

# Rock the Vote

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## Democratic Strategic Analysis

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*Democratic candidates for Congress remain firmly in the lead among young voters and still show significant room for growth. Since April, the party identification advantage has expanded, Democrats have a double-digit lead in the vote, and key demographic groups have shifted away from Republicans and to either undecided or vote outright Democratic. Perhaps most importantly of all, the issue environment – even as it becomes more focused on terrorism and homeland security – still works to the Democrats' advantage. On the war in Iraq, college affordability, health care, jobs and the economy, and energy independence, young people prefer the Democrats. Meanwhile the Republican advantage on terrorism has eroded and Democrats show real competitiveness on the issue. Nationally, polls show the generic congressional ballot tightening while the opposite is true here. Only young people who identify as strong conservatives, those who identify as Republicans, and white evangelicals vote Republican. Still, young voters are not yet engaged by the campaigns. In fact, young voters are not even showing more interest than in the April survey and they tend to feel that many of the issues they care about most are not being discussed.*

*In sum, the environment is ripe for a big Democratic bounce if young people vote. The challenge is whether or not Democratic candidates are committed to mobilizing the support of America's young voters.*

*Currently, young people prefer the Democrat to the Republican by an immense 21-point advantage (43% Democrat to 22% Republican). This is up from a 19-point advantage in April, and within the margin of error of that survey. The Democratic lead comes on the heels of real growth in partisan identification. In April, 39% of voters identified as Democrat and 31% Republican for an 8-point advantage; today 42% are Democrat and 29% are Republican, for a 13-point advantage. The lead in the generic vote extends to every region of the country -- including the South and the West -- and across demographic groups -- including white men and women. The youngest voters and those in their late 20s, college graduates and non-graduates, and students and non-students alike prefer the Democrat. To be clear, this lead is not due to any one region, gender, or ethnicity – like young voters who themselves crave diversity, this coalition is diverse and primed to expand.*

*Young voters remain a change-oriented electorate and they support a new direction for America. The country is moving in the wrong direction (58%) and the President is doing a poor job (62%). Their mood for change goes beyond the war in Iraq. In fact, while they think the war was a mistake and not worth fighting, they are not looking for a quick withdrawal. Resembling older voters, they prefer a drawdown with a date-certain for an exit and they think Iraq is part of the war on terror. Both parties have*

*room to maneuver on that issue. Similarly, both parties can make headway on the war on terror – especially the Democrats. The advantage the Republicans held on this issue in April is gone; Democrats have found their voice and young people are ready to reward them.*

*Domestic issues, however, remain very important and give Democrats the biggest edge with young voters. Young people struggle with the cost of college and it is their top issue concern; it is also the clearest contrast for Democrats to employ against Republicans, cleaner even than terror or Iraq. Energy independence could be the difference in close elections; it bridges the gap for Democrats between populist blue-collar cost-conscious young people and more progressive environmentalists. It can wedge moderates and men to support a candidate who offers a new direction for America's energy problems. Together these issues provide Democrats with a clear path to victory in November.*

*As always, while the frame for a Democratic victory is clear, the work still has to be done. Young people show interest in the election, but are not as enthusiastic as they need to be in order for us to see huge turnout and grand vote gains for Democrats. In fact, some progressive demographic groups are less hyped today than in April while more conservative groups are more excited. If Democratic candidates want to reap the benefits of young voter support, they need to make the commitment to persuading them to vote and turning them out on election day. Progressives stand to win two out of every three votes this fall from this age group (66% of those who chose a candidate today). Third party youth-targeted organizations are doing their part this year to build upon the success in 2004, but the question remains whether we Democrats have the determination and commitment to help institutionalize this vote by targeting these voters.*

***Do not get us wrong: This is more than an exercise in civility and it is about more than an exchange of opinions in the marketplace of ideas; it is about retaking control of our government. Young voters can be amongst our most loyal partners in that endeavor. This could be the second consecutive election in which young voters vote solidly Democratic. If engaged, this could be the start of permanently aligning this cohort.***

### **Interest and Engagement in the Election**

*Young people continue to show interest in the election, but they also continue to show some signs of indifference. The bottom line is Democrats cannot afford for enthusiasm to wane among this cohort.* Young voters are interested in the election, but in many ways the summer months appear to have lessened their intensity. Currently, 80% of young people say they are registered to vote, similar to April when 79% were registered. Eighty percent registration is certainly an overstatement, but only one in five says they are unregistered. Democrats and Republicans (84% and 83%, respectively) are equally likely to be registered as are those who vote Democratic (82%) or vote Republican (85%).

