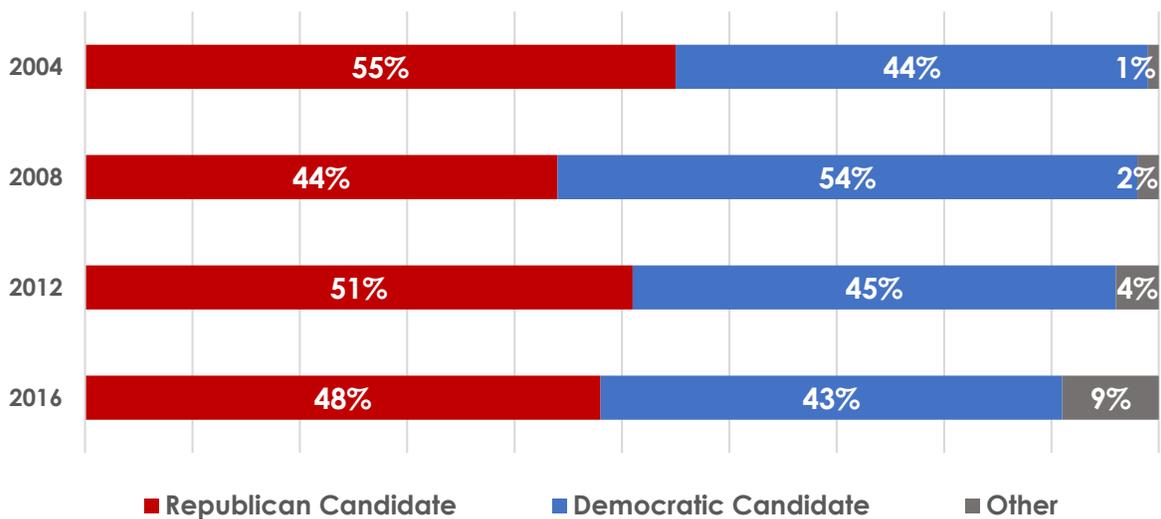
That said, a significant minority (41%) of Clinton's own voters were bothered “somewhat” or “a lot” by the allegations surrounding her private email server, and 36% viewed her as dishonest, suggesting some ambivalence about her candidacy even among those who chose her over Mr. Trump. Finally, 38% of Clinton supporters were first-time voters, which is 8 percentage points higher than among Trump voters.

While Hillary Clinton won youth overall, she could not match President Obama's level of support from young voters in his 2008 and 2012 electoral victories. Among some key segments of youth, the Clinton campaign was bested by Donald Trump; among others, she defeated him handily but did not benefit from the same margins as Obama did in his previous elections.

Notably, **Hillary Clinton lost White youth, 48% to 43%**. However, that's a trend—not an anomaly—for Democratic presidential candidates. In the last four elections, only Barack Obama got more support from White youth than the Republican candidate, and only in 2008.



### Presidential Candidate Choice Among White Youth, 2004-2016



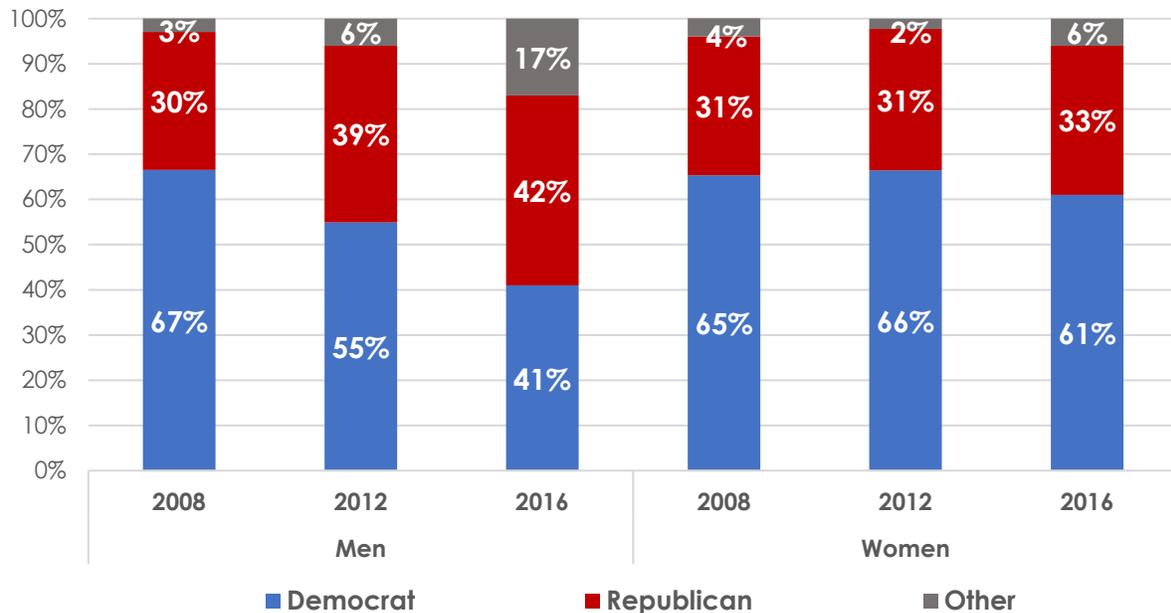
Source: Tisch College's CIRCLE analysis of the Edison Research National Exit Poll, 2004-2016

