

Polling Young Voters

An Analysis of Young Adults' Responses to Recent Political Polls

Volume I, September 2006



Polling Young Voters was compiled by **Young Voter Strategies**, a project of the Graduate School of Political Management at The George Washington University with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts. Young Voter Strategies is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that provides the public, parties, candidates, consultants, and nonprofits with polling and demographic research on the youth vote and tools to effectively mobilize this electorate for upcoming elections. We are committed to making the targeting of young voters a more permanent part of electoral strategies.

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Other publications from Young Voter Strategies

Winning Young Voters: A Guide to Youth Vote Organizing

Young Voters and the Media, with Professor Diana Owens of Georgetown University

Young Voter Mobilization Tactics: A Compilation of Research on Voter Turnout Techniques, with the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)

Young Voter Battleground Poll I, with The Tarrance Group & Lake Research Partners

Young Voter Battleground Poll II, with The Tarrance Groups & Lake Research Partners
(forthcoming, September 20, 2006)

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INTRODUCTION

Young Voters: An Emerging Political Force

Conventional wisdom in the political community is that young people don't vote, so why target them?

Conventional wisdom, however, is outdated. Consider the facts:

Young adults are huge in number and growing. There are 42 million 18-29 year olds eligible to vote in the U.S., one-quarter of the entire electorate. By 2015, "Millennial Generation" voters between 18-38 years of age will make up one-third of the electorate and be the biggest, most diverse generation in American history.

Today's young adults are paying attention to politics and increasingly likely to vote. In 2004, turnout among 18-29 year olds jumped by nine percentage points, more than twice the turnout increase of the overall electorate. **Over 4.3 million more 18-29 year olds cast ballots in 2004 than in 2000, for a total of 20.1 million voters.**

Young voters will turn out to vote IF you ask them. We know that youth-targeted mobilization campaigns work, particularly with this new generation of more engaged young adults. Further, polling shows that both parties have a stake in turning out different groups of young voters. With their huge numbers, young adults can make the difference in close elections. In the long run, studies show that voting and partisanship are habits that, if developed early, tend to last throughout life.

Given that the Millennial Generation will be one-third of the electorate in less than a decade, today's young voters are essential to building your party for the future. The question then becomes – how do we mobilize young voters?

Demystifying the Youth Vote

The term "youth vote" can conjure a number of (mis)impressions, from the infamous "boxers or briefs" interview to a vague notion of a kid who cares more about the drinking age than about health care, schools or jobs.

This analysis of young voters' political attitudes helps correct these misimpressions. The fact is that young adults are quite similar to the overall electorate in many ways. **Voters 30 and under consistently rank jobs and the economy, education, energy and health care as the most important issues for our elected officials to address, and also show a strong interest in issues of national security and the war in Iraq. They want candidates to reach out to them, to talk about these issues in ways relevant to their lives, and to ask for their votes.**

Of course, today’s 18-30 year olds are also a new and different generation in many ways. This generation is more technologically-savvy, more diverse, more mobile, and more global than any in U.S. history. This analysis also includes a briefing on the news and communications habits of the Millennial Generation and a summary of the group’s demographics, both important factors to consider when targeting and mobilizing today’s youth vote.

Both parties have a stake in targeting and mobilizing young voters, and can do so using simple, cost-effective techniques. In 2006 and beyond, bringing young voters into your party or organization will help win close elections today and build power for the future.

ISSUES

Young Voters Attuned to Economy, Education, Health Care, and Iraq

Voters 30 years and under consistently rank jobs and the economy and education as the top two most important issues that elected officials should prioritize. As Table 1 shows, surveys conducted by Young Voter Strategies, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Riehle-Tarrance Strategies, and others all found these issues to be primary in young voters’ minds, along with another “pocketbook” issue—gas prices—and the war in Iraq.

Issue	GQR	YVS	RTS	Pew	QPI
Jobs & Economy	18%	12%	21%	22%	11%
Education	16%	15%	16%	24%	6%
Health Care	9%	8%	13%	5%	7%
Iraq War	7%	10%	16%	7%	15%
Energy	n/a	19%*	15%*	14%	7%
Immigration	6%	8%	14%	7%	13%
Table 1: Young Voters’ Top Issues					
*Question asked “gas prices”					

As Table 2 shows, young voters’ concerns line up with those ranked as important by voters of all ages.

