

Rock the Vote

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Democratic Strategic Analysis

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Young voters are poised to continue their trends – reaffirmed in 2004 – of supporting Democratic candidates by large margins. As Democrats gear up to retake control of Congress and Republicans gear down to separate themselves from President Bush, young voters are clearly ready to vote for change. The challenge for Democrats is significant. For every young person who supports a Republican for Congress, there are nearly two who support a Democrat (1.75:1 ratio), a ratio far more significant than the 8-point party identification advantage in this survey. But young voters need attention and efforts to get them out to vote. If they receive it, the Democrats stand to gain in significant ways. In 2004, young people were the only age group to vote significantly Democratic.¹ They do not historically turn out in off year elections. Democrats need to change that. It is an opportunity progressives cannot let slip.

Currently, young people give Democrats a whopping 19-point advantage in the generic Congressional ballot (45 percent Democrat, 26 percent Republican), which outshines the identification advantage (39 percent Democrat, 31 percent Republican). The advantage is wide and deep and includes leads among men (+19 percent), young white people (+7 percent), and voters in every region of the country. Contrary to public opinion, it is not only young women (+19 percent) and young people of color (+59 percent African-Americans, +31 percent Latino/as) who bolster the Democratic advantage. In fact, without support from young men and young white people the Democratic advantage would be muted. 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.

Young people want real change and say they will vote that way. There is little good news here for Republicans. Clearly young people believe neither the President nor the Republicans in Congress are the answers to their concern. Half believe the Democrats would do a better job on their top issue concern. In fact, on their most important issues (gas prices, health care, college affordability) young people give Democrats advantages ranging from 41 to 32 points net. There are issue cautions for Democrats (terror and perhaps immigration), but Democrats are on the offensive and Republicans have a lot to fear if Democrats control the issue agenda.

The issue agenda – to reach young voters – must include measures to make college and health care more affordable and real proposals to end gas-price gouging and to invest in renewable and sustainable energy. Democrats must find their voice on fighting

¹ In 2004 voters aged 18-29 supported John Kerry over George Bush by a margin of 9 points (54 percent to 46 percent).

terror – we know that is where Republicans will go – but capitalizing on the issue agenda means talking about college affordability, health care, and addressing gas prices.

The formula for a Democratic victory is coming into focus among all voters. To the extent progressives effectively target young voters the margins we need among older swing voters are reduced. Young voters are becoming less and less of a swing constituency. The President's and the Republican's failed leadership make this clear. This is an experiment in the future as well. University of Michigan studies show that if a cohort votes the same way three times in a row, they acquire permanent partisan leanings. The question is whether we Democrats have the determination and commitment to target young voters who are there for the taking.

Interest and Engagement in the Election

Young people are interested in the election but they are not yet as engaged as they should be. However, at this early stage of the election year, Democratic-oriented young people are measurably more engaged in this election. Overall, 79 percent of people age 30 and younger say they are registered to vote. We know from the census that this is an overstatement of registration. Still, only 18 percent say they are unregistered. It is not surprising that older people in this group (23 to 30 years old) are more likely to be registered (83 percent say registered) while younger people are less likely (73 percent). Women are also more likely than men to say they are registered to vote at this time (84 percent compared to 75 percent). Democrats and Republicans are equally likely to be registered to vote (86 percent each).

Young adults also say they are likely to vote this year (73 percent yes, 26 percent no) but Democrats trail in this regard (Republicans 85 percent, Democrats 78 percent). Most nation public polls now show Democrats more engaged than Republicans but this survey shows the opposite among younger people.

Campaigns, however, have to do a better job engaging young people. Half (46 percent) of young people say they are following the election but most of those people are only somewhat closely (32 percent) following the election compared to only 14 percent who are following it extremely or very closely. On this measurement, however, there is no separation among young partisans (Democrats 17 percent extremely or very closely, compared to 16 percent of Republicans).

