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The Center for Information & Research on
Civic Learning & Engagement

Youth Voting in the 2004 Election

By CIRCLE Staff¹
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On November 3rd, CIRCLE released statistics on voting by young Americans. More than half of the eligible under-30 population voted, as their turnout reached a level not seen for more than a decade. Today, CIRCLE releases additional information on young people’s voting and their attitudes and values as revealed by the exit polls.

Like the Under-30s, Voters Under the Age of 25 Increased Their Turnout

Based on the national exit poll conducted by Edison/Mitofsky² and vote tallies from the

Associated Press, CIRCLE estimates that the turnout of 18-24 year-olds was approximately 42.3%, up from 36.5% in 2000.³ Young people between the ages of 25 and 29 voted at a higher rate, 58.8% in 2004 vs. 53.1% in 2000.

Table 1 - Background: What is Youth Turnout?

“Youth turnout” means the percentage of eligible young people who voted:

$$\frac{\text{Number of young voters}}{\text{eligible youth population}} = \text{about 53\% for 18-29s, 42\% for 18-24s.}$$

That is the standard definition and the most significant measure of youth participation. It shows that more than half of 18-29-year-old citizens voted. However, some news reports have been using a different figure as the “youth turnout” rate: the percentage of all voters who were young. In other words, they have calculated the youth share.

The “youth share” means the percentage of all voters who were young:

$$\frac{\text{Number of young voters}}{\text{Number of all voters}} = \text{about 17-18\% for 18-29s; 9\% for 18-24s.}$$

The 18-29 youth share in 2004 was about the same as in 2000 (approximately 17-18%), although the number of votes cast and youth voter turnout was up sharply this year. The reason is that both young people and older people increased their voting.

Exit polls also indicate that 18-24 year olds' share of the total vote stayed about the same as in 2000, at around 9%. Their share of the voting eligible population also stayed the same. However, the *turnout* of 18-24 year olds went up from 2000 by about 5.8 percentage points. Overall turnout increased dramatically this year, and the increase in the turnout of 18-24 year olds is at least as high as that seen in older age groups.

Currently, exit polls are the only source of data for estimating youth voter turnout, but they may not be the best data source for comparing the turnout of different age groups over time. More information about youth voter turnout will be available in 2005 when the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey November Supplement is released.

Young Voters are Concerned about the Same Voting Issues, but Express Distinctive Attitudes and Values

Young voters and older voters were generally concerned about the same issues. For example, 22% of under-30 voters selected "moral values" as the single most important issue, exactly the same rate as in the electorate overall.

Younger voters were somewhat more concerned about education and taxes and less concerned about terrorism, compared to older voters. Although young voters were as concerned about jobs and the economy as other voters, they were the most likely to have experienced a job loss in their household within the last four years. Forty percent of 18-24 year olds had experienced a job loss in their household and 43% of 25-29 year olds had experienced a job loss, 7 and 10 percentage points higher than the average.

Despite a pattern of broadly similar issues, there were some clear differences between young Americans and their older counterparts on specific issues such as gay marriage and the role of government. For example, 41% of 18-29 voters said that gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to marry, compared to 25% of all voters and just 16% of those 60 and older. Fifty-six percent of under-30s and 60% of under-25s believe that "government should do more to solve problems," compared to 46% of all voters.

Big Differences Between Youngest Generation and Generation-X

Under-30 voters often diverged strikingly from voters who are currently in their 30s, according to the exit polls. On a few issues, such as abortion and Iraq, the under-30s hold similar views to those between the ages of 30 and 39. However, compared to this older group, the under-30s were eight percentage points more likely to vote for John Kerry and seven points more likely to vote for the Democratic House candidate. In addition, compared to voters in their thirties:

- By six percentage points, under 30 voters were more likely to believe that John Kerry says what he believes,
- By 12 points, under 30 voters were more likely to identify as liberal (and seven points less likely to call themselves conservative),

- By six points, they were less likely to approve of the Bush administration,
- By five points, they were more likely to believe that the Bush administration's tax cuts have been bad for the economy,
- By five points, they were more likely to believe that the "government should do more to solve problems,"
- By 16 percentage points, they were more likely to favor gay marriage,
- By eight percentage points, they were less likely to identify as Protestant but 5 points more likely to categorize themselves as "other Christian,"
- By seven points, they were less likely to live in a household with a gun,
- And under 30 voters were more likely to live in large cities and less likely to live in suburbs (by 6 points and 8 points, respectively).

More Critical of George W. Bush, More Supportive of John Kerry and Other Democratic Candidates

Young voters were the only age group to prefer the Democratic ticket over the Republican, albeit by a fairly narrow margin of 54%-45% for those under 30. If age groups are broken down further, support for the Democratic ticket was strongest among 18-24 year olds at 56%, followed by voters over the age of 75 at 54%. However, in party identification, 18-29 year old voters closely resembled the overall voting population (37% Democrat, 35% Republican, and 29% Independent--just one point more Democratic and two points less Republican than the electorate as a whole).