Issue	Lake/ Tarrance Spring 2006		RTS April 2006		GQR Spring 2006		Pew August 2006	
	% 18-30	% All Ages	% 18-34	% All Ages	% 18-29	% All Ages	% 18-29	% All Ages
Jobs & Economy	12	17	21	19	18	13	22	27
Education	15	3	16	9	16	9	24	15
Iraq	10	11	22	16	7	14	7	10
Gas Prices/Energy	19	n/a	15	12	n/a	n/a	14	12
Immigration	8	4	14	12	6	7	7	9
Health Care	8	12	10	13	9	9	5	11
Corruption	6	n/a	n/a	n/a	3	6	1	2
Social Security	6	2	n/a	n/a	6	9	1	2
Taxes	3	n/a	n/a	n/a	9	8	4	5
Terrorism	2	6	6	7	7	9	2	3
Moral Values	3	n/a	n/a	n/a	13	12	0	1

Table 2: Young Adults' and All Adults' Issue Rankings

Intensity: Young adults surveyed in the May 2006 Young Voter Battleground Poll expressed strong feelings about energy independence, college costs, and affordable health care. When asked to rate a hypothetical candidate's series of statements on a scale of 0 ("not at all convincing") to 10 ("extremely convincing"), the following rated the highest:

Statement	Mean Rating	% 18-30 Rating 8 to 10
"Calls for affordable health insurance for all by the year 2010"	7.4	59
"Calls for energy independence and to invest in sustainable energy"	7.4	58
"Supports increased funding for student aid programs like the Pell grant"	7.4	54

CANDIDATE & PARTY PREFERENCE

Currently, polling shows that young voters' party preferences are tracking the overall electorate in general and leaning slightly more Democratic in some cases.

Presidential Approval: As of August 2006, President Bush's approval rating among the overall electorate is in the high 30s, up slightly from early summer but down significantly from two years ago. Young voters' approval of Bush has followed a similar trajectory. As Table 3 shows, young adults currently give President Bush an approval rating in the mid to low 30s, consistently a few points lower than the overall electorate.

Direction of the Country: Polling shows that young adults currently feel the country is moving in the wrong direction. (Table 4) This response is consistent with polling of the overall electorate. An August 2006 Cook Political Report poll found that 64 percent of voters of all ages feel the country is on the wrong track, Newsweek found 65 percent "dissatisfied" with the direction of the country, and a Gallup Poll found 69 percent dissatisfied.

	GQR	YVS	RTS	Pew	QPI	IOP
% Young Approve of Bush	36	35	32	29	30	33
% Young Disapprove of Bush	60	64	62	61	63	59
% All Adults Approve of Bush	39	46	36	36	35	n/a
% All Adults Disapprove of Bush	57	52	59	57	58	n/a

Table 3: Young Adults' Job Approval of President Bush

	GQR	YVS	RTS	Pew	QPI	IOP
% Young Country Right Track	24	29	23	34	35	30
% Young Country Wrong Track	68	63	64	62	65	59
% All Adults Country Right Track	27	31	27	30	38	n/a
% All Adults Country Wrong Track	65	60	63	66	62	n/a

Table 4: Young Adults' Opinion of if U.S. is on the Right or Wrong Track

Party Identification: Young voters diverge somewhat from the overall electorate here and are more likely to identify as Democratic than Republican. Polls show young adults giving Democrats an 8 to 10 point advantage when asked with which party they identify, compared to a zero to four point advantage among the overall electorate.

Analyses of polling find that young voters who identify as Democrat—ranging from 29 to 41 percent—are very dissatisfied with the current direction of the country and the Republican leadership, and are hungry for change. Young adults in 2006 are far more likely to identify as Democratic than two years ago, when the age group polled about evenly Republican, Democratic, and Independent.

Among the 22 to 31 percent of young adults who identify as Republican, analyses find strong loyalty for the GOP and its leaders, as well as a greater propensity to vote. According to the Young Voter Strategies Battleground Poll in May 2006, Young Republicans give President Bush and the Republican Party a 76 percent and 85 percent favorability rating, respectively, and 65 percent say they are extremely likely to vote, compared to 58 percent of young Democrats.