The Mood of Young People: Ready to Vote for Change

Young voters are intensely dissatisfied with the direction of the county and are ready to vote for change. Nearly two-in three young people are pessimistic about the country's direction (63 percent wrong track) with more than four in ten saying they feel this way strongly (43 percent). Fewer than a third of young people are optimistic (29

percent right direction). The dissatisfaction is wide and deep across demographic groups. Eighty-one percent of Democrats are dissatisfied, which is unsurprising; what is important is that 71 percent of independents agree with them (only 32 percent of Republicans say wrong track). African Americans tend to be the most dissatisfied (77 percent wrong track), but young white voters are also frustrated (62 percent wrong track). Latino/as are majority-negative (57 percent wrong track), but feel less intensely about it than do whites and African Americans. Undecided voters in Congressional race are also dissatisfied. Clearly, dissatisfaction is not limited to just Democratic base constituencies and the unease young voters feel is pervasive.

The Players: Bush is a Negative Catalyst Among Young Voters, they are Positive Toward Democrats

President Bush is a significant drag on the Republican ticket this year and has become a considerable negative-catalyst among young people. His efforts since his reelection to reach out to young people – appointing a young Ken Mehlman to head the party and focusing early on Social Security reform among other things, have been a failure to this point.

Sixty percent of young people have an unfavorable opinion of the President (45 percent very favorable) and his job performance ratings are even worse (64 percent disapprove, 46 percent strongly disapprove). It is a struggle to find a constituency among young people who have a favorable opinion of the President – in fact only young Evangelical Christians are net positive (+3 points). White voters (-11 points), African Americans (-60 percent) and Latino/as (-50 percent) all have an unfavorable opinion of President Bush. Republicans (+54 points) and conservatives (+28 points) are the only demographic groups who give the President a net-approve job rating.

The Democrats are much better positioned. A strong majority of young people have a favorable impression of the Democratic Party (61 percent) and barely a quarter of them have a negative opinion (27 percent). **Contrary to conventional wisdom it is not only young women or young people with diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds bolstering Democrats.** Democrats have a net-positive rating by +34 points among young women and young men are extremely positive giving Democrats a net-rating of 60 points. Whites are +26 points positive toward Democrats, African Americans are +49 points positive and Latino/as are +61 percent net positive. The youngest people in this case are the most positive toward Democrats (+47 percent positive among people age 17-23, +26 among those over age 23).

The President's ratings must be discouraging to Republican candidates at this time. In fact, the Republican Party performs only slightly better than Bush. Thirty-nine percent of young people are favorable toward the Republican Party and 46 percent have a negative impression. **If there is one ray of hope for Republicans among young people it is that they may be positioned to localize Congressional elections in an environment where national trends move completely against them.**

People dislike Congress but like their member of Congress. More than half of young people (54 percent) approve of the job **their** Member of Congress is doing (26 percent disapprove). Disapproval of Congress in general is higher (48 percent approve, 43 percent disapprove). If Republicans are successful at localizing the elections, then incumbency can rule and they have some hope of holding their majority.

The 2006 MidTerms: Democrats Pull Ahead with a Significant Undecided Block

Democrats have a whopping 19-point advantage in the generic Congressional ballot which is double their party identification advantage. Currently, 45 percent of young people say they would vote for a Democrat in Congress compared to only a quarter who support Republican candidates (26 percent). The party identification advantage among young people, is at 8 points (39 percent are Democrats, 31 percent Republicans, 30 percent are independent/other). But, 30 percent of young people are undecided. Democrats are doing a much better job holding their base. Eighty-two percent of Democrats support the Democratic candidate compared to only 73 percent of Republicans who support the Republican candidate. More than half of independents are undecided (55 percent) but a third choose Democrats (35 percent) while only one in ten choose a Republican (10 percent).

- ◆ **Undecided voters.** A solid three in ten young people are undecided at this time, if they break toward Democrats then a 19-point advantage can double. If they break Republican, however, the generic ballot is tied. Undecided voters are spread across a number of groups. They are disproportionately independents, living in the Midwest, moderate and those without a cell phone.
- ◆ **Republican Base.** The Republican base is limited. Solid supporters include Republicans (73 percent support Republican candidate), conservatives (51 percent), parents (35 percent) – especially fathers, and Evangelical Christians (39 percent). Twenty-six percent of college graduates and 26 percent of non-college graduates support Republicans, similarly, non-students (27 percent) and current students (25 percent) equally support Republicans.
- ◆ **Democratic Base.** Democrats are remarkable strong across the board. Democrats are strongest with men under 23, African-Americans, voters in the Northeast, college women, and liberals. Forty-five percent of men support Democrats compared to 44 percent of women. Forty-six percent of people under age 23 support Democrats compared to 44 percent of those age 23 and older. Thirty-eight percent of whites vote Democratic along with 52 percent of Latino/as and 68 percent of African Americans. This is significant, whites are more likely to self-identify as Republican by 5 points (39 percent Republican, 34 percent Democrat) but favor Democrats by 7 points in the generic (38 percent Democrat, 31 percent Republican). **Republicans under-perform their party identification advantage by 8-points and turn a 5-point party-identification advantage into**