Voters between the ages of 18 and 24 were the most likely to express either anger or dissatisfaction with the administration of George W. Bush. When asked "Which comes closest to your feelings about the Bush Administration," about 57% of this group expressed anger or dissatisfaction, 8 percentage points more than all voters and 6 percentage points more than 25-29 year olds. They were the age group most likely to hold an unfavorable opinion of Bush with 56% having an unfavorable opinion of Bush compared to 46% of all voters. The under-25s were the least likely of all voters, at only 29%, to think that the Bush administration's tax cuts were good for the economy.

Young voters were John Kerry's strongest supporters; 56% of 18-24 year olds held a favorable opinion of him and the same percentage reported voting for him. In contrast, 51% of all voters said they held an unfavorable opinion of John Kerry. The under-30s were also the only age group that preferred Democratic candidates for the US House of Representatives (52% Democrat vs. 42% Republican). For the population as a whole, the split was 47% Democrat vs. 48% Republican.

Cell Phones Only

Young voters were the most likely to say that they did not have a landline and only used a cell phone. Nineteen percent of 18-24 year olds and 20% of 25-29 year olds said that they only had cell phone service while 7% of all voters said they only used a cell phone.

A Diverse Cohort

Young voters (age 18-29) are more diverse than older voters, according to the exit polls. Thirteen percent classified themselves as Hispanic/Latino, larger than the proportion in the electorate as a whole (8%). Fifteen percent of young voters self-identified as Black, compared to 11% of all voters. Six percent identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, compared to 3% of the whole electorate.

New Voters

Young voters between the ages of 18 and 29 were the most likely to be first-time voters; approximately 42% of under-30 voters, or about 8.2 million people, had never voted before. Among *all first-time voters* in this election, 64% were between the ages of 18 and 29. According to the national exit polls, 11% of all voters (or approximately 12.8 million people) were first-time voters. About 4.6 million of the new participants were older than 30, and about 8.2 million were between the ages of 18-29.

Young voters were relatively late to make up their minds: 13% said that they had decided within a month of the Election, compared to 10% of the whole electorate.

Updated Statistics on Voters between the Ages of 18 and 29

CIRCLE's estimates of youth turnout are based on three variables: the number of votes cast in the election (from local election officials via the Associated Press), the percentage of actual voters who are in that age range (according to exit polls), and the size of the citizen population between the ages of 18 and 29 (according to Census Bureau⁴).

The total number of votes cast has risen since our November 3rd release and will continue to rise as local election officials count absentee ballots and provisional ballots. As that tally rises, the estimate of the number of votes cast by young people, and hence youth turnout, also increases.

Meanwhile, there are now three estimates of the percentage of voters who were under 30. In our November 3rd release, CIRCLE used the Edison/Mitofsky National Election Pool exit polls for the 50 states plus the District of Columbia. We chose this measure because the aggregated state exit polls have a very large sample size (76,343) and they had been updated publicly by the morning of November 3rd. There is also a completely separate *national* exit poll conducted by Edison/Mitofsky with a sample size of 13,639. Finally, the *Los Angeles Times* has a national exit poll of its own. Each survey generates slightly different results because of margins of error and sampling methods, but all surveys tell the same basic story. Youth turnout has reached its highest levels in more than a decade.

Table 2 – Three Estimates of Youth Share of the Electorate

<i>Source:</i>	<i>Percentage of all voters who are age 18-29 (youth share of electorate)</i>	<i>Estimated Number of Votes Cast by Voters Age 18-29 (based on votes counted as of November 7)</i>	<i>Percentage of citizens age 18-29 who voted (turnout)</i>
National Election Pool: national exit poll	17%	19,802,575	48.7%
National Election Pool: 50 states plus the District of Columbia, aggregated state exit polls	18.4%	21,433,375	52.7%
<i>Los Angeles Times</i> exit poll	20%	23,297,147	57.3%

Notes

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² On January 19, 2005, the company that conducts the National Election Pool national and state exit polls, Edison/Mitofsky, released an evaluation of its 2004 polls. Nothing in the 77-page report suggests that there is any special reason to doubt the findings on youth voting, which are consistent in three separate exit polls.

As mentioned in the main text of this Fact Sheet, the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, November 2004 Supplement will give us a more reliable estimate of youth voting. While this dataset has some limitations, we believe it provides a more reliable estimate for two reasons: (1) unlike the exit polls the methodology has remained unchanged throughout the years and (2) it has a larger sample size.

³ These percentages are based on a 2004 tally of votes as reported by the Associated Press on November 8, 2004, and a 2000 tally of votes cast on November 9, 2000. These vote tallies are 116,485,736 for 2004 and 101,000,214 for 2000.

⁴ Population estimates are taken from the Current Population Survey Annual Demographic File March 2004 and the 2000 November Supplement.