

Rock the Vote

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Democratic Strategic Analysis

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In April 2006, we noted that young voters were poised to continue the trend they started in 2004, supporting Democratic candidates and aligning their cohort as part of the Democratic base, and on Election Day, that trend was amplified as voters under age 30 supported Congressional Democratic candidates over Republican candidates by 60% to 38%. Rock the Vote's first ever Battleground poll this month shows that the trend not only continues, but has gained remarkable momentum heading into the presidential election this fall. In our three year relationship with Young Voter Strategies and now Rock the Vote, this is the strongest position in which the Democrats have ever been. They hold a 19-point partisan identification advantage, Senators Clinton and Obama lead Senator McCain by double digits, and the Democrat leads the Republican in the generic Congressional ballot by 25 points. For the first time, Democrats have a stronger intent to vote than do Republicans. Quite simply, there is little good news here for Republicans.

However, this advantage can be fleeting if Democrats fail to target and organize young voters with aggressive communication and turnout strategies. Young voters can be key to either delivering or denying Democrats the White House this November, but the potential payoff will be even longer lasting. As we have stated before, University of Michigan research shows that voters who cast a ballot for one party in three consecutive elections are disproportionately likely to remain with that party for life. The first election was 2004, when young voters broke for Senator Kerry; 2006 was the second election, when young voters supported Democrats in their bid to retake Congress; and 2008 can be that key third election that solidifies this generation's consistent support for Democrats for the rest of their lives. This is an opportunity that progressives are poised to exploit.

The trend has gained momentum because young Democrats are more likely to vote this year and more excited about their candidates than young Republicans. Seventy percent of self-identified Democrats say they are extremely likely to vote in the November election, compared to just 61% of Republicans – a 9-point advantage for Democrats. Similarly, 65% of voters who say they will support the Democrat in a generic Congressional race are extremely likely to vote compared to just 56% of those who say they will support the Republican – another 9-point advantage. Notably, at least a third of Clinton's and Obama's supporters are very excited to vote for those candidates. On the other hand, only 12% of Senator McCain's supporters are very excited to support him. All of the energy and enthusiasm is with Democrats, at present.

We want to be clear. This movement toward an energized youth vote and enthusiasm toward Democrats is not just some trend driven by one candidate or a cult of personality. These trends existed well before Obama decided to run for President and

well before the wheels came off the Bush Administration. In 2004, young voters supported Kerry and in 2006 young voters were instrumental in helping Democrats win Senate seats and Congressional seats across the country. The trend began in 2004 and has the potential to continue no matter who the Democrats nominate in 2008.

While the November election is months away, all indications are that it will be another nail-biter. If Democrats are successful in targeting young voters, winning their support, and turning them out, the margins we need among older swing voters are reduced. Democrats' advantage on the Congressional ballot is also sizable, so young people will help us up and down the ballot. In short, young voters can be decisive for us in this election, and they deserve our attention.

Interested and Engaged in the Election

Young people are interested in this election and show strong engagement at this time. They are more engaged today than they were in at a similar time in 2006. Overall, 78% of young people say they are registered to vote; in 2006 79% said they were registered. We know, of course, from the census that this is an overstatement of registration, but it is nonetheless a strong indicator of interest in the campaign. Only 21% say they are not registered. Almost two-thirds (63%) of young people age 18-22 are registered to vote compared to 87% of 23 to 29 year olds. This represents somewhat of an increase for those age 23 and older (up from 83% in 2006), but a decline for those under age 23 (down from 73%). Democrats (82%) and Republicans (79%) are equally likely to say they are registered while independents are less likely (72%). If there is one note of caution for Democrats, it is that young Latinos continue to trail in registration, as only 73% of Latinos are registered compared to 80% of both African Americans and whites. This continues a trend we noted in 2006. Half of young people who are not yet registered to vote (55%) say they are likely to register in time to vote in November.

