



Young Voters in the 2012 Presidential Election

By CIRCLE Staff
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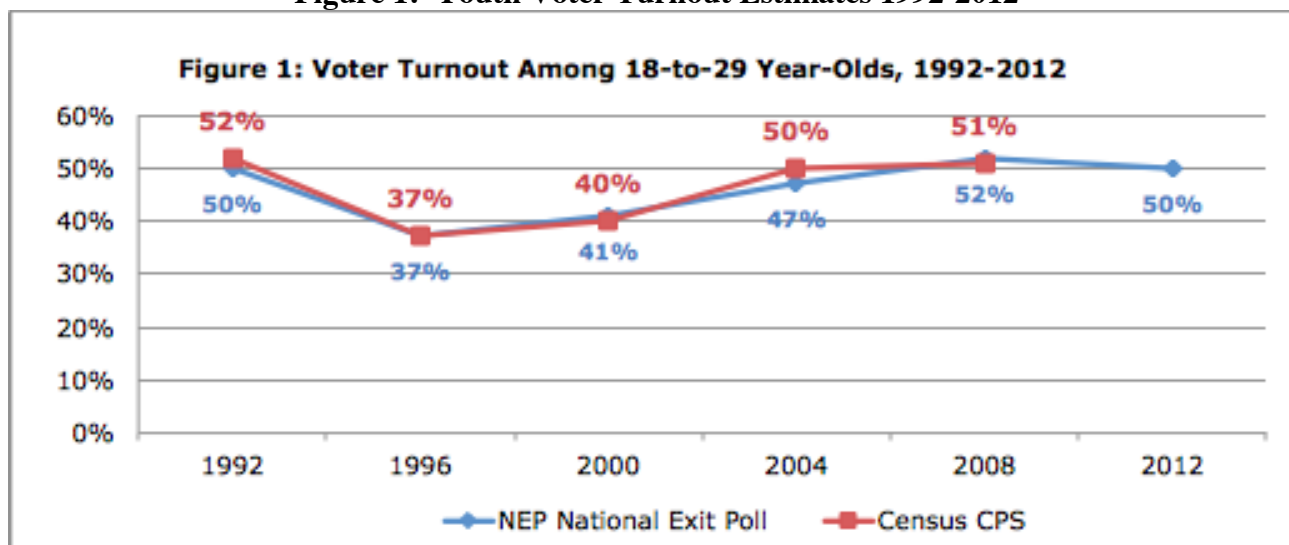
An estimated 23 million young Americans under the age of 30 voted in the 2012 presidential election which is on par with voting rates during the 2008 presidential election. CIRCLE estimates that youth voter turnout was 50 percent of those (18-to-29) eligible to vote. This was very close to the 2008 youth turnout rate of 52 percent, indicating that youth held steady in their participation.

This CIRCLE fact sheet summarizes youth participation in the 2012 election, as available data allows. We offer CIRCLE's exclusive turnout analysis, as well as major findings from the 2012 National 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 describe young voters as a whole. Subsequent fact sheets will focus on racial and ethnic analyses by gender as well as analysis by educational attainment (youth with and without college experience).

Unless otherwise noted, the phrase "younger voters" refers to those between the ages of 18 and 29. "Older voters" refers to ages 30 and older. "All voters" means ages 18 and older.

Figure 1 shows the turnout rate calculated in two ways: using exit polls and vote tallies, which are available immediately after Election Day, and using the Census' November national survey, which asks respondents whether they voted (and is released several months after an election). The two methods have tracked very closely, giving us confidence in our 2012 estimate of 50%. Prior to 1996, youth voter turnout was relatively consistent at around 50%, but it dropped in 1996 and 2000. The recent higher turnout rates could indicate that 1996 and 2000 were aberrations, or that a new upward trend is developing.