Importantly, the likelihood to vote among young people is similar to what it was in April with seven in ten young people saying they plan to vote (69% now, 73% then). At this point in the cycle, however, we would hope to find young people more interested than they were in April. In fact, intensity is also down slightly, from 53% extremely likely in April compared to 44% now. For Democrats this is obviously a large concern. Women in this cohort went from 54% likely to register to only 33% today. Unregistered Democratic partisans went from 59% likely to register to just 35% today. For every young person who votes Republican there are two who vote Democrat -- we cannot afford for our most loyal age cohort to be less enthused about this election. Not surprisingly, younger voters in the group are less likely to be registered than older voters (70% compared to 86%). What is worrisome for Democrats is that younger women are the least likely to be registered among this cohort (66% registered) compared to 88% of older women in this group and 79% of all men.

Campaigns and political parties need to take some of the responsibility for increasing young voters' enthusiasm for the election. Currently, 63% of young people say they are paying attention to the election and but only 18% are paying a lot of attention. Slightly more than a third (37%) are not paying attention and only 14% say they are paying no attention at all. Overall, members of both parties show equal interest with 20% of Democrats paying a lot of attention compared to 19% of Republicans. On a scale from zero to ten, where ten is extremely interested, young voters rate their interest in the election a mean of 6.2. Only 16% of young voters score themselves a ten and only 36% are in the range we would consider very interested (8-10). Republicans have a slightly higher mean than Democrats (6.8 compared to 6.5) but in both cases only 18% and 17% respectively rate themselves a ten. On the other hand, immigration and terrorism focused voters tend to be more intense other voters (22% and 23% "10") and they voters tend to disproportionately support Republican candidates. *Notably, voters who are most concerned about jobs, Iraq, college, and health care all show less interest at this time than voters concerned with terrorism and immigration – and that should concern progressives.*

### **The Mood of Young People: Still Disappointed about the Direction of the Country**

Young people continue to be concerned about the country's direction with more than half who are pessimistic (58% wrong track). A third feel things are moving in the right direction (31%) but no demographic groups have a majority of voters who are currently optimistic about the direction of the country. In April, 63% of voters said the country was moving in the wrong direction and 29% felt things were on the right track. Although pessimistic feelings are down slightly, for the most part young people still want change and that desire for change is wide and deep. At least 50% of voters in all demographic groups except Republicans, conservatives, and older men feel the country is moving in the wrong direction. Undecided young people and independents are both pessimistic about their country's direction (59% and 53%, respectively). Dissatisfaction

continues to be wide -- even nearly half of conservatives (44%) say the country is off on the wrong track.

### **The Players: Bush Continues to Be a Drag While Democrats and Bill Clinton are Popular Figures**

Among young people, the President remains an albatross around the neck of Republican Congressional candidates. In April, 60% of young people had an unfavorable opinion of Bush and that rating remains rock solid negative today at 58% unfavorable, including 42% very unfavorable. In fact, more young people have a very unfavorable opinion of Bush (42%) than all of young voters who feel favorable toward him combined (38%). Bush's job performance rating is also upside down with 62% of young Americans disapproving of his job performance and only 37% approving. Again, more young people intensely disapprove (44% strongly disapprove) of the President's job performance than approve in total (37%). Any bounce the President may have felt immediately after the 9-11 ceremonies has been a limited effect among these voters and his numbers remain similar to where he was in April (64% disapprove, 35% approve). Every demographic group except conservatives, Republicans, and men in the West Central Region is net-negative on the President's job performance.

Although Republican candidates hope to separate themselves from the President, it is clear they have work to do. Forty-eight percent of young people have an unfavorable view of the Republican Party, while 38% rate the party favorably. These numbers are as low as they were in April when 46% were unfavorable and 39% were favorable. The best news for the Republican Party candidates is that they are not as bad off as the President.

