

Young Voters in the 2010 Elections

By CIRCLE Staff

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This CIRCLE fact sheet summarizes important findings from the 2010 National House Exit Polls conducted by Edison Research. The respondents are actual voters; citizens who did *not* vote are excluded. The exit polls attempt to include early and absentee voters in proportion to their numbers. In this fact sheet, we first describe youth voters as a whole and then focus on racial/ethnic minority youth and youth without college experience, because we are committed to understanding populations historically underrepresented in the electorate. Unless otherwise noted, the phrase “younger voters” refers to those between the ages of 18 and 29. “60+ voters” refers to ages 60 and older. “All voters” means ages 18 and older.

Youth Voter Turnout Estimate

CIRCLE’s turnout estimate (based on the exit polls, the number of ballots counted, and population data) suggests that about 20.9% of eligible young American citizens voted.¹ (That is the best definition of “turnout.”) According to the National Election Pool (NEP) national exit poll, younger voters represented 11% of the *share* all voters. Voters between the ages of 18 and 24 represented 5% of the *share* all the voters; those between 25 and 29 represented 6% of the *share*. Note that “turnout” (the percentage of young people who vote) is different from the share of voters who are young.

Among voters as a whole, only three percent said this was their first time voting. The 2010 electorate was largely a *subset* of previous electorates. Among younger voters, 13% went to the polls for the first time, meaning that 87% of youth were repeat voters. In that respect, the 2010 election was very different from 2008, when 43% of younger voters had been first-time voters. In 2010, 84% of younger voters said they had voted in the Presidential election in 2008, 50% supporting Barack Obama, 29% John McCain, and 4% “other.” Out of the repeat-voters in 2010, 60% had voted for Obama in 2008, compared to 35% for McCain. The 2008 exit polls showed that young voters had split for Obama over McCain that year by 66%-32%, a higher ratio in the Democrats’ favor. This suggests that a smaller proportion of youth who voted for Obama returned to cast their ballots this year than those who supported McCain or other candidates in 2008.

Demographics of Young Voters

Younger voters were more racially and ethnically diverse than the electorate as a whole. Among younger voters, 66% were white, 14% Black, 15% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 2% “all others”² (this last category includes Native Americans and those who choose to classify themselves in any of the other categories). In contrast, among voters 30 and older, 80% were white, 10% Black, 7% Hispanic, 1% Asian, and 2% “all other.”

Seven percent of younger voters said they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual, compared to 4% of all voters.

Seventy-seven percent of the youth votes were cast by youth with college experience. Only about 58% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 have college experience, so the young electorate was tilted toward college-educated people. In fact, preliminary estimates by CIRCLE suggest that young people who have some college experience were more than twice as likely to vote as their peers who have not been to college. This is consistent with CIRCLE’s past findings using both the NEP, National Exit Poll and the U.S. Census, Current Population Survey (CPS) data.

Young voters had a different religious profile than other voters. Among voters as a whole, one third said they were Protestant, and one quarter, Catholic. Among older voters, 69% placed themselves in those two categories. But among younger voters, only 16% said they were Protestant, and 22%, Catholic. The unusually large categories among younger voters were “other Christian” (28%) and “none” (24%).

Forty-three percent of younger voters said they had no land-line at home, compared to just four percent of older voters.

Unlike Older Voters, Majority of Young Voters Support the Democratic Party

Younger voters chose Democratic House candidates over Republican House candidates by a margin of 57%-40%. In contrast, all voters favored the Republicans by 52%-45% (Figure 1). Support for Republicans rose with age. Over-60s voted Republican by 57%-41% (Figure 2). In Senate races, younger voters preferred the Democratic candidates by 55%-40%, compared to the 50%-44% Republican advantage among all voters (Figure 3).