Figure 1: Youth Voter Turnout Estimates 1992-2012



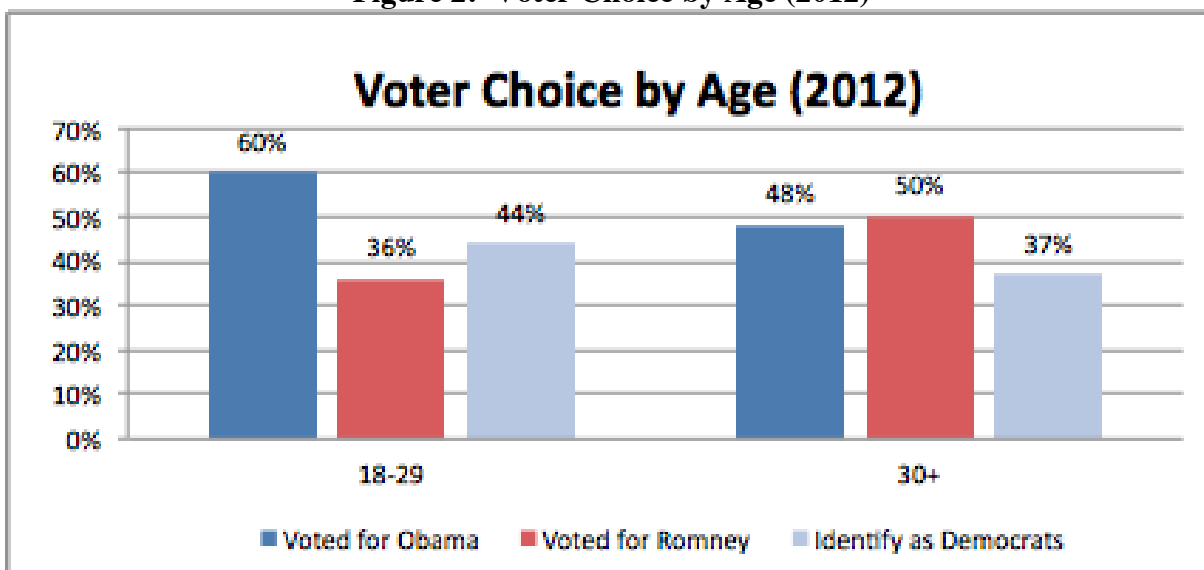
NOTE: Census CPS 2012 is not currently available.

Young Voters Continue to Lean Democratic, but the Gap between Candidates Narrowed

In 2012, young voters preferred President Obama to former Governor Romney by 24 points (60% to 36%). This gap was smaller than in 2008, when young voters chose then-Senator Obama to Senator McCain by a 34 point margin (66% to 32%). Despite this decline in support for the President, young voters were a decisive factor in the results particularly in key battleground states such as Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

Young people were stronger supporters of President Obama than the overall electorate was. In the 30+ population, more voters chose former Governor Romney (50%) than President Obama.

Figure 2: Voter Choice by Age (2012)



Additionally, 49% of young voters felt that President Obama's response to Hurricane Sandy was an important factor in their decision to vote for him. Among the youngest voters, those 18 to 24, 53% felt this way. This is in contrast to older voters, of whom only 40% saw his hurricane response as important in their presidential vote decision. However, 89% of voters, and 83% of 18-to-29 year-olds, indicated

that they had decided who to vote for in the presidential election in October or before, prior to the effects of the hurricane.