***As we mentioned in April, one ray of hope for the Republican Party was that most young people still rated their Congressperson approvingly; now that measure is even stronger.*** Fifty-eight percent of young people approve of the job ***their*** representative is doing in Congress while only 23% disapprove (54% approved in April while 26% disapproved). Certainly, there are more Republican incumbents on the ballot in Congressional races this year than there are Democrats and the longer this measure stays right-side up the more secure Republican incumbents will become. In both cases, undecided voters are more favorable to Republicans than young people overall: 43% of undecided voters rate the party favorably and 54% approve of the job their Congressperson is doing. ***If Republicans are successful and make this a "choice" election between an incumbent and a flawed challenger, they can maintain control. Democrats must make this election a referendum and tie vulnerable Republicans to the weakened President.***

***The Democratic Party remains popular,*** and it is, in fact, the most popular organization or person tested. Sixty-five percent of young people rate the party favorably compared to 25% who rate it unfavorably. These ratings are slightly more positive than in April when 61% were favorable and 27% were unfavorable. Only Republicans and

conservatives rate the party unfavorably. Favorable ratings are highest among young people age 17-19 (71%) and lowest among those age 26 to 30 (61%). Whites (59% favorable), African Americans (83%), and Latinos (72%) are net-favorable, proving again that the party's strong identity is held up by more than base voters. In fact, white women have grown increasingly positive toward the Democratic Party since April (56% favorable in April, 63% now). Undecided voters are more positive toward the Democratic Party (52% favorable) than they are toward the Republican Party (43%).

Finally, while Hillary Clinton is focused on her reelection race this November, she and President Clinton are remarkably popular figures. Sixty-six percent of young people have a favorable impression of Bill Clinton and 60% have a favorable impression of Hillary Clinton. In both cases fewer than a third of voters have an unfavorable opinion of either candidate. Sixty-one percent of undecided voters and 71% of independents rate the former President favorably. ***The former President is a strong voice among younger Americans and he could become an asset to Democratic candidates as a turnout force down the stretch.***

### **The 2006 Mid-Terms: Democrats Hold Their Lead as More Voters Move to Undecided**

***The Democratic advantage has grown from 19 points in April to 21 points today and all indications are that this vote share can continue to grow.*** Currently, 43% of young people say they will support the Democratic candidate for Congress compared to 45% who said the same in April. Republicans are supported by 22% of young people now compared to 26% in April. A third of young people remains undecided (35%) which is up slightly from three in ten in April (30% undecided). It is important to remember that this is a 13-point Democratic sample (up from 8 points Democratic in April), so the generic candidate for Congress still performs an additional eight points above partisanship.

In April, our Republican partners in this research said one highlight for Republicans' strength was that young Republicans continued to support their party's candidate. That now appears in doubt. While Democrats hold 81% support among identified Democrats, Republicans only hold 61% of self-identified Republicans. Democrats continue to hold their base (82% in April) while the Republican base is slipping (73% in April). To be sure, these young Republicans are not yet supporting Democrats (only 8% now and 7% in April), but they have moved to undecided and are considering their options (20% undecided in April, 31% now). Fifteen percent of Democrats were undecided in April compared to 16% now. ***Democrats are in position to grow their share of the vote and expand their identification advantage while Republicans do not even have the luxury of playing catch-up because they must first recapture their base.***

- ✓ **There are more undecided young voters today than there were in April.** Now, 35% are unsure how they will vote. Women and men are equally undecided

(35% each). Not surprisingly, the youngest people in this cohort are the most undecided (38% of under 23 year olds undecided). One caution for Democrats is that 42% of women under age 23 are undecided, up from only 31% in April. The good news is that these young women are not voting Republican (14% now, down from 29% in April), but Democrats have yet to consolidate support from them. Non-college graduates are more likely to be undecided than college graduates, but both groups are more undecided today than they were April. Non-students are among the most likely to have moved from supporting a candidate to being undecided (28% undecided in April, 38% now).