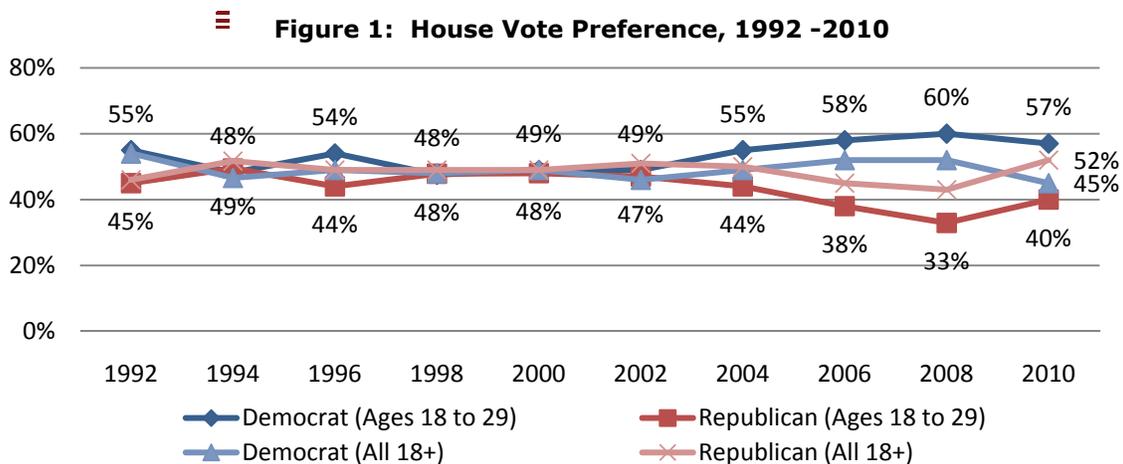


Figure 2: % of Voters Supporting Republican Candidates by Age

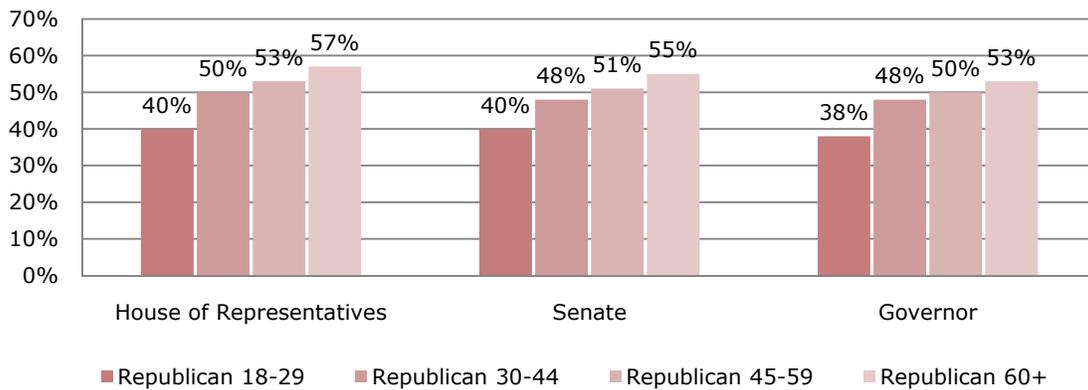
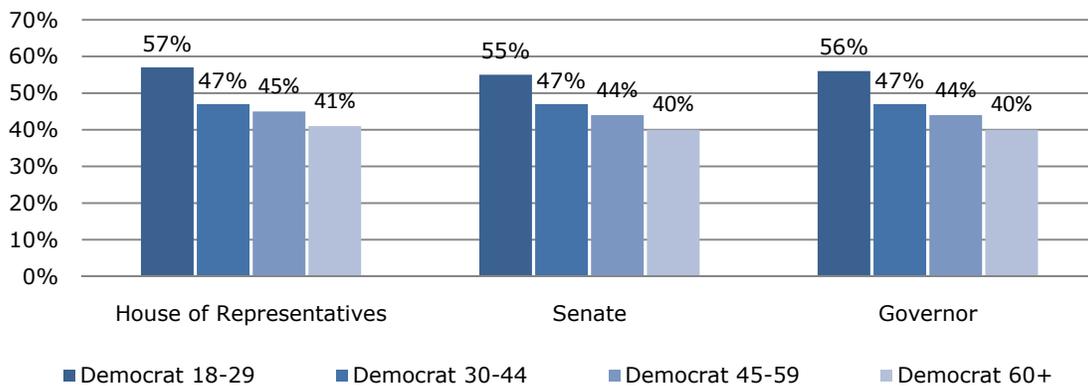


Figure 3: % of Voters Supporting Democratic Candidates by Age



In gubernatorial races, younger voters split 56%-38% in favor of the Democratic candidates, compared to a 49%-46% lead for the Republicans among all voters (Figure 2 and 3).

More than half of younger voters (59%) said they had a favorable view of the Democratic Party, compared to 43% of all voters, and just 38% of over-60s. Thirty percent of younger voters had a favorable view of the Republican Party compared to 42% of all voters.