*Young adults say they are likely to vote this year – and Democratic supporters are more energized than Republican voters. Eighty-two percent of young people intend to vote in November, including 62% who are extremely likely to do so. This represents a ten-point increase compared to 2006 (73% then), and is about on par with 2004 (81% intended to vote in July 2004). Young women are slightly more likely to vote than are young men (65% and 59% extremely likely, respectively), and older people in this cohort (67%) are more likely than younger people (55%). The good news for Democrats – and a different trend than we saw in 2006—is that those who support Democratic candidates are more likely to vote than are those who tilt toward the Republicans. Seven in ten self-identified Democrats are extremely likely to vote (70%), compared to only 61% of Republicans. Sixty-nine percent of those who plan to vote for a Democrat for President are extremely likely to vote, compared to only 61% of McCain's supporters; and 65% of those who support a Democrat for Congress are extremely likely to vote, compared to just 56% of those who will vote Republican. *Young Democratic voters are enthusiastic and energized to vote this year and that bodes well for Democratic candidates in races across the country and up and down the ballot.**

Democratic voters are also more likely to be following the election. Seventy-eight percent of all young people are following the election closely, including 17% who are following it extremely closely. This is up greatly from 2006, when 47% of young people were following the election closely. Self-identified Democrats are more likely to be following the election, compared to Republicans (87% compared to 78%), but the same share of Democrats and Republicans are following the election extremely closely (17% and 18% respectively). African American young people (84%) are following the election most closely compared to whites and Latinos (79%, each).

Young voters are following the election closely because they think it is going to be an important election, because they seek change, and because they think they can make a difference. Forty percent of young people say they are following the election closely because they feel it is going to be very important, and 29% are doing so because they want change. Another 24% are excited about a particular candidate (8%), care about an issue (8%), or will be voting for the first time (8%). There are important differences on this measure. By +11 points overall, young people say they are following this election because of its importance compared to change. Young Democrats however say they are following the election because they want change (+6). Even young Democrats have different opinions. *Those who support Clinton against McCain are divided between change and the importance of the election (+1 for change), while Obama supporters choose change (+7).* While African Americans choose change (+25), whites (-21) and Latinos (-14) say they are following the election because of its importance. For Republicans, the importance of the election is the predominant motivator (54%), and independents also choose importance (47%) over change (30%).

Young people are more likely to be motivated this year by their collective power than by their individual power. Seventy-two percent of young people strongly agree that “as a group, young people have the power to change things in this country,” which is slightly higher than their agreement that “I have the power to change things in this country” (55% strongly agree). There is also some agreement that “young people are making more of a difference than usual” (50% strongly agree), and that “this year, my vote will count” (60%).

In sum, young people are engaged in this election and intend to vote. Notably, the most energy and enthusiasm for this election comes from young people who self-identify as Democrats and who intend to support Democrats for President and Congress. This enthusiasm, coupled with their already strong Democratic leanings, make young people a key cog in the Democrats’ march toward the White House.

Ready for Change on the Economy, Iraq, and Health Care

Young people continue to be incredibly dissatisfied with the country’s direction and they are even more disappointed than they were two years ago, when they voted Republicans out of the majority. Currently, only 25% of young people believe the country is going in the right direction, compared to 68% who feel things are seriously off on the wrong track. In April 2006, 63% felt the country was off on the wrong track. Both

young men and young women are unhappy with the country's direction, but young women are slightly more disappointed (63% and 73% wrong track, respectively). It is not surprising that Democrats and independents are saddened by the country's direction (77% and 70% wrong track), but even self-identified Republican young people are unhappy about the way things are going (52% wrong track). African Americans tend to be the most dissatisfied (78% wrong track, similar to 77% in 2006), but young white voters are also frustrated (67% now up from 62% in 2006). Latino/as are also more disappointed today than they were in April 2006 (65% now compared to 57% then). The problem for McCain and Republicans is that undecided voters in the Presidential election (65% wrong track) and Congressional races (60%), think the country is moving in the wrong direction. There is energy for change that McCain – and so far Congressional Republicans – are unable to tap into.

Young peoples' focus for change is diffuse centered on economic issues. At the top is the economy and jobs (17% top concern), Iraq (12%), health care and prescription drugs (11%) and education and the cost of college (10%). Immigration (8%), the environment (7%), corruption and reform (6%), and gas prices (also 6%), round out a second tier. The youngest people in this cohort focus on the cost of college (15%), while older people focus on the economy (19%). African Americans are almost solely focused on the economy (27%), while white young people focus on the economy (16%), Iraq (12%), and health care (12%). Latinos have a more interesting rank order, with immigration at the top (14%), followed by the environment (11%) and the economy (11%). Republicans focus on the economy (19%) and immigration (15%). Self-identified Democrats, however, have the most diffuse agenda and are concerned about many different issues at the same time. The economy (17%), Iraq (16%), health care (15%), and the cost of college (11%) all compete for attention among these voters.