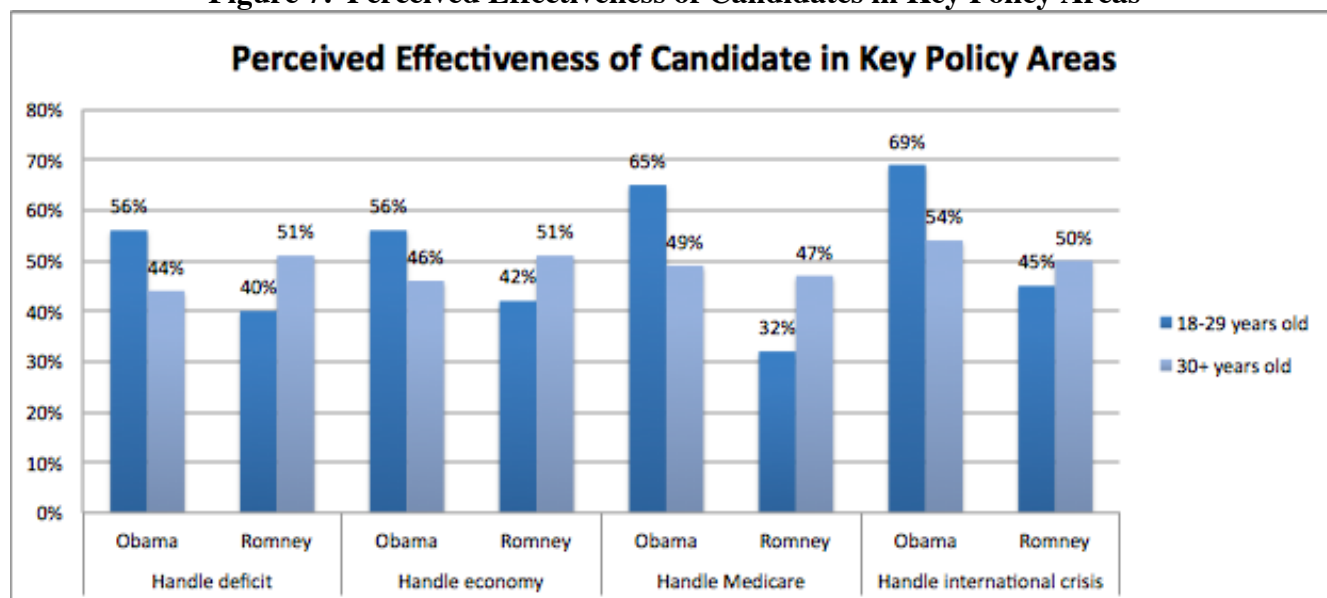
In the U.S. House of Representatives races, 58% of young people voted for the Democratic candidate versus 37% for the Republican candidate. Among all voters, 49% voted for the Democratic candidate versus 47% for the Republican candidate. See more about trends in youth voting for House candidates below.

Less Enthusiasm for Obama in 2012; But they See Him as more Capable to Lead

In 2008, 48% of young voters said they would be "excited" if Obama won. While this exact question did not appear on the 2012 exit poll, 33% said they were "enthusiastic" about the President, a decline in perceived enthusiasm for the President. However, 63% percent of young voters approved (strongly or somewhat) of Obama's handling of his job as president. This was twelve points higher than the rate among voters 30 and above.

And while enthusiasm for the President might be lower than in 2008, young voters clearly expressed that they felt Obama was better able than Romney to handle a range of policy areas including the federal deficit, the economy, international crises and healthcare.

Figure 7. Perceived Effectiveness of Candidates in Key Policy Areas



Party Identification and Ideology

Young voters were most likely to identify as members of the Democratic party (44% versus 38% of all voters). Moreover, young people were more likely to identify as "Independent or Something Else" (30%) than Republican (26%). Compared to 2008, this marked a slight decrease in the number of young voters who identified with the Democratic party and an increase in those who identified as "Independent or Something Else," with Republican party identification remaining the same.

The ideological leanings of young voters stayed consistent from 2008, with only 26 percent identifying as conservative (same in 2008) and 33 percent considering themselves liberal (32% in 2008). Young voters in the 2012 election were more likely to identify as liberal than the general voting population (33% of young voters versus 23% of all voters), and less likely to say they were conservative (26% of