- ✓ **As noted, the Republican base is slipping.** At present that base includes white men (29%), young people in the East North Central region (31%) and in the Midwest (28%), college women (29%), and conservatives (47%). This base is centered more by region than in April and has few demographic groups who disproportionately support Republicans.
- ✓ **Democrats have deep and broad support.** Sixty-seven percent of liberals, 55% of young people in the Northeast, 52% in the Mid-Atlantic, 48% of college men, and 28% of independent men support the Democrat. African Americans (64%) and Latino/as (47%) remain steadfast Democratic supporters but even Anglos support the Democrat (37%). White men prefer the Democrat by 7 points today, down from 10 points in April; however, white women prefer Democrats by 13 points today compared to only 4 points in April. While young whites are currently even in their partisanship, they give the Democrat a ten-point advantage. Both younger women and older women in this cohort support the Democrat with 44% of their vote. Democrats have slipped some among young men in this cohort, dropping from 52% support to 43% today. Older men have held steady for the Democrats (40% in April, 41% now). If Democrats can break through among non-college graduates in this age cohort, they can really maximize their support. The problem is that while 47% of blue-collar men supported Democrats in April, their support dips to 40% today. The good news, however, is that those voters are not yet supporting the Republicans; instead, those who moved away from the Democrats are now undecided (30% undecided in April, 37% today).
- ✓ There are few surprises among issue-focused voters. Voters who focus on immigration or the war on terror support the Republican candidate (+10 and +7, respectively) while voters who focus on Iraq (+47 Democrat), gas prices (+23), health care (+27), education and the cost of college (+29), and jobs and the economy (+43) all vote for the Democrat.
- ✓ President Bush has negative coattails. Only 49% of voters who are favorable toward Bush vote for the Republican. Conversely, 62% of those who are unfavorable toward the President vote for the Democrat. Similarly, only 45% of those who are favorable toward Republicans vote Republican, while 69% of those who are unfavorable vote for the Democrat.

We ended this section in April by cautioning Democrats that base voters – namely African Americans and Latina/os – supported the Democrat at the time but were less enthusiastic and less likely to be registered than other young people. Unfortunately, this remains the case for young Latino/as, but African Americans have reversed course and are now as likely to be registered and show signs of more enthusiasm than other voting groups. If enthusiasm and intensity among Latino/as can likewise be improved Democrats will be significantly strengthened come November. The window is closing, however, as registration deadlines are quickly approaching.

### **The Change Agenda: Democrats Close the Gap on Security, Still Lead Big on College, Health Care, and Jobs**

The issue agenda has changed slightly from April. In April, gas prices dominated with 19% of young people listing it as their top concern; followed by education (15%), jobs and the economy (12%), and Iraq (10%). Today, education and the cost of college dominate (17%) while jobs and the economy (13%) fill out the top tier. Iraq (11%), terrorism and homeland security (9%), immigration (9%) and gas prices (8%) are second tier concerns initially, though Iraq and terrorism are central to the criterion young people will use when deciding their vote. Lower-tier concerns include: Social Security and retirement (7%), health care and prescription drugs (7%), government corruption and reform (7%), moral values (4%), gay rights (2%), the federal budget deficit and taxes (2%).

Importantly, when it comes to trusting either the Democrats or the Republicans to address their issue concern, most young people prefer the Democrats (+27 point advantage). Overall, half of young people (50%) prefer the Democrat to address their issue concern while only a quarter prefer the Republican (23%). This 27-point advantage has grown stronger since April when Democrats held a 20-point advantage. So although more young people are now undecided on their vote since April, it is likely that as they refocus on the election they will trend Democrat. Significantly, the Democratic advantage on addressing the most important issues is also 27 points when the party is pitted against President Bush (53% prefer Democrats, 26% prefer Bush).

