

Rock the Vote May 2006 Poll

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Republican Strategic Analysis

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Introduction and Overview

In examining the political environment, it is notable that young voters mirror many of the same characteristics seen in the electorate at large. Fully 67% of younger voters believe the country is on the wrong track. The issues that top their list of concerns are gas prices (18%), education (15%), jobs and the economy (13%), and Iraq (11%). And, in a trend often seen in the overall electorate, while 61% say they are “extremely likely” to vote, only 17% of them say they have been following news about the elections “extremely closely” or “very closely.”

This negative attitude about the direction of the country is also seen in attitudes about the party in power Washington. On a name identification series, President Bush (60% unfavorable/36% favorable) and the Republican Party (51% unfavorable/37% favorable) are both upside down on young voter approval. The Republican Party is also down 20 points on the generic ballot (47% Democrat/27% Republican). On issue handling, the Republicans and President Bush trail on every issue with the exception of Homeland Security.

All of this would seemingly lead to the conclusion that the Republican Party is in immense trouble with this segment of the electorate. However, two important facts should be kept in mind. First, much of this data is driven by the same type of intense partisan polarization seen in the overall electorate. Second, this is an age cohort with which it is often difficult for the Republican Party to build support, even in the best of environments. In the 2004 election, President Bush received only 45% support from voters aged 18-29. It was the only age cohort he lost.

This analysis will examine the partisan differences in this data and provide insights into how the Republican Party can most effectively recruit these voters in support for the GOP.

Political Environment – Young Republicans Remain Stalwart Supporters

As noted above, while the overall trend among young voters is decidedly negative, young Republicans remain optimistic about the country, the party, and its leaders. Regarding the direction of the country, 60% of young Republicans believe the country is headed in the right direction. Among young Republicans, President Bush has a favorable rating of 76% and the Republican Party has a favorable rating of 85%. Senator John McCain, who enjoys a 46% favorable to 16% unfavorable rating among the overall young electorate, also enjoys a higher rating among young Republicans of 53% favorable.

A similar trend is seen on issue handling as on every issue young Republican voters select the Republicans in Congress as the party best able to handle this issue. This includes some dramatically high levels of support for Republicans in Congress versus Democrats in Congress: there is a 90 point gap on the issue of Homeland Security and Terrorism, a 67 point gap on the War in Iraq, and a 63 point gap on the issue of immigration.

For President Bush versus the Democrats in Congress, the entities are tied on the issue of college affordability among young GOP voters. However, on every other issue, young Republican voters select President Bush, including some equally dramatic levels of high support on issues like Homeland Security (61 point gap), war in Iraq (51 point gap), taxes (50 point gap), and cleaning up corruption in Washington (49 point gap).

Last, on the generic ballot, 73% of young Republicans select the GOP against only 7% of young Republicans who select the Democratic Party.

Young Voter Motivations

As noted above, on the issue matrix, the top concerns of young voters are remarkably similar to the top concerns of the overall electorate. An additional indication of the partisan polarization of the young electorate is seen on the follow-up question to the most important issue question. When asked which party will do a better job of addressing their top issue, 73% of young Republicans select the GOP and 86% of Democrats select the Democratic Party.

The remainder of the Congressional session will show whether Congress is able to take decisive action on key issues like energy policy and the economy. This survey also examines some specific positions that a candidate might take during the course of a campaign. Young voters are asked to rate these positions on a 0 to 10 scale regarding its level of convincingness to persuade them to support that candidate. Eleven (11) positions are tested.

Overall, the positions that rated the highest among all young voters are:

- Calling for energy independence, including investing in sustainable and renewable energy (7.5 mean score),
- Calling for affordable health insurance for all by the year 2010 (7.4 mean score), and
- Support for increased funding for student aid (7.4 mean score).

However, as with the other portions of the study, young GOP voters have a slightly different perspective. Their top concerns are:

- Calling for energy independence, including investing in sustainable and renewable energy (7.3 mean score),
- Calling for reforming Social Security so that young people can invest a portion of their earnings and have more control over their retirement (7.1 mean score), and
- Believing that our major crisis is a decline in morality and values (6.9 mean score).

It should be noted that a development of a comprehensive energy policy, Social Security reform that includes individually controlled savings accounts, and the promotion of increased moral standards have all been major policy initiatives of the Bush administration.

Contacting Young Voters

These young voters are asked a series of questions about how they stay connected with friends and family and about how they would like to be contacted by candidates and political organizations. These questions illustrate the value that campaigns can get when they embrace an internet-based campaign and when they embrace targeting younger voters.

In asking how often young voters use certain methods to stay connected, it is clear that the biggest methods younger voters use by far are the internet (84% daily or near daily use) and e-mail (79% daily or near daily use). Despite their high levels of publicity and marketing, things like blogs (25% daily or near daily use), text messaging (38% daily or near daily use), and downloading podcasts (7% daily or near daily use), all rank near the bottom of this list.

This high level of the internet and e-mail is seen in the preferred methods of campaign contact by young voters. The top rated methods of contact for young voters are sending an e-mail on issues important to you (66% more likely to pay attention), sending a vote reminder e-mail on Election Day (64% more likely to pay attention), sponsoring a live online discussion to answer questions (61% more likely to pay attention), sending mail about the campaign (59% more likely to pay attention), and having a young voter oriented weblog (56% more likely to pay attention).

It should be noted that a well-run online presence by a campaign could generate much of this contact including sending e-mails, sponsoring online question and answer sessions, and creating a weblog. For most campaigns, the cost of creating this presence is well worth the returns this presence can generate in creating voter goodwill, soliciting donations, and building electoral support and intensity. This equation appears to be even more favorable among younger voters.

Review and Comment

Republican campaigns should be aware of three important findings about young voters. First, young Republican voters enjoy a seven point intensity advantage over young Democratic voters (65% extremely likely to vote versus 58% extremely likely to vote). Second, young Republican voters have a high level of support for President Bush and the Republican Congress. Last, the poll suggests that young voters are open to being contacted by campaigns through low-cost activities like e-mail, web-based events, and direct mail. In addition, many of these materials do not need to contain specialized, young voter oriented messaging, but can instead focus on traditional Republican campaign issues like energy policy, the economy, and promoting traditional moral values.

Conclusions

As with the overall electorate, there is certainly an anti-Washington trend among the young electorate. However, these attitudes have not yet led to either hostile attitudes about individual Members of Congress, who hold a 55% approval rating, or a noticeable drop in support for the Republican Party among young Republican voters.

While this negative trend could certainly lead to erosion in partisan support among young Republican voters, this data indicates that young GOP voters remain strong in their support of the party. As the 2006 election season heats up and campaigns work to maximize the performance of their supporters, it would certainly be wise for them to consider efforts to reach out to younger voters who have shown a propensity to turn out when motivated and can be motivated by cost effective means.