	GQR	YVS	RTS	Pew	QPI	IOP
% Young ID Democrat	41	39	32	34	29	32
% Young ID Republican	31	31	22	22	23	24
% Young ID Independent	27	18	39	39	37	41
% All Ages ID Democrat	38	42	31	33	33	n/a
% All Ages ID Republican	34	42	28	29	27	n/a
% All Ages ID Independent	27	15	36	31	33	n/a
Table 5: Party Identification of Young Adults						

Generic Ballot: Polls find young voters give Democrats a 10 to 20 point advantage when asked for whom they will vote in November 2006. (Table 6) In the Young Voter Strategies Battleground Poll in May 2006, young voters gave Democrats a 19 point advantage when asked for whom they would vote in the 2006 Congressional election.

	GQR	YVS	RTS	Pew
% Young Vote Dem for Congress	55	45	44	56
% Young Vote Rep for Congress	38	26	34	36
% All Ages Vote Dem for Congress	50	46	44	51
% All Ages Vote Rep for Congress	42	40	32	39
Table 6: Young Adults' Generic Ballot Pick, U.S. Congress 2006				

Among the overall electorate, recent polls are finding a 9 to 16 point Democratic ballot advantage in August 2006, (CNN, Aug. 18-20, CBS News/New York Times, Aug. 17-21, Harris, Aug. 18-21, Newsweek, Aug. 24-25) up several points from spring and early summer, when polls found from a 3 to a 13 point Democratic advantage. (Fox/Opinion Dynamics May 2-3, CNN May 5-7, USA Today/Gallup June 14, June 9-11)

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Study after study has shown that personal outreach is the best way to mobilize a young person to vote.¹ A phone call and knock on the door are effective and cost-efficient ways to reach out to young voters, while direct mail and automated phone calls are not.

That said, understanding young adults' information habits is useful. As with all voters, a campaign can use a variety of media to relay its message. As Table 7 shows, many young adults get their news from different sources than do their parents and grandparents, and new technologies are rapidly changing communications.

Social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook are also immensely popular among young adults. According to Alexa, a website ranking service, MySpace is the third most popular website in the U.S.—just after Google and Yahoo—and Facebook is sixteenth. A 2006 Harvard University poll found that 97 percent of college students polled had visited Facebook within the past month.

YVS 2006: Do you ____?	% 18-30 Daily	% 18-30 Twice Weekly	Combined
Use the Internet	70	11	81
Check email	62	12	74
Send text messages	27	10	37
Read a blog	14	9	23

Table 7: Young Adults' Communications Habits

It is crucial to reiterate that, while it is useful to understand young voters' information habits, there is **no evidence that email, MySpace, blogs, and other online activities are effective ways to mobilize young voters.** Years of study and practice show that **personal outreach with a trusted messenger—phone calls and door knocks—are the most effective and cost-efficient way to mobilize young adults to vote.** For more information on best tactics, see our *Winning Young Voters* and *Young Voter Mobilization Tactics*.

¹ See Young Voter Strategies' *Winning Young Voters* and *Young Voter Mobilization Tactics*, available at www.youngvoterstrategies.org.

Table 8 outlines ways in which young adults get news and election information today. While young adults report turning television news at about the same levels as older adults, they report reading print newspapers far less frequently. In addition, youth-oriented comedy shows like *The Daily Show* are very popular among young adults.

Table 8: Young Adults' Information Habits		
*Combines % of responses to two separate answer choices, "regularly" and "sometimes."		
Pew Nov 2004: Did you get your election news from ____?	% 18-29	% All Ages
Television	72	76
Internet	40	21
Newspaper	23	46
Pew Jan 2006: Get election news from ____ regularly/sometimes?*	% 18-29	% All Ages
National network TV	64	70
Local TV	64	77
Daily paper	56	61
Internet	44	33
<i>The Daily Show</i>	50	26
Pew July 2006: Do you watch ____ regularly/sometimes?*	% 18-29	% All Ages
Local news	72	77
Cable news	66	65
Nightly network news	43	54
<i>The Daily Show</i>	33	21
IOP Fall 2005: Do you watch, read, or listen to ____ regularly/sometimes?*	% College Students	% All Ages
Network TV	79	n/a
Cable TV	75	n/a
<i>The Daily Show</i>	42	n/a
Print newspapers	43	n/a
Online columns or blogs	34	n/a

DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE MILLENNIALS

The generation of young people born between 1977 and 1997 has been dubbed the Millennial Generation and is different from their older Generation X siblings and Baby Boomer parents in many ways. The Millennial Generation is huge in number, very diverse, active in community service, immersed in high-tech, and coming of age in a global world. Understanding the basics of the Millennials is helpful in efforts to target and mobilize this voting bloc:

This generation of youth is large, very large

In the reality of close elections, they are a bloc that will play an important role in deciding elections in the next decade.

Young adults are huge in number. Today, there are 75 million 12-29 year olds in the U.S., including 41.9 million 18-29 year old citizens. (U.S. Census Bureau)

These populations are growing. By 2015, potential Millennial voters ages 18-38 years old will be one-third of the U.S. electorate. (U.S. Census Bureau)

The Millennial Generation the most diverse generation in U.S. history

Between 1972 and 2000, the percentage of young Americans (15-25 years of age) identifying themselves as white decreased from 88 percent to 65 percent. During the same period, the percentage of young Hispanic citizens has grown 11 percentage points from 5 percent in 1976 to 16 percent in 2000. (CIRCLE, 2002)

One-third of children under 18 are racial or ethnic minorities and 20 percent of elementary- and high school-age students are immigrants or children of immigrants. (U.S. Census Bureau)

Millennials are increasingly active in politics and volunteerism

After years of Gen X, which never got its political legs, this **new generation of youth, the Millennials, is a civically and politically re-engaged generation.**

In 2005, an all-time high of 83.2 percent of college freshmen reported that they volunteered at least occasionally during their high school senior year. 70.6 percent volunteered weekly.

73 percent of 18-30 year olds surveyed by Young Voter Strategies in May 2006 report that they will vote in 2006.

Millennials are the most educated generation in American history...

College enrollment is increasing. Between 1970 and 2004, the school enrollment rate for 18-19 year olds jumped from 48 to 64 percent and from 22 to 35 percent for those ages 20-24 years. (National Center for Education Statistics)

High school degree attainment is high: 87 percent of 25-34 year olds have high school diplomas. (U.S. Census Bureau)

More and more adults are going to college: Two-thirds (67%) of 25-34 year old high school graduates have attended college and 35 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher. (U.S. Census Bureau)

...but on its way to being the first generation *less economically secure than their parents*

Young adults' earnings are declining and increasingly dependent upon additional education.

In 1972, the typical young male high school graduate earned \$42,000 annually; three decades later, this same group earns just over \$29,000 on average. (National Center for Education Statistics, inflation-adjusted)

In 1972, a young adult male with a bachelor's degree or higher earned on average \$52,087 annually, but in 2002, this group's average earnings are down to \$48,955. (National Center for Education Statistics, inflation-adjusted)

Unemployment is higher among young adults than among adults overall. According to a 2003 government report, unemployment among young adults is two to three times higher than among adults overall. (Bureau of Labor Statistics)

Young adults are swimming in debt. Today, the average college graduate leaves school with \$20,000 in student loans, up more than 65 percent from 1992-1993, and more than 25 percent of college graduates had student loan debt over \$25,000. (National Center for Education Statistics, inflation-adjusted)

Average credit card debt among young adults increased by 55 percent from 1992 and 2001 to \$4,088. (Demos, *Generation Broke*, inflation-adjusted)

Young adults are more likely than any other age group to lack health insurance.

Approximately one in three young adults lack health insurance, compared to one in six Americans overall. (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004)

Millennials are tech-savvy and constantly connected

Young adults use the Internet frequently and increasingly for both social and informational reasons. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 88 percent of 18-29 year-olds are online, compared to 71 percent of 50-64 year-olds and 32 percent of those aged 65 and older.

Nearly two-thirds of 18-30 year olds check their email daily, 70 percent use the Internet daily, and one-quarter use online communications such as Facebook.com or instant messaging. (YVS)

Virtually all (97%) of college students surveyed in 2006 had visited Facebook.com in the past month. (IOP)

For more background on the Millennial Generation, see www.youngvoterstrategies.org

CONCLUSION: Winning Young Voters

Both Democrats and Republicans have a stake in turning out young voters in 2006 and beyond.