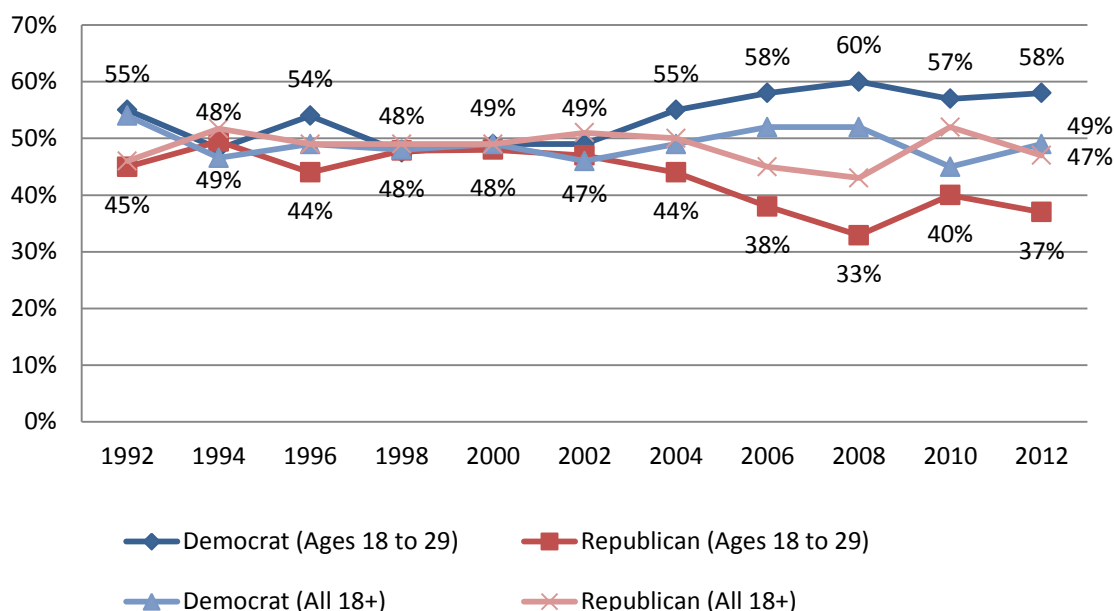
young voters versus 37% of all voters).

A Conservative Shift?

Despite strong support for Democratic candidates in 2012 among young voters, their support was not as strong as it had been in 2008. As noted above, this was true in the Presidential race, since Governor Romney gained more young voter support than Senator McCain (37% to 32%) and the President's support amongst this group slipped from 66% in 2008 to 60%. Slightly more 18-to-29 year-olds also voted for Republican House candidates in 2012 than in 2008 (37% compared to 33% in 2008), but Democratic House candidates received the same level of support (58% compared to 60% in 2008). Compared to 2010, support from young voters for Republican and Democratic House candidates was within the margin of error. These trends in House races are also seen among all voters, so the gap between younger and older voters remained constant.

Figure 3. House Vote Preferences, 1992-2012

House Vote Preference Among 18-29, 1992 -2012



Comparing youth vote choice in House races from election to election, we note that young people were evenly divided until 2004, when they started to prefer Democratic House candidates. By 2008, there was a 27-point gap between the Democratic candidate support and Republican candidate support. This gap shrank to 17-points in 2010, but has increased to 21 points in 2012.

An Increasingly Diverse Cohort

Young voters (age 18-29) were more diverse than older voters, according to the exit polls. Eighteen percent of young voters self-identified as Hispanic/Latino. This is larger than the proportion in the electorate as a whole (8%). Seventeen percent of young voters self-identified as Black, compared to 12% of all voters. Nine percent of young voters identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, compared to four percent of the whole electorate. These are all increases when compared to the 2008 election. We

analyze in greater detail the racial, ethnic and gender composition of young voters in a separate factsheet.