The Democrats have a 49-point advantage over Republicans among jobs and the economy voters, a 45-point advantage among education and college voters, and a 32-point advantage among Iraq voters. Only homeland security and terrorism focused voters prefer Republicans (+5 Republican). Against Bush, the advantages are exacerbated on both sides: +72 Democrats among Iraq voters, +50 among health care voters, +40 among jobs voters. However, those who focus on homeland security and terrorism give Bush a +14 point lead on dealing with that issue. ***Clearly, Republicans and the President want this election to be about terrorism while Democrats would choose to battle this out on the war in Iraq. The truth is that both issues are important to young people and the Democrats cannot afford to lose on either of them. We must keep the score close on terrorism and exploit our advantage on the war.***

**Let us be clear: winning this election among young voters is likely to come down to who young Americans trust on terrorism, the war in Iraq, and the cost of college.** In two cases Democrats have the advantage (Iraq and college) and in the other case Republicans currently lead but Democrats have reduced the gap in the past few months. In sum, young voters continue to say that there are very few reasons to support Republican candidates. Homeland security and the war on terrorism, we are told, are manna from heaven for Republicans. While that may be true among older voters, younger voters are preparing to turn that logic on its head. In April, 51% of young people said Republicans would do a better job handling homeland security and the war on terrorism compared to only 32% who chose the Democrats. That 19-point Republican advantage has been reduced to only 5 points: 44% prefer the Republicans in Congress on that issue compared to 39% who prefer Democrats. Republicans continue to have an advantage on the issue, but clearly Democrats have eroded that advantage and if the trend continues they can take the lead.

The reality is even more ominous for the President. In April, 46% of young voters preferred Bush on homeland security and the war on terrorism, compared to 40% who preferred the Democrats. Now, the issue is a tossup with Bush only leading the Democrats 45% to 44% among young voters. Republicans can go to the well of homeland security and terrorism only so many times before it runs dry. Democrats used the past few months well to credential themselves on this issue and have taken away a major tool from the Republicans.

The Democratic advantage on other issues is as impressive as their recovery on terrorism and homeland security. On the war in Iraq, the advantage over Republicans was 13 points in April and it has increased to a 17-point advantage now. Democrats had a 19-point advantage over Bush in April on the war in Iraq but that has dropped slightly to a 13-point advantage. On moral and values based issues young people make clear that Republicans will be unable to use this issue to wedge support. Democrats have a 5-point advantage compared to both Bush and the Republicans. Bush's more progressive position on immigration is rewarded by young people (only a +5 point lead for Democrats) while they give Democrats a large lead over Republicans in Congress (+19).

On all other issues – and issues that young voters indicate are priorities for them – the Democrat advantage is never less than 26 points against Republicans or 32 points against the President. On health care, Democrats hold a 40-point advantage over Congressional Republicans and a 38-point advantage over Bush. The advantage is 38 points compared to Congressional Republicans on college affordability and 43 points over the President. The issue of gas prices favors the Democrats over the Republicans (+34) as well as over Bush (+41) and creating jobs also advantages Democrats over both Republicans (+26) and Bush (32). These advantages are often nearly four times the Democratic partisan identification advantage. Clearly, independents and some Republicans prefer the Democrats over Republicans on these important issues.

In six of eight issue areas against Republicans in Congress and in three issue areas against the President, Democrats have improved their positioning since April. No area is

more important than terrorism and homeland security. Pulling even on that issue, or at least keeping it competitive, closes off one avenue the President and Republicans have that could make this election more competitive among young people. Among undecided voters, Democrats have an advantage over Republicans on all issues but Iraq (where they are even) and on terror (where they have gained significant ground since April). The same is true for all issues except immigration when positioned against the President. Even while Democrats become more competitive on security issues, we do not want college affordability to get lost as an issue. College affordability provides the strongest contrast among undecided voters for Democrats at this time and they would be remiss if they ignored it as an issue in mobilizing young voters (+25 compared to Bush, +31 compared to Republicans in Congress).

### **Message Direction**

Young people, as the table indicates below, say they have not heard enough from candidates on health care, college affordability, creating jobs, and gas prices and energy. They do think they have heard enough about the war in Iraq and homeland security and terrorism when it comes to evaluating candidates. Comparatively, young people say they would be interested in hearing more about health care, gas prices and energy and creating jobs. Candidates who ignore these issues may pay a price – particularly on health care and college affordability. Among undecided voters, 74% say they have not heard enough about health care and 32% rate the issue a ten in terms of what they are interested in hearing about. Similarly, 70% of all young people have not heard enough about college affordability and 25% intensely want to hear more about the issue (rated it a ten).

