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The Center for Information & Research on
Civic Learning & Engagement

Youth & Adult Voter Turnout From 1972-2002

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Since 1972, the first presidential election when 18-20 year olds were eligible to vote, youth voter turnout has declined. For 18-24 year old citizens, turnout has declined by 13 percentage points from 55% in 1972 to 42% in 2000. For 18-29 year old citizens, turnout has declined by 12 percentage points from 58% in 1972 to 46% in 2000.

Table 1: Presidential Elections
Voter Turnout for Citizens Ages 18-24 and 25+

Voter Turnout, CIRCLE Method Citizen Population			
Year	Ages 18-24	Ages 25+	Difference* between age groups
1972	55%	70%	16% pts
1976	48%	69%	21% pts
1980	45%	69%	24% pts
1984	46%	70%	24% pts
1988	42%	67%	25% pts
1992	51%	72%	21% pts
1996	40%	66%	27% pts
2000	42%	70%	28% pts
Difference* in turnout b/n 2000 & 1972	-13% points	0% points	13% points

Table 2: Midterm Elections
Voter Turnout for Citizens Ages 18-24 and 25+

Voter Turnout, CIRCLE Method Citizen Population			
Year	Ages 18-24	Ages 25+	Difference* between age groups
1974	28%	54%	27% pts
1978	27%	55%	29% pts
1982	29%	58%	30% pts
1986	26%	55%	29% pts
1990	25%	55%	30% pts
1994	25%	55%	31% pts
1998	21%	53%	32% pts
2002	23%	56%	33% pts
Difference* in turnout b/n 2002 & 1974	-5% points	+1% points	6% points

Source: November Supplements of the Current Population Survey;

*The differences reported here were calculated using more precise turnout percentages calculated to five decimal points, and are reported in percentage points.

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Table 3: Presidential Elections
Voter Turnout for Citizens Ages 18-29 and 30+

Voter Turnout, CIRCLE Method Citizen Population			
Year	Ages 18-29	Ages 30+	Difference* between age groups
1972	58%	72%	14% pts
1976	52%	71%	19% pts
1980	50%	71%	22% pts
1984	51%	72%	21% pts
1988	46%	70%	24% pts
1992	54%	74%	20% pts
1996	44%	68%	25% pts
2000	46%	72%	26% pts
Difference* in turnout b/n 2000 & 1972	-12% points	0% points	12% points

Table 4: Midterm Elections
Voter Turnout for Citizens Ages 18-29 and 30+

Voter Turnout, CIRCLE Method Citizen Population			
Year	Ages 18-29	Ages 30+	Difference* between age groups
1974	32%	57%	25% pts
1978	31%	58%	28% pts
1982	33%	62%	28% pts
1986	30%	58%	29% pts
1990	29%	58%	29% pts
1994	29%	58%	30% pts
1998	25%	56%	31% pts
2002	26%	58%	32% pts
Difference* in turnout b/n 2002 & 1974	-6% points	+1% points	7% points

Source: November Supplements of the Current Population Survey;

*The differences reported here were calculated using more precise turnout percentages calculated to five decimal points, and are reported in percentage points.

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 the Census Bureau's November Current Population Survey (CPS) for data on voter participation. For the CPS collection, respondents report on their own behavior, and their answers – including whether or not they actually voted – cannot be verified.

Estimates of voter turnout can be calculated for either all U.S. residents, regardless of their citizenship, or for only those U.S. residents who are citizens and therefore eligible to vote. CIRCLE's method does not include non-citizens in calculations of turnout.

Because the source of data for estimates of voter turnout by age is a survey, there is an additional problem. Some respondents choose not to answer the question about their voting behavior. At CIRCLE we do not include non-responses in our calculations of turnout. For a complete discussion of CIRCLE's method of calculating voter turnout², see CIRCLE Fact Sheet *Youth Voter Turnout Has Declined by Any Measure*. For a comparison of voter turnout percentages calculated by different methods, see Table 5.