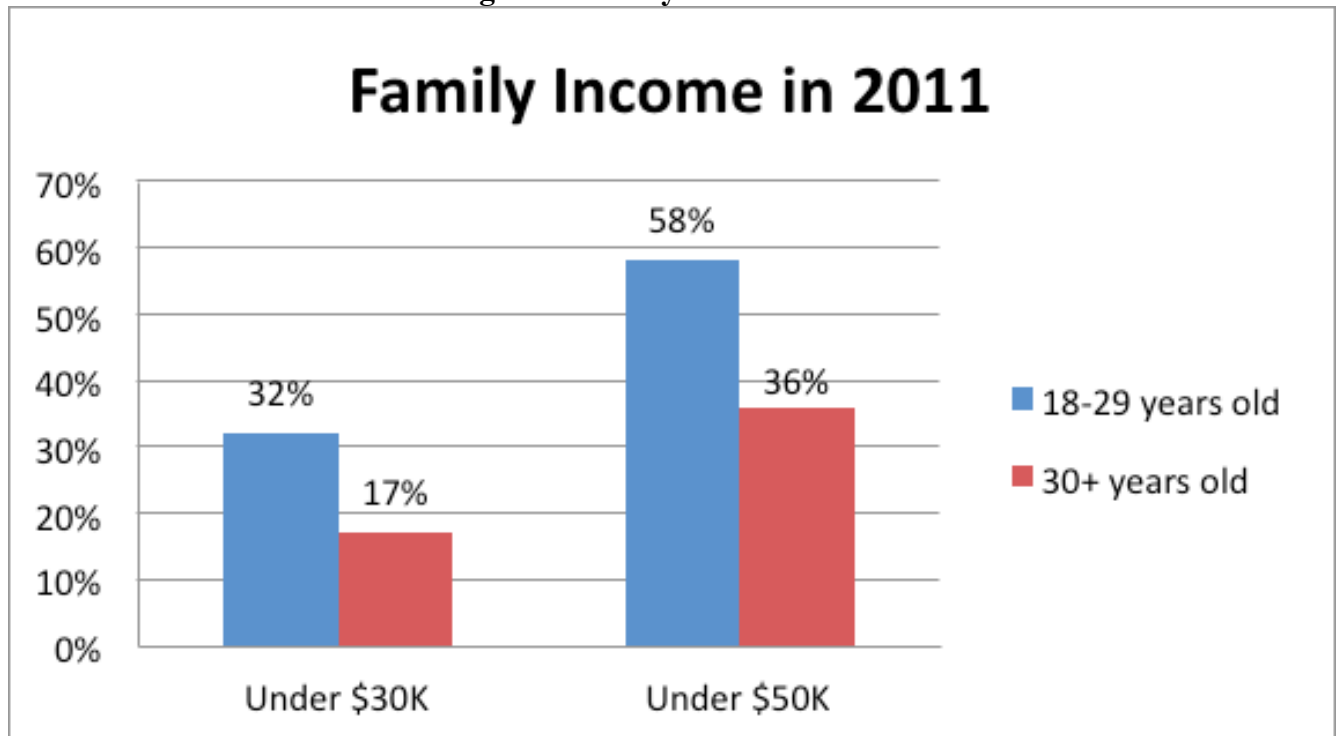
Young Women Slightly Less Represented than in 2008

More young women (52%) than young men (48%) voted. Yet this represents a decline for women compared to 2008 where young women cast 55% of votes cast by the 18-to-29 age group. In 2012, older women made up a larger proportion of those 30+ who voted, than young women voters made up. This is a change from 2008 when young women made up a larger proportion of the young electorate, when compared to the proportion of older voters that women over 30 made up.

Young Families Working to Make It

While young voters as a whole were less likely than older voters to have children under 18 years old in their home (30% compared to 38%), young voters who were in the 25-to-29 year-old age range were just as likely to have younger children in the home as older voters (41% to 38%). And while 25-to-29 year-olds were less likely to be married than older voters (39% to 69%), they were more than four times as likely to be married than their peers who were 18 to 24 years old (39% to 8%). Over half (58%) of young voters were part of families with incomes under \$50,000 in 2011 and nearly a third of young voters (32%) had family incomes under \$30,000 in 2011. These are both significantly higher percentages than the 36% of older voters (30+) who had incomes under \$50,000 and 17% of older voters who had incomes under \$30,000 in 2011.

Figure 4. Family Income in 2011



Educational Gap Persists

Continuing with the trend observed in the past elections, young people with no college experience were

underrepresented in this election. Although 60% of the U.S. citizens between ages of 18-to-29 had had any experience with college, 72% of the young voters had gone to college, meaning that college-educated youth were over-represented at the polls. We will be releasing a more comprehensive analysis of young voters by educational attainment.