Young Voters More Supportive of the President

By a 60%-40% margin, younger voters approved of Barack Obama's handling of his job as president. By a 55%-41% margin, they said that his policies will help the country in the long run. In contrast, a 54%-45% majority of all voters disapproved of the president and a 52%-44% majority of all voters said his policies will hurt the country. Twenty-eight percent of young voters said that one reason for voting was to express support for Barack Obama, four points higher than the rate for all voters. But almost as many (25%) said they had voted in part to express opposition to President Obama. The remainder (43%) of youth said Barack Obama was not a factor. In the 2008 Presidential Election, 79% of young voters disapproved of the way then President George W. Bush was handling the job.

Voters of all Ages Agree: Economy is the #1 Issue Facing the Country

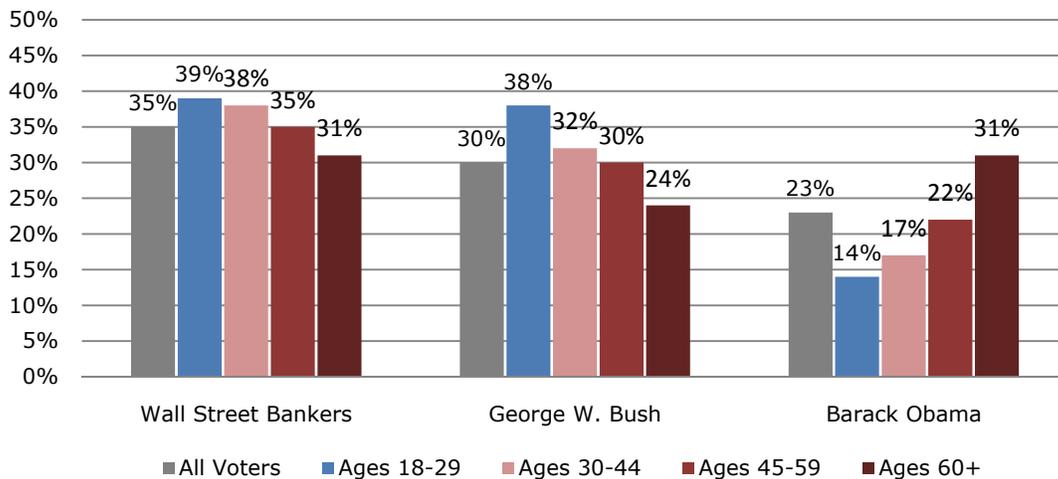
Given a choice among four issues that could be the most important facing the United States, younger voters chose the economy (59%), followed by health care (24%), the war in Afghanistan (8%) and illegal immigration (6%). These choices were not much different from those of all voters or any other age group.

Younger voters also held similar views to voters in other age groups about Congress' priority in the next session. Like older generations, younger voters were evenly split between wanting Congress to reduce the budget deficit (39%) and spending more to create jobs (35%). Eighteen percent said that Congress should focus on cutting taxes. This means that 58% of young voters supported an economic agenda that could be described as conservative.

A plurality of younger voters (40%) favored retaining the Bush-era tax cuts only for families earning less than \$250,000 per year. One quarter would let all the tax cuts expire. They were about twice as likely to want the tax cuts to expire as older voters were.

The exit poll offered three options for "who is the most to blame for our current economic situation." Among all age groups, "Wall Street Bankers" were the first choice, George W. Bush came second, and Barack Obama came third (Wall Street and Barack Obama were tied as top for those 60+). Younger voters were the least likely to blame President Obama (14%), and the most likely to blame Wall Street (39%) or President Bush (38%). Their difference with older voters was substantial on this issue: those 60+ were more than twice as likely to blame President Obama (31% of older voters versus 14% of younger voters).

Figure 5: Who is To Blame for Current Economic Problems by Age



Health care: voters overall were critical of the new health care law, only 16% wanting to keep it as it is and 48% favoring repeal (and 31% wanting to expand it). Younger voters were somewhat more favorable, with 19% wanting to leave it as it is and 41%

wanting to expand it. Thus a 60% majority of young voters was in favor of the general idea of more government involvement in health care (compared to about half of all voters).