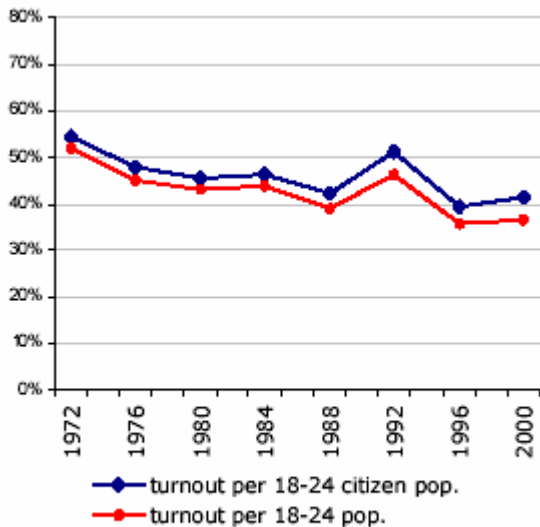
Table 5: Voter Turnout Presidential Years, Three Methods for Calculating Voter Turnout

Year	Voter Turnout: CIRCLE Method Counting Citizens Only			Voter Turnout: Census Method Counting Citizens Only*			Voter Turnout: Census Method Counting All Residents (including noncitizens)		
	18-24 year olds	25+ year olds	Difference in turnout	18-24 year olds	25+ year olds	Difference in turnout	18-24 year olds	25+ year olds	Difference in turnout
1972	55%	70%	16%	52%	68%	16%	50%	66%	16%
1976	48%	69%	21%	44%	65%	21%	42%	63%	21%
1980	45%	69%	24%	43%	68%	25%	40%	63%	24%
1984	46%	70%	24%	44%	69%	25%	41%	63%	23%
1988	42%	67%	25%	40%	66%	26%	36%	61%	24%
1992	51%	72%	21%	49%	70%	22%	43%	64%	21%
1996	40%	66%	27%	36%	62%	26%	32%	57%	25%
2000	42%	70%	28%	36%	63%	27%	32%	58%	26%
Turnout Difference d/n2000 & 1972 in	-13% points	0% points	12% points	-16% points	-5% points	11% points	-18% points	-8% points	10% points

*Contrary to CIRCLE's method, the Census Bureau codes all respondents who did not answer the voting question as non-voters.

Although there are different approaches to calculating youth voter turnout, they all reflect the same trend. Moreover, they are all valid measures if they are compared to the corresponding percentages for adult turnout. For example, if youth turnout is calculated for citizens only, the comparison for adult turnout should also be calculated for citizens only. Graphs 6 illustrates the common trend in declining youth voter turnout for two different methods of calculation.

Graph 6: Youth Turnout in Presidential Years (Two Measures)



source: Census (calculated using CIRCLE method)

¹ Research Director and Youth Director respectively at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

² Our figure is based on the 1972 to 2002 U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) November Supplements, completed within two weeks of each November election. 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. The simplest and most common measure used by researchers of voter turnout is the number of voters divided by the number of adult residents. Voter turnout in this fact sheet is calculated for U.S. citizens only, which generates higher voter turnout figures than those reported by the U.S. Census Bureau. Furthermore, we adjust the voter turnout rate for non-responses in the voting question. While the quality of data from the CPS is generally excellent, there are survey participants who do not answer every question presented in the survey. CIRCLE excludes those individuals who did not answer the voting question from our calculations when determining voter turnout; we do not count them as non-voters, because we believe that this would understate voter turnout. Typically, researchers who do count non-answers as "no's" find a lower turnout rate in each year than we present here. For this report, we calculate turnout for citizens in the following manner:

$$\text{Voter Turnout}_{\text{citizens no missing}} = \frac{(\# \text{ of self-reported voters})}{(\# \text{ of U.S. Citizens over age 18 who answered the voting question})}$$

All data are publicly available, and all programs used to generate these data are available upon request. For more information on issues related to estimating voter turnout, see "Youth Voter Turnout Has Declined by Any Measure" by Peter Levine and Mark Lopez of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), September 2002.