Still, behind Trump's "victory" over Clinton with White youth lies her lagging performance among, especially, young White men—whose participation and influence surged in this election—and young moderate men. Moderates in particular were the largest ideological bloc of young voters, making up 38% of the youth electorate. They were also the largest group among young White voters, and **Donald Trump won White moderates by 48% to 39%**.

A crucial factor seems to have been gender. Moderate young women backed Clinton over Trump by a nearly 2-to-1 margin in this election, 61% to 33%. Moderate men, meanwhile, split their vote almost evenly between both candidates: 42% for Trump and 41% for Clinton. That represents a staggering drop from the support President Obama received in 2008 (67%) and even 2012 (55%). At least part of that shift is due to third-party candidates, which drew only 3% support from moderate men in 2008, but 17% this year.



## Presidential Vote Choice Among Young Moderates, by Gender



Source: Tisch College's CIRCLE analysis of the Edison Research National Exit Poll, 2008-2016

This gender gap also showed up in the only racial group that preferred Trump over Clinton. **Young White women preferred Clinton over Trump, 50% to 42%**, while young White men favored Mr. Trump by almost 20 points (54% to 35%).

Young women, across most demographic groups showed stronger support for Clinton, especially young single women. At least three quarters of young women who voted in 2016 were unmarried, and they backed Clinton over Trump by an overwhelming margin (**67% to 27% among single women, 51% to 37% among single men**). Support varied by race and other factors, with the highest level coming from young, unmarried women of color (86%). That said, here again, Clinton received lower support than President Obama, who won 77% of young unmarried women in 2008 and 71% in 2012.

By contrast, the Clinton campaign lost heavily-Republican groups of young women, such as married women, born-again and evangelical Christian White women, and women living in rural areas.

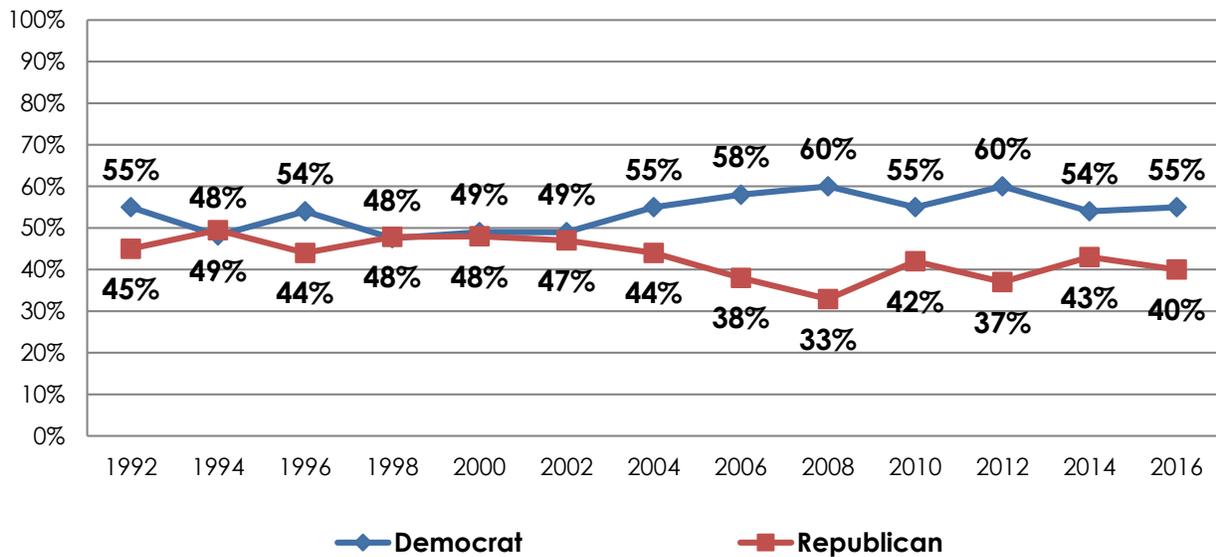
As we pointed out in an [earlier analysis](#), young people of color were considerably more likely to support Clinton, backing her over Trump by 20 points or more. Black and Asian youth were the most likely to support Clinton (and least likely to support Mr. Trump), particularly young Black women, who according to the exit poll estimates were the only racial and ethnic group to vote in the single digits for Mr. Trump.