Young Voters Evenly Split between Liberals, Conservatives and Moderates

Young voters were more likely to identify themselves as Democrats than as Republicans, but the ideological split was more even than the partisan split. Forty-two percent said they usually think of themselves as Democrats, versus 29% Republicans and 20% Independents. But 33% said they were liberal, 31% conservative, and 36% moderate. In the 2008 Exit poll, 45% of young voters thought of themselves as Democrat, 26% as Republican, and 29% as Independent or something else. This change does not necessarily mean that young people are generally shifting toward the Republican Party. However, it does suggest that young Republicans represented a larger portion of the electorate compared to 2008.

Younger Voters Less Supportive of the Tea Party than Older Voters

Twenty-seven percent of young voters supported the Tea Party, with 10% "strongly" supporting the movement. In contrast, 40% of all voters and nearly half (47%) of 60+ voters supported the Tea Party. Twenty-seven percent of 60+ voters supported it "strongly." A plurality of younger voters (38%) were neutral about the Tea party, and 30% opposed it (20% "strongly"). Fourteen percent of younger voters said that the Tea Party was not a factor in determining their vote, but more said they had turned out to vote against the movement than in favor of it (23%). That ratio was almost reversed for 60+ voters (16%-25%).

Young Voters Report Mixed Economic Circumstances

Younger voters were somewhat more likely than other voters to report that their own families' financial situations had improved since 2008. Twenty-two percent noted an improvement, compared to just 8% of 60+ voters. Young adulthood is a time when one's own economic situation should improve annually, yet 42% of younger voters felt their situation had worsened. Young adulthood is also an unstable time, especially during a recession. Thirty-eight percent of young voters reported a layoff in their own families, compared to just 21% of 60+ voters.

Young Voters More Optimistic About the Future

Despite the challenging economic times, younger voters were by far the most optimistic age group. Forty-two percent said the next generation will be better off, and 28% thought it will be worse off. That ratio was almost reversed for older voters (age 60+), who chose "worse" over "better" by 39%-28%. Even regarding the short term—the economic situation for the next year— younger voters were slightly less worried than other voters were, although 87% reported that they were worried. Finally, younger voters were much more likely to say that the country is generally going in the right direction (41%) than older voters were.

Young Voters by Race and Ethnicity

This next section of the fact sheet focuses on how voters of various races differed in their voting patterns and preferences. As noted above, about one third of younger voters were people of color. Younger Blacks represented 14% of all younger voters, just about the same as their proportion of the whole 18-29 population (14.4%). In 2008, they represented 18% of younger voters and had the highest turnout rate of any racial/ethnic group of young Americans.³ This year, it appears that their turnout was about on par with younger voters as a whole. It is unlikely that the turnout rate of younger Blacks again surpassed that of younger whites, but they did vote at about the same rate, despite having lower average educational attainment and higher rates of disenfranchisement because of felony convictions. In short, being Black was itself a positive predictor of voting, although social class factors removed most of that advantage. Meanwhile, younger Hispanics represented 15% of younger voters, again close to the same as their proportion of the 18-29 population as a whole (14.2%). In past elections, the turnout of young Hispanics had lagged behind other racial/ethnic groups, but the exit polls suggest that they may have narrowed or even erased the gap in 2010.

Opinions among young voters of color often differed sharply from those of younger white voters. They were also somewhat different from white voters demographically. For instance, almost half (49%) of younger Black voters and 37% of younger Hispanic voters reported family incomes below \$30,000, compared to 26% of younger white voters. Thirty-three percent of younger Black voters and 31% of younger Hispanic voters reported having less than a high school diploma, compared to 19% of younger white voters.