Importantly, whether a young person focuses on the economy or health care, in each instance they choose the Democratic presidential candidate rather than Senator McCain. Economy voters choose the Democrat by 21 points, education voters choose the Democrat by 63 points, health care voters choose the Democrat by 44 points, and Iraq voters choose the Democrat by 48 points. In fact, only immigration-focused voters prefer McCain against the Democratic candidates (by 29 points).

Young people have a lot of economic concerns on their minds, and candidates need to be able to address many of them if they want to demonstrate an understanding of the challenges young people face. Twenty percent of young people say a lack of jobs that pay a wage that supports their family is their top economic concern that will help determine their presidential vote. Another 16% say rising health care costs is the economic concern they will use to judge candidates, followed by 10% who say expenses like child care and college, and 9% who say high taxes. Lower economic concerns include every day expenses (9%), gasoline costs (8%), debt from credit cards and student loans (8%), losing their job (4%), retirement (4%), and a mortgage (4%).

Health care is also a key concern, and the good news for Democrats is that their ideas on the issue track more closely with Obama and Clinton than with McCain.

Almost seven in ten young people (68%) say making sure all Americans have healthcare coverage is the responsibility of the federal government, while only a quarter (27%) say it is not the federal government's responsibility (5% do not know).

Iraq is another issue where young people are determined to hold McCain – and other candidates – accountable on the issue. Seven in ten young people (69%) want to see some level of withdrawal including 36% who want all troops withdrawn and 33% who want some troops withdrawn. Twenty percent say the levels should stay the same as they are now, and only 6% want to see an increase in troops. McCain's willingness to stay in Iraq for 100 years will certainly hurt his chances with young voters.

In sum, this issue environment is stacked against McCain and the Republicans. Young people focus on issues that traditionally favor Democrats such as the economy and jobs, health care, the cost of college, and the war in Iraq. In each case, no matter what top concern young people identify with, they vote Democrat in hypothetical races. Republicans can try to change the dialogue to the progress with the surge, or to terror, but young people will not be distracted in their displeasure with their country's direction and their intent to vote for change.

The Congressional Ballot

Democrats have a commanding lead over Republicans in a generic Congressional match-up, and young voters can help them hold onto control of Congress in the fall. Among young adults, Democrats have a 25-point lead over Republicans in a generic Congressional match-up (52% to 27%, respectively), which is slightly greater than Democrats' party identification advantage. This is an even greater advantage than we saw in April of 2006, when 46% of young people planned to support the Democrat and only 26% planned to vote Republican (a 19-point margin for Democrats). In that election, the Democrats resoundingly took back the House and achieved wins in traditionally Red states that helped them take the Senate as well. This year, with young voters even more supportive of Democrats at this early stage and feeling very empowered to affect change in this election, this strength among young voters could translate to big wins for Democrats across the country.

While there is a gender gap among young voters, Democrats win both young men (+15) and young women (+35) by significant margins. They also hold a strong lead among independents (40% vote Democrat to 15% Republican). African American young people are most likely to vote Democratic on the Congressional race (76% Democrat to 12% Republican), but Democrats also win convincingly among young Latinos (59% to 20%) and young white voters (44% to 32%).

Notably, among McCain voters, only 65% intend to vote Republican in the Congressional race, while 16% intend to vote Democratic. On the Democrats' side, Clinton and Obama voters are much more likely to vote Democrat down the ballot (79% of Clinton supporters and 77% of Obama supporters) while only a few defect to vote Republican for Congress (4% among Clinton supporters and 7% among Obama

supporters). The Democratic candidates for president do a better job of pulling in young voters to vote for Democrats up and down the ticket, while McCain supporters are less certain to vote consistently Republican, so his ability to grow Republican support among young voters is limited.

Obama, Clinton, and McCain

Senator Obama is a very popular among young people and has the opportunity to become a transformational figure to this generation, in much the same way President Kennedy was for baby boomers. Senator Clinton is popular, but she also happens to be more polarizing. McCain also, has a positive relationship among young voters but personal support for him is less enthusiastic.

Sixty-nine percent of young people have a favorable impression of Senator Obama, compared to only 20% who have an unfavorable opinion of him. His 3:1 favorable to unfavorable ratio is nearly twice that of the other candidates tested. His efforts to energize young people are clearly paying off. Quite simply, the only measurable demographic groups who have a negative impression of the Senator are strong Republicans and Republican men; in the other demographic groups across the board Obama is well-liked.