a 7-point disadvantage in the horserace, a net-shift of 12-points. The advantage Republicans hold with older white voters is evaporating among younger white voters at this time.

Geographically, 42 percent of young people in the West support Democrats compared to 43 percent in the South, 40 percent in the Midwest, and 57 percent in the Northeast. Democrats perform slightly better among college graduates but should not ignore the blue collar vote (49 percent among college graduates, 44 percent among non-college graduates.) Almost half of unmarried young people support Democrats compared to just under 40 percent of married young people (49 percent compared to 38 percent).

One last caution for Democrats, however. African Americans and Latinos are base voters, but they are under-registered and less engaged in this election. These trends must be reversed in order to maintain the current Democratic advantages. Importantly, Republican outreach efforts to these constituencies have failed, but Democratic efforts at energizing young people of diverse backgrounds can have a big payoff.

The Change Agenda: Democrats Dominate Most Issues, Republicans Hold a Card

The initial issue environment also suggests young people are ready for change. Nineteen percent of young people choose gas prices as the most important issue they want Congress to do something about. Young people also make education issues a top tier issue concern (17 percent overall, 15 percent education, 2 percent college loans). Young people also focus on jobs and the economy (12 percent), Iraq (10 percent), immigration (8 percent) and health care and prescription drugs (8 percent). Lower tier concerns include: government corruption (6 percent), Social Security and retirement (6 percent), taxes (3 percent), the federal budget (3 percent), moral values (3 percent), gay rights (2 percent), and terrorism and homeland security (2 percent). Among independent young voters the concerns are jobs and the economy (19 percent), gas prices (19 percent), and immigrations (13 percent).

The Democratic advantage however, is clear on which party young people trust to deliver on their issue concerns (+21 points Democrat advantage). Overall, half of young people (49 percent) believe the Democrats would do a better job on their issue concerns compared to 28 percent who favor Republicans. Among those who focus on jobs and the economy Democrats have a +40 point advantage. The Democrats' advantage is also significant among those who focus on education (+37 points Democrat), Iraq (+30 points), and gas prices (+25 points).

Young people tell us that there is very little reason to vote Republican this year. **When asked to rate the two parties on a host of specific issues, voters tend to afford Democrats wide advantages over Bush and Republicans in Congress.** In fact, while Democrats lead on most issues, the Republicans perform stronger than Bush against the Democrats. This is important because the President is not on the ballot this year and if Republicans are able to separate themselves from the President they can help minimize

the damage on some issues. Young people give Democrats an even greater advantage over Bush on college affordability (+6 points), gas prices and energy (+7 points), the federal budget deficit (+17 points), and creating jobs (+9 points).

Democrats lead on several issues – and these are the issues most important to young people. By 41 points young people believe Democrats would do better than Republicans on college affordability and by 37 points they believe Democrats would do better on health care. The Democratic advantage is significant on gas prices and energy (+32 points), creating jobs (+23 points), and handling the federal budget deficit (+18 points). Smaller advantages include: taxes (+10 points), war in Iraq (+6 points). Democrats also have an advantage on cleaning up corruption in Congress (+19 points) but there is little intensity behind either party on this measure.

The Democrats' advantages on issues, when compared to the President, are even more intense than when compared to Republicans. By 47 points young people prefer Democrats to Bush on college affordability and by 39 points on gas prices and energy. The advantage is significant on health care (+36 points Democratic), the federal budget deficit (+35 points), creating jobs (+32 points), and corruption (+20 points). Smaller advantages exist on the war in Iraq (+19 points) and taxes (+13 points). When Republicans and the President no longer have an advantage on taxes they are in real trouble. And on the President's signature issue – Iraq, young voters have completely lost faith in his handling the issue.

