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Youth Voter Turnout 1992 to 2004: Estimates from Exit Polls
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CIRCLE has issued two releases estimating youth turnout in the 2004 presidential election. The first release was issued on November 3rd and provided the earliest turnout estimates based on National Election Pool (NEP) state and national exit polls[2] and a preliminary vote count. The second was a Fact Sheet released on November 8th which provided estimates based on a more current vote tally.

Because vote tallies increase after Election Day as more votes and absentee ballots are counted, it is important to use a consistent vote tally when comparing youth turnout from year to year. In the table below all calculations are based on vote tallies reported two days after the election. Another important point about current youth turnout estimates is that they all rely on NEP exit polls, and there are two ways of calculating turnout from the exit polls. Each state has an exit poll and there is a separate national exit poll. Therefore, youth turnout can be calculated by aggregating all 50 state exit polls along with the District of Columbia poll *or* it can be calculated using the national exit poll. Currently, the most accurate estimate of youth turnout is the range given by these two polls: 42%-47% for 18-24 year olds and 48-52% for 18-29 year olds. The following table compares youth turnout estimates using both methods and a vote tally as reported by the Associated Press two days following the presidential election.[3]

Table 1- Youth Turnout Estimates, NEP State and National Exit Polls

18-24 Year Old Turnout Estimates, NEP State and National Exit Polls			18-29 Year Old Turnout Estimates, NEP State and National Exit Polls		
Year	Aggregated State Exit Polls	National Exit Poll	Year	Aggregated State Exit Polls	National Exit Poll
2004[4]	47%	42%	2004	52%	48%
2000	36%	37%	2000	42%	43%
1996	32%	35%	1996	38%	39%
1992	48%	50%	1992	53%	54%

The table below shows the estimated youth votes cast according to state and national exit polls and a vote count tallied two days after the election.

Table 2- Youth Votes Cast, Estimated by State and National Exit Polls

18-24 Year Old Votes Cast Estimates, State and National Exit Polls				18-29 Year Old Votes Cast Estimates, State and National Exit Polls			
Year	Aggregated State Exit Polls	National Exit Poll	Range Given by Both Polls	Year	Aggregated State Exit Polls	National Exit Poll	Range Given by Both Polls
2004	11.6 million	10.3 million	10-12 million	2004	21.1 million	19.5 million	19.5-21 million
2000	8.6 million	8.7 million	about 9 million	2000	16.6 million	16.8 million	about 17 million
1996	7.9 million	7.2 million	7-8 million	1996	14.9 million	15.6 million	15-16 million
1992	10.7 million	10.3 million	10-11 million	1992	20.4 million	20.9 million	20-21 million

The following table shows the estimated youth shares of the electorate according to the 2004 national exit poll and the 2004 aggregated state exit polls. The youth share of the electorate is the percentage of all voters who were young.

Table 3- Estimates of Youth Share of the 2004 Electorate

Source:	18-29 Year Old Share	18-24 Year Old Share
National Election Pool: national exit poll	17%[5] [2,300]	9% [1,200]
National Election Pool: 50 states plus the District of Columbia, aggregated state exit polls	18.4% [14,000]	10.1% [7,700]

Note: Approximate sample sizes for the different exit polls are contained in brackets.

Problems with Estimating Youth Turnout

It is important to note that all national voter turnout percentages that are reported by age are *estimates*. Because age data is not recorded for voters in all states, we rely on surveys to estimate youth turnout. The two main surveys that are used are exit polls and the Census Bureau's November Current Population Survey (CPS).

Immediately following the presidential election, exit polls are the *only* data source available for estimating youth voter. However, exit polls do have limitations. Some voters refuse to answer exit polls, and surveys that are taken at polling places cannot capture early or absentee voters. In 2004, NEP supplemented its exit polls with telephone surveys in selected states, but the turnout figures may still be inaccurate because of the nationwide prevalence of early and absentee voting.

The Census Bureau's Current Population November Supplement is a better dataset for estimating youth turnout. Each year, the survey samples over 50,000 individuals of the non-institutionalized population in the United States, and includes many questions about voting participation, registration, citizenship, and other background factors. It is a much larger dataset than either the state or national exit polls, and it can be used to estimate turnout for different age groups over time. This dataset also has some limitations. In particular, data about voting is self-reported. Respondents may be more likely to say that they voted even if they did not. Nevertheless, this data source remains the best for comparing turnout by age. While this source would provide a more reliable estimate of youth voter turnout, it will not be available until sometime in 2005.

Notes

[1] We thank Brent Elrod and Kimberlee Moore for excellent research assistance.

[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] In both cases, voter turnout is calculated in the following way:

$$voter\_turnout = \frac{\left(\%18-29\_from\_exit\_poll\right)*\left(num\_of\_votes\_cast\right)}{\left(citizen\_population\_18-29\_March\_2004\right)}.$$

[4] Because only published tabulations, and not the raw data sets, are publicly available for the 2004 NEP exit polls, there are rounding differences between 2004 numbers and those for past years.

[5] Estimates of the youth share rounded to the tenth will not be available until the NEP exit poll data are released.