Barack Obama			
	Favorable	Unfavorable	Net (Fav – Unfav)
TOTAL	69	20	+48
Men	66	23	+42
Women	72	17	+54
17-22 Years Old	74	14	+59
23-30 Yeas Old	65	24	+41
White	64	24	+40
African American	87	8	+79
Latino	71	18	+53
Democrats	87	10	+77
Independents	71	17	+53
Republicans	41	41	0
Non-College Men	62	24	+38
Non-College Women	70	16	+54
College Men	76	21	+55
College Women	74	19	+54
Married Men	60	35	+25
Married Women	54	31	+23
Unmarried Men	68	19	+49
Unmarried Women	80	10	+70

Senator Clinton has a solid base of personal support among young people (51% favorable), but is also polarizing (43% unfavorable). Here favorable to unfavorable ratio is

only 1.2:1, and her very unfavorable ratings (25%) are higher than her very favorable ratings (17%). Clinton has a strong base among young women (61% favorable), while among young men she has a net negative rating (-11). She is more polarizing in a partisan way than Obama.

It appears the campaign over the last two years – both the campaign run against her and the campaign she has run challenging Obama – has taken a toll on her favorable ratings. In September 2006, 60% of young voters rated her favorably, and only 29% rated her unfavorably, representing a 9-point decline in favorability and a 14-point increase in unfavorable ratings.

Hillary Clinton			
	Favorable	Unfavorable	Net (Fav – Unfav)
TOTAL	51%	43%	+8
Men	41%	51%	-11
Women	61%	36%	+26
17-22 Years Old	50%	41%	+9
23-30 Yeas Old	51%	44%	+7
White	42%	53%	-11
African American	80%	13%	+67
Latino	56%	36%	+20
Democrats	73%	22%	+50
Independents	48%	45%	+4
Republicans	18%	79%	-61
Non-College Men	40%	52%	-13
Non-College Women	61%	34%	+27
College Men	44%	49%	-4
College Women	59%	37%	+22
Married Men	45%	54%	-9
Married Women	52%	45%	+7
Unmarried Men	39%	51%	-12
Unmarried Women	65%	30%	+35

McCain is not as well positioned as the Democratic candidates. Forty-four percent of young people rate him favorably, and 33% rate him unfavorably. Almost as many young people have a very favorable opinion of Obama (38%) as are favorable overall toward McCain (44%). McCain's popularity has increased since September 2006 (was 36% favorable), but his negatives have almost doubled (was only 18% unfavorable in 2006).

John McCain			
	Favorable	Unfavorable	Net (Fav – Unfav)
TOTAL	44%	33%	+11
Men	48%	31%	+18
Women	39%	35%	+5
17-23 Years Old	41%	30%	+11
23-30 Yeas Old	46%	35%	+11
White	49%	31%	+18
African American	25%	38%	-13
Latino	39%	35%	+5
Democrats	34%	41%	-7
Independents	43%	41%	+12
Republicans	64%	21%	+43
Non-College Men	44%	32%	+13
Non-College Women	35%	34%	+2
College Men	60%	29%	+32
College Women	47%	37%	+10
Married Men	47%	36%	+11
Married Women	42%	37%	+5
Unmarried Men	49%	29%	+20
Unmarried Women	38%	34%	+4

In the Race for the White House, Obama Leads Overwhelmingly

Senator Obama has an impressive and commanding lead over Senator McCain in a hypothetical Presidential contest. Senator Clinton also holds a lead over McCain. In either case, McCain has little hope of winning this cohort and the real question is how much leverage Democrats can gain among these voters if the candidates are willing to reach out to them.

Senator Barack Obama has the support of 57% of young people today, more than doubling the 27% who indicate they would support McCain if the election were held today. In fact, more young people strongly support Obama (43%) than support McCain overall (27%). Fifteen percent of young people are undecided or do not know who they will vote for. Obama's lead is overwhelming. He leads in every region of the country and the only subgroups who choose McCain over Obama are Republicans, married men, and Evangelical men; Obama leads among every other demographic group. He leads among men and women (+18 and +41, respectively), whites (+17), African Americans (+79), and Latinos (+40). He wins white women by +31 points and white men by +4. Blue collar men – a key expansion target for Democrats among older voters – favor Obama by +19 points, and blue collar women – a key persuasion target among older voters – prefer him by +46 points. Obama holds 86% of Democrats, wins 52% of independents, and pulls away 18% of Republicans from McCain. Simply put, Obama crushes McCain.