There was also a stark contrast in how youth of color reported feeling about each candidate. **Sixty-seven percent of Black youth and 36% of Latino youth reported being "scared" if Mr. Trump**

**won.** Meanwhile, 84% of Black youth and 57% of Latino youth said they were “excited” or “optimistic” about a Hillary Clinton presidency. Nearly half (49%) of young Latinos who voted in 2016 reported that they had cast a ballot for the first time, far surpassing other racial and ethnic groups.

While youth support for Democrats seems to have peaked in 2008 and has experienced a slight decline since, and while it was not enough to win the White House this year, Democrats still enjoys a healthy advantage that was reflected down the ballot. This year, **55% of young voters reported supporting a Democratic House candidate**, compared to 40% for a Republican candidate. Young people of color were also far more likely to support Democratic House candidates than young Whites.

### House Vote Choice Among Youth, 1992-2016



Source: Tisch College’s CIRCLE analysis of the Edison Research National Exit Poll, 1992-2016

## Conclusion and Implications

Our comprehensive analysis of the 2016 youth electorate suggests that, despite many young people holding overall negative views of both major party presidential candidates, we estimate that youth turnout remained about the same as 2012. The youth electorate also remained racially diverse, yet featured more college-educated youth than the general youth population. The overall size and influence of the youth electorate did not shift.

Yet which groups of young people voted, and how those young voters supported—or not—the presidential candidates of both major parties experienced certain shifts that will have implications on future elections and on our democracy:

- **Change They Can Believe In:** Young people are clamoring for significant changes in their country, though not all youth agree on what that change should look like. Almost three

quarters of young Trump voters came out to choose a President that could bring “needed change,” reminiscent, in tone if not in substance, of the rhetoric that powered President Obama’s election in 2008. Though young people, even young conservatives, were slow to warm up to Mr. Trump, a larger than expected share of youth ended up choosing him over an opponent whom many saw as less likely to bring that change.

- **A Political Awakening?** Young White men offered higher support to Donald Trump in 2016 than they have to previous Republican presidential candidates. It remains to be seen whether this will be the start of a trend; elections can be formative for young people, meaning that those who vote for one party in their first few elections are likely to remain loyal to that party for the remainder of their lives. Both Republicans and Democrats will now have an opportunity, to solidify and to win back, respectively, the support of these young voters moving forward, especially in the 2018 midterm election. This will take energy, strategy, and outreach.
- **Reaching Moderates:** At the same time, the young Republican base, which has produced some committed GOP voters, has not grown since 2008. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party lost some young voters, and even among self-identified Democrats, some youth chose to vote for a third-party candidate. In his two elections, President Obama drew support from well over half of young people who saw themselves as neither liberal nor conservative. This year, while moderate women backed Clinton, moderate men did not, and she lost White moderates overall. These young people who eschew the political extremes are likely to continue playing decisive roles in elections to come.
- **(Re)Building their Bases:** Beyond the 2016 presidential race, in an era when 4 out of 10 (41%, Pew Research) young people choose not to associate with any political party, both Democrats and Republicans face challenges moving forward. Just over half (55%) of young 2016 voters view the Democratic Party favorably, and just over a third (37%) saw the Republican Party favorably. Given that both parties’ nominees this year were relatively unpopular with youth, both will have work to do to convince youth moving forward that their organizations and candidates are worth young people’s allegiance.
- **Cultivating an Active, Informed Electorate:** In just two years, there’s another federal election. While presidential cycles get all the attention, only about one in five young eligible voters turned out to vote in the 2014 midterms—80% of youth stayed home. Millions of young people will be newly eligible to vote in 2018, and long-term investments are required to ensure that, by the time all youth turn 18, they are fully prepared to vote in local, state, and national elections, and that they feel a responsibility to participate.
- **A Civic Identity:** Stronger civic education is one important key to a more active and informed youth electorate. Another is the [organization](#) provided by political parties, workplaces, and grassroots organizations, which often provide an entryway into more substantive political engagement and broader civic action. Given that young people are increasingly less likely to identify with a major party, there is a danger that these young voters may become [politically disconnected](#), responding only when a particular candidate stokes their passions rather than motivated by underlying political values or policy preferences. That danger is amplified by the fact that most [state civic education standards](#) do not currently require students to learn about the modern ideological underpinnings and fundamental policy positions of the major parties. Moving forward, multi-sector, partisan, and nonpartisan efforts must all contribute to helping youth develop a strong civic identity that engages them in shaping our democracy through participation in elections and other aspects of civic life.

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CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement) is a nonpartisan, independent, academic research center that studies young people in politics and presents detailed data on young voters in all 50 states. CIRCLE is part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

Learn more at [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)