Clearly, young people do not see President Bush as the solution to their problems or concerns. On only one issue do young people give the President a performance advantage: terrorism and homeland security. By 46 to 40 percent young people believe President Bush would do a better job handling terrorism and homeland security – a six point advantage. Only partisan Democrats, liberals, African Americans, and single people believe Democrats would do better on this issue. **“Terror” is a very real concern to young people and they tilt conservative on the issue – in fact Republicans in Congress also have an advantage over Democrats in Congress on terror** and it is larger than the President's advantage at +19 points Republican (51 believe Republicans are better, 32 percent believe Democrats are better). Independents give Democrats a 4 point advantage over Republicans on “terror” but give Bush a 6 point advantage over Democrats on “terror”. The President and the Republicans want to run this campaign on terror and will do what they can to that extent controlling the issue agenda. Democrats must establish credentials on this issue.

Immigration, overall, is a wash – though there is more intensity among young Republicans on this issue and it might be used in a targeted way this fall among them. Thirty-nine percent of young people believe Republicans would do better on immigration compared to 38 percent who believe Democrats would do better. But young voters believe Democrats would do better than the President (45 percent prefer Democrats, 35 percent prefer Bush).

In sum, the issue environment is stacked against the Republicans. Remember, Democrats have only an 8-point identification advantage but their issue advantage is sometimes as large as nearly 40 points. There is one note of caution for Democrats (terrorism), but young people turn to Democrats on the issues most important to them (college affordability, gas prices and energy, health care). The message advantages are also intense.

Message Direction

Young people most favor a progressive message agenda centered on pocketbook and economic issues - affordable health care, college affordability, and gas prices and energy independence. There is significant intensity around Iraq from base-Democrat voters, but health care, college, and energy independence have more breadth among target constituencies.

Young people are very convinced to support a candidate who calls for affordable health care for all by the year 2010 – they rate it a 7.4 mean on a ten-point scale, and more than half rate it intensely (an 8-9-10). A candidate who calls for energy independence and more investment in renewable and sustainable energy also receives strong support (7.4 mean, 58 percent intensely). The third issue piece is college affordability, young people give a candidate who supports increased funding for student aid programs like the Pell grant a 7.4 mean and 54 percent rate the issue intensely. Iraq should also be a focus because young voters – especially base voters – hold intense feelings (a mean of 5.9 but 29 percent rate it a “10”). Broader issues like health care and college affordability will gain the Democrats more votes in the long run, though Iraq is a key centerpiece in energizing base supporters such as liberals, partisan Democrats and African Americans. Blue collar women are also intense on the issue. Independent young voters are similar to all young voters in that they find most of the same candidate stances appealing including affordable health care, energy independence, and increased student aid. They are also highly opposed to privatizing Social Security (6.8 mean and 30% rate it a “10”).

- ◆ Cornerstone Republican-positioning has less support. Young people rate a candidate who calls for making the tax cuts permanent a mean of 5.8 and a candidate who believes our major crisis is a decline in morality earns a mean of only 5.7.
- ◆ Social Security is a complex issue among young voters and Democrats should be aware that Republicans may use it with careful targeting. Young people give a mean of 6.7 to a candidate who *supports reforming Social Security* so young people can invest a portion of their earnings and have more control over their retirement. Conversely, they also give a rating of 6.7 to a candidate who *opposes privatization*. It is unlikely Republicans make a major issue of privatization considering the beating they took last year, **but with careful targeting to young people they might reap some reward.**

- ◆ Ending the tax breaks for companies who outsource jobs overseas is popular (6.6 mean) but there is less intensity. Similarly, there is some support for a candidate who believes our major crisis is economic instability, but little intensity (6.2 mean). Young people are concerned with the economy and pocketbook issues (jobs, health care, affording college, gas prices) and these message elements do not really address their concerns.

In sum, young people are focused on pocketbook issues – affording college, ending gas-price gouging and supporting renewable and sustainable energy, and making health care affordable for all. This framing is widely successful and has a large coalition among young white people, young people with diverse ethnic backgrounds, men and women, and blue collar workers and college graduates.