Obama vs. McCain				
	Obama	McCain	Undecided/ Don't know	Net (Obama- McCain)
TOTAL	57%	27%	15%	+30
Men	52%	34%	15%	+18
Women	63%	22%	16%	+41
17-22 Years Old	65%	19%	15%	+46
23-30 Years Old	52%	33%	16%	+19
White	51%	34%	15%	+17
African American	83%	4%	13%	+79
Latino	61%	21%	18%	+40
Democrats	86%	6%	7%	+80
Independents	52%	27%	21%	+24
Republicans	18%	67%	15%	-50
Non-College Men	52%	33%	14%	+19
Non-College Women	65%	19%	17%	+46
College Men	53%	36%	11%	+17
College Women	57%	29%	14%	+28
Married Men	37%	51%	12%	-14
Married Women	43%	38%	18%	+5
Unmarried Men	57%	29%	14%	+28
Unmarried Women	71%	14%	15%	+56

Senator Clinton also enjoys a large lead over McCain. Clinton leads by 11 points (47% to 35%). She fails, however, to reach majority support. Clinton leads among women by 28 points and trails among men by 6 points. She wins 75% of Democrats, but only ties McCain among independents (40% compared to 37% for McCain). African American voters prefer Clinton by 65 points, and Latinos vote for her by 24 points, but she loses the white vote to McCain (46% McCain to 37% Clinton). Clinton holds white women (+10 points), but trails among white men (-27 points).

Clinton vs. McCain				
	Clinton	McCain	Undecided/ Don't know	Net (Clinton – McCain)
TOTAL	47%	35%	15%	+11
Men	37%	43%	19%	-6
Women	55%	28%	17%	+28
17-22 Years Old	47%	32%	21%	+15
23-30 Years Old	46%	38%	16%	+8
White	37%	46%	17%	-9
African American	72%	8%	20%	+65
Latino	52%	28%	20%	+24
Democrats	75%	9%	15%	+66
Independents	40%	37%	24%	+3
Republicans	3%	84%	13%	-80
Non-College Men	35%	42%	22%	-7
Non-College Women	53%	29%	18%	+24
College Men	44%	45%	11%	-1
College Women	58%	27%	14%	+31
Married Men	30%	57%	13%	-27
Married Women	50%	40%	10%	+10
Unmarried Men	41%	36%	22%	+5
Unmarried Women	58%	21%	21%	+37

The sad news for McCain continues, because it is clear young voters are not excited by his campaign – even those young people who support him. Overall, only half (51%) of those who say they will support McCain are excited to do so, and only 12% are very excited. Comparatively, 86% of Obama’s supporters are excited to support him and half (50%) are very excited – his “very excited” supporters outnumber McCain’s very excited supporters by nearly 5:1. Clinton also has enthusiastic support. Sixty-nine percent of her voters are excited to support her, including 29% who are very excited, and her “very excited” supporters outnumber McCains by nearly 3:1. It is clear that both Clinton and Obama can defeat McCain in this age group.

Both candidates have significant character advantages over McCain. As the table below shows, Obama’s strongest trait comparisons against McCain are that he will bring change (+53 for Obama), that he understands the problems of people your age (+54 points), and that he will bring people together (+48). McCain only keeps it close on who is strong enough to be President (+17 Obama), and is honest and trustworthy (+19 Obama), but still trails badly on the traits he is likely to focus on in the months ahead.

TRAIT COMPARISONS							
	Clinton Better	McCain Better	Clinton Net		Obama Better	McCain Better	Obama Net
Shares Your Values	46%	28%	+18		53	27	+26
Honest and Trustworthy	33%	35%	-2		44	26	+19
Stands Up For What They Believe	41%	29%	+12		51	23	+28
Has the Right Experience	42%	33%	+9		28	48	-19
Is Strong Enough to be President	37%	36%	+1		45	28	+17
Understands the Problems of People Your Age	50%	18	+32		65	12	+53
Will Bring Change	59%	16	+44		68	15	+54
Will Bring People Together	43%	28	+15		63	15	+48
Will Get Things Done	44%	31	+12		52	27	+25
Is Typical Politician	39%	32	+7		22	51	-29

Clinton also enjoys an image advantage over McCain. Her strongest traits are that she will bring change (+44 points) and understands people your age (+32). Her key advantages are smaller on sharing your values (+18) and bringing people together (+15) McCain actually has an advantage on being honest and trustworthy (+2 McCain) and pulls even on being strong enough to be President (+1 Clinton).

Generally, and with specific candidates, the Democrats have the advantage.