Most Living in the South, but Youth Have Clout in the West

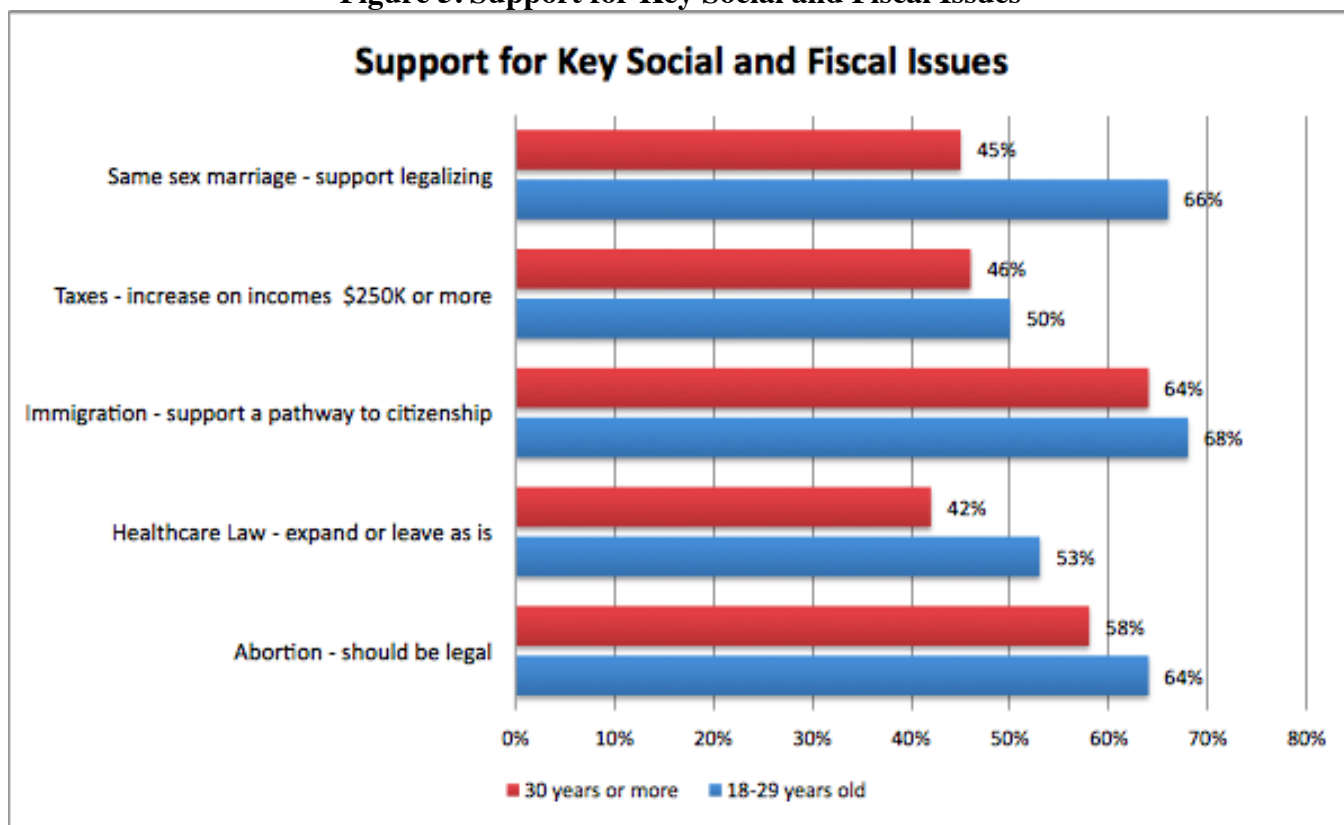
In terms of where young voters were geographically located, 30% were in the South, 26% in the West, 24% in the Midwest and 20% in the East. Young voters were a more concentrated group in the West than voters 30+ (26% compared to 21%).

Differences between the Young Voters and Older Voters on Key Issues

Overall young voters were more liberal than voters 30+ on a range of social and fiscal issues. For example, 64% of 18-to-29 year-olds indicate that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, compared to 58% of older adults. On immigration, 68% of young voters support a pathway to citizenship for immigrants who do not have legal status. This is four points higher than voters 30 or older. Most notably, while only 45% of older voters support same-sex marriage, 66% of 18 to 29 year olds would support legalizing such unions in their state.

Regarding the 2010 national healthcare law, 53% percent of young voters were willing to expand or maintain it. This was eleven points higher than support from older voters (42%). Young voters were also more willing than older voters to raise taxes on those with incomes over \$250K (50% to 46%).