<i>Issue</i>	<b>Not Heard Enough</b>	<b>Interested in Hearing About</b>
Health Care	<b>70%</b>	8.1
Gas prices and Energy	66%	8.1
Creating jobs	68%	7.8
War in Iraq	34%	7.7
Homeland sec./terrorism	34%	7.5
College affordability	<b>70%</b>	7.3
Immigration	48%	6.7
Moral and values-based issues	53%	6.5

- ***The war in Iraq is clearly a defining issue in this campaign for young people.*** Almost nine in ten young people (86%) say the issue will be important in deciding whom to vote for, including 55% who say it is very important to them. Only 10% of young people indicate the issue has no resonance with them. No other issue (college affordability or energy) carries this much weight with young people. The war in Iraq, at this time, favors Democrats as 40% of young people say the issue makes them more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate for Congress compared to only 17% who say it makes them more likely to vote Republican. Importantly, Iraq as an issue has less intensity among undecided voters (43% very

important) but, at present, neither party has an advantage among undecided voters (17% more likely to vote Democrat, 16% more likely to vote Republican).

While most young people consider the war a mistake (57%) and a bare majority says it was not worth fighting (51%), young people are not reactionary. Only 30% support an immediate withdrawal compared to 30% who support staying until the situation is stable. A plurality prefers a more moderate option of setting a date certain for withdrawal that is no more than two years away. Despite Democratic efforts to separate the war on terror from the war in Iraq, a majority of young people see Iraq as part of the war against terror (55% part of war on terror).

Democrats have two audiences. Forty-six percent of Democratic voters support a date-certain, 74% think the war was a mistake, and 72% do not think it was worth fighting. These base supporters are energized by the issue and are primed to vote for Democrats because of it. Undecided voters, on the other hand, are remarkably split on this issue: 33% say stay until stable, 32% say set a date-certain, 31% support an immediate withdrawal and 58% say it is part of the war on terror. Undecided voters, in sum, are divided on this issue and Democrats have the potential to lose as many votes as they gain based on the issue.

- ***As we have demonstrated elsewhere, college affordability is also a key issue and Democrats have an advantage on the issue.*** It is the top issue concern voters want their Congressperson to address and, against both Bush and Republicans in Congress, Democrats win on the cost of college. Forty percent of voters say the issue makes them more likely to vote for the Democrat and only 11% say the Republican. Three in four say it will be an important issue when it comes to deciding their vote in November. Sixty-five percent of undecided voters and 87% of Democrats say the issue is important to their vote decision.
- ***Energy independence is also an important issue for Democrats.*** Young people indicate it even has the potential to be more important in their vote criterion than college affordability (84% important) and they give Democrats a four-to-one advantage on the issue (41% more likely to vote Democrat). While undecided voters are unsure at this time which party they prefer on the issue (20% Republican, 10% Democrat), three in four say it is an important issue when deciding for whom to vote (74%). The issue also bridges many divides: it brings conservationists together with more conservative voters who want to see their country free from dependence on foreign nations; it joins cost-focused young voters with environmentally-focused young people; and, a third of white men (30%) are more inclined to vote for Democrats based on the issue.

Voters support more energy independence for three prime reasons. First, they want to reduce our dependence on foreign countries (29%). Second, they want lower energy prices for things like utilities and gas (22%). Third, they want to help the environment (19%). Fewer young people support energy independence because it will keep us out of war (12%). Twenty-nine percent of Democratic

voters and 27% of blue collar men support energy independence as a way to end our dependence on foreign countries. Undecided voters tend to focus more on costs (23%) as do blue collar women (24%). The issue has strength as a wedge issue to potentially peel away cross-pressured Republican and independent men. Importantly, it is also one issue that campaigns are currently using to speak to older voters.

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*In the end, young people are focused on a trio of issues that can help win support for Democratic candidates. They struggle with the war in Iraq, but most feel it was a mistake and support Democratic candidates because of it. They want to be safe at home and want their country to win the war on terror but they have drifted away from the President on this issue in the last four months. College affordability is the clearest winner among these issues because it is the cleanest contrast. Instinctively young people know Democrats are better on the issue and, by four-to-one, the issue makes them more likely to pull the lever for a Democrat. The trends are clear: Democrats are stronger today than in April on the issues important to younger voters and young voters are primed to vote for them if campaigns are willing to work for their support.*