Young adults are the parties' votes to win – or lose. **Potential Millennial voters 18-29 are nearly 42 million strong today and by 2015, 18-38 year olds will be one-third of the U.S. electorate.** Winning young voters today means winning close elections now and building toward being the party in power in the future.

Parties, nonprofits and campaigns can see Young Voter Strategies' *Winning Young Voters* and *Young Voter Mobilization Tactics* for the best ways to turn out youth.

The Democratic Case for Targeting Young Voters

Young voters, particularly young Democrats, are dissatisfied with the current direction of the country and the Republican leadership. Young adults are polling more Democratic now than in 2004, when they were the only age group John Kerry won.

As Democratic pollster Celinda Lake notes: "There is a real opportunity this year to seize this advantage and institutionalize the young vote as part of the Democratic bloc – a bloc that includes significant shares of young people across the demographic board...The question is whether we Democrats have the determination and commitment to target young voters who are there for the taking."

The party that persuades young voters today can both win elections now and build a strong base for the party in the future. Young voters, particularly college students, are increasingly engaged in their communities and paying attention to politics. They will vote IF asked, and campaigns can and should reach out to them – on campus, at home, via new technologies, and on the phone.

The Republican Case for Targeting Young Voters

While the strong Democratic polling of young adults may lead Republicans to assume themselves in great trouble with this age group, that would be a mistake.

First, the current anti-incumbent and anti-Republican mood among young voters is not unique to this age demographic and should be taken into account when reviewing the polling of young adults, as it may be temporary.

Further, an analysis by prominent Republican pollster Ed Goetas shows that today's young Republicans enjoy an intensity and loyalty advantage over young Democrats. According to the May 2006 Young Voter Battleground Poll, 65 percent of young Republicans say they are extremely likely to vote versus 58 percent of young Democrats. Further, 60 percent of young Republicans believe the country is headed in the right direction, more than twice that of the overall electorate, and President Bush enjoys a favorability rating of 76 percent.

Republicans can turn out their young voters with traditional campaign issues. Polling shows that young Republicans rank as most important issues that top the GOP's agenda: 1) energy independence 2) reforming Social Security so that young people can invest a portion of their earnings and 3) believing that our major crisis is a decline in morality and values.

The party that persuades young voters today can both win elections now and build a strong base for the party in the future. Young voters, particularly college students, are increasingly engaged in their communities and paying attention to politics. They will vote IF asked, and campaigns can and should reach out to them – on campus, at home, via new technologies, and on the phone.

SOURCES

This analysis was compiled by Young Voter Strategies based on data from the following sources:

Cook Political Report/RT Strategies Poll (denoted as “RT”): 18-34 year olds responses from five polls conducted April-August 2006. Samples sizes for 18-34 year olds range from 219 to 288; samples for all ages range from 874 to 1028.

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (denoted as “GQR”): A compilation of 18-29 year olds’ responses from polls conducted from March to June 2006 by GQR for Democracy Corps, for a total sample of 575.

Harvard University Institute of Politics (denoted as “IOP”): Polling of college students conducted in March 2006 (sample size: 1200, 95% 18-24 years old) and October 2005 (sample size: 1204, 90% 18-24 years old).

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (denoted as “Pew”): Data in the “Issues” and “Candidate and Party Preference” sections are from three Pew polls conducted in June, July and August 2006. (18-29 year old sample sizes 128, 406 and 738) All other data is from spring and summer 2006 polls with 18-29 year old samples ranging from 104 to 782.

Quinnipiac Polling Institute (denoted as “QPI”): 18-34 year olds responses from Quinnipiac Polling Institute’s June 2006 national survey (sample size: 460). Sample of all ages is of 1,534 registered voters.

Young Voter Battleground Poll (denoted at “YVS”): A poll of 507 18-30 year olds conducted by Ed Goeas of The Tarrance Group and Celinda Lake of Lake Research Partners in April 2006. A comparison of all adults is taken from a March 2006 Goeas and Lake poll (denoted as “Lake/Tarrance,” sample size 1020).

Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)

U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey



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