Figure 5. Support for Key Social and Fiscal Issues



Like older voters, 18-to-29 year-olds saw the economy as the most important issue facing the country. However, they were less concerned about the economy with 54% indicating it as a top concern

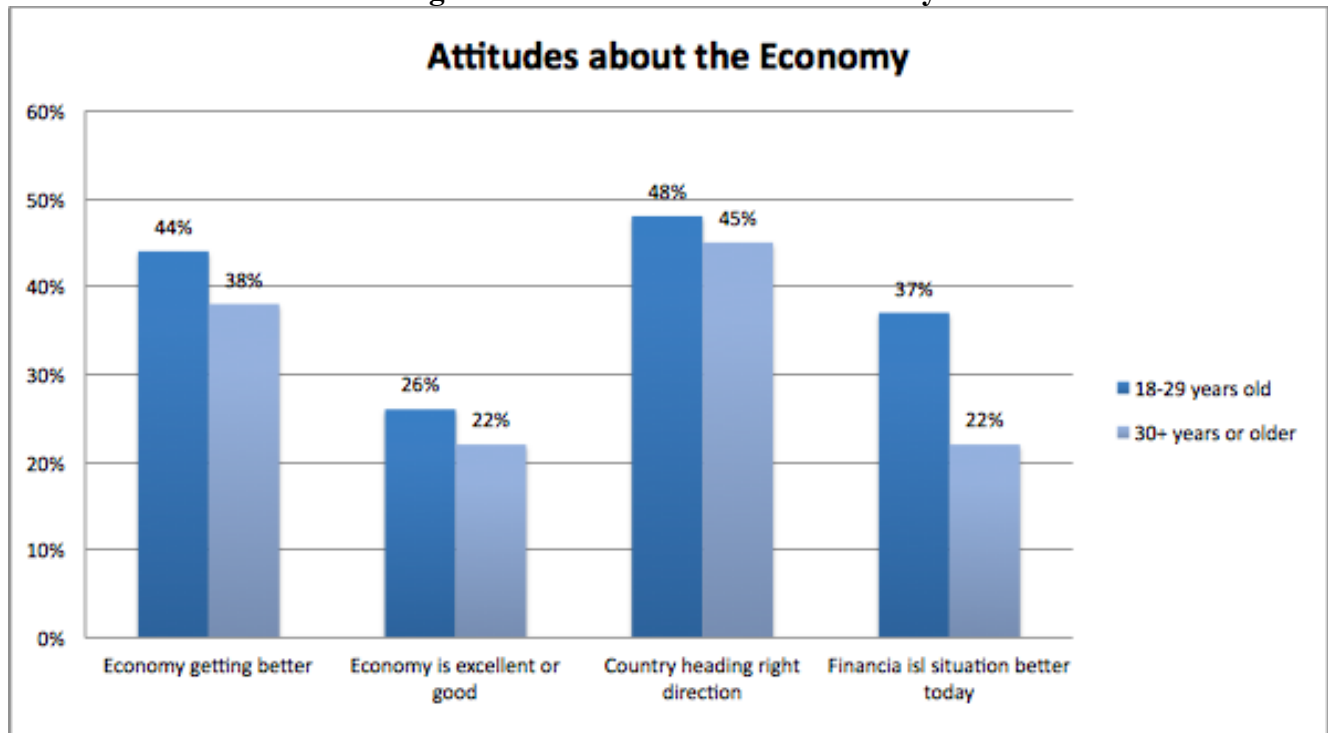
compared to 60% of those 30 years and older. All voters saw healthcare as the next most important facing country. In this instance, 21% percent of younger voters saw it as the next most important issue facing the country, roughly the same as older voters (within the margin of error).

Young voters were most concerned with unemployment (48%) and rising prices (36%). Older voters were concerned with these issues as well, but unemployment figured less in their thinking with only 36% seeing it as a concern.

Young Voters More Optimistic about the Economy

Young voters also had a decidedly different attitude about the economy than older voters. Forty-four percent saw the economy “getting better,” 48% percent believed that the country was heading in the “right direction” and 26% percent thought that the economy was either “excellent” or “good”. Older voters were less optimistic, with 38% thinking it was “getting better,” 45% percent seeing the country heading in the “right direction,” and 22% percent seeing the economy as either “excellent” or “good.” And while 22% of voters thirty and over thought they were better off in 2012 than four years ago, 37% of 18-to-29 year-old voters said they were better off now than four years ago.