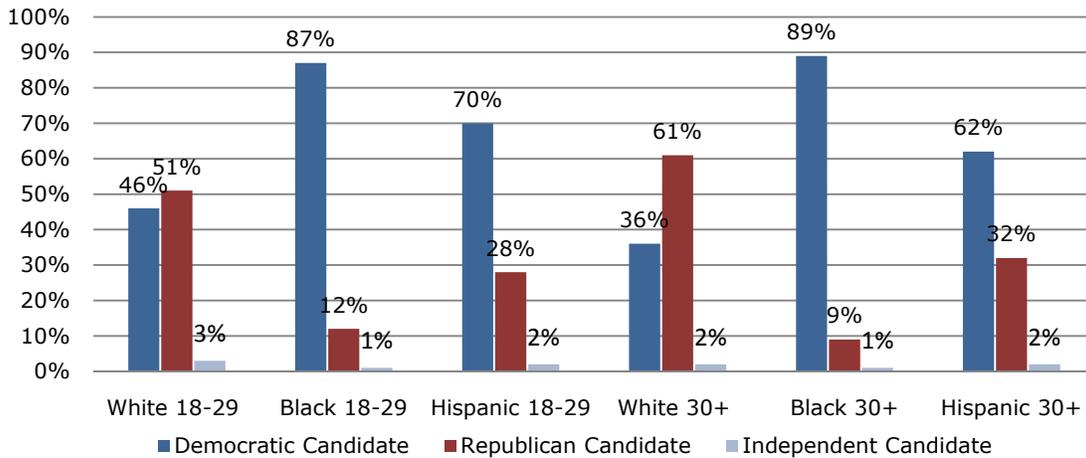
Party Support Varies Widely Among Voters of Different Races

Nearly 90% of Black voters, regardless of age, supported the Democratic candidates in the House of Representatives races. That was true of 86% of younger Black voters. Roughly the same proportion (90%) of younger Black voters had chosen Democratic House candidates in 2008.

Seventy percent of Hispanic youth voters supported the Democratic candidate, almost the same proportion as in 2008 (72%), and more than their age 30+ counterparts, 62% of whom voted Democratic.

Whites were more likely to support the Republicans, with just 51% of white youth and 61% of white voters over the age of thirty voting for the Republican candidate. Notably, white young voters were more likely to support the Republican candidate (51%) than the Democratic candidate (46%).

Figure 6: House Candidate Support by Race and Ethnicity



When asked about political party identification, roughly one in five voters self-identified as “Independent/Something Else” (the other choices were Democrat or Republican). However, in the 2010 House of Representatives races, many voters who did not identify with one of the two major parties nevertheless voted for either a Republican or a Democratic candidate. White Independent voters split their support evenly between the two main parties, while white Independents age 30 and above were more likely to vote for the Republican candidate. Independent Black voters of all ages swung to the Democrats, along with young Independent Hispanic voters. Independent Hispanic voters age 30 and over swung to the Republican Party.⁴

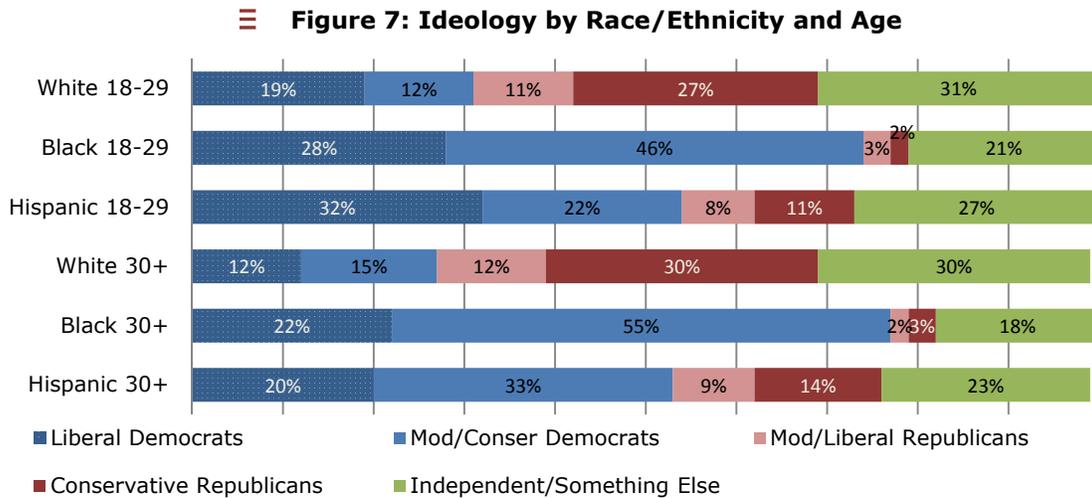
Overall, young voters were more likely to see the Democratic Party favorably (59%) than unfavorably (38%). However, white youth were about evenly split in their view of the Democratic Party (49% favorable, 47% unfavorable). Although data for other racial groups are not available, white youth stand out in their dislike for the Democratic Party. White youth are, nonetheless, far more in favor of the Democratic Party than their 30+ counterparts, 62% of whom view the Democratic Party unfavorably (32% favorably).

Black and Hispanic Youth Most Likely to Identify as Liberal Democrats, White Youth More Likely to Identify as Independents or Conservative Republicans

Young voters in the 2010 election varied greatly in their party and ideological identification. Among young Black and Hispanic voters, nearly three in ten self-identified as liberal democrats compared to 20% of their white counterparts. White youth, on the other hand, were most likely to self-identify as Independents/Something Else (31%) or Conservative Republicans (27%). Roughly half of both young and older Black voters identified as Moderate/Conservative Democrats (Figure 7).

Younger Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to describe themselves as Liberal, compared to their older counterparts. Thirty-five percent of young Black voters describe themselves as Liberal, compared to 26% of older Black voters. Young Hispanic voters were much more likely to describe themselves as Liberal (42%) compared to their elders (28%). Specifically, young Black and Hispanic voters were more likely to

describe themselves as Liberal Democrats than their older counterparts, by six and twelve percentage points, respectively. In addition, 30+ Hispanic voters were thirteen percentage points more likely to describe themselves as Conservative when compared to young Hispanic voters (21% of youth and 34% of 30+).



White Youth More Likely to Support Tea Party Movement

White youth were more likely to support the Tea Party movement (33%) than young Black and Hispanic voters (15% and 16%, respectively), although they were less supportive than their adult counterparts (47% of whom supported the movement). About one third of young voters, regardless of race, opposed the movement. Roughly half of Black and Hispanic young voters reported neutral feelings about the movement compared to a third of white young voters. Voters age 30 plus had more polarized views of the movement, and those opinions differed by race. Whites 30 and older were most supportive of the movement (47% supported it), while 30+ Black voters were most opposed (60% opposed the movement).

Hispanic, 30+ voters were considerably more likely than younger Hispanic voters to say that they support the Tea Party movement (ages 18-29: 16% support, ages 30+: 31% support). At the same time, older Black voters were considerably more likely to say that they oppose the Tea Party movement, when compared to their younger counterparts (29% of youth oppose, 60% 30+ oppose). Under 30 Black voters were slightly more likely to say they support the Tea Party movement, but about half of young Black voters say they are neutral about it.

View of the Current Administration

As noted earlier, young voters were far more likely to approve of the way President Obama is handling the job than voters ages 30 and older. Among youth, however, young white voters were more likely to disapprove of President Obama than approve, suggesting that strong support from President Obama comes from minority youth. Young voters were also more likely to approve of the way Congress is handling its job

than the older voters. However, white young voters were also more likely to disapprove of the Congress (70%) than young voters overall (62%).

Issues

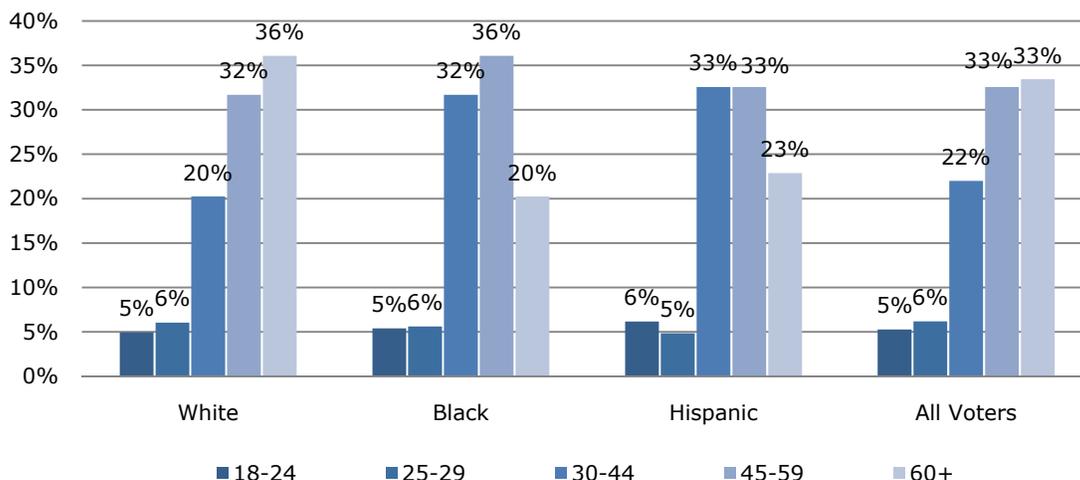
Young voters of all racial backgrounds felt that the economy was the most important issue facing the nation today. Fifty-eight percent of younger white voters, 58% of younger Black voters, and 63% of younger Hispanic voters chose the economy ahead of the other choices offered: health care, illegal immigration, and the war in Afghanistan. In 2008, the exit polls offered different choices (including energy and terrorism), but then, also, the economy was the top choice across all racial/ethnic groups of younger voters.

Despite their similar sense of the most important issue, younger voters expressed different opinions about individual issues and what the government should do about them. Although data are not available for each ethnic minority group, the data show that white young voters held views that were quite different from young voters as a whole, implying that young people of color, as a group, disagreed substantially with younger white voters. For example, 48% of young white voters said that the next Congress should focus on reducing the budget deficit, compared to 39% of the entire young voter population. White young voters were less likely to think that spending more to create jobs was important than the rest of the young voters. Furthermore, they were far more likely to say that the Congress should repeal the new health care law than the rest of young voters, and less likely to think it should expand it. Compared to young voters overall, white young voters were slightly less likely to believe that the economic stimulus packages has helped the economy.

Voters' Race, Age and Voter Share

In several respects, people of color who voted in 2010 were younger than white people who voted. Overall, 53% of the younger voters (under 30) were between the ages of 25 and 29, and 48% were between the ages of 18 and 24. These two age groups represented 5% and 6% of all votes, respectively. Among the 30+ voters, who represented 88% of all votes, 62% were between 30 and 59, and 38% were 60+. But under-30 Hispanic voters were younger than under-30 white voters. Among young Hispanic voters, 56% were between the ages of 18 and 24 and 44% were 25 to 29. The 60+ white voters stood out, as they cast 36% of all the white votes. Among minority groups, older voters were less predominant. The 60+ age group represented 20% of Black voters and 23% of the Hispanic voters (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Share of Voters by Age with Racial/Ethnic Group



Youth Preferences by Educational Attainment

The final section of this fact sheet focuses on the effects of education on voter turnout and voter preferences. Research generally finds that young people with no college background are less likely to vote than youth who have any college experience. Given the sample sizes of the exit polls in 2010, we are reluctant to estimate a precise turnout rate for subsets of younger voters. However, it appears that the turnout rate of younger voters with college experience was *at least twice as high* as the rate of their counterparts who have not attended college. That difference is consistent with trends in past elections. In 2010, younger voters without any college experience represented 23% of all younger voters. In 2008, they had represented 30% of the much larger electorate.

Party Support and Ideology

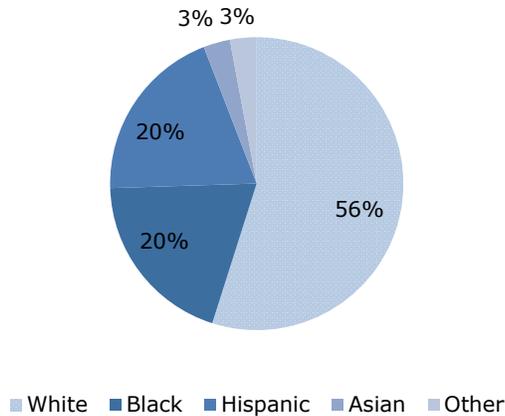
Forty-six percent of young voters without college experience identified themselves as Democrats; young voters with some college experience were slightly less likely to do so (41%). It is worth noting, however, that youth in general were most likely to consider themselves politically moderate. This was true for both young voters with college experience (35%) and young voters without college experience (40%).

Voters' College Experience, Race, Age and Turnout

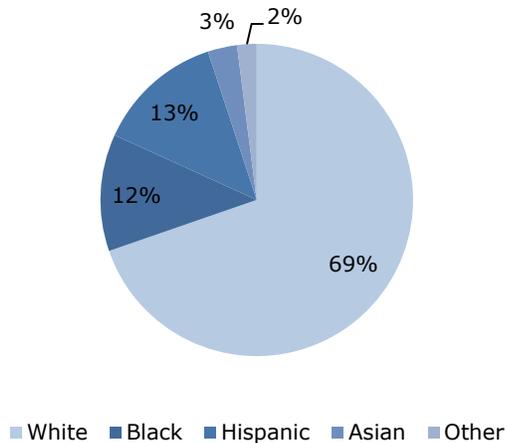
Thirty-three percent of young people without college experience were first-time voters in the 2010 election - compared to only 8% of college educated young people age 18-to-29. This is partly because voters without college experience tend to be younger than voters with college experience. (In turn, one reason for that difference is that individuals who have no college experience at age 19 or 20 may obtain some college experience later in life.) Voters without college experience were more racially diverse than their counterparts with college experience. Among non-college voters, 56% were white,

20% were Black, and 20% were Hispanic. Among young voters with college experience, 69% were white, 12% were Black and 13% were Hispanic.

≡ **Figure 9: Racial Composition of Young Voters without College Experience**



≡ **Figure 10: Racial Composition of Young Voters with College Experience**



Views of the Nation’s Top Issues Differ by Education Level

Young voters without college experience were significantly more likely to say that their financial situation was worse than two years ago (44%), compared to their college-educated counterparts (33%). But young voters with college experience were 10 points more likely to say the economy was the #1 issue facing the country (62% vs. 52%). Almost 30% of young voters with no college experience chose health care as the nation’s top issue. They were also more likely to believe that Congress should expand the new health care bill than their counterparts with college experience. When asked what the highest priority should be for the next Congress, young voters with college experience were most likely to say that reducing the budget deficit was most important (42%) and young voters without college experience say that spending to create jobs was most important (40%). When asked what Congress should do about the Bush-era tax cuts, young people with college experience were twice as likely to say that they should continue them only for families that earn less than \$250,000 a year (43% vs.

26%). On the other hand, young voters with no college experience were twice as likely to say they should let the tax cuts expire for all citizens (42% vs. 20%).

Non-College Youth More Supportive of the Current Administration

Young people without college experience were more likely to approve of the way Congress is doing its job (39%) compared to those young people with college experience (33%). They were also more likely to believe the country is headed in the right direction (48%) than their counterparts with college experience (39%). Moreover, young people with college experience were slightly less likely to believe that Barack Obama's policies will help the country (54%) compared to their counterparts without college experience (59%). Despite feelings that their financial situation is worse than two years ago, the above indicates that young people without college experience are still especially hopeful.

Views of Economy Are Similar but They May Disagree on Solutions

Although young voters with no college experience view the current administration more positively, they view the current economic situations just as bleakly as their college counterparts do. Almost 90% in both groups believe that the current economy is in poor or "not so good" shape, and 37% of non-college voters were "very worried" about the direction of the nation's economy in the next year (34% among college youth). However, young voters with and without college experience seemed to disagree about how to tackle the economic crisis. As noted above, young voters without college experience believed that spending more to create jobs was an important priority, while they were more likely than their college counterparts to believe that Congress should let the Bush-era tax-cuts expire. On the other hand, young voters with college experience were most likely to say that the next Congress should prioritize reducing the budget deficit, but keep the Bush-era tax cuts for families that make less than \$250,000 per year.

Furthermore, young voters with college experience were most likely to blame the Wall Street bankers for the current economic problems while young voters without college experience blamed George W. Bush. Finally, they differed about the role of government. Forty-eight percent of young voters with college experience felt that government was doing too many things that might be better left to businesses and individuals, while 36% of young voters without college experience felt the same way.

Notes:

¹CIRCLE computes youth turnout by multiplying the highest total vote tally reported by media outlets by youth share reported by the NEP National Exit Poll, and dividing the product by estimated 18-to-29 year old citizen count from March 2010, Current Population Survey. For more details on how CIRCLE estimates turnout, please refer to: <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP35CIRCLE.pdf>. National vote tallies were obtained from www.CNN.com and www.NYT.com in the morning of November 3, 2010 for first-day tally estimate (which produced an estimated youth turnout of 20.4%), and mid-day of November 4, 2010 (which produced an estimated youth turnout of 20.9%) for a second-day estimate. All figures used to estimate turnout are available upon request.

²We use the terminology that the NEP National Exit Poll uses to classify racial and ethnic groups in this fact sheet.

³ See CIRCLE Fact Sheet, *The Minority Youth Vote in the 2008 Presidential Election*, available at: http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/fs_race_09_final1.pdf.

⁴ It is important to note that we currently have no way of estimating exactly how voters who claim no specific party affiliation ("independents") voted in 2010. Our analysis is an estimation based on the available data. We will be able to estimate how these voters voted once we have a complete exit poll data available from Edison Research becomes available in 2011.