Figure 6. Attitudes about the Economy



Yet younger voters were critical of the economy. Sixty-one percent of this group believed that the current economic system favors the wealthy, compared to 54% of older voters. They also were more likely than older voters (65% to 50%) to put the blame for the current economy on former President Bush rather than President Obama.

The Youngest Voters: 18-to-24 year-olds

The 2012 exit poll did not ask whether individuals were voting for the first time. However, the 18-to-24 age cohort encompasses 18-to-21 year-olds, who cannot have voted in a presidential election before. While this cohort of the youngest voters was very much like the entire 18-to-29 year old bloc,

they were different in a few areas:

- 18-to-24 year-olds were less polarized about abortion, with only a 23-point spread between those wanting it to be legal and illegal. The spread for 25-to-29 year olds was 44 points.
- Seventy percent of the youngest voters supported a pathway to citizenship for immigrants. The 25-to-29 year-olds supported it at a 5 point lower rate of 65%.
- They were less likely to support tax increases on those making \$250K than the 25-to-29 year-olds (49% to 53%)
- By 12 points, the youngest voters had a more optimistic outlook on the economy than their older peers. However, they were also less confident that their financial situation was better in 2012 (33% to 42%).
- The younger members of the cohort were more willing to blame the economy on George Bush (67%) than the older members, 62% of whom blamed Bush. They were also more likely to think that the economic system favors the wealthy (63% to 58%).
- This group was also seven points more likely than the 25-to-29 to see the President's response to Hurricane Sandy as the "the most important factor" in their decision to vote for the President (18% to 11%). This may be linked to the fact that they, more than their older peers, made their decision to vote in the last few days of the election (32% to 22%).

CIRCLE Methodology for Estimating Youth Voter Turnout

Immediately after each national election, CIRCLE estimates voter turnout among young people (18-29 years old) based on the total vote count as reported by major news outlets, National Election Poll's exit poll estimate of youth voter share (i.e., portion of the votes cast by young people), and the U.S. Census Current Population Survey estimate of the 18-29 citizen population.

The estimated population size used in our estimates comes from the Census Bureau's March Demographic File. The following formula was used to calculate turnout percentages using the National Election Pool: Youth turnout = $[(\% \text{ votes cast by } 18-29) / (\text{total votes cast})] / \text{CPS citizen population for } 18-29 \text{ year old}$.

It is important to note that the voter turnout and youth vote count figures that CIRCLE publishes immediately after the election are estimates, because votes will be tallied for days after the election, and the exit poll data are subject to reweighting. Both of these variables can change the estimates. However, the exit polls are the only data source available for estimating youth voter turnout, and CIRCLE's estimates of presidential voter turnout have tracked the Census estimates of youth turnout well in the past.

Estimates based on both data sources data have some limitations. For example, the national exit poll consists of only a few thousand young voters, and although the exit poll by Edison Research captures early voters and absentee voters by contacting them via landline and cell phone, it is a small sample relative to the millions of young people who come out to vote. Because the data collection methods have changed over time we can only go back to 1992 data. The national poll's margin of error is approximately 3 percentage points. For more information about the exit polling by the National Election Pool and Edison Research, please refer to http://www.edisonresearch.com/exit_poll_faq.php.

The Census Current Population Survey is a large, ongoing data collection of 50,000 households and

about 150,000 individuals. In November of even years, the respondents are asked about voting and registration. Because of the large sample size, researchers can produce more reliable estimates of turnout and registration rates among smaller groups, such as young Hispanics or young men without college experience. We can also analyze data going back to 1972. This dataset also has some limitations. In particular, data about voting is self-reported and in some cases reported by members of the household. Self-reporting weeks after the election can cause some error or over-reporting. Finally, because of the time it takes to prepare data, the CPS voting is will not be available until the following year. For more information about the Census Voting and Registration data, please refer to <http://www.census.